

**PARTNERSHIPS: A NEW PARADIGM IN FOSTERING AN
ENDURING PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN
CHILDREN'S EDUCATION**

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Introduction

Education is a social phenomenon and a very important institution in every society, community or country. It is through education that knowledge, skills and values are transmitted from generation to generation in order to ensure economic, political and social continuity and advancement of a country.

This need to transmit relevant knowledge, skills and values to the youth is a dominant concern of every progressive society. In Africa education is seen by many as an investment for the individuals, families, clans and indeed communities. Parents send their children to school to prepare them for future roles in economic, social and political spheres of life. They want the best education for their children because education determines economic and social mobility, and for that matter status in African societies. The fact that the best education could guarantee good life motivates parents to send their children to even more expensive private schools. Notwithstanding the importance parents and families attach to education, they invariably limit their role to securing admission at school, paying fees and buying kits for the children. Parents need not retire to the background and wait in anticipation for the school to provide their kids with education. The socio-economic and political changes taking place in the contemporary society however makes it impossible for the school alone to educate the child. This necessitates a relationship between the home and the school. Thus as Bastiani(1986) points out; "home-school relations take place against a broader backcloth of social and educational change which exacerbates old problems as well as bringing new ones". The home has always been the place where every child receives his/her first education. This educative role of parents must not therefore end when a child enters school. In this period of democratisation and transformation of education, particularly the management of the school (curriculum, instruction and assessment) it becomes more imperative for partnerships to be established between the two key players in education – the school and the home/family. As various authorities on the subject have pointed out (Mcbeth 1993, Decker etal 1994, Sergioviani 2000 and Bastiani 2000) the collaboration between home and the school is of great value to parents, learners, the school and the community at large. The coming together of the school and the home as partners must be done in order to realise better education outcomes. The arguement here is that it is only through co-responsibility of the school and home that success can be achieved by learners, parents and the school.

Why some Parents do not get Involved in their Children's Education

By parents' involvement means showing interest in what a child does at school, supporting and guiding him/her by making time available to chat with the child about school work, assisting him/her in doing homework and participating in school activities eg.attending parents' meetings, serving as a governing body member or visiting the school. Too often teachers [and even educational administrators and other personnel] assume that parents who do not actively demonstrate an interest in their child's education are apathetic and unconcerned. This is not always true, however. These parents want very much to be a part of their child's education, but feel they cannot (Decker, Gregg and Decker 1994). As natural 'educators' parents can play meaningful role in formal education; unfortunately however some of them cannot meet the educational expectations and needs of the modern society. They may be illiterate or semi-literate who can hardly offer input to their children's education. To this category of parents their contributions may be limited to seeking admission and buying their children school kits. Supporting this view Van Schalkwyk (1993) adds that many parents are illiterate or ignorant in fields such as science and mathematics or they understand very little of their child's specific needs in his pre-primary, primary or teenage phases.

The structure of modern curricula is also probably too complex for some parents to grasp. Indeed the changing curriculum of the modern school makes it more difficult for most parents who left school some years ago to understand some of the new learning areas and assist children do their homework. As society changes school system, management and courses also change. Most of the subjects parents did at school 10-15 years ago have either been phased out from the curriculum or transformed so drastically that they can hardly offer any input when a child asks for help.

Parents may have minimum information on what to do. Many schools may not provide parents with information on what is expected of them, what they should do or materials they should use to support their children's learning at home. In many cases communication to parents may be written in languages not appropriate to parents. Apart from writing in a language not appropriate some parents may not be able to read or understand the tone of some letters from the school while others are worded in such a manner they may undermine parental values or heritage.

Many schools are like islands set apart from the main land of life by a deep moat of convention and tradition(Decker, Decker et al 1994). The boarding school system for instance, hardly gives parents the opportunity to play any active or meaningful role in their children's education. By its modus operandi children in boarding schools spend much of their time without their parents. This excludes them from participating effectively in their children's education. A chat with some parents may reveal their misgivings about modern education system which technically controls the running of schools and offers them very little room to be actively involved in educating children. In most cases the state in modern society has taken over the control of formal education to such an extent that there is very little room for the parent in the running

of schools. This control of education by modern society, in the opinion of Van Schalkwyk (1993) has contributed to the school being run like a factory.

The primacy of basic survival needs of the modern society may not permit parents to get involved in their children's education. The need to provide food, shelter and clothing for the family may sometimes take undue precedence over parents' involvement in their children's education. In the contemporary market economy, many parents usually work outside their communities. Some may travel to and fro on daily basis, arrive at home late and leave very early or may visit home only at the end of the month. In cases of this nature children may stay with grandparents, aunts or elder sisters and brothers. This contributes to parents' inability to be involved in the education of their children.

The negative experiences of some parents' own school days may keep them out of their children's education. A parent who was not successful at school is likely to feel uncomfortable or incompetent to interact with their children's school. In some instances parents might have left school because of teenage pregnancies, bullying or mistreatment from bigger pupils or even some teachers. Such parents may either feel guilty, ashamed or uncomfortable to get involved in the school in any way. For many parents school brings back memories of their own failure. Some feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, even guilty when they walk into a school. Others do not feel valued by the school (Vandegrift and Greene 1992).

Important Role Parents can Play in the Education of their Children

Not too long ago, many parents and educators shared the view that once a child enters school, it is best to leave education to the professionals; since they are the ones trained to do this job (Decker, Gregg and Decker 1994). This view is outmoded in view of the rapid changes taking place in modern societies. Democracy and transformation in education require a closer co-operation between the school and the home (parent, caregivers and guardians) as a pre-requisite for the realisation of educational goals. Parents in the modern society have an increasing role to play in the education of their children. As rightly remarked by Squelch and Lemmer (1994) the home and the school are no longer separated by the 'white line' on the play ground. Every child is born into a home and the first education of every child is received from the home (i.e. the first teacher being mother, father or guardian). School education builds on the foundation laid by the home. For those reasons parents and guardians need to work closely with the school in order to provide the child with a suitable education that will benefit all – child, parent, and society. Modern technology has its negative impact on the growing child. The presence of violence, rape, drugs, alcohol and pornographic programmes on television nevertheless have their toll on teenagers. The tendency for children to experiment with sex, drugs, alcohol etc at early stages of their lives is very high because these things are readily available to them. Parents need to be vigilant, support and guide their children at home to complement the educator's work at school. Supporting this fact Decker, Gregg and Decker (1994) point out that because increasing numbers of children come to school with problems caused by poverty, divorce, drug use and teenage pregnancy schools may no longer be able to limit

themselves solely to academic roles. Schools, families and communities must all share responsibility for children's development and learning.

Many school children may neither do home work nor study at home. Some prefer to watch television right after school or roam the streets till late night. In some instances children leave home in the morning to go to school but do not set foot in the school. Schools may notice much absenteeism among learners which parents and guardians may not be aware of. Such a problem is likely to be identified and solved where and when there is a working relationship or co-operation between the school and parents as partners in education. Although government may enact very good policies on drugs, alcohol, HIV, Culture of Learning and Teaching etc these policies affecting the welfare of learners and communities at large cannot be effectively and fully implemented neither can they benefit anyone without parental support and involvement in children's education. In affirming the important role of parents as partners in education Collison, (2003) writes:

The crucial foundation for student growth are two pillars of parent and staff support. It is no surprise that the students with best overall performance come from loving and responsible homes where what the student learns at school is reinforced.

It is indeed the parents' responsibility to talk with their children on education issues – asking them questions, explaining some learning aspects, helping in home work or looking for some part-time teacher to assist where necessary, motivating and giving children positive feedback on their school work. Such discussions with learners can improve their academic performance. Heysted and Paquette (1999) mention parental participation is not only important in governance, but also at other levels in the school. At the lowest level of management and decision-making, parents can assist their children with their homework and motivate them to be positive towards school and their education.

In South Africa for instance this recognition of the vital role parents and indeed, communities can play in supporting school achieve education goals, led the government to enact the South African Schools Act in 1996. The Act (1996: section 16) vests the governance of every public school in the hands of its governing body. This therefore makes it mandatory for parents to be involved in their children's education. The Act (SASA 1996) thus makes parents, guardians and communities aware of their rights, responsibilities and roles in their children's education and encourages them to participate fully in it. Parents naturally spend more time with their children than schools or educators do and have in mind the kind of education they want their children to receive. Parker and Leithwood (2000:38) add that advocates of decentralization base their reforms on the premises that to ensure improvement in schools, those closest to the students should be given the authority to make decision. This makes it crucial for parents to be involved in their children's education.

Ensuring Parents' Involvement: The Formation of Home-School Partnerships

It has been emphasised in this discussion that modern political and socio-economic realities necessitate a close co-operation between the home and the school in the education of the child. The demands of democracy (eg. more rights for parents and learners) and career obligations of parents imply that the job of supporting children to achieve at school and in life is too big for any particular group – school, home or community- to tackle alone. As an African adage goes; 'it takes the whole village to bring up a child'. This then calls for the establishment of an enduring partnership between the home and the school in order to achieve desirable education outcomes. In partnership the home (parents) and the school (educators) have equal responsibilities towards children's education. The two major stakeholders – home and the school – are equally and mutually responsible for the child's total upbringing (ie imparting social and economic skills formally and informally). They also 'swim' or 'sink' together ie they share in both successes and failures of a child's education. In the words of Williams and Chavkin (1989) the foundation upon which effective parent involvement programmes must be built is the primary concept of an equal, mutually supportive partnership.

Important Steps To Form Home-School Partnership.

The school by its nature as an organised organisation should initiate the formation of Home-School partnership.

- **Marketing the Partnership Idea.**

As the first step representatives from the school should visit community meetings, churches, civic organisations, homes, the chief (in the case of rural community) or the local mayor and notable community members eg. Religious leaders, retired educationists etc to 'sell' the idea of partnership and lobby for their support for the formation of Home-School partnership.

- **Invitation of Parents (and other community members).**

The school may set up a possible date and time and invite parents and community members for a meeting (most certainly on a day many people are likely to home). The school will send letters of invitation through learners, inform the chief to request community members to attend or announce it on a local radio where possible.

- **Welcome by Principal and a Notable Member of the Community.**

The principal will briefly welcome all community members and parents to the school and inform them why they have been called to the school.

- **Motivation by a Notable Community Member**

A notable local community member (eg.a retired educationist) may be requested to inform the audience of the importance of a Home- School partnership and how its formation could benefit learners, parents, school and the entire community.

- **Setting up an Interim Committe to see to the Formation of the Partnership.**

The gathering may choose a small interim committee of about 3-4 people comprising representatives from the school, parents and the larger community to oversee the formation of the partnership. The interim committee may suggest a date for the meeting of all community members.

- **Meeting to Elect office Bearers**

At the second meeting of the wider community office bearers may agree on the composition of office bearers(eg. chairperson, secretary, treasurer etc) and their functions. The entire gathering may elect office bearers to serve on the Home-School partnership programme.

Guiding Principles For An Enduring Parents' Involvement In Childrens' Education

Although getting Home and School working as partners in education may bring mutual benefits (to children, families, schools and communities) there is no formular or recipe for the success of such a partnership. However it is my view that to ensure an enduring partnership between Home and School there must be some framework to guide the smooth running of the organisation. To enhance its work the home -school partners should re-envision the school environment and create new policies, practices, structures, roles and attitudes to realise the vision. The new policies, structures and practices should be effectively managed to achieve its desired goals. Based on the Williams and Chavkin (1989) and Bastiani(1986) ideals of a successful implementation of parents' involvement programme, the following guidelines may be taken into consideration in establishing the partnership.

- **A Written Policy**

The office bearers the partnership programme (ie parents and educators) should set up a sub-committee to develop policy to guide its activities. The document must specify areas of parents' involvement, and the duties and powers of parents serving on the programme. The parents' involvement document should be written or interpreted into the dominant language(s) of the community for easy access to parents. If for instance the policy document is for a parents' involvement in a school located in Taung it must be written in both Setswana and English.

- **Administrative Support for the Committee**

The school which has established partnership with parents should offer administrative assistance to the association. For instance the principal should request the school clerk or secretary to type the association's letters free of charge. The school may also distribute the association's letters through learners. These measure may not only lessen office bearers' work but could make things faster for the association.

- **Workshop for Parents and Educators**

Both parents and educators serving on the partnership association need to be given a continuous training in the form of workshops on all aspects of parents' involvement in a child's education. The training could assist both parents and educators to know their roles in the involvement programme.

- **A Partnership Approach**

In all aspects of the school activities – both curricular and extra-curricular) parents and school educators must see themselves as equal partners in their effort to educate the child. A parent who knows any school subject which the school does not have a teacher may be requested to volunteer to teach at his or her free time . In the same way a parent who is very good in music may be invited to teach the school choir some songs. In deed schools need a community ready to collaborate

and to welcome this collaboration – prepared to find ways to educate all its students, not just those who come well-rested, well- scrubbed and culturally and educationally prepared (Decker et al 1994).

- **A Two - Way Communication**

There must be emphasis on a two-way communication between the school and parents. The best and effective two-way communication, especially in rural communities, would be visits from parents and educators. Parents should be encouraged to visit the school as often as they can and educators may also visit homes of learners and parents. This two-way communication may not only encourage children to study at home and school but also enhance the co-operation between the school and parents as partners.

- **Parents Component of the Partnership to laise between Home and Community**

As partners parents may give correct information on new courses, school fees, discipline etc to the general public. This type of public relations exercise may create good image for the school in the local community.

- **Evaluation of the Involvement Programme**

The parents' involvement programme must be evaluated continuously in order to review its activities to meet the needs of the school and the community at large. The evaluation may be done through focus group discussion or questionnaires to find out the views of the public on the partnership. It is only when the school accurately assesses the realities of family and community influence on its activities that the latter can design better ways and means of making the school more and more part of the community.

Conclusion

This paper has emphasised the importance of parents' involvement in the education of their children. It has been pointed out in the discussion that although ignorance, illiteracy and career responsibilities hinder parents' involvement in children's education, democracy and realities of the contemporary society demand their full increased participation in education. The paper argued that the new approach to involve parents in their children's education is through the establishment of partnerships between the home and the school. The task of educating children is no longer the responsibility of one particular organisation – called a school. As an African adage goes; 'it takes the whole village to bring up one child' and 'no single person's arms can embrace the Baobab tree'. Education of the child is therefore the co-responsibility of parents and the school. To foster an enduring and successful parents' involvement therefore this paper has offered some guidelines to assist the partnership between the school and the home.

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