

## Positive Fatherhood: A Key Synergy for Functional Early Childhood Education in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** This paper presents findings from an empirical study of fathers' involvement in the preschool education of children in one South African rural community. Both the social capital and the bio-ecosystems theories were employed to elucidate the concept of positive fatherhood, its value in Early Childhood Education (ECE), and some of its inhibitors and enhancers. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from ten fathers. Data was analysed through content analysis method. Key findings reveal that participants define positive fatherhood in relation to being able to provide for their families. The value of positive fatherhood in ECE is perceived in terms of breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring bright futures for children. The main inhibitor of positive fatherhood is the weak relationship between teachers and fathers, whereas the main enhancer is forging strong ties with fathers and the community at large. The implications on research and practice are also discussed.

### INTRODUCTION

Children's early start in education is strongly recommended due to associated positive outcomes for schools, children, families, and the government. A considerable volume of research reveals that early starters are less likely to drop out of school, or repeat grades, and have better chances of leading successful lives upon the completion of school, compared to late starters (Department of Education (DoE) 2001; Allen and Daly 2007; Okeke 2014; Tekin 2014; Mathwasa and Okeke 2016b; Mncanca et al. 2016). Not only do these benefits spare parents psychological stress as a result of their children's poor adjustment in school, they also spare parents and the government vast amounts of money on remedial education. Successful completion of school, particularly at an early age, can increase the chances of employment and significantly alleviate pressure on parental and state welfare.

However, in South Africa, access to quality early childhood services including health and education remains a challenge, especially for poor children in rural areas and townships. Their situation is exacerbated by lack of parental support, and more specifically fathers who tend to be absent from the lives of their children. Absent fatherhood is associated with various academic and developmental challenges in childhood, with serious implications in adulthood (Okeke 2014; Mathwasa and Okeke 2016a; Mncanca et al. 2016). This paper forms a part of an

ongoing academic dialogue and generation of knowledge base on the role of positive fatherhood in South Africa's post-apartheid ECE sector.

### South Africa's ECE Context

The South African government envisages that by 2030, every child will be enrolled in an ECE program for at least two years before commencing primary school education (Department of Basic Education (DBE) 2014). This vision needs support from various stakeholders, especially parents and communities at large. Parental involvement constitutes a big challenge, especially in the light of large numbers of South African children who lack an involved father in their lives (Mncanca et al. 2016). Other threats to this vision include the need for extensive infrastructure development, coupled by the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality (Mabugu and Amusa 2015). These threats are attributed to the legacy of apartheid, whose characteristics include instability in most black families due to absent fathers (Rabe 2006). These threats are also attributed to the entrenched socio-economic inequality which translates into a variable quality of ECE provisioning between the private and the public, and between urban and rural ECE sectors (DoE 2001; Ebrahim 2010).

Nowhere within the ECE sector, is the legacy of apartheid more evident today than in the pronounced racial dimension regarding access to quality ECE and education in general (Keswell 2010). Only about one-third of black children

have access to out-of-home ECE centres that offer a better quality of educational programs (Mabugu and Amusa 2015). Earlier, the Statistics South Africa (2013) reported that just over a third of black children live with their biological fathers. This background sheds light on the necessity to study black fathers as a unique social group that is still reeling from the unique historical experience of colonialism and apartheid, and the subsequent post-apartheid reality of poverty, unemployment and inequality which disproportionately affects black families.

### *The Role of Positive Fatherhood in ECE*

More than the need for care and teaching of essential developmental skills, what makes positive father involvement crucial in ECE is the research evidence which highlights benefits for children and their families. Research overwhelmingly espouses that positive father involvement in ECE constitute a key determining factor for successful early childhood development (Khewu and Adu 2015; Richter et al. 2012). Research reveals that by the age of three months, babies understand that they have two parents, a mother and a father (Coleman and Garfield 2004). Research suggests that father involvement is necessary even during the neonatal stage because “in the first few hours after birth, a baby is primed to react to the father’s voice” (Fletcher 2011: 20). It is also important to note that eight percent of the human brain construction takes place before the age of four years (Centre for the Developing Child (CDC) 2014). Therefore, the manner in which fathers interact with babies can literally restructure a baby’s brain (Fletcher 2011). Earlier research conducted in the United States found that father-child interactions afford children an experience that is exclusively unique to fathers and not interchangeable with mother-child interaction (Downer 2003). The research also revealed that father involvement in ECE has a positive impact on the children’s school readiness and adjustment (Downer 2003). Based on these findings, the case for positive fatherhood in ECE cannot be overstated.

### *The Current State of Father’s Involvement in ECE*

Despite the above findings, lack of father availability and involvement in the lives and education of the majority of South African children continues to be one of the biggest social

problems. Local researchers concur that for most children, father absence has become a norm rather than an exception (Richter et al. 2010; Richter et al. 2012; Khewu and Adu 2015). Researchers had earlier noted that “for many young people (in South Africa) the care and protection associated with the presence of a father is an alien experience” (Richter et al. 2004: 1). In a recent study of stress and coping strategies, it was reported that lack of father involvement in their children’s education was one of the leading causes of stress among preschool educators (Okeke et al. 2015). One of the key reasons why this is more prevalent among Black families is the unfavourable socio-economic condition of the majority of Black South Africans. This scenario itself has its roots in the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa, which is elaborated in the following paragraph.

### *A Historical Orientation to Black Fathers’ Absence in ECE*

In 1951, the apartheid government instituted the Bantu Authorities Act, which resulted in the forced removals and confinement of Black people into economically unviable rural areas called ‘homelands’ (Noble et al. 2014). Black men travelled long distances from the homelands to find work in the cities, and would visit their families back home once a year (Harrington et al. 2004). Consequently, family life was destroyed, and that led to the emergence of the absent father phenomenon in most Black families (Rabe 2006). The migrant labour system also resulted in delayed marriages and a high number of children born out of the wedlock (Richter et al. 2010). However, very little has changed in the labour and residential patterns of post-apartheid South Africa.

The majority of Black families still live in the same homeland zones, and they still travel to the cities to sell their labour as was the case during apartheid (Mncanca et al. 2016). Noble et al. (2014: 1) argue that “although the homelands were incorporated into the Republic of South Africa in 1994, these areas still differ markedly from others within the country in terms of deprivation and income poverty”. According to Mncanca et al. (2016), the squalid living conditions of Black men in the cities have a dehumanizing effect, which ultimately leads to alcohol abuse and neglect of children. Discussing the living conditions of migrant Black men in one of South

Africa's cities, one research participant noted that "the conclusion is that in the towns we are spilt just like water on the ground" (Morrel 2006: 34). Researchers concur that poverty and lack of employment play a leading role in preventing Black fathers' involvement in their children's education (Rabe 2006; Richter et al. 2010; Eddy et al. 2013; Mncanca et al. 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### *The Bio-Ecosystems Theory*

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory posits that the study of human development should consider the entire social context in which human development takes place in a given period. To facilitate better understanding of how the social context affects and influences human development, Bronfenbrenner (1994) classified the social environment into five systems. The micro-system, which refers to immediate environments in which growth is taking place including homes and schools. The meso-system, which refers to relationships within and between micro-systems. A good example is the relationship between home and school. The exo-system, which refers to relationships between two or more micro-systems. Although the child may not be directly involved, it however, "indirectly influences...the setting in which the developing person lives" (Bronfenbrenner 1994: 40). For instance, the workplaces influence the amount of time parents spend with their children.

The macro-system includes environments that are distant from the developing individual but have an overarching influence in all the micro-systems. Examples of the macro-systems include politics, laws, belief systems, and cultures which "ultimately affect the particular conditions and processes occurring in the micro-system" (Bronfenbrenner 1994: 40). Lastly, the Chrono-system, which refers to changes in the individuals as well as in the micro-systems. For example, individuals change due to age, health status, death and the acquisition of knowledge. These changes ultimately affect early childhood development specifically and human development generally.

The ecological model was considered suitable in this study because it reveals the importance of the family (micro-system) and the cultural contexts (macro-systems) in which children

develop, and in which the fatherhood identity is practiced. The ecological model provided a theoretical lens to analyse how the socio-economic and the socio-cultural contexts influenced fatherhood practices and informed the construction of fatherhood identities among the research participants. This understanding helped to elucidate how the micro-macro-systems continuum influences fathers' involvement in early childhood education (ECE).

#### *Social Capital Theory*

Coleman's (1988: 100) theory posits that "social capital comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action". Coleman (1988) explains that social capital in the family can refer to the time parents spend with their children on educational activities. Social capital of the family, therefore, depends on the kind of relationship parents have with their children. This means social capital depends on the physical presence of both the parents. In this study, the analysis was premised on Coleman's theoretical perspective, which posits that physical absence of a father or a father figure in a child's life constitutes a structural deficiency in the family social capital. This theoretical approach helped to analyse and formulate an understanding of participants' definitions of positive fatherhood. It also provided a theoretical lens to glean insights about participants' relationships with their children, and how fathering practices are influenced by the nature of relationships participants reported to have had with their own fathers.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study's design was framed as an exploratory inquiry, which used a qualitative approach located in the interpretive paradigm. As a result, data were obtained through the semi-structured interviews from ten fathers of children under six years who were purposively selected from one school only. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to probe deeper into relevant issues and provided leverage for the interviewees to perceive the interview as a dialogue and to tell stories that were important to them (Cohen et al. 2011). The participants were engaged to understand their views on the concept of positive fatherhood; the value positive fa-

therhood have on ECE; the enhancers and inhibitors of positive fatherhood on ECE; and the implications of their views on the practice of ECE. A qualitative content analysis approach was employed to analyse interview data using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software.

### Ethical Considerations

All participants were recruited by their children's preschool through an invitation letter to minimise any feelings of coercion. They were all provided information sheets about the purpose of the study in simple language that they were familiar with. All participants gave informed consent, and signed all the necessary consent forms. All ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the process of the research and no complaint was raised before, during and after the research.

## RESULTS

### Participants' Definitions of Positive Fatherhood

The participants' own definitions of a 'good father' or positive fatherhood focused on whether one who is able to make material provisions for his family. The father as a breadwinner was, therefore, a recurring theme in the participants' responses. Asked what his roles were in his family, *Ntando*, one of the father participants noted, "my job is to put food on the table". It seemed that for one to be considered a good father one must provide, irrespective of whether one fulfils other obligations attributed to fatherhood within the cultural framework. Conversely, one can fulfil all the obligations attributed to fatherhood, but fall short of being considered a good father if he cannot provide according to *Ntando*. Along these lines, Coleman (1988) speaks of expectations and obligations, norms and effective sanctions in the creation of social capital. In the context of the present study, the cultural norm is that fatherhood is synonymous with one's ability to provide, and the expectation is that a father should "put food on the table."

Fathers in the present study took pride in being breadwinners in their families, and explained how they verbally sanctioned their friends, relatives and neighbours who defaulted on their obligations. One of the participants, *Mfundisi* explains:

*"My friend's ex-girlfriend misuses the money he provides for child maintenance. His ex (sic) is a loan shark, and she supports her business with child maintenance. So my friend stopped paying maintenance. That's when I called him and asked, if you stop paying, what's the child going to eat?"*

Similarly, *Xola* thought that the biggest challenge to fatherhood is fulfilling the biggest role of a father, which involves providing for his family. According to *Xola* "You need to be financially strong in order to be a good father". In the same vein, *Lunga* mentioned that providing for his children's needs, even when he did not agree with his wife's or his children's school's demands, was his main responsibility as a father. It is therefore, evident that being a breadwinner is integral in the participants' practicing of a fatherhood identity.

### The Value of Positive Fatherhood in ECE

The participants acknowledged that fathers have an important role to play in their children's education. However, their views differed regarding what they considered to be the value of being involved in their children's education. Such variety of views can be attributed to, among other things, the participants' life stories which differed significantly in regard to family background, upbringing, age, marital status, and occupation. It also became evident that the participants' experiences with their fathers were the most influential factor on their current fatherhood practices and views. This finding was most relevant to *Mfundisi* than the other two participants. What *Mfundisi* considered to be the value of his involvement in ECE is largely influenced by the relationship he had, or rather never had, with his late father. He explained:

*"I value education a lot because my parents were not educated and they couldn't afford to send me to school even though my mother tried by all means. My father was never there for me. So now I am trying to change this situation...so that they (his children) will have a much brighter future than mine."*

For *Mfundisi*, the value of positive fatherhood in his children's education lies in being able to break the cycle of poverty by "changing this (current) situation" through education. *Mfundisi's* father, it seems, did not have this mind-set as he "was never there" for him.

For *Lunga*, the value of positive fatherhood in ECE is to be in a position to instil in his child the values of commitment to study and appreciation of education. *Lunga* explained that for his “*involvement to have any value the child himself must appreciate education as the most important thing in life.*” *Lunga* added that he wants his child to “*understand at an early age why (he) sends him to school every day. He must also understand that it is important to start early in education to avoid challenges later in life.*” In a similar vein, *Xola* explained,

*“I am laying a foundation so that he can understand the importance of education. Children’s behaviours change as they grow but if you cultivate what is right while they are still young it will be difficult to change. I must assist him with homework...It is important for the teacher to see that the child was assisted with homework.”*

Of the participants, *Xola* was the only one who seemed concerned about how the teachers perceived his involvement in his child’s education. He also mentioned that if he has a question for the teacher, he writes it in a message book that stays in his child’s school bag, and the teacher would respond the following day. *Xola’s* involvement through helping his child with homework and staying in contact with his child’s teacher elucidate how positive fatherhood could be key to functional ECE. The present researchers then suggest that while positive fatherhood in ECE is essential for securing brighter futures for children, as the participants alluded, it is also a key synergy for functional ECE. Let the researchers now turn to challenges fathers reported to have experienced when attempting to enact positive fatherhood in their children’s early education.

### ***Inhibitors of Positive Fatherhood in ECE***

It must be noted that although ten fathers participated in the study, the views of three participants: *Mfundisi*, *Xola* and *Lunga*, have predominantly featured in this paper mainly because their views have had direct impact on the objectives of the study. The participants’ views concerning inhibitors, or challenges to positive fatherhood can be grouped into two categories namely: inhibitors within micro-systems and inhibitors in the macro-systems. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994), micro-systems refer to

people’s immediate environments such as homes and schools. Factors in the micro-system have a direct impact on individuals within the system. On the other hand, macro-systems refer to distant environments and abstract entities like cultures and belief systems. The individual often does not deal directly with macro-systems, therefore the macro-system has an indirect influence on the individual.

### ***Inhibitors within Micro-systems***

Under inhibitors within micro-systems, participants reported two key challenges to positive fatherhood in ECE. These were the weak teacher-father relations, and dysfunctional parental relations. The participants claimed not to have direct personal experience of some of the challenges but experienced them through a relative or a friend who was directly affected. Due to the limited scope of the current paper, only ‘weak teacher-father relations’ will be discussed here. The participants presented distinct views about the level of support they received from the same preschool. Whereas *Xola* and *Lunga* felt that there was a reasonable level of support for fathers in the preschool, *Mfundisi* felt that he could not answer the question because he had no relationship with his child’s teachers. When asked whether he had received any encouragement from the preschool to become involved in his child’s education, *Mfundisi* responded: “*No! I’ve never received any support, to be honest with you. The only time they got me involved was when I did not pay school fees.*” When asked about his reception at the preschool, *Mfundisi* added:

*“I have basically never been there. I went there once because my child got sick. Even then I didn’t spend a long time because they were busy with a lot of things and I was careful not to disturb.”*

Although *Mfundisi* believes that “*when it came to a lot of issues they preferred to speak to (his) wife,*” he does not think he is being discriminated because he is a man. Unlike *Mfundisi*, *Xola* felt that he was receiving enough support from the same preschool. He explained:

*“they give me the platform to voice my concerns. For example, they have a message book, which has all our details...The message book stays in my child’s bag...if I want to communicate with the class teacher, I write in the mes-*

*sage book, and I say 'from father' and the teacher will write back (Xola)."*

Despite the level of support *Xola* believes he receives, when the interviewer asked him to describe his relationship with his child's teacher he said, "we don't have much of a relationship. Most of the time we use the message book, we don't see each other unless she wants to see me." Similarly, *Lunga* felt that he was receiving some form of support from the preschool to become involved in his child's education. He reported to have been more involved "in activities such as sport, fun walks and attending meetings." Regarding his relationship with his child's teacher, *Lunga* explained, "we have a good relationship. We understand each other, perhaps it's because we are both teachers." Whereas *Mfundisi* felt that he had no relationship with his child's teacher, *Lunga* and *Xola* had a different perception. Notwithstanding, all the participants' responses revealed weak ties between fathers and teachers, as will be discussed later in this paper.

#### *Inhibitors in the Macro-systems*

The impact of poverty and unemployment on fathering practices and views was a recurring theme throughout the study. Out of the ten fathers who participated in the research, only *Lunga* had a tertiary qualification and he was the only participant doing a professional job. Other participants' occupations involved menial tasks such as being a cashier or a watchman. All the participants mentioned providing food for their families and paying school fees for their children as the motivation for their endurance in low paying jobs. The participants showed strong awareness of their socio-economic status and how it affected their fatherhood identities. It should be reiterated that in the participants' cultural framework fatherhood is defined in relation to being able to provide material support for one's family. Unemployment makes it hard for fathers to practice their fatherhood identity through breadwinning, hence fathers are likely to experience a jolt of an identity crisis. When asked what he considered as the main challenge of being involved in his child's education and upbringing, *Xola* did not hesitate to point it out. According to him:

*"Obviously, it is finances. You need to be financially strong in order to be a good father, to keep the family going in terms of clothes,*

*food, sending your children to the school you think is good for them. And giving them opportunities you never had."*

In this cultural framework, positive father involvement in children's education is not viewed so much in terms of assisting children with homework, but what school materials can the father make available to his child. Hence, *Xola* mentions clothes, food and being financially equipped to send his children to school. Similarly, *Mfundisi* feels that it is difficult to play a fatherly role in his children's education and upbringing because he is unemployed. According to *Mfundisi*, "being an unemployed father is another challenge because I'm always broke...At times I had to sacrifice the stipend I receive from the university to buy things for my children." Although *Lunga* is an employed professional with two university degrees, he also thinks that finances pose a challenge in fatherhood responsibilities. However, unlike *Xola* and *Mfundisi*, *Lunga's* views about fatherhood covered a variety of challenges in a holistic approach to parenthood. He said:

*"Challenges involve discipline firstly. How you discipline a child in a constructive way. The second relates to health, you have to maintain health with medication and this costs a lot of money. The other challenge is how I will counter the negative influence of peers as he grows up (Lunga)."*

*Lunga* also spoke about financial issues. According to him, "the other thing is finances, and I think this is a problem with all parents. There are times when the school do fundraising activities which I did not plan for and that is very bad for my budget."

The participants placed emphasis on employment and financial stability as key to practicing a fatherhood identity in ECE. It also appears that widespread poverty and high rates of unemployment bring uncertainty and threatens the fatherhood identities of even those who have jobs and seem to lead stable lives. Poverty and unemployment, therefore, seem to constitute a key inhibitor of positive fatherhood in ECE.

#### *Enhancers of Positive Fatherhood in ECE*

The fathers who participated in this study showed commitment in their children's education and made huge sacrifices to realise their

children's educational goals. *Mfundisi*, for example, sacrifices his stipend as a university student to buy clothes for his children. Despite their unfavourable socio-economic backgrounds, the participants showed resilience in enacting positive fatherhood in ECE. Their resilience withstands what appears to be teachers' indifferent attitudes toward fathers' involvement and the resultant weak ties between teachers and fathers, as reported in the preceding paragraphs. The participants remained convinced there are ways and means to circumvent challenges and enhance positive fatherhood in ECE.

In the course of the interviews, the fathers revealed that it is not compulsory for preschools to register paternal details of enrolled children. The participants claimed to know this because they did not register their contact details at the preschool, instead the teachers kept contact with the children's mothers. According to *Mfundisi*, one of the ways in which positive fatherhood in ECE can be enhanced is to ensure that preschools register the details of both parents when a child enrolls at the preschool. He elaborated:

*"Teachers should have telephone numbers of children's fathers so that they can call them directly. I think that can make us much more involved even if we don't stay with the children's mothers. This can also improve communication between the parents since the father will have to share with the child's mother whatever information he gets from the preschool."* (*Mfundisi*)

On the other hand, *Lunga* suggested that preschools should host fathers' meeting where fathers could have an opportunity to voice their views without the fear of judgement from their partners and other women. *Lunga* also advised that preschools principals or designated staff should explain to the fathers the importance of their involvement in their children's preschool education. This suggestion is pertinent within the South African cultural context or beyond, where fathers might still be holding the view that preschools are not places of learning, but places of caring. The perception that preschools are childcare centres and not so much of educational centres could also be the reason most men do not participate in ECE, since the role of caring has been traditionally attributed to women. To substantiate this argument, *Ntando* cited a common view about preschools. According to *Ntando* "they (children) are not even grasping

*much at the crèche, but we send them there to be cared for while we are working."* It is such commonly held misconceptions that meetings with fathers can address. A better understanding about the functions of preschools can lead to change in perceptions among fathers and possibly translate to enhanced involvement of fathers in ECE.

*Lunga* added that teachers should complement group meetings with one-on-one meetings so that they can become aware of individual and sensitive challenges that fathers might not be willing to share publicly. *Lunga* elaborated:

*"In addition to that, I think fathers should be invited to the classrooms to observe how their children are performing and teachers should get used to discussing children's problems with both parents, especially with fathers. That could motivate fathers and they can slowly become more and more involved in their children's education."*

*Xola* felt that his child's preschool behaved like an "island in the vast ocean of communities." *Xola* believed that positive fatherhood in ECE cannot be realised if preschools do not "forge strong ties with the surrounding community." He added that preschools' governing bodies (SGBs) should meet with fathers to discuss and find solutions to challenges that inhibit involvement in their children's education. Lastly, *Xola* believes that positive fatherhood could be enhanced by professional social workers who can make interventions in cases of child neglect, abuse, and father absence, which are very prevalent in the rural community where this study was conducted, as well as in all of South Africa's township and rural communities.

## DISCUSSION

The participants' definitions of positive fatherhood seemed to emanate from their cultural frames of reference, which conceptualise fatherhood mainly in terms of breadwinning. A similar finding appears in the study of Rabe (2006), which investigated South African Black mine-workers' conceptualisations of fatherhood. Rabe (2006) showed that the participants in her study thought their fathers were good because they provided for them. For example, one participant explained how he remembers his late father, "what I remember about my father is that he was the only breadwinner working, he was looking

after us, he was buying food for us, and he was buying clothes for us” (Rabe 2006: 109). Similarly, Morrell (2006: 21) states that “in many parts of Africa, a ‘big man’ only commands respect when he can provide”. By the same token, the fathers in the present study strongly associated fatherhood with the ability to provide for their children. The Social Capital Theory (Coleman 1988) reveals how cultural norms in the macro-systems can influence behaviours in the micro-systems. In the current study, the cultural norm dictates that positive fatherhood is contingent on a man’s ability to provide for his family, and this influences how fathers practice the fatherhood identity within their family environments as well as in the preschools attended by their children.

Despite the evidently strong focus on the breadwinner role of fatherhood within their cultural framework, the participants were aware that there was more to positive fatherhood than being a disburser of funds, commonly referred to as the ATM father. Participants understood that positive fatherhood should include an emotional attachment and support in their children’s education, although they conceded that this was not the norm in their community. *Mfundisi*, for example, mentioned that “his father did not like talking to children and that children were advised to show respect for men by keeping a distance, especially when men are talking.” Mkhize (2004) explains that in the traditional African society the disciplining of children was a father’s duty, whereas nurturing was a mother’s duty. These cultural views are still dominant in many areas across South Africa, and they influence how fathers become involved in ECE (Richter et al. 2010; Mathwasa and Okeke 2016; Mncanca et al. 2016).

The researchers have noted that the participants’ fathering practices were influenced by the kinds of relationships they themselves had with their own fathers. This finding is consistent with previous studies, which revealed that a generation’s fathering values and practices are often influenced by a preceding generation of fathers. This is commonly referred to as intergenerational transmission of fatherhood beliefs and practices (Rabe 2006; Campos 2008). In an earlier study of fathers’ communication of affection to their sons, Floyd and Morman (2000), revealed that affection received from fathers predicts men’s affection with their own children.

*Mfundisi*, one of the participants in the current study, resents that his father did not provide educational opportunities for him, and believes that he is different from his father because he cares for his children. The researchers argue therefore that, by playing a positive fatherhood role to his children’s education, *Mfundisi* is compensating for a fatherhood he never experienced. A similar finding on compensatory fatherhood behaviour was revealed in the study by Makusha et al. (2013), which investigated men’s experiences of fathering in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Makusha et al. (2013: 149) revealed that “male participants expressed the desire to be more available to their children than their fathers were to them”.

*Lunga* and *Xola* differed from *Mfundisi* in that they did not reveal much about their past experiences of being fathered. While *Xola* was raised by a single mother, he did not resent his upbringing the way *Mfundisi* did, nor did he make any reference to his father. On the other hand, preferring not to mention one’s father at all in a conversation on fatherhood could be interpreted as a sign of resentment. On the contrary, *Lunga* grew up in the presence of both his parents. He mentioned that he wants to raise his children in the same manner he was raised. The intergenerational transmission of fatherhood values was quite evident in the case of *Lunga*, and there was no evidence of compensatory fatherhood, as expected, since he approved of his upbringing. *Xola* displayed neither of the two perspectives on fatherhood, since he preferred not to talk about his father or his upbringing. What seemed important for *Lunga* and *Xola*, however, was a strong desire to secure bright futures for their children. They perceived positive fatherhood in ECE as an essential means to fulfil this desires.

In addition to the above, the participants’ responses revealed that the teachers at the preschool seldom held meetings with individual fathers to discuss children’s academic progress. While *Mfundisi* is convinced that he has no relationship with the teachers, *Lunga* and *Xola* believed there is some form of a working relationship. But this belief, in the case of *Xola*, is disputed by his own admission that he almost never sees his child’s teacher in person and they only communicate through the message book. In this wise, the researchers argue that the over-reliance on message book could obstruct op-

portunities for meaningful face-to-face conversations between parents and teachers. Similarly, *Lunga* thought the preschool supported his involvement because of his involvement in extra-curricular activities such as sport and fun walks.

The researchers concede that extra-curricular activities are integral components of a functional ECE service, and that fathers' involvement in this area should be encouraged. However, the researchers contend that sports, fun walks and most extra-curricular activities are often gendered (Mackay 2012; Stevenson and Clegg 2012). It is therefore notable that these are the kinds of activities that *Lunga* reported to have been encouraged to become involved in. The researchers caution that a selective and gendered-involvement of fathers within ECE services can instil gender roles, become a breeding ground for negative gender stereotypes and discourage male involvement. The envisaged kind of positive fatherhood is that, which involves a holistic involvement of fathers in various ECE activities. Based on the participants' views, the researchers argue that their weak relations with preschool teachers serve as an inhibitor of positive and optimum fatherhood involvement in ECE.

The challenges of poverty and unemployment, as well as general financial problems in practicing a fatherhood identity in ECE contexts were conspicuous in the fathers' talks. These challenges fall under inhibitors in the macro-system because they often take place in distant environments from the child, but have serious consequences for the child's educational opportunities. Children's early education suffers due to poverty and unemployment. Research shows that unemployed fathers tend to become disinterested in children's education and other welfare (Richter et al. 2010). In turn, children tend to try to avoid appearing provocative toward their unemployed fathers by staying away from them (Richter and Morrell 2006). In a study of absent fathers in Johannesburg Eddy et al. (2013: 22) noted that "it became clear that an unemployed father who is unable to provide for his family tends to feel emasculated and unable to fully assume the role of a father". It is evident that not only does poverty and unemployment deprive children material resources necessary for enhancing academic and general developmental outcomes, but it also limits access to their parents, especially their fathers. Such limited

access to fathers deprives children of social capital that is embedded in father-child relationship (Coleman 1988).

The participants in the study believed that one of the key enhancers of positive fatherhood in ECE would be the registration of all fathers who have children at the preschool. Currently, preschools have no mandate to collect the biographical details of fathers. Similarly, in terms of the Birth and Deaths Registration Act of 1992, when a child is born mothers are under no obligation to reveal or register their children's paternal information (Department of Home Affairs (DHA) 1992). Participants disclosed that preschools collect the mother's biographical details when the mother comes to register her child for the first time. The participants did not know what happens when a man comes to register a child, however, they believed that a child's mother would be required. The participants also recommended that preschools should organise fathers' meetings, and that teachers should regularly inform fathers about their children's progress in a one-on-one discussions. During this process, the participants said, fathers should be educated about the importance of their involvement in preschool education, since most fathers are likely to underestimate it. Lastly, the participants believed that to effectively encourage positive fatherhood in ECE, maximum cooperation of stakeholders will be integral. School governing bodies and professional work are some of the stakeholder that can make the initiative a success.

While research of this kind is still limited in South Africa, some of the strategies presented above resonate with the findings from the study of absent black fathers in Johannesburg (Eddy et al. 2013). The researchers stressed the need for formal support systems for fathers, who felt systematically marginalised due to a seemingly disproportionate state focus on women's issues. One aspect the researchers found alarming was the participants' lack of urgency regarding the initiation of home-school dialogues and the implementation of strategies that enhance positive fatherhood in ECE. All the strategies recommended by the participants required teachers to initiate and implement them. This could be due to fathers' inferiority complex when dealing with preschool teachers, who have a higher level of education than almost all the participants. In his study of parental involvement in children's pri-

mary school education, Heystek (1999) revealed that parents in South African schools were unprepared to assume leadership in school governance due to inferiority complex, which resulted in negative attitudes towards schools. Similarly, Nojaja (2009) discovered that poor parents were likely to be illiterate and these factors inhibited their involvement in their children's education. Lastly, the gender of preschool teachers, who were all females, could have also discouraged fathers from trying to lead initiatives in an area they perceived as a female domain.

### CONCLUSION

Positive fatherhood is integral in the realisation of the desire for functional ECE for children. The researchers have noted that fathers who participated in the study reported in this paper held education in high regard despite most of them claimed that they did not receive any formal education. The fathers stated a desire to give their children educational opportunities that they themselves never received. However, in the light of current socio-economic challenges for most fathers, it is sometimes difficult to enact positive fatherhood in their children's education. Contrary to the widely reported disinterestedness amongst fathers and men in relation to their children's education, the current study noted that the ground appears very futile for a fruitful engagement of men and fathers in the ECE sector. Fathers in the study showed huge interests in the education of their children. There is therefore for all stakeholders in the education of children under the age of six to take advantage of these renewed interests, which were observed among the participants in this study. In the light of high rates of unemployment and widespread poverty, preschools need to partner with various stakeholders to find ways in which unemployed fathers can pay their children's school fees through voluntary work within the preschools. Lastly, the researchers suggest that fathers, especially those who are unemployed, should be encouraged to volunteer in food gardens and other community development projects within the schools.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, the researchers make the following recommendations:

There is the need for a larger study to be conducted in this area. In other words, researchers should involve much larger samples in order to widen the scope of varying perspectives among research participants. Such widening may equally consider the effect of varying demographic variables among men with regards to their level of participation in the educational activities of their children under six years. It is recommended for data to be collected from a multiplicity of viewpoints, which may involve the use of different methods. Not only can that enhance validity through triangulation, it can also open new avenues for interpretations that can either validate or challenge the researchers' findings.

It is equally recommended for future research to focus on fathers' emotional support towards their children with regards to father sensitivity. This can provide a more holistic view of fathers' involvement in ECE especially considering that the current research narrative tends to focus on the financial support fathers' provide for their families.

On the other hand, ECE practitioners should endeavour to forge ties with the surrounding communities in order to enhance positive involvement of fathers. ECE practitioners should exploit any existing fatherhood networks albeit it's informal and complex outlooks.

In addition ECE practitioners should initiate outreach programs to encourage father involvement and educate fathers about the importance of their involvement in ECE. There is also the urgent need to de-gender ECE spaces to make them accessible, supportive and accommodative to fathers and other men who may be interested in the spaces.

### LIMITATIONS

The researchers would like to comment on few constraints, which may have affected the study generally. First, the researchers would like to caution readers of this study regarding any attempt to generalise the findings of the study. The sample size of ten fathers was not set out for generalisation. The participants presented their own views, which do not represent the views of the study population. It is therefore cautioned that the findings from this study cannot be generalised.

The analysis relied on the views presented by the fathers who participated in the study. No

attempt was made to verify their claims by interviewing the teachers, for example. Collecting data from teachers and the spouses of the participants could have enhanced the reliability of the findings through triangulation. However, the researchers should stress that the purpose of this study was not to discover absolute 'truths', but to glean useful insights that can enhance positive fatherhood in ECE, from an emic perspective.

Finally, the research reported here more pressing questions than conclusive answers, which could be interpreted as both a strength and limitation of the investigation. One of the key questions relates to how preschool educators and participants' spouses could have responded to the main questions of the study, and what would the meanings and implications of conflicting perspectives among ECE stakeholders be for positive fatherhood in ECE.

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