



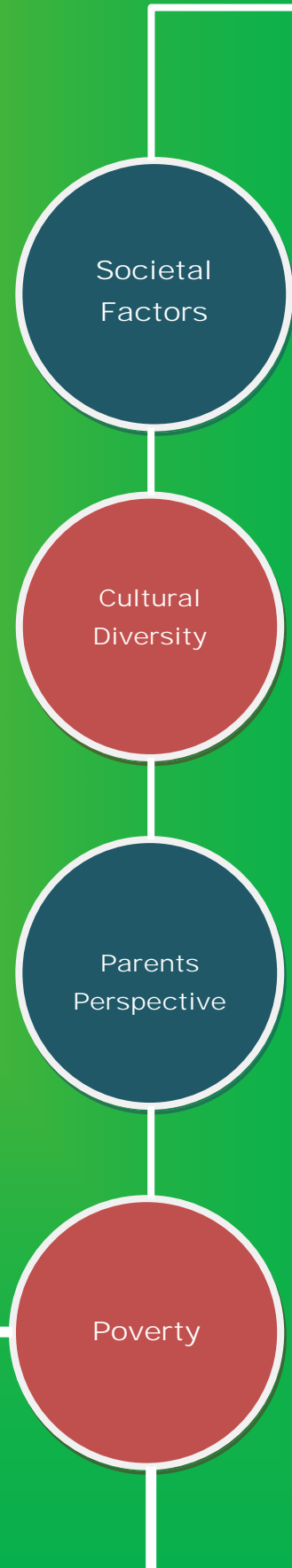
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Parental Involvement in
Early Childhood
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Literature Review



RESEARCH PUBLICATION

Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Development

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1. Introduction

Early Childhood Development continues to be one of the crucial sectors in the education system in the world. Significant investments are made to improving the ECD sector to ensure quality learning outcomes and academic success for children. As the African proverb says “charity begins at home”, it is important to ensure that the family and home environment is taken as the key player in enhancing early childhood education. Children are brought up at home before they can be sent out to external environment therefore parental involvement is vital to ensuring the success of children’s learning outcomes. This literature review will discuss the importance of parental involvement in early childhood education.

2. Understanding and Description of Parent Involvement in ECD

Patrikakou (2008:1) defines parent involvement in ECD as “participation of parents in regular, two-way and meaningful communication between the home and ECD centre activities that ensure that (a)parents play an integral role in assisting the child’s learning; (b) parents are fully included in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the development of the child”. According to Bridgemohan (2001) parent participation can be referred to as “as a working relationship characterised by a shared sense of purpose”

Bridgemohan (2001) argues that parent involvement is not clearly understood in schools and explains that two aspects need to be emphasised when it comes to parent involvement. First, she asserts that parents are supportive, understanding and encouraging and also show great commitment to their children and their education. Second, she also explains that parents are active and their actions can be observed.

Over the years significant amount of focus has been dedicated to shaping and building the foundation for early childhood years to enhance children’s academic success. Focus has been on the quality provision of learning environments, teachers and engaging families with early care and education programs as these factors have been identified as vital for improving learning experiences of young children and their educational outcomes thereof (Fagbeminiyi, 2011). Baker, Goesling & Letendre

(2002) state that the way in which children grow and develop is mainly influenced by family, therefore parent involvement can contribute positively in their learning outcomes and other outcomes in life.

Children who have parental support in their education usually show high levels of achievement, good behaviour and motivation in school. Parents who also take interest in learning outcomes and take part in supporting their children's learning activities encourage and contribute to their children's ability to excel academically. Families play a key role in the support of their children's learning in early care, education programs and at home, hence it is important for families to understand the roles they play in their children's education. These roles need to be facilitated across services offered to young children and their families (Fagbeminiyi, 2011).

3. Legislative Framework

a) The South African Children's Act of No.38 of 2005

According to the Act parents have the responsibility to "care for the child, maintain contact with the child, to act as a guardian of the child, to contribute to the maintenance of the child". The Act also provides a comprehensive framework on provision of social services for children in South Africa. Chapter 8 of the Act is dedicated to early intervention programmes, and also highlights that parenting and family support are considered key outcomes of prevention and early intervention programmes and the provisions recognise ECD services as a form of prevention and early intervention.

The South African Children's Act highlights the importance of parent's participation in their children's education. The act states that it is the responsibility of a parent to ensure that a child's needs are met. The act also advocates for partnerships between parents and caregivers in prioritising the best interest of the child and ensuring successful ECD programmes. Parent participation involves consistent communication between teachers and involvement in ECD activities and functions

b) White Paper on Education and Training

According to the White Paper ECD programmes should be inclusive of various strategies and a wide range of services aimed at assisting families and communities in meeting the needs of children. It also highlights that the Reconstruction Development Programme (RDP) is significantly vital and its successful implementation will enhance the lives of young children while enabling families and communities to provide more adequate care to them as it addresses basic needs such as shelter, water, sanitation, primary health care and employment. Given the perspective of the RDP programme, ECD then depends on and contributes to community development, thus the education of parents should go hand-in-hand with that of children. Therefore, it is important to have Adult Basic Education and Training for ECD programmes be linked up with ECD programmes so as to empower parents and impart knowledge and skills of effective parenting.

c) South African Interim Policy on Early Childhood Development

Government's intervention on Early Childhood Development is based on the principles that it is the constitutional duty to ensure the protection of rights of young children and their right to basic nutrition, health care and basic education. Therefore, families and parents have a responsibility for the upbringing and care of their children. This policy highlights that in order for an ECD programme to be effective, it needs to be based on the involvement of parents, communities and other stakeholders within the democratic governance structures.

4. The level of parent involvement in ECD centres

Parents and teachers have an expectation to work together in ensuring optimal care and enhancing children's development. Even though partnership between parents and teacher is seen as crucial researchers argue that parents are often passive participants and rarely take part in decision making of ECD programmes (Mukuna and Indoshi, 2012). Parents should be involved in decision making and assisting teachers on non-educational and educational activities, attending events organised by ECD centres and receiving progress about their children's performance. The partnership between parents and teachers should be child-centred in a way that

ensures that children are cared and taught within conducive, clean and spacious learning environments (Abdu, 2014).

Mukuna and Indoshi (2012) further argues that should be able to provide play materials for teachers to use and also ensure that the schedule allows time for children to learn rest. However, one can argue that the issue of parents providing learning materials can in some instances be unrealistic given the nature of poverty levels in South African communities. Especially, when most children within these communities are still unable to access and afford ECD services and parents are also not able to buy toys and learning materials for their children at home. Abdu (2014) asserts that parents should participate as classroom assistants and organisers as cited in Epstein (1996). As much as parents need to be actively involved, it will prove to be a great challenge for them to act as classroom assistant since some of the parents work and do not have time to be involved in ECD activities.

5. Factors influencing and affecting parent involvement in ECD

The National Development Plan highlights that early childhood development “critical for ensuring that children are able to reach their full potential” (NDP, 2011). Abdu (2014) also adds that “teachers are key stakeholders in ECD especially at the implementation stage”. There are steps that both teachers and parents can take to build and maintain relationships amongst themselves. There are various factors influencing parental involvement in early childhood education. These range from various belief systems, values and expectations, cultural differences, parent’s perspective on early childhood education. These factors will be explained as follows:

a) The Home and ECD centre environment

Firstly, Patrikakou (2008) asserts that the relationship between home and the ECD centre is shaped by beliefs and expectations of parents and teachers. The author adds further to say that beliefs about individuals and group characteristics are what drives people’s choices and behaviour. Therefore, it is important to create a positive environment that will enable opportunities for parents to participate in their children’s early education. On the one hand Wright (2009) argues that lack of parental involvement can be linked to how teachers interact with parents. As it is often seen that teachers may use words that parents are unable to understand which result in a

miscommunication and leading teachers losing support and respect from teachers. Barriers to parent involvement can also be influenced by the type of contact teachers establish with parents. More often than not conflict arises because teachers only involve parents when there are behavioural or academic problems with their children instead of involving them even when their kids succeed (Abdu, 2014).

b) Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity has great influence on parental involvement in early childhood education. Due to the vast cultural diversity, it is normal for the home and ECD centre environment to be shaped by various belief systems.

Children's development is also affected by parent's cultures. Involvement can also be encouraged by whether or not ECD centres choose to embrace the culture of parents. You find that many parents are reluctant to voice their own concerns due to cultural beliefs as it is believed that the teacher is an authoritative figure in their children's education. You also find cases where parents are in fear of being questioned or criticised because they think they might put their children at a disadvantage in the classroom (Abdu, 2014).

c) Societal Factors

Furthermore, local communities on which families depend on for social participation and helping networks have also changed just like family structures when it comes to societal factors. South Africa has experienced a long history of cultural separateness where many people grouped themselves according to culture, religion, languages and to some extent political views. Due to this diversity these social groups believe that their traditions and values are best compared to their counterparts and have no interest in other people's values. Therefore, the ability of parents from diverse cultures to interact well with schools depends on their past educational background and whether they were brought up in rural or urban communities (BridgeMohan, 2001).

The social context of which early childhood development takes place is so broad in the sense that a large number of the population live under conditions of extreme poverty, deprivation, malnutrition, inadequate housing, poor education and health services. The majority of children in South Africa are greatly disadvantaged by virtue

of the apartheid system. External factors such as family structure, societal factors, poverty and HIV/AIDS pandemic could impact the role of parents in their children's education (Bridgemohan).

d) Parents perspectives

Children's development can be positively influenced by parent involvement in the ECD centre. Children's whose parents are actively involved in their early childhood learning are more likely to progress in academic, social and emotional learning and also engage less in risky behaviours later on in life. Parents and teachers often misinterpret the adolescent's desire for independence as a development barrier to parent involvement when children enter adolescence. The same situation is seen on the stages of development for children between to four years of age who are interested in exploring their surroundings. At this stage toddlers develop a sense of independence and a sense of ability to handle many problems on their own, but if caregivers demand too much and refuse to let children perform tasks of which they are capable, children may develop low self-esteem and doubt their own ability to handle problems.

d) Family Structures

Family structures in South Africa have changed post-apartheid system due to high numbers of women entering the labour market. Due to factors such as urbanisation, industrialisation and migration many women found themselves working away from home trying to merge economically productive work with caring and nurturing of their children. This has been influenced by the sharp rise of female headed households in diverse cultural settings. Therefore, these issues have an impact on addressing the need for childcare since children are left to the formal or informal organised systems of childcare and in most cases childcare is left to siblings, grandparents or extended kin. Previously in South Africa children learned most of their values in a family setting as people lived closed to each other during the early years of a child's life. However, in the current South Africa citizens re expected to take part on many levels of society thus there is little time dedicated to the children's life and in turn family loses control over children (Bridgemohan, 72).

e) Poverty

Poverty is rife in many of our South African communities. The employment rate of many fathers and mothers can thus give an indication that income in most households might be quite low. Due to the unemployment rate many parents are under pressure to provide a day's meal in their households and as a result, becoming involved or taking part in their child's educational activities is not a priority in these poverty stricken homes.

f) HIV/AIDS Pandemic

South Africa is one of the countries with more people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, of which half of its population is characterised by children. Consequently, a large number of these children are infected by HIV/AIDS. "HIV/AIDS does not only attack individuals but also attacks systems". Historically, the marginalised in South Africa were women and children, which the stats remains the same today. The poor, unemployed, women and children still have lack of access to adequate health care facilities and services. These issues greatly impact on learner enrolment in schools as families are not able to afford to keep children in school due to health care costs. Therefore, the demand for Early Childhood Development will continue to increase as young children continue to become orphans due to parents dying of HIV/AIDS. Parents have the pressure of coping with the illness and other related problems which means they may not necessarily have the time to actively be involved in their children's education.

g) Illiteracy

Lastly, most parents in South African communities are illiterate due to non-completion of formal schooling. Most of these parents did not finish primary education thus have difficulties in assisting their children with homework. High levels of illiteracy among parents negatively impact the ability of children to perform well at school (Bridgemohan). Parents, caregivers or guardians in rural areas are often illiterate and spend long hours working to provide for their families. These factors prevent them to access opportunities to be equipped in contributing positively to their children's education. Given these circumstances, it necessary to promote parent

involvement by making it part of the programme in early childhood development education (Van der Vyver, 2012).

6. Conclusion

Undeniably parental involvement is vital to ensuring that children succeed in early childhood education and beyond. Due to the injustices of the past, many parents in South Africa have no formal schooling or have completed primary education which negatively impacts their ability to support their children with school activities. There are also other factors hindering parents to be involved in early childhood education such as poverty, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS, societal factors, family and cultural systems and so forth as explained in the literature. Parents need to be empowered and be given skills to enable them to actively take part in their children's education.

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