

Educators' Perspectives on Fathers' Participation in the Early Childhood Education of Their Children

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ABSTRACT In this study, the researchers were interested in finding out how educators utilise the social environment in which fathers operate to the advantage of the learning of their children in the foundation phase. The perspectives of 6 educators on fathers' participation in early development of their children were explored through qualitative data collected by semi-structured interviews. Data obtained were thematically analysed. Results of the study show that although educators understood the concept of father involvement, formal programmes that enabled educators to involve fathers in the school were non-existent. Findings also suggest that fathers' participation in the school was insignificant. The study concludes that fathers' participation in their children's education is germane to effective early childhood education in schools. It also recommends a collaborated effort between schools, District Education Office and parents in the formulation of fathers' involvement policies and programmes through workshops on fathers' involvement

INTRODUCTION

The prospective benefits of parental involvement to teachers, students and parents in schools are well reinforced by empirical evidence (Cheung and Pomerantz 2012; Okeke 2014; Kraft and Rogers 2015). Building positive relationships with parents, therefore, becomes one of the most beneficial aspects of teaching and learning. It is a belief deep-rooted in many people's minds in the early childhood development sector that women appear naturally predisposed to caring for young children while most men appear not to (Sanders 2002; Cunningham and Dorsey 2004; Quinn 2014; Seward 2014). Hence, women have been charged with the responsibility of raising children both in the home and elsewhere (Wardle 2004). The rise of single female-headed households has created a tendency of early childhood programmes communicating with mothers, thereby leaving fathers out in the cold as if they do not exist (Mukana and Mutsotso 2011; Mashiya et al. 2015).

Following Mandela's wise words that education was a vehicle that could break the cycle of poverty, the South African government made provision for parents to be active stakeholders in their children's education through the South

African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996). The philosophical idea was to encourage parents to participate actively in the school governance, administration and maintaining schools with the aim of creating fertile ground for excellent academic pursuits. Academic performance in the Foundation Phase is seen as a predictor of academic progression through schooling. However, countrywide research and worldwide comparison indicates that Grade 3 learners seem to perform dismally (Prinsloo 2008; Hallberg 2010). Speculation on the under-performance has been blamed on the use of the language that children are not familiar with in the classroom (Owen-Smith 2010), hence the announcement by the Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga in Pretoria (2010) that teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase had to be conducted in mother tongue. In the report on South Africa's education crisis, Spaul (2013) commented that evidently, there are severe disparities in the reading ability of learners based on the teaching and learning language. Seemingly, this strategy has not improved performance in the Foundation phase, hence the focus on parental involvement, particularly father participation.

Ideally, involving parents would improve children's academic performance, reduce dropout rate and improve the moral fibre of the youth (Bloch 2009). Nevertheless, parents in South African townships schools have botched embracing these expectations as nearly eighty per-

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cent of townships schools are dysfunctional (Smit and Oosthuizen 2011; Mogale 2014). Lack of parental participation has been mentioned as the significant cause for the deterioration of academic achievement due to unproductive and incompetent schools. The lack of enthusiasm of parents to participate in the education of their children has caused township schools' failure to improve the ethos and principles of teaching and learning (Mogale 2014). Parental resistance and lack of eagerness continue to be enigmatic, hence the need to unravel it.

There is a dearth in research on how the educators influence fathers into being involved in education even when most studies suggest that fathers' involvement is associated with better socio-emotional and academic functioning in schools (Allen and Daly 2007; Lamb 2010; Harris 2015). Consistently, evidence indicates that schools are not able to fully involve fathers and afford them with information about the content learnt by their children and how they are progressing in school (Okeke 2014; Noel et al. 2015). The scarcity of programmes that involve fathers has motivated the researchers to look into the educators' perspectives on strategies to improve the level of fathers' involvement in the early education of their children in the foundation phase.

Main Research Questions

The main research question the study addressed was:

What are educators' perspectives on fathers' participation in the early childhood education of their children?

Sub-research Questions

The following were the sub-research questions:

- i) What programmes are there in place to involve fathers in early childhood education?
- ii) What strategies do educators use to enhance fathers' participation in early childhood programmes?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the Social Learning Theory (SLT) as developed by Miller and Dollard (1941), Sears (1951), and Bandura (1962) which subscribed to connecting behavioural and cog-

native approaches to learning. According to Bandura (1977), learning first occurs cognitively through imitation and is then modified through the application of consequences. The social learning theory assumes that people learn within the social context, and behavioural modification comes about through observing live models and listening to verbatim instructions from people. Social learning theorists share several expectations with behaviourists, predominantly the belief that people are fundamentally shaped by their surroundings throughout their learning progressions. In other words, people learn through socialization more than through biological inheritance. The Social Learning Theory has been chosen for its suitability in clarifying how individuals can learn new concepts and progress to new behaviours by interacting with and watching other people.

In his study, Schoeman (2010) adopted the Social Learning Theory of aggression to show how young people in South Africa, who are often caught up in a cycle of violence, also tend to become perpetrators of violence. Explaining the xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals, Cooper (2009) in Schoeman (2010) infers that the resentment and frustration experienced by the youths became an acceptable motive for violent attacks. This confirms the notion that the social learning and imitation theory suggests that individuals obtain competence and new styles of behaviour through response penalties (Miller and Dollard 1941: 26-42). Therefore, the assumption is that at all times learning occurs in a specific socio-cultural context. The various features in this context will include the societal and organisational values which prevail at any given time. In short, book learning collaborations happen in the context of the meso- and macro-social worlds.

The theory has been chosen for its strength that development is a result of interactions which involve people including parents and teachers, playmates and schoolmates, brothers and sisters. Both the people and their environment are reciprocal determinants of each other (Bandura 1999). This means that whatever exists in the environment such as physical settings as well as people who are present or absent around a person have potential reinforcing stimuli. The surroundings influence the gravity and regularity of the behaviours, just as the behaviours themselves can have an impression on the sur-

rounding. Social learning theory proposes that augmented interaction with fathers affords children with opportunities to learn social skills at the same time receiving emotional and contributory support (Leidy et al. 2013). Children become attentive to some models and transform their behaviour by imitating the observed behaviour, especially those of parents and peers. The people within the child's environment respond to the copied behaviour with either support or reprimand (Bandura 1977). If rewarded for a modelled behaviour, chances are the child is very likely to continue performing the behaviour. This is where teachers need the support of parents and vice-versa.

Literature Review

Fathers' Participation in Early Education

It is well documented by researchers that from the infancy stage, the early childhood years are engrossed with profound chances to development in children the skills for reasoning, linguistic acquisition, and solving problem (Yeung et al. 2000; Amoateng et al. 2004; Bartik 2014; Okeke 2014; Mashiya et al. 2015; Wilson 2015). During this crucial period, the importance of a father's participation in the life of a child cannot be downplayed. It is a time when mothers and fathers alike use as much family resources as possible and spend maximum time with their child to enrich the child's learning. While traditionally, the role of nurturing children at this stage has been bestowed upon mothers, research has shown that a father's role, at this stage, has more impact on the child's cognitive and moral behaviour than the mother (Cairney and Ashton 2003; Greene 2003; Okeke 2014; Quinn 2014; Change 2015).

An involved father is defined as a father who has a relationship with his child (Solomon-Fears 2016). He can also be regarded as being sensitive, heartfelt, close, approachable, supportive, intimate, nurturing and loving, encouraging, comforting, and tolerant (Goldman 2005; Seward 2014; Karani et al. 2015; Khewu and Adu 2015). Furthermore, fathers are categorized as being involved if their offspring has developed a solid, secure attachment to them (Levton et al. 2015; Smith 2015). Father participation with children from an early time of life has been found to equate with improved cognitive development. Activities undertaken by fathers at home are usually

more significant for children's intellectual and social development than the parent's job, education or earnings (Melhuish et al. 2004). In the United States, a study carried out to explore the special effects of different categories of father participation in homework established that different systems of support such as for children's autonomy were related with higher test marks, while direct involvement was linked with lower test marks (Duckworth 2008).

A father's actions, opinions and engagements with their child happen within complex surroundings of other influences. Hence, the study is grounded in the social learning theory. The quality and nature of the relations that children have with educators, neighbours, peers, extended family, siblings and other relatives contribute in shaping the academic progressive outcomes of the child. International literature suggests that fathers of the twenty-first century are more engrossed in the lives of their children than was previously the case (Gauthier et al. 2004; Maume 2011; Change 2015). This is partly because of the legal parental leave provision that is granted to fathers in Europe and America. Without this parental leave, some men resort to using other types of leave to ensure they spend some time with children during their first months of life (O'Brien and Moss 2010). Maume (2011) contends that the increased participation of women in paid work to augment family income is another contributing factor to fathers' involvement. Although fathers' leave positively influences their involvement in childcare and housework-related tasks (Brandth and Gislason 2012; O'Brien and Moss 2010), their involvement in education centres is not well explored hence the need to find out the educators' perspectives on fathers' involvement in the foundation phase.

In their book 'Baba', Richter and Morrell (2006) insinuate that in South Africa, not all men are proud to be fathers, and not all fathers want to participate in the lives of their own children. This statement depicts a nation of uncaring men which may be debatable. Of interest though is the realization that the parental leave provision granted to fathers in countries like the USA and Japan has not been embraced in developing countries. The South African legal system has remained father-unfriendly, according to Chauke and Khunou (2014). Although Trade Unions and other civil society organisations in South Africa have attempted to raise the debates about pa-

ternity leave (Appolis 1998), thus far, the debates have not yielded positive results as yet. Paternity leave is the time off a father can take to be with the mother of his newborn baby. The length of the leave varies according to countries. In developed countries, it can be taken at the end of maternal leave so that both parents take turns to care for the baby, thereby giving both parents a chance to bond with the baby (Moss 2015). According to Dancaster and Cohen (2015), the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) in South Africa governs all leave conditions for employees through the Minister of Labour (MoL); this gives authority to determine leave in unique circumstances in various industries. While a mother can go for four months' maternity leave, which is a statutory entitlement provided by MoL, there is no statutory entitlement for fathers who wish to attend the birth of their child. However, a father who wishes to be present when their child is born can take what is called "family responsibility leave". In South Africa, granting of family responsibility leave in 1997 was a way to assist an employee to obtain compassionate leave in the case of childbirth, sickness or death of a family member, which is only three days in twelve months' period (du Toit et al. 2003). Arguably though, fatherhood has failed to become a policy issue due to sociological and historical determinants (Morrell 2006).

For decades, pre-1994 South African Black families were formed and restructured by colonization, exclusion and settlement, ethnic segregation, subjugation and racial emasculation (Townsend et al. 2005). Evidently in the post-apartheid era, South African Black fathers still remain prejudiced by present-day social and cultural factors where patterns of temporary labour migration, especially from rural to urban and from smaller towns to larger cities, have continued (Camlin et al. 2014). Validating these sentiments, Desmond and Desmond (2006) found that in South Africa, fifty-two of children below the age of 18 did not reside with their biological fathers. The proclamations from Statistics South Africa (2011) also revealed that as a result of father absence, only about a third of South African pre-school children live in the same homes as their fathers.

While South African Black fathers are still facing high levels of redundancy, negotiating traditional cultural principles with the pressures placed by society on Western standards of fa-

therhood (Camlin et al. 2014), there seems to be a negative perception about the commitment and role of South African fathers. Media and literature assume that the majority of South African men do not give the impression that they are interested in their children as they rarely attend the birth of their own children; they do not acknowledge paternity of their own children and habitually fail to partake in their lives (Richter and Morrell 2006; Khewu and Adu 2015; Mashiyia et al. 2015). It is against these revelations that this study explored educators' perspectives on the strategies to improve fathers' involvement in the education of their children in the foundation phase.

Educators' Views on Fathers' Participation in Education

Lamb (2010) suggests that there is dearth in research about educators' experiences in having fathers' participation in the education of their children. Therefore, there is a scarcity of studies that guide families and educators on the aspect of father involvement (Jeynes 2013). Yet the issue of involving fathers in the early childhood has recently taken a centre stage in education (Clough 2000; Okeke 2014; Change 2015) because of the studies that have highlighted the importance of paternal involvement (Hakoama and Ready 2011). However, educators' perspectives toward involving fathers impact on the extent to which fathers' probability to be involved in their children's schooling. On the other hand, fathers may be seen as less involved with their children; emergent social data advocate mother and father responsibilities differ and are often entangled with each other (Gray and Anderson 2010; Lamb 2010). This means that fathers offer to children what mothers cannot offer, thereby making them significant partners in raising children. At the same time, researchers indicate that fathers struggle with being included as educational team members (Mueller and Buckley 2014) because they are stereotypically left out (Lamb 2010). The notion that fathers are sole providers as breadwinners lingers in minds of many. West (2000) noted the importance of teachers initiating positive contact with fathers as this has the potential effect on students' achievement in school.

Similarly, Van Voorhis (2001), Simon (2001) and Mashiyia et al. (2015) assert that involving

fathers in various ways has a positive impact on academic achievement, school attendance, behaviour, and completion rate. In as much as fathers may want to be involved in the education of their children, they may not know how to participate. The initiative of father involvement emanates from invitations that started from school through specific teacher invites and general invitations for participation from the school (Walker et al. 2005). The foundation phase is a female dominated arena, where there is 'woman-to-woman' or mother-to-mother' syndrome, with a tendency of leaving fathers out of the children's schooling.

According to Van Velsor and Orozco (2007), some teachers may not invite parents to participate because of their frustration with a low-achieving child or because they regard the family as the foundation of their students' accomplishment problems (Trotman 2001). It emerged that different power dynamics related to educational success and professional expertise may hinder healthy father-teacher relationships, thereby disregarding low income parents instead of enabling them (Barton et al. 2004). However, common among the Black community is the parents' lack of confidence to associate with school due to their literacy levels. Low father involvement in school activities has been noticed in South African Black schools in recent years, noting that some causes are ascribed to diverse factors including the negative attitudes and inferior feelings that parents have in general (Heystek 2003). This then requires teachers to possess special skills to encourage participation from fathers.

While it is true that fathers' involvement and nurturing leads to improved language and intellectual capabilities (Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006), stimulating comprehensive partnerships between schools, families, and communities to work together develops well-adjusted individuals. The suggestion is that programmes need to be established upon the individualized requirements of the students, teachers, families, and communal members involved (Morin 2013). Professional and in-service training for teachers that emphasises on working with families is not yet widely available; neither do many pre-service programmes across the country offer that kind of training for upcoming teachers in the expansion of school-family relationships (Kessler-Sklar and Baker 2000; Okeke 2014; Mashiyi et al. 2015).

The Department of Education mandated the establishment of school governing bodies (SGBs) in order to create a healthier and robust relationship between schools and societies and to provide an alternate method of culpability to bureaucratic surveillance (DoE 1996; Dladla 2013). This encouraged schools and societies to join forces in making significant decisions about educational options and to make sure schools improve (Parker and Leithwood 2000). Nevertheless, the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 (DoE 1996) does not show how educators invite all fathers to be involved in the academic development in the foundation phase. In their opinion Heystek and Louw (1999) posit that parents (as clients of the school) have minute voice in the school governance, and as such, a partnership-oriented approach is essential to permit them to be more proactive in the education of their children.

Strategies to Strengthen Fathers' Participation

Richter et al. (2012) note that South Africa has the highest rate of absent fathers in the world. This observation was confirmed by Statistics South Africa (2011) which stated that only one third of children in the South African pre-schools lived under the same roof with their fathers and mothers. The above statements paint a gloomy picture as educators endeavour to improve fathers' participation in the education of their children in the Foundation Phase. Yet strengthening fathers' participation in early childhood education can significantly reduce the need to invest in closing the gap between academic achievement and failure later in life (Karoly et al. 2005; Barnett and Belfield 2006)

School Based Strategies

There are many strategies that educators can adopt to strengthen fathers' participation in early childhood development. However, for some time, educators have hidden fathers' participation behind the use of '*parent*' as fathers perceive it to mean 'mothers' and technically excludes them (Department for Education and Skills 2007). This then compels educationist to explicitly invite fathers through well thought out programmes. One of the greatest effective techniques to recruit and retain fathers is through the use of tactics specifically and clearly cus-

tom-made to suit the needs of men (Lloyd et al. 2003; Goldman 2005; Potter and Carpenter 2010; Shwalb et al. 2013). Programmes such as 'Me and my dad' and 'Daddy's day' offer strong sustenance for the relations between fathers and child and augment confidence for men in concerning their participation in their children's play and learning (Potter and Carpenter 2010). However, positive response to these programmes may not be spontaneous but would compel educators' ingenuity such as holding training, motivating sessions with fathers, offering snacks and transport to and from the centres of participation.

The other strategy to improve fathers' participation is by equipping educators with the necessary skills to invite and ultimately maintain the interest of participation in fathers. Firstly, educators acquaint themselves with fathers by engaging in courteous conversations at 'drop off pick up points' as this is how far some fathers can go into the school. Educators need to mind the language they use and not be too judgmental of the children such that it scares the father away. Through these encounters, fathers are enticed or motivated to find out more about the child's learning within the place of learning.

Besides being involved in the teacher-parent association, father participation can be fostered through the skills they possess. Volunteering their services to coach a sporting game, teaching an extra-curricular activity such as drama, and perhaps, accompanying children to a field trip are strategies meant to enhance fathers' participation. For one to freely participate in any organisation there has to be a welcoming atmosphere in which one feels valued and respected. It then becomes imperative for educators to communicate with and include fathers through many forms of communication and to make them aware of the impact their participation on the development of their children (Griffin and Galassi 2010).

Home Based Strategies

There may be conflicting views as to what father's participation is, but associating it to 'pick up drop off' may not be sufficient as the element of the father holding a child's hand in the academic journey may not be there. Designing home assignments that motivate parent-child collaboration as well as coming up with stratagems that institutes of learning and families use to monitor and support effective home assignments is im-

portant. One way of ensuring that fathers are involved in the education of their children is to establish school-initiated training for parents in tactics, techniques, and resources to encourage learning in specific school subjects (Bernhard et al. 2006; Boyce et al. 2010).

Fathers' participation may be improved by encouraging father-child activities for learning and development, such as frequenting the museum and the library (Cairney 2000; Gutman and McLoyd 2000; Tapia 2000) and other enrichment opportunities such as creating a memory book where photographs, written materials on father and son/daughter experiences can be recorded as part of a project that stretches for a stipulated time. During these activities, the father is able to monitor literature that is exposed to the child and limit association with the dangerous streets. Fathers can be encouraged to work on projects with their children at home over a period of time and that will allow the fathers, even those working away from home, to partake in the projects.

Fathers' involvement can be strengthened by emerging fathers in personal skills, particularly their communication skills, to augment their relations with their children (Doherty et al. 1998). Since fathers are viewed as authoritative disciplinarians, children shy away from them, yet that closeness can bring out the best in a child. While the importance of fathers' participation has been emphasized, the strategy of creating fathers-only clubs or programmes may not suit all situations (Barrett 2010; Spaulding et al 2009; Rienks et al. 2011). Some men may not be enthusiastic about attending men/father-only groups; these tend to be unsustainable as some fathers prefer to be involved as a couple. The advantage of involving both parents is that in the event the father is away, the mother is able to continue holding the child's hand in the academic journey.

METHODOLOGY

The interpretive paradigm, which perceives the world as constructed, interpreted and experienced by the people in their dealings with each other and social systems (Holloway and Wheeler 2010), was utilised in this study. The qualitative approach, which attempts to describe and understand social phenomena through insider perspectives on social action from the actors themselves, was adopted. The justification for this approach was based on the fact that it is a

realistic, explanatory approach concerned with discovering phenomena from the interior (Flick 2009) in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The choice of this research design was influenced by the nature of the problem and on the desire to understand the perceptions and experiences of real life situations of individual educators on fathers' participation. A semi-structured interview was adopted as it was suitable for extracting the views and perceptions of participants through narration of the experiences of six purposively selected participants. The usage of a digital voice recorder minimised the risk of recording inaccurate data. Data were analysed in a chronological order, describing the daily life of participants according to their meanings, revealing patterns, regularities and critical events in terms of its emerging themes and sub-themes (Leedy and Ormrod 2005).

Credibility and Trustworthiness of Instruments

Trustworthiness means that the investigators' findings are sound and reliable (Marshall and Rossman 2011) meaning that genuineness and correctness of the interpretation of events is paramount (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). In this study, trustworthiness which consists of four criteria, namely: credibility transferability, dependability, and conformability, (Lee and Lings 2008; Gubrium and Holstein 2011) was ensured through member-checking done by confirming with all participants that recorded responses were correctly transcribed and endorsed as a true reflection of the actual interviews.

Ethical Requirements

In conducting this study, the researchers observed participants' rights such as maintaining privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, avoiding harm, betrayal and deception including the right to withdraw from participating in the study at any stage of the research (Graham et al. 2007a). The researchers gained access to research sites and respondents through gatekeepers using clearance letters from University Ethics committee and East London Education District office as the research required an in-depth study where a considerable amount of time was spent on this task. Participants were made to sign informed consent as a way of en-

suring that they understood what it meant to participate in this particular research (Bryman 2012). On the issues of anonymity and confidentiality, the researchers used pseudonyms and avoided statements that could be linked to an individual so as to reduce harm.

FINDINGS

Educators' Views on Fathers' Participation in Education

The study sought to find out the educators' perceptions of fathers' participation in the education of their children. It emerged from the study that although educators were conscious of the significance of fathers in the education of their children, they did not specifically involve them. From the interviews, all educators confessed that they had not invited fathers in their classes. In her response, Daisy said: *Personally, I have never invited fathers....maybe it's the woman thing.* Concurring with her was Vivian who said, *I have never really thought about inviting fathers because when I call for a parent, the mothers always come. I realise my mistake now. But fathers are important.* On the same note, Kate alluded to the absence of fathers in many homes as the reason she did not invite fathers. She said *when I ask the child about the father and they say he is not there ... then I don't ask further....* Data emerging from the interviews indicate that educators had not applied concerted efforts to invite fathers to participate in the school activities.

Lack of Programmes that Involve Fathers

The study sought to find out if there were programmes that involved the participation of fathers in the foundation phase. In this study, interviewed participants unanimously revealed that there were no programmes designed to include fathers in the academic growth of children in the foundation phase. For instance, Greta's response on programmes for fathers was:

We don't have programmes for fathers...gee we never gave it much thought but now that you bring it, up I see the error we make as educators. Maybe it is cultural I don't know we always call mothers. But there are few fathers who show interest in their children.

Echoing similar sentiments, Vivian stated: *"We don't have programmes as yet but only when*

there are soccer matches, at prefect induction or when there are merit awards ceremonies at the end of the year you see fathers there". Also emergent from the data was that fathers could be seen in school when there are important occasions such as soccer matches, induction of prefects and merit awards ceremonies at the end of the year; they were also visible when children have behavioural problems. Without any set programmes influencing fathers to be involved in schools, establishing the different dimensions of fathers' involvement becomes difficult.

Nature of Educators' Communication with Fathers

The study sought to find out how educators communicated with fathers. Data coming from interviews shows that educators did not communicate with fathers *per se*, but rather preferred to do so through the children's communication books, circulars or the standard letters sent out to share information with parents. Illustrating this point is Vivian who admits: "*I usually communicate with parents through the child's communication book and often address it to parents/guardian*". Kate confessed: "*I have not really communicated with the fathers but have sent circulars to parents*". The findings of this study confirm Brandon et al.'s (2009) argument when they note that people in the schools have habitually used the term "parents" as an umbrella denoting not only the natural parents and/or traditional family structures but also talking about the caregiving adults in a child's life such as grandparents, guardians, foster and older siblings.

Absent-Father Syndrome

Data from the interview revealed that educators have not specifically addressed fathers or mothers because of the diverse situations children come from such as single parent, foster care or child headed homes. This led the educators in this setting using an umbrella communication which is addressed to 'parents/guardians'. For instance, Daisy remarked:

We don't say Mr and Mrs because we understand that our children come from different situations where there is no father or a mother for that matter. Our situation today is that you find single mother, single fathers, child-headed homes or children that are in foster care homes.

Some children live with relatives who are not their biological parents. Some children don't know where or what to call home.

Echoing the same sentiments Mike said "*We have a lot of children who live with guardians because we complete a lot of South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) form for grants*".

The above findings corroborate the notion that the highest rate of father absences in the world is found in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2011; Richter et al. 2012; Khewu and Adu 2015). Even though father absence has been linked with adverse consequences for children, economic provision and the role of being a breadwinner of the home dominates the duties the father does for the family. Fathers find themselves away from families due to migration for work, the fluidity of family life, gender-based violence, and the growing autonomy of women (Posel and Devey 2006; Richter et al. 2010; Mashego and Taruvinga 2014; Mashiya et al. 2015) and incarceration (Geller et al. 2010; Houghton and Navarro 2014).

Strategies to Involve Fathers

The study endeavoured to find out if educators in this setting had any strategies in place to improve fathers' participation in the education of their children. Data gathered showed that while there were no strategies in place at the time of conducting the study, educators indicated their willingness to invite fathers to participate in the education of their children. Plans were being put in place as all participants suggested:

We plan to have a father's day celebration and will use this day as a springboard where fathers and educators will come up with activities that aim to improve not only academic performance but behaviour and general well-being of children. I am personally excited and from here, I promise to turn my focus to fathers and not mothers, Vivian explained.

Likewise, Kate advocated: "*I think we need to have awareness programmes where educators realise they need fathers more and invite them the school*". Similarly, Grater proposed that "*Having fathers responsible for clubs, sporting teams, doing maintenance work would boost the morale of children*". Participants in this study were willing to embrace fathers to participate in the education of their children by creating opportunities for joint activities.

DISCUSSION

In its endeavour to unveil the educators' perspectives on fathers' participation in the education of their children, the study found that fathers were still forgotten contributors to child development since educators have not made the initiative to invite them. The first encounter with the research participants revealed ignorance of the educators on the importance of involving fathers. Yet, educators acknowledged the prominence of fathers in children's lives and education as a stabilizing factor to behaviour and academic achievement. There are varied assumptions as to why educators have not invited the fathers. Some noted assumptions include lack of knowledge, parental disillusionment, and reluctance from both educators and parents to introduce a programme (Westergård and Galloway 2010). While programmes to support fathers and fathers-to-be are springing up in places like Canada, some European countries and the United States where paid paternity leave is increasingly on the government agendas and campaigns (Quinn 2014; Seward 2014; Change 2015; Levtov et al. 2015; Mashiya et al. 2015), there is a dearth of programmes and policies developed to promote, understand, and support fathers' participation in South Africa.

It also emerged from the study that even though educators acknowledged the significance of fathers in the education of children, their involvement has remained misty due to lack of programmes that enhance fathers' participation in this setting. There is no record of father involvement in the school where this study took place. However, parental involvement was legislated by the Department of Education (1996) and emphasised by Roehlkepartain (2000) who sees fathers as primary and the most suitable educators; there still is a sense of disconnection in the unification. While involving parents in volunteering activities may boost the morale of children, thereby leading to modified behaviour, it is in their academic involvement that better academic performance will be ensured (Makgopa and Mokhele 2013; Okeke 2014).

While the use of titles such as Mr, Mrs or Ms establishes respect in a relationship, educators in the current study often used the term 'parents' as a catch-all meaning not only to biological parents but also referring to other caregivers such as grandparents, guardians, foster

parents and older siblings. This means that fathers have not been specifically invited to partake in the education of their children, yet schools can engage fathers through frequent communication with them.

The study revealed that communication to parents was usually in the form of children's communication books or the standard letter addressed to parents. While this type of communication gets to the parent, its clarity is not guaranteed. Sometimes parents want to help but may not know how the teacher does a certain academic task (Zarate 2007). Information derived in this study is that communication is mostly one way as it does not indicate how parents communicate with educators. The message emerging is that educators only contact parents when they have a concern on the child's performance or behaviour, thus confirming the assertion by Christenson and Sheridan (2001) whose concern was that communication from school to parents is primarily during crises. The extent to which this kind of communication reaches and is understood by the recipients is not certain, hence Davern (2004) suggests that it is imperative to engage in face-to-face meetings which can be more suitable than a written conversation since the issue can be resolved or clarified immediately.

On the other hand, without any special invitation, the current study revealed that fathers have been reportedly visible in the school during important events such as induction of prefects, sports days and award presentation days. This indicates that fathers' willingness to participate in schools is influenced by the kind of activity as well as the techniques that the schools use to implement the activities (Wu 2005) or when opportunities to do so are provided for them (Cohen 1993). While educators may want to communicate with fathers, the study uncovered the diverse backgrounds from which most of the children came from. It was observed that most of the children's fathers were physically absent. It emerged from this study that the majority of fathers are absent from their homes, as evidenced by the completion of SASSA forms in schools. This scenario confirms the findings of the Human Science Research Council (2005), which showed that a whopping forty-two percent of South African children are growing up without a father in their lives (Richter et al. 2012). Corroborating this research is the assertion that

globally, as well as in the South African setting, society is undergoing fatherhood crisis, where huge numbers of children are residing in fatherless homes and grow up not knowing or having seen their fathers (Baskerville 2004; Richter et al. 2010).

It further emerged from this study that even though educators were mindful of the prominence of fathers in children's lives, there were no programmes targeting fathers' participation and hence strategies to involve fathers were in the pipeline. The scenario in this study corroborates findings of a research undertaken in the north of England which found that slight attempt had been initiated to invite and accommodate men into the classroom (Clough 2000). In the same study, teachers expected fathers to be more involved with school, yet they confessed to be more comfortable talking to mothers rather than to fathers.

CONCLUSION

The study set out to explore the educators' perspectives on fathers' participation in the education of their children. Although educators acknowledge the importance of fathers, they have not specifically invited them due to the absent father syndrome, lack of programmes that include fathers in the school and inadequate skills of the educators to invite fathers. Achieving benefits of parent-teacher co-operation requires concerted efforts in changing the mindset of educators as well as parents so that children in the early childhood education develop to the fulfilment of their rights and aspirations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the Social learning theory discussed and applied in this study, the following recommendations are made:

- ◆ Special training should be afforded to educators on skills relating to how to invite and involve fathers in the early childhood development programmes in school and at home.
- ◆ Schools should plan activities that assist to introduce families and educators in a positive way early in the school year, rather than waiting until complications arise.
- ◆ Schools must plan programmes that involve fathers' participation early in the year

so that fathers can include the school schedule in their work schedules.

- ◆ School and parents should jointly plan tailor-made programmes of involvement that cater for different categories of fathers according to their socio-economic contexts.
- ◆ Educators should periodically provide updates of class activities, assignments and expectations to parents and welcome feedback from fathers.
- ◆ Schools should initiate presentations, workshops and homework guides; they should also give library reading recommendations for parents to augment support their children's education.

The study recommends continuous research of this nature which is set to change the perceptions of educators who, despite their understanding of the essential role fathers play in the education of their children, still pay no attention to innovations that seek fathers' participation.

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