

Problems Confronting Fathers in the Education of their Pre-school Age Children and the Implications for South African Early Education Policy

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ABSTRACT The Draft Early Education Policy and other related policies noted that parents, including fathers, are supposed to play an active role in their children's pre-school education. This paper aims to investigate problems confronting fathers and hindering them from being involved in pre-school education and implications for policy. The key finding of this paper is that problems confronting fathers in pre-schools are mainly familial, that is, prejudiced belief systems, legislative gaps, the fathers financial and employment status, and the relationship quality of parents. Therefore, it is evident that the identified problems can result in the envisaged policy objectives not being realized. Consequently, there is a need to implement intervention programs that are meant to equip fathers and communities in understanding parenting roles and implications of child related policies and customary laws on active fatherhood. Policy reviews looking at violation of children's rights versus parental care, especially by fathers, are also necessary.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Draft Early Childhood Development Policy (No. 204 13 March 2015), a pre-school focuses on young children that have not yet reached the legal school going age, that is, from conception until they start Grade R (7 years) or 8 years in case of children with special needs. Luxomo (2009) noted that pre-schools are also called Early Childhood Development centers. Zanoni et al. (2013) also shared that pre-school children are at a stage where they develop physically, morally, emotionally, mentally, spiritually and socially. Furthermore, Shumba et al. (2014) believed that pre-schools assist to shape the children's goals (current and future), and therefore active parent involvement is necessary to support the process. In the best interest of the pre-school children and the Early Childhood Development programs, legislative frameworks like Act No 38 of the Children's Act (2005), the White Paper on Families (2012) and the Draft Early Childhood Development Policy (No. 204 13 March 2015) also emphasize the imperative-ness of the partnerships between parents and pre-school caregivers. In addition, Modesaotsile (2012) noted that parental involvement is important in pre-school education, as it is a stage where

children develop emotional intelligence, that is, a child learns to be purposeful, independent, confident, curious and cooperative. Specifically on father involvement in early education, Hodgskiss (2015) justified that compared to women, men bring more rough and tumble play, that is, active movement and entertainment, therefore, a male approach can also challenge the way in which many Early Childhood Development programs currently operate. Hodgskiss (2015) also believed that young boys and girls need to develop positive relationships with men, as several studies have revealed that active fatherhood enhances children's mental and emotional development.

As much as it is strongly emphasized that both parents are expected to actively participate in pre-schools, Daily Maverick (2015) established that globally South Africa is listed amongst countries with the highest rate of father absence. Many researchers (Byaruhanga and Dlada 2015; Makofane 2015; Cronje 2015; Richter et al. 2012; Mzimakhwe 2015) confirmed that father absence is a common phenomenon in South Africa (particularly amongst blacks) as many children in pre-schools are from "broken" and re-constituted families, that is, divorced, single or step parents. Byaruhanga et al. (2015) noted that for

many children maternal uncles, grandfathers and older brothers assume the role of father and provide for a child's livelihood, his or her education, paternal love and guidance. The prevalence of absent fathers is a great concern because international and local studies are indicating that young children with supportive or active fathers start school with advanced levels of school readiness, better cognitive competence and can handle stress and frustration associated with schooling (Daily Maverick 2015; Coley 2001; Palkovitz 2002). Harris (2015) also believed in the significance of active father involvement in developing their children's emotional intelligence during their formative years. In retrospect, literature (Shannon et al. 2002) revealed that children without fathers are likely to be exposed to poverty, substance abuse, crime, dropping out of school, health problems, emotional problems and teenage pregnancy. Daily Maverick (2015) further cautioned that although father presence alone does not necessarily guarantee that a father is actively participating in a child's life or education, nonetheless, the absence of a father has more unfavorable consequences for families and the society at large. It is therefore clear that prevalence of father absence may pose a challenge on the implementation of the Draft Early Childhood Development Policy objective, that is, active involvement of both parents in early education.

Rationale

As aforementioned in the introduction, the Children's Act No 38 of 2005, the White Paper on Families (2012) and the Draft Early Childhood Development Policy (No. 204, 13 March 2015) emphasized the significance of involved parenting in pre-school education as that is a determinant of how a child relates to learning, the school and life in general. Research (Brown and Duku 2008; Mmotlane et al. 2009; Mncube 2009; Mbokodi and Singh 2011) felt that although issues of parental involvement are uniquely packaged in different legislative frameworks in South Africa, it is clear that parental involvement in school activities has not yet reached the expected levels. Other researchers (Felix et al. 2008; Makgopa and Mokhele 2013) cautioned that father un-involvement does not necessarily mean that fathers are unconcerned about their children's education, but it could be a result of pover-

ty, re-constituted families, illiteracy, effects of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome pandemic, men's inherent personalities, laws not covering unmarried fathers, customary laws related to payment of damages (*intlawulo*), the quality of relationships between spouses and unmarried parents, residence issues and migration. However, Downer and Mendez (2005) shared that despite the problems mentioned above, fathers are rarely involved in school-based classroom activities, school trips and volunteering, instead they are more involved in home-based learning experiences. It is therefore, important to understand the problems confronting fathers and thereby hindering them from being actively involved in pre-schools and the implications on policy.

Objectives of the Study

This study may assist to identify the problems hindering active father involvement in pre-school education as well as highlight policy gaps that may further exacerbate the problem of father non-involvement in pre-school education.

An Ecological Approach to Paternal Involvement

Ecological approach to paternal involvement is the most relevant theoretical framework for this study as it outlines a multi-systemic perspective on what determines father roles and the effect of these roles on children's minds, emotions and behaviors (Sameroff and Fiese 2000). This theoretical framework will evidently present the problems that hinder father involvement in pre-school education. Downer and Mendez (2005) noted that the chosen ecological approach has three elements that contribute to father un-involvement in early education, that is, the child, the father and familial qualities or attributes. The three qualities are discussed below.

Child Attributes

There are a number of a child's attributes that fathers usually struggle with, however Swartz and Bhana (2009) noted that these attributes usually emanate from the emotions that are triggered during the process of parenting and educating the children. A study undertaken by Bretherton et al. (2014) discovered that fa-

thers get frustrated when they fail to reassure children that they feel need reassurance. At times fathers get worried when they notice that their children are emotionally clingy (Byaruhanga et al. 2014). Fathers also struggle with the following, that is, not knowing whether to be assertive or permissive when a child misbehaves, cannot tolerate children “pushing their buttons”, get irritated when their children do not understand that they are tired, feel guilty whenever they lose control or overreact, feel irritated when their children are not cooperative, resent working hard to get their children to listen and understand, blame themselves for grooming self-confident and self-assured children, and are not comfortable with gender and temperament, as fathers seem to relate more with boys than with girls (Bretherton et al. 2014; Downer and Mendez 2005; Engel 2011; Krohn and Bogan 2001; Spencer 2001). As a result of the above, fathers develop negative feelings about themselves and thus decide to be unavailable (Bretherton et al. 2014).

Father Characteristics

Individual father characteristics that can impede father-child interactions could be the fathers’ supposed capabilities, role fulfillment and participation, and his self-esteem and receptiveness (Downer and Mendez 2005). The personalities of fathers also present problems as in most cases fathers have this “fix it” attitude, and in dealing with pre-school children these efforts are often fruitless and frustrating, and as a result fathers feel powerless, ineffective and even irrelevant (Lavoie 2005). Rorich (2008) and Lavoie (2005) noted that fathers of children with learning difficulties have a tendency to deny the existence of the problem, and as a result, fathers may not have an opportunity to view the cycle of failure and frustration, and on recognition they feel guilty that they took a while to notice that there was a problem. Fathers also have a tendency to focus on the needs of their women or wives and their children while ignoring their own needs as they always see themselves as supporters (Bezuidenhout 2006). Fathers usually back off whenever they feel that their attempts to help a child with learning problems is not appreciated by their wives or partners (Stanberry 2014). With relation to physical activities, a father’s involvement mostly consists of physical

interaction as they will play, discuss or do outdoor activities with children (Halme et al. 2009). Fathers become very worried whenever their children are involved in dangerous activities and they discourage children from undertaking such activities or they would recommend less risky activities (Halme et al. 2009). Lack of education is also a barrier, as some fathers are illiterate, therefore their reading, writing and numeracy skills are lacking, and as a result they encounter problems when they have to assist their children (Modesaotsile 2012). Emotional trauma is also an issue with fathers who experienced physical or sexual abuse by their own fathers or other men, and usually struggle to be close to children (Richter et al. 2010).

Familial Characteristics

Familial characteristics that make it difficult for men to play an active fathering role in early education include the following, that is, prejudiced beliefs favoring women over men, gaps in laws and policies, cultural beliefs, financial or employment status of the father, relationship quality between unmarried parents, the marriage quality, the marital status of parents, father’s residence and father’s family size (Hodgkiss 2015; Posel 2003).

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Literature notes that the following are some of the problems that confront fathers and hinder them from being involved in their children’s pre-school education.

Prejudiced Beliefs Against Men

Zanoni et al. (2013) established that except for fathers who voluntarily decide to be absent in their children’s early education, a number of countries including South Africa practice a systemic overlooking of fathers in various facets of their children’s lives, including pre-school education. Colpin et al. (2004) noted that many fathers are interested in being involved in education, however, schools discourage them from getting involved and they “feel they are perceived as incompetent parents in general”. There is a belief that compared to men women have an intrinsic gift to be better caregivers (Hodgkiss 2015; Posel 2003). Posel (2003) also reported that

fathers are viewed as sources of immorality due to a number of social ills perpetrated by men and this has posed a problem for fathers. Hodgkiss (2015) also testified that it has been established in literature that fathers cannot be trusted with children due to the prevalence of social ills like rape. Fathers note that family members are suspicious of them and do not trust them to “leave children in their care/supervision”, as they are always viewed as rapists (Posel 2003). Hodgkiss (2015) revealed that not only fathers are shunned in pre-schools but the male staff as well as the society tend to question their motives of wanting to work with children, they are also labeled as either gay or pedophiles.

Ignorance Resulting in Reluctance to Get Involved in Schools

As much as Okeke (2014) mainly talked about parents in general, that is, both mothers and fathers, the researcher established that many parents do not understand their role in schools, and some are even apprehensive of the way schools are run because they do not know how schools function. As an intervention measure to the identified problem, Okeke (2014) suggested the inclusion of parents in school governance as well as in their children’s learning.

Legislative Gaps

Act No. 84 of the South African Schools Act (1996) revealed that provisions concerning pregnancy and parenthood are generally understood as referring exclusively to mothers and fathers are not specifically included in any school practices regarding pregnancy and parenthood. Bhana et al. (2014) confirmed the latter by noting that schools tend to regard pregnancy and parenthood as challenges for girls and therefore place the burden of parenthood onto girls rather than boys. School going fathers are seldom identified and when they are identified they are treated as ‘a problem’ or ‘an inconvenience’ (Bhana et al. 2014). However, Swartz and Bhana (2009) argued that contrary to the popular perception that teenage fathers are not interested in fatherhood, teenage fathers express a need to participate in their children’s education.

In addition, Paizes (2006) also reported that the child’s right to be cared by both the mother and the father is constitutional, however, the Common Law noted that unmarried fathers have

no right to take care or to have direct contact (access) with their children, as their key responsibility is to give financial support. Act No. 86 of the Government Gazette (12 December 1997) that refer to unmarried fathers noted that in order for fathers to have access, custody and guardianship of children:

A court may on application by the natural father of a child born out of wedlock make an order granting the natural father access rights to or custody or guardianship of the child on the conditions determined by the court and an application referred to in subsection (i) shall not be granted, (a) unless the court is satisfied that it is in the best interests of the child; and (b) until the court, if an enquiry is instituted by the Family Advocate in terms of Section 3, has considered the report and recommendations referred to in that section. In addition, the Children’s Act (2005) recognizes that in terms of Section 21, biological fathers of illegitimate children will be given automatic family rights and responsibilities if they comply with certain criteria. The criteria is outlined in Chapter 3 Section 21 of the Children’s Act (2005) that unmarried fathers do not have parental responsibilities and rights and can only acquire full parental responsibilities and rights if: (i) at the time of child’s birth the father was living with the mother in a permanent life partnership; (ii) He, regardless he has lived or is living with the mother; (iii) consent to be identified or successfully applies to be identified as father according to Section 26 or has paid damages according to customary law; (iv) contributes or has attempted in good faith to contribute to the child’s upbringing for a reasonable period, and contributes/has attempted in good faith to contribute towards expenses in connection with the maintenance of the child for a reasonable period.

Looking at the above mentioned quotation, practically the Constitution of South Africa (1996) and the Common Law are disadvantaging natural fathers because a non-resident father, who is not intending to live or marry his child’s mother, who lacks resources to pay for damages for impregnating the woman (*intlawulo*), who does not have resources to approach courts and who lacks knowledge about his rights, is not to be covered by the laws mentioned above. In such cases, natural fathers end up being barred from participating in their children’s lives due to their

inability to support their children financially (Makofane 2015). Therefore due to the latter, Makofane (2015) added that in such cases parental care for children is often compromised.

Financial and Employment Status

The 'caregiver versus financial provider' role is also connected to the employment status or ability of the father to provide for the child (Swartz and Bhana 2009). McLanahan and Carlson (2004) noted that unemployed fathers are less involved and fathers with busy work schedules also present with reduced involvement. Richter et al. (2010) shared that unemployed fathers' as well as teenage fathers' inability to provide financial provision for their children result in them being absent in their children's early education. Posel and Devey (2006) noted that young men in South Africa struggle to support their children financially due inadequate education and rife unemployment, as a result fathers feel like failures because they cannot support their children. Makusha and Richter (2015) revealed that the father's unemployment status and low income put South African men at a disadvantage, as they cannot live with their children or have access to them. Makusha and Richter (2015) also shared that compared to unemployed men there is high likelihood that men with financial resources reside with their families, that is, wives and children.

Linked to the issue of financial provision, many young and unemployed fathers are often hindered by their inability to pay damages (*intlawulo*) for impregnating the child's mother (Posel and Devey 2006). In most cases, the mother's family would require the man to pay and if the father cannot or is unable to pay, the mothers' family can prevent the father from having access to the child (Bhana and Nkani 2014; Swartz and Bhana 2009; Makusha and Richter 2015). The 'father as the provider' is understood as a traditional duty of a man and it is also what is role-modeled by fathers to their sons, therefore, when men cannot provide financially for their children, they feel like failures, and thus some choose to be absent (DoE and UNICEF 2009).

Quality of Relationships Between Parents

A poor relationship between a man and a female partner or her family has an influence on

father involvement, as the mothers' reluctance to give the father access to the child correlates with less father involvement (Downer and Mendez 2005; Makusha and Richter 2015). Generally, there is a belief that the marital status of the parents is supposed to have a positive impact on the time spent with children, however, research revealed that fathers sharing a home with their children do not dedicate much time to their pre-school age children, whilst those who do not stay with their children dedicate more time (Halme et al. 2009). Sarkadi et al. (2007) argued that in terms of time dedicated to children, although fathers in marriages spend insufficient time with their children and divorced and cohabiting fathers dedicate more time, it was reported that physical activities takes most of the time that fathers spend with their children. Motlane et al. (2009) shared that compared to single fathers, married fathers seem not to be spending adequate time in pre-school education, and this non-involvement or discontinuity is usually caused by separation from a spouse or problems that have resulted in contact avoidance between spouses. Halme et al. (2009) believed that the bigger the family, the less time the father spends with his children, and vice versa.

The marital quality can also negatively affects father involvement in pre-school education, as it is reported that fathers in happier marriages are actively involved in their children's rearing and nurturing (Allen and Daly 2007). Some scholars also reported that fathers who are more fulfilled in their marriages and get support from their spouses participate more in their children's schooling due to the perception that at times, fathers are encouraged (to be involved) by the aspiration to satisfy their spouses (Gordon 2012; Richter et al. 2012; Smit 2002). Halme et al. (2009) also shared that compared to those who do not have, fathers who have custody of their children appreciate being involved in pre-school education.

In terms of residence, Downer and Mendez (2005) added that resident fathers are involved in various childrearing activities compared to non-residential fathers. However, Makusha and Richter (2015) and Makofane (2015) cautioned that not living with a child does not necessarily imply that a father is not involved as most fathers (not living with their children) use other ways to connect with their children, for example, by providing financial or emotional support. Rich-

ter et al. (2010) shared that migration has also contributed a lot to non-resident fatherhood, as most South African men leave their homes for mining areas in order to support their families. Richter et al. (2010) shared that, sadly, due to high levels of unemployment the migrant labor system still persists in contemporary society.

It is clear from the above discussion that problems confronting South African fathers are not largely linked to children and father attributes but mainly on familial characteristics, such as prejudiced belief systems, legislative gaps, financial and employment status as well as the relationship quality of parents. It must also be noted that besides the problems of fathers being systemically unwelcomed in pre-schools, being viewed with suspicion, and a possible lack of knowledge about their role, some of the problems identified by the study do not necessarily guarantee that if they were not an issue, fathers would be involved in early education. Richter et al. (2015) and Madhavan et al. (2008) cautioned that a father's presence and father's accessibility do not necessarily guarantee that a father is active in the education of his child, as there are fathers staying/accessible to their children but are uninvolved. In the light of the above argument, legislative gaps, financial/employment status and the quality of relationships between parents can only be deemed as some of the problems that could "possibly" hinder fathers from being involved in pre-school education. Although Makusha and Richter (2015) strongly argued that the father's presence and accessibility does not necessarily "mean" active fatherhood, they advised that regardless of financial challenges and relational problems between parents, continued encouragement of non-resident fathers to be involved in pre-school education is necessary.

Implications for South African Early Education Policy

As much as not all the problems identified above are linked to policy gaps, it is evident that government policies and cultural laws also contribute greatly in hindering fathers from being involved in pre-school education. For both government and customary laws, it is highly evident that the issue of financial contribution or lack thereof, seems to be the key determinant whether a father can have access or can partici-

pate in a child's life. In terms of ensuring that all fathers are given an equal chance to be involved in schooling, it is clear that the Constitution of South Africa (1996), the South African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996) and the Common Law have some gaps that still make it difficult for fathers to exercise this right. As aforementioned in the introduction, fathers have a significant role in pre-school education, probably, if the identified problems are left unattended what is envisaged in the Draft Early Childhood Development Policy (No. 204, 13 March 2015) will not be realized. This disregard for problems that some fathers might be experiencing, confirms what Posel (2003) said, "South Africa seem to be envisaging an ideal man, a man of peace, a loving father and a provider who is able to support his family. Regrettably, the conditions in South Africa are not as ideal, and therefore, if left unattended, these gaps can pose challenges with relation to father involvement in pre-schools. Therefore, it is imperative that the above mentioned problems be addressed, failing which, children will continue to miss the critical role that fathers ought to play in pre-school education in order for them to grow to be balanced people.

CONCLUSION

The above mentioned findings reveal that the problems that impede father involvement in pre-school education are a result of the quality of relationships between parents, socioeconomic factors as well as from legislations governing the issue of paternity or fatherhood. Therefore, there is a need for intervention measures that will seek to address all the identified problems. If these identified problems can be left unattended, there is a probability that fathers will continue to experience problems with relation to active involvement in their pre-school education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the abovementioned findings, the following intervention measures are recommended:

1. There is a need for training programs aimed at capacitating fathers to understand child rearing and the role that fathers are expected to play in pre-schools.

2. Communities need to be counseled/trained on ways to deal with fathers in the aftermath of an emergence of the “new father”, that is the father who seeks to participate in his child upbringing, including education.
3. Communities need to be trained on ways to deal and cope with social ills like physical and sexual violence, and also to be wary of the fact that generalization in dealing with such problems can only aggravate the problem of absent fathers.
4. A platform needs to be created in communities, where issues related to customary law and its implications on child development and children’s rights are discussed. Communities need to devise and suggest ways in which the customary law can accommodate young and unemployed fathers.
5. There is an urgent need to revisit policies related to the rights and responsibilities of fathers in order to make provision for other aspects of care (emotional/psychological, academically, physical, spiritual), and not to solely concentrate or emphasize financial care and support. Issues related to financial provision, the employment status of young and unemployed fathers, and the child’s right to parental care also need to be given serious consideration when the policy reviews are conducted.
6. Support groups for fathers by other fathers and Early Childhood Development practitioners need to be formed so that fathers struggling with parenting issues can be supported.

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