

Spinoffs Associated with Parental Involvement in the Education of Their Children with Literature Drawn from South Africa

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ABSTRACT This paper is a literature review, which was inspired by a study of children with disabilities, which the researchers were conducting at a special school in Bloemfontein. Financial, social, psychological factors and attitudes and beliefs of parents all contribute to the weakening of their involvement in and the commitment and attention, which they devote to the education of their children. As a result, in a significant number of cases there is either limited involvement, or else, none at all. A corollary to these findings concerns the institutional arrangements, which either directly or indirectly make it difficult for these parents to become involved to any significant extent in the education of their children, which tends to result in either the partial or full exclusion of these children from the education system. This finding reveals the failure of the ostensibly inclusive system to grant equal access to education to vulnerable groups such as disabled children. More proactive, multi-sectoral responses need to be instituted in order to ensure that the factors, which hinder parental involvement are overcome and that their children are able to have the same access to education, which is of adequate quality as those without disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement is a combination of commitment and active participation on the part of parents to the schools, which their children attend and to their education. According to Hampden-Thompson et al. (2013), parental involvement, in almost any form, produces measurable gains in the academic achievements of their children. Vandergrift and Greene (1992) maintain that there are distinct levels of parental involvement, namely, a level of commitment to providing support through encouraging their children and being sympathetic, reassuring and understanding, and also a level of parental activity and participation in terms of assuming an active and observable role in the education of their children.

Lai and Vadeboncoeur (2012: 868) explain that parental involvement in schools generally concerns the ways in which parents support the education of their children by linking the home and the school contexts of their lives. As an example, parents should be able to assist their children with their homework when it is necessary to do so, in order to augment the assistance, which they receive from their teachers at school. Sad and Gürbüztürk (2013) have advocated for

equal partnerships between teachers and parents in the education process. The active involvement of parents in the education of their children has been found to yield positive results for the children, which include improved academic performance, rare instances of behavioral problems, increased self-confidence, regular attendance and increased feelings of satisfaction at school, improved social relationships with peers and improved preconditions for their quality of life after leaving school. The likelihood that children will succeed at school is increased when the work that they do at school is supported and continued at home. It has been observed that parents are more likely to become involved in the education of their children when the relationships between parents and teachers are characterized by equality (Surks et al. 2015: 329).

According to Msila (2012), the South African Schools Act (SASA) Act 108 of 1996 accorded the parents of children in public schools a crucial role to play in their governance. The parents are expected to guide their schools and to help their communities by ensuring that the schools have a symbiotic relationship with their communities. Parents who serve in the governance of schools help not only to uphold the

constitutional values of the country and the right of learners to education, but they also help secure the future of their children and they work with the principals to steer their schools towards success. Among other objectives, the SASA aims to ensure that schools actively work towards the elimination of poverty and the instilling of a human rights culture. The parents who serve in school governing bodies (SGBs) are intended to work towards advancing this agenda.

In the opinion of the authors of this paper, a convincing case has been made for the crucial importance of parents becoming involved in the education of their children, whether their children are disabled or not. When the members of communities start to work together, the prognosis for success is generally good and when parents and teachers work hand-in-hand in the education of children, the likelihood of achieving significantly positive results becomes great. When parents assume an active role in the education of their children, particularly those who are disabled, the children will be encouraged to work harder and to succeed in their schooling. In order to maximize the benefits, which are to be derived from the active involvement of parents in the education of their children, teachers need to develop sound relationships, which are characterized by equality with parents.

According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), most studies of parental involvement have found that the active involvement of parents in the education of both children and adolescents has proved to be of great benefit to their learning. However, children also succeed in their studies even when their own parents are not really actively involved in them. The factors that encourage this trend include good training, positive relationships with adults other than their parents and personal resilience. It has also been established that parents usually become involved in the education of their children in order to extend their parental roles, for the satisfaction, which is to be derived from having helped their children to succeed in their studies or in reaction to the demands and the opportunities that are made and presented both by their children and by their schools.

Many teachers believe that parental involvement is crucial to the success of the educational experience, especially for children with disabilities. Parents are a valuable resource for professional educators, and by comparison with teach-

ers and other service providers parents typically have a greater investment in their children, not only in terms of time but also in terms of emotional commitment. Although usually no one will know an individual child as well as the parents do, as their experiences predate and exceed those of professional people, only recently have professionals come to realize the value of parents and endeavored to establish collaborative relationships with them (Gargiulo 2014: 105).

In South Africa, it has been estimated that some 718,409 children between the ages of 5 and 19 years live with disabilities (Statistics South Africa 2014: 7). According to the Human Rights Watch (2015), an estimated half a million of these children have not been included in the mainstream of South Africa's education system. On the basis of this information it is of crucial importance that a study should be conducted concerning the role of parental involvement in the education of disabled children, in order to provide adequate and effective social work interventions. Parents who did not have the same opportunities as those that are available to their children usually show great concern for their schooling and desire their children to learn from their own mistakes by remaining in school, as many of these parents had themselves dropped out of school (Van Wyk and Lemmer 2009: 12).

Problem Statement

Undoubtedly, equal access to education remains a mirage for most of the children who have disabilities in South Africa. One of the most effective institutions for enabling the progressive realization of access to education is the family, and parents have a particularly significant role to play. Unfortunately, many parents find it very difficult to become actively involved in the education of their children, owing to the pressing needs that are imposed by their own circumstances and responsibilities, which range from caring for to providing for their families, which leave them with little time to attend to the educational needs of their children. Also, for some, their backgrounds make it difficult for them to understand the relevance of education, usually owing to the fact that they themselves have not received much education. These beliefs and attitudes can make it very difficult to motivate parents to become actively involved in the education of their children. Conversely, although much

existing policy advocates for inclusive education, it appears to amount to little more than rhetoric, as educational systems are also not inclusive to any significant extent and tend to preclude parents from becoming properly involved in the education of their children. As social workers, the authors of this paper believe that research that advocates the overcoming of the inequalities that are experienced by children with disabilities in terms of their right to education is long overdue.

Aim and Objective of the Paper

The aim and objective of this paper is to establish an understanding of the benefits, which are associated with the involvement of parents in the education of their children, in order to suggest support structures, which promote parental involvement.

METHODOLOGY

This paper has made use of a literature review methodology in order to provide a holistic account of the benefits associated with the involvement of parents in the education of children who have disabilities. The authors have consulted United Nations (UN) documents, government publications and empirical findings, in tandem with their own experiences in the domain of the research topic.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical Framework

Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement

A framework, which comprises six types of parental involvement, was developed by Epstein (2001). Its principal focus is on the developing of partnerships among families, schools and communities and it is used to determine the factors that are most effective for promoting the education of children. The six factors, which have been identified are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community. The framework advocates that in the realm of parenting, families need to be supported to understand the development of both children and adolescents. It also promotes the establishment of a support-

ive home environment for children as learners. In order to improve parenting skills with respect to education, Epstein suggests parent education and other courses or types of training for parents, such as family literacy, family support programs to assist families with health and nutrition and other services.

In order to establish effective channels for communicating, Epstein explains that it is very important to design and to conduct an effective two-way communication from the school to the home and from the home to the school, concerning school programs and the progress of individual children. Examples of effective communication include teachers meeting with every parent at least once a year, with follow-up meetings, as they are needed, and the consulting of report cards by both learners and parents, in order to discuss improving of grades with teachers. Volunteering applies to the recruiting and organizing of help and support from parents for schools, their programs and the activities of learners. Epstein describes three ways in which parents are able to volunteer to participate in the education of their children. First, they may volunteer to participate in school or classroom activities by helping teachers and administrators as tutors or assistants. Secondly, they may volunteer to help the school by participating in fundraising for a particular event or by promoting the school in the wider community. Finally, they may volunteer as members of an audience in the attending of school programs or performances.

For Epstein, learning for parents entails the distribution of ideas and information to them concerning how they can best assist their children with homework and decisions and activities, which are related to the school curriculum. An example could be provided by parents taking their children to a museum in order to expose them to artifacts, which add a dimension of reality to their learning at school. Activities of this sort encourage the development of school-friendly families and encourage parents to interact with the school curriculum. Decision-making entails parents participating in decision-making at their schools, either by serving on school governance committees or by joining school associations such as parent teacher associations. Other decision-making activities include assuming leadership roles in the distribution of information to other parents.

Collaborating with communities pertains to identifying and integrating communities, services and resources in order to support schools, learners and their families. As it could be anticipated, the influence exerted by each of the six factors can produce different results for learners, parents, teaching practices and school environments. As each factor entails many different types of partnership practices, difficulties concerning obtaining the involvement of all families may arise. In order to overcome them, Epstein (2001) suggests that each school should choose the factor, which is believed to be the most likely one to assist it to attain its goals and to develop a climate of alliance between homes and the school. Epstein explains the phenomenon of parental involvement in terms of the behavior of schools towards children and their parents. She maintains that the ways in which schools demonstrate their concern for their children is reflected in the ways in which they demonstrate their concern for their families. If teachers regard children as being learners only, they are likely to regard their families as being separate from their schools. As a consequence, they are likely to expect families to play their role outside of the schools and to leave the education of their children to the schools. Conversely, if teachers regard learners as children, they are likely to regard both their families and their communities as being in partnership with their schools in the education and the development of the children. Partners are likely to recognize their shared interests in and their responsibilities to the children, and together, to develop improved programs and opportunities for learners.

Benefits Associated with Parental Involvement

The Influence of Levels of Education of Parents

Factors that pertain to the lives and the educational achievements of parents can also serve to discourage or to preclude their involvement in the education of their children. The levels of education, which they themselves have attained, will inevitably influence their perceptions of whether they have adequate skills and knowledge to participate in the educational activities of their children (Hornby and Lafaele 2011: 39). As an example, parents who did not complete their own high school education may doubt their abilities to help their children with their home-

work. Parents who do not have university degrees may also feel intimidated by teachers, whom they know are better qualified than they are, and may be hesitant to work closely with teachers as a consequence.

The Beliefs of Parents Concerning Education

Parents who believe that the contribution that they make to the educational success of their children is confined solely to taking them to school are unlikely to become actively involved in either school-based or home-based educational activities (Hornby and Lafaele 2011: 39). Parents who refrain from playing an active role in the education of their children are likely to believe that intelligent children are particularly fortunate and born intelligent and not to attend parent teacher meetings or assist their children with their homework. According to Robinson and Harris (2014: 28), parents from low social classes may be particularly likely to view the educational achievements of their children as residing within the arena of the school and not to wish to disturb the educational process. The perceived separation between the home and the school can preclude parents from responding to requests from teachers to provide their children with at-home learning. From the assessments of these researchers it is evident that the perceptions, which parents have of the need to involve themselves in the education of their children will determine whether or not they will take an active part in their education. Consequently, it is of vital importance that parents should be informed and educated concerning the role, which they need to play in the education of their children.

The Employment Status of Parents

Single parents may be overworked and not have the time or the energy to become actively involved in the education of their children. However, this is also contrasted by findings that show that this also depends on the psychological wellbeing of the children (Sahu 2016). If both parents are employed, the factor of single parents and the kinds of employment in which they work can mitigate against their playing a sufficiently active role in the education of their children. When both parents work, their work may cause them to be too tired at the end of each day to allow them to provide adequate assistance to

their children with the homework (Roeters et al. 2012). Those who work shorter hours or in workplaces where they have a higher degree of autonomy have been found to perform better (Roeters et al. 2012). When parents are unemployed, a lack of money could preclude them from being able to afford a car, taxi fares or to pay babysitters in order to attend school meetings. Mestry (2014) confirms that even the educational outcomes are significantly compromised for children from households where parents are unemployed.

The Health of Parents

The overall physical and psychological health of parents will inevitably determine, to a very large extent, their ability or their willingness to take an active part in the education of their children (Lachman et al. 2014). Parents who are in poor physical or mental health or without an effective social support network, including receiving assistance from members of their extended families, may find it difficult to assist their children effectively with their homework or to consult with their teachers (Lachman et al. 2014). As their physical and mental health deteriorates, it becomes increasingly likely that they will neglect their children (Mariga et al. 2014: 41). As has already been mentioned, single mothers tend to become increasingly over-worked, as they strive to earn sufficient money to support their families, and because they do not know how to provide sufficient assistance to their children, they experience severe emotional stress (Sahu 2016).

The Social Class of Parents

According to Robinson and Harris (2014: 28), parents from low social class backgrounds tend to be less involved in the education of their children, both at home and at school, than those from middle and upper class backgrounds. Being socially disadvantaged serves to isolate poor parents from the efforts, which are made by schools to increase their participation. School programs and practices, which are designed to connect parents with the schools which their children attend are likely to attract more educated and more socioeconomically advantaged parents, which can tend to exclude socioeconomically disadvantaged parents, who may believe

that they do not belong in the company of their more educated and affluent peers. Parents who are burdened with financial hardships are often the primary targets of initiatives, which are introduced in order to increase parental involvement, because they tend to be less visible than other parents in the schools (Cheng Yong 2015). Their ability to become involved in the education of their children is often constrained by a lack of flexibility in their work, a low likelihood of being able to afford paid childcare and economic isolation from the efforts of schools, which are designed to promote participation on the part of parents.

The Living Conditions of Parents

Many socioeconomically disadvantaged parents have experienced being evicted from their homes, crowded housing and having utilities disconnected. These privations generate a great deal of financial instability, which is likely to inhibit the extent to which parents are able to create stimulating home environments (South African Human Rights Council (SAHRC) 2014). The financial circumstances of families can constitute significant barriers, which preclude parents from becoming actively involved in the education of their children (SAHRC 2014: Venter and Rambau 2013). Single parents and parents with young or large families may find it particularly difficult to become actively involved in educational activities, owing to the responsibilities which are entailed by taking care of their families. It also needs to be stressed that the environments in which children live and receive their education are significant factors for both their academic performance and their development. If children are placed in environments, which are not conducive to healthy development and learning, their performance at school will inevitably be adversely affected (Venter and Rambau 2013).

Factors which Pertain to the Relationships between Parents and Teachers

Goals and Agendas

Related to the factors which pertain to relationships between parents and their children, which were discussed earlier in this paper, are the differences with respect to goals and agen-

das between families and schools in the endeavor to make alliances between homes and schools a reality. Interactions between parents and teachers and their respective roles are frequently shaped by different expectations and interests. From the perspective which is provided by their goals, schools and their governing bodies may regard the involvement of parents as an important means of increasing the accountability of schools to their communities and of increasing the academic achievements of children or as a cost effective resource and as a means of overcoming the disadvantaged status and the inequalities of the past. However, the goals of parents are more likely to be confined to improving the academic performance of their children, wishing to influence the ethos which prevails in their schools or the school curriculum and wishing to increase their understanding of school life.

Teachers also have their own goals with respect to parental involvement. According to Rudney (2005), for teachers the value of parental involvement tends to lie in assisting children with their homework, providing a nurturing environment, raising money and attending school events and parent teacher meetings. Parent teacher meetings provide a good example of the extent to which the goals and agendas of parents and teachers can differ. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) have suggested that the goals of teachers for parent teacher meetings include discussing the progress of children and any difficulties which they may be having, finding out from parents how children are coping with being at school, identifying ways in which parents can help their children at home and identifying potential conflicts with parents. They maintain that the goals of parents include discussing the progress of their children and any difficulties which they may be having, comparing the progress of their children with that of others in their classes, learning more about the school and the methods of teaching which are used and questioning teachers about any concerns which they have.

From this assessment it is evident that although there are similarities in the respective agendas of parents and teachers for these meetings, there are also significant differences, which could preclude the establishment of the relationships between parents and teachers, which are needed in order to ensure the effective involvement of parents in the education of their chil-

dren and in the running of schools. In their discussion of the effects of the diverging goals of parents and teachers, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) maintain that relationships between homes and schools are based upon an agenda of socialization, by means of which schools attempt to shape parental attitudes and practices in order to facilitate schooling. These differences with respect to goals create conflicts, which limit both the types of practices pertaining to parental involvement and their success, which ultimately results in frustration as each party seeks to achieve its own agenda, independently of, and often in opposition to, that of the others.

Attitudes

Another crucial factor for understanding the complexity of the difference between what is said and what is done concerning parental involvement is represented by the attitudes of parents and teachers (van den Berg 2013; Christina Grové and Naudé 2016). It is in these attitudes that the influence of many of the other factors that have been discussed becomes evident. Teachers and parents each bring to the problems that are associated with parental involvement personal attitudes, which are deeply rooted within their own historical, economic, educational, cultural, class and gender-based experiences (van den Berg 2013). Many teachers tend to perceive parents in terms of a deficit model, which is manifested through attitudes, which imply that as parents are considered to be problems, they are consequently best kept out of schools (Hornby 2000). At a fundamental level, parents and teachers may also differ in their understanding of the relationship between schooling and education. If education pertains mainly to schooling, logically, teachers are perceived to possess greater knowledge, skills, power and expertise than parents. Conversely, if schooling is merely a component of education, there is a clear shift in terms of power and expertise towards parents, who are intimately involved in the greater part of the education of their children, which occurs outside of school (Hornby and Lafaele 2011).

Many assumptions tend to be made about parents, including the pervasive notion that they are, to an ever-increasing extent, not meeting their responsibilities towards their children as their forebears had done in the past (Menjies

and Bray 2006). By contrast, the findings of research studies suggest that relationships between modern parents and their children are more loving than they were in the past, that the health of children has improved significantly and that the forms of abuse of children which were once considered to be appropriate and desirable are no longer tolerated (Beutel and Anderson 2008; Irwin and Elley 2012). The media, and television in particular, tend to show many examples of poor parenting and often portray parents as being weak and incompetent especially for fathers (Koenig-Visagie 2013). Many teachers make assumptions that some parents are either not interested in or do not really care about the education of their children (Hornby 2000). Parents often feel ignorant concerning the curriculum and the processes of schools. They may believe that teachers would prefer a superficial relationship with them and that they are concerned only with discussing particular problems, rather than with working towards overall solutions (Elizabeth 2011). In this context, it is not surprising that there is a lack of mutual understanding between parents and teachers, with the result that mutual mistrust develops and barriers increase (Hornby 2000; Whitbread et al 2007). It is widely accepted that the vast majority of parents do care about the education of their children and that working parents care just as much as middle-class parents do (Epstein 2001).

In addition, most teachers have a genuine desire to find solutions and to engage meaningfully with parents (Elizabeth 2011). Today teachers work in an environment in which they are, to an increasing extent, held accountable for the academic achievements of children, such as through the publication of the results of national tests, and they are often required to assume responsibility for tasks for which they have received little or no training, including working closely with parents (Engel 2015). As a result, the differences between the assumptions which are held by parents and teachers respectively contribute to the corresponding differences between the rhetoric pertaining to the desirability of parental involvement and the realities which are entailed by endeavoring to encourage meaningful participation on the part of parents in the education of their children.

A comparison of two studies of the attitudes of parents and teachers reveals both the depth and the breadth of the obstacles, which they

create to perpetuate the differences between rhetoric and reality with respect to parental involvement. First, a survey of the attitudes of parents which was conducted by the National Opinion Research Centre (1997) in the United States shows that parents believe, to an overwhelming extent, that schools regard them as making a valuable contribution to the learning of their children and that they have a genuine desire for both themselves and teachers to learn more about the ways in which they are able to become involved in the schools which their children attend. Parents expressed a particular desire for increased involvement in educational programs and decision-making. Secondly, an investigation of the perceptions of teachers revealed that they had specific ideas concerning the type, the frequency and the nature of the involvement, which they desired from parents. The participants in this study expressed the desire for parents to support their ideas and efforts and maintained that although they recognized that certain factors served to preclude the active involvement of parents, they believed that if parents genuinely wished to do so, they could find ways to become more involved in the education of their children. They considered the support which parents provided by assisting their children with their homework to be of particular importance, along with the need for parents to take adequate care to provide for both their physical and their emotional needs. They believed that although parents represented valuable resources in terms of skills, talents and funds, they were also often inclined to question their professionalism. Madiba and Mokgatle (2016) undertook a study that also had results that showed most parents were in full support of programs that were proposed to be implemented at school for the benefit of their children. Whilst it is stated in this paper vividly that parents and teachers indeed may have very genuine desires to work together and be involved, it is critical to address the obstacles to improve the academic and school power of parents regardless of their circumstances as well as empowering teachers with the most powerful lenses to utilize in engaging with parents of children. As one of Nelson Mandela's ideal that education is the most powerful tool that can change life conditions, there is a great need to foster efforts towards ensuring families and schools are good environments to harness and

create an enabling environment for grooming of high quality citizenship and educated children with good character.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that the active involvement of parents in the education of their children can help develop their capacity for learning, whether their children are disabled or not. Although problems are still encountered in the endeavor to enable parents to become actively involved in the education of their disabled children, there have been significant improvements, as relationships between parents and their disabled children are generally growing stronger. Teachers and parents need to work together to improve the education of all learners. Education holds the key for empowering learners from previously disadvantaged population groups, as it has untapped potential for developing secure livelihoods, for transforming communities, and ultimately, for contributing to the growth of the economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that both communities and parents should become actively involved in the education of their children. As it has been found that when the members of communities start to work together, the likelihood for achieving success becomes great, if parents and teachers collaborate as equals to ensure the future of their children through developing their capacity for education, the results will inevitably be extremely beneficial to their communities. The active participation of parents in the education of their children will encourage them to work harder and to succeed in their schooling. Disabled children are in particular need of encouragement and positive reinforcement. Schools for disabled children need to develop programs and policies to encourage parental involvement in order to create support structures for parents who have not been able to become actively involved in the education of their children, for various reasons. Social workers and teachers together need to raise awareness through concerted campaigns, in order to encourage parental involvement and also to educate parents and communities of the crucial role, which it has to play in the education and the development of disabled children.

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