Examining the Role of Parents in Early Childhood Development Programmes

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Abstract: Parents play a crucial role in the development of schools. Efforts to encourage parents to participate in the development of schools have contributed to the Zimbabwean government coming up with statutory instruments that established School Development Committees (SDCs) and School Development Associations (SDAs) in both primary and secondary schools. Within the primary school set-up, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has introduced the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme. The paper focuses on the role of parents in ECD programmes. It examines the concepts participation and involvement. It further explores the advantages of participation and involvement of parents in school issues. While the paper demonstrates that the two concepts are tenets of democracy, they have their own limitations when it comes to school governance issue. The major contributions noted are how parents contribute to the development of the school, how teachers learn pupils' cultures through interaction with the community and the benefits that accrue to the pupils which contribute to their personal development. However, the paper also notes that the problems of inequality and inequity may not be addressed as the gaps between communities may be reflected in the different schools. The paper concludes that the participation and involvement of parents in school work benefits the school, teachers, pupils and the community at large in many ways.

Keywords: Participation; Involvement; Parents; Communities; Democracy; Early Childhood Development; Programmes.

Introduction

Parents are the first caregivers to children before they come to school. They are directly involved in the development of the child right from conception. The family is the first major system that forms the child's environment. The family, through parents, peers and relatives is able to provide nurturing, affection and socialisation for the child. Parents have to continue playing these roles in ECD programmes. Parents have a role to play in the provision of physiological needs, psychological needs and social needs of children. The ECD programme covers different domains of child development. These include curriculum issues such as health and safety, administration and management of ECD centres, provision of resources, skills development purchasing materials and equipment and caring for the materials and equipment. The paper analyses the role of parents in terms of the contributions they make in the different areas of the ECD programme. The following key terms are defined: parents and ECD programmes.

Definition of Terms

Morrison [1] defines parent as anyone who provides children with basic care, direction, support, protection and guidance. Pufall and Unsworth [2] concur with the definition as they define parent as a caretaker of the offspring in their own species. What stands out in the two definitions is that parents could be biological or any adult who takes the responsibility of raising children. This includes adoptive parents or relatives within the family. Within the context of the paper, parent is used to refer anyone who has the responsibility to raise children and take care of their needs, for example paying for school fees and buying school requirements which include school uniforms.

Morrison [1] defines ECD programmes as a set of planned activities that are planned to cover the development of children from birth to 8 years old. Faber [3] also defines ECD programmes as professional activities that guide the development of children in order to promote a healthy development of the learners. ECD programmes can therefore be explained as the curriculum that is designed to meet the growth of children from birth to eight years.

The concept of participation and involvement

The desire for democracy has encouraged participation and involvement of communities in school affairs. To encourage participation some governments

have decentralised powers to lower levels of the political spectrum. The link between decentralization and democratisation is not surprising as both include participation and involvement. Participation and involvement are both tenets of democracy, though they do not necessarily guarantee democracy. Much depends on the level and the extent of participation and involvement in major decisions. Owens [4] raises interesting issues about participation and involvement as tools that aim to democratise institutions such as schools. As such, Owens [4] views participation as the mental and emotional involvement of a person in a group situation that encourages the individual to contribute to group goals. Similary, Morrison [1] defines parental involvement as a partnership between parents and teachers. Morrison [1] further notes that participation and involvement of parents give credence to the claim that participation and involvement benefit both the school and the community. In that regard participation and involvement are intended to benefit the children at a school and the community at large. It is generally believed that parental participation and involvement promote school achievement. This comes about as a result of different stakeholders sharing ideas through information dissemination, communication, and consultation. Desforges and Abouchaar [5] observed that parental involvement cuts across all facets that contribute to a conducive upbringing of a child. These include good parenting in the home, creating a secure environment for the child, intellectual stimulation and being a role model to the child [5]. For parental participation and involvement to be effective, parents and community have to take part in school governance issues and monitor the work of their children.

A school as an organisation undergoes change. Adedeji [6] concluded that participation and involvement accelerate the change process. This is possible as there is ownership of the change process by different stakeholders. They both ensure accountability. Other benefits include better policy targeting, provision of a closer fit between the needs and demands of beneficiaries and the design of policy objectives and modalities, building ownership of policy solutions and better conformity, and result in facilitating greater sustainability of policies and thus providing an empowering effect [7].

Parental participation and involvement benefit the different levels of the school system. The school as a system comprises of pupils, teachers, parents and the school itself. All these different components of the school system are expected to benefit from parental participation and involvement. Parental involvement can benefit pupils as it encourages pupils to do their homework, since parents will have an appreciation of school requirements. On the part of the school and teachers, parental involvement contributes to an understanding of the pupils' background and cultures.

Understanding the culture of children who come to school helps teachers in many ways. It enables them to come up with the best strategies that contribute to the different tenets of child development. These tenets include social development, cognitive development, moral development, and physical development. On the other hand, interaction with the school enables parents and the community to develop an understanding of how children develop and at the same time enabling them to identify school basic needs in terms of resources and learning materials. There are many examples in Zimbabwe where School Development Committees and School Development Associations have constructed classrooms, equipped laboratories, bought textbooks and bought school vehicles.

However, there are a number of challenges that are most likely to arise as a result of involvement of parents in children's work. These challenges relate to the parents' social class, their level of education, and their economic situation. On the other hand, whilst participation of parents and communities can be viewed within the context of achieving educational objectives and improving the quality of education, the level and extent of parental participation has not been easy to ascertain. The social and economic classes have a bearing in terms of the extent to which communities can contribute to the development of their schools.

Participation and involvement of parents in school governance issues have been criticised for a number of reasons. For example, Saito [8] observed that the problem of scarce resources has negatively impacted on equity within communities.

Parental involvement in ECD programmes
The ECD programme involves children doing academic work. The academic work is supposed to contribute to cognitive development of the child. In the cognitive development of the child, parents have to provide an extension of what the child will have learnt at school. As observed by Gupta [9] parents can play a very significant role in the cognitive development of their children, by giving them the necessary attention when they ask questions. At the same time parents have to provide a home environment that allows the child to freely handle and look at various pictures, books, good comics, and story books, audio and video programmes [9]. The role of the parent is to monitor the relevance and importance of the material children are exposed to. The home environment has to provide the child with learning experiences. Frost [10] asserts that when parents are involved in ECD programmes that interest shows that the parent values the child's education. Involvement in the child's academic work has a motivational effect on the child, at the same time providing extension of what the child has learnt. For example if the child had a lesson on animals found in Zimbabwe, parents can support the child's academic

work by taking the child to a game park. In addition to this parents can monitor children's homework.

Parents participate in ECD programmes through committees. These committees represent parents and the interests of the ECD centre. Committees as noted by Frost [10] allow parents to share input and make decisions on important matters of the ECD programme. Such committees have to manage development projects at the centre. As noted by Morrison [1] parents can be involved in ECD programmes through task orientation, process orientation and developmental orientation. Under task orientation parents are asked to participate in specific activities. They can be asked to run a tuck-shop at the school as a way of fund raising for a specific project. Such projects can include fund raising for the purchase of play centre equipment and materials such as paint, blocks, balls, books and other learning materials.

Under process orientation, parents can serve as members of the school development committee or school development association. Parents participate in activities that have a direct bearing on the learning of children. For example parents who have experience in sports can train and develop children in specific skills. Such skills training programme may include basic skills in soccer, volley ball, tennis, swimming, music and other sporting activities. This can involve inviting resource persons in the community and parents can actually be involved in identifying these resource persons.

Within the context of developmental orientation, parents as noted by Faber [3] are also learning skills as they work at the centre. For example, parents can come to the school or ECD centre to help with cooking and preparation of feeding programmes. They will be developing their skills and knowledge in food and nutrition at the same time engaged in activities that benefit children both at home and at school. As noted by Faber [3] developmental orientation helps parents develop skills that benefit themselves, children, the centre, teachers and families at the same time enhance the process of parents' involvement.

Apart from fundraising activities, parents contribute to the well-being of ECD programmes by funding programmes at the centre. This is in the form of the fees and levies they pay. Normally, such fees and levies are agreed in general meetings of parents and school development committees assist in the collection of the fees and levies. Apart from contributing through fees and levies most of the ancillary staff found at ECD centres is not government employees. They are paid by parents through the school development committees and school development associations.

Parents are also involved in the actual building of the centre. They also initiate proprammes to improve water and sanitation at the centre. They do this by sinking boreholes and building toilets. ECD programmes require wide range of resources. Within the community there are people who can make some equipment that can be used at the ECD centre. Such equipment includes chairs, play equipment and make donations. They can also be involved in toy production. Involving parents in decision making through committees contributes to ownership of the development projects at the centre. Stoner and Freeman [11] note that shared decision making increases productivity and reduces resistance to change.

Such involvement promotes communication between the teachers and the parents. Parents can also communicate with the head of the centre and teachers when they attend meetings. Communication can also be in the form of newsletters, which highlight developments at the centre. As noted by Faber [3] children need protection and care to support their physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual growth and the best people to provide such support are parents.

However, there are factors that impede on how parents can play their roles in ECD programmes. The education level of the parents may negatively impact on how the parent can assist a child with homework. The education level may contribute to a parent developing a negative attitude towards ECD programmes. This may be common in some areas in Zimbabwe since the emphasis on ECD is a new development. One other hindrance is lack of information on the part of the parent. The teacher has a role to ensure that school management encourages parental participation and involvement in children's learning at school and at home [12].

Conclusion
The role of parents in education is very crucial and more so at ECD level. They have to be part of the learning process of the child. The paper has identified and discussed the critical role parents play in the implementation of ECD programmes. The paper focused on parents' role in academic work, in funding programmes, in skills development and in marketing the school or centre. It can be concluded that the teacher and the management have to involve parents in ECD programmes for the good of the child, centre, teacher, parents and community at large.

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