



Barriers to Parental Involvement in Primary Schools: A case of Central North Region of Botswana

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Abstract

Research in Botswana has shown the importance of parental involvement in primary school education. Consequently, researchers have argued for strengthening the school-community relationship in order to improve the quality of primary school programmes and enable children to succeed in the academic environment. Nonetheless, little has been done to identify barriers to parental involvement in children's academic work and possible solutions geared towards quality education. This study therefore seeks to investigate the causes of limited parental involvement in their children's schooling and to identify strategies to help minimise these barriers and improve academic performances in primary schools. This study is a qualitative case study wherein twenty-four participants (twelve teachers and twelve parents) are interviewed. The sample was drawn from the Central North region of Botswana and covered remote, remotest, sub-urban, and urban locations. Random sampling was used to select teacher-participants while parents were identified with help of village headmen. Botswana education policies and school regulation or guideline handbooks were also examined to determine the extent to which these documents promote community involvement. The findings of this study reveal significant divergences in the responses of parents and teachers. Most of the parents, especially those in remote areas, for example indicated that they were not aware that they were supposed to offer teaching assistance services in schools. Teachers in the same areas indicated that parents were not cooperative in contributing to their children's learning. Likewise, while teachers listed examples of workshop initiatives designed to sensitise parents to the importance of being involved in their children's learning, parents said they were only called to collect children's progress reports, for Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, or to be threatened about failure to pay school development and sports fees.

Keywords: Parental involvement, Barriers to parental involvement, Primary school, Botswana, School-community programmes, School-community relations.

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INTRODUCTION

Community-school teamwork is believed to be fundamental to students' academic achievement. The important role of parents in their children's education has long been evident, particularly in the past when children were exposed to traditional indigenous education. Parents taught their children domestic chores, survival skills and societal expectations so as to preserve individual ethnic groups' cultures. Abosi and Kandjii-Muranga (2002) explain that "the education of the child was so important that it was shared by parents, siblings and neighbors" (p. 5). There is therefore a need to identify ways of alleviating barriers and promoting partnerships between schools and communities to support the healthy development of children (Mannathoko & Major, 2012).

Theory, research, policies, and exemplary programmes and practice especially in Western countries demonstrate the importance of family and community involvement in improving the quality of school programmes. Little is known, especially in Botswana, however, about barriers to family and community involvement in schools and effective programmes to help teachers and the community come together in the teaching of children at primary schools. Often times, blame falls to parents for ignoring their children's academic work. Nonetheless, most if not all research in Botswana indicates little has been done by government to identify major barriers and take appropriate and effective measures to eliminate these barriers and thus strengthen school-community teamwork. Statements alone, such as that in the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE, 1994), which encourages schools to establish Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) to promote the involvement of parents in children's academic work and other school activities, are not enough. Such policies need to be reworked to not only advocate for community involvement in children's learning, but to offer strategies that could help parents commit to their children's learning. There should be, for example, clear guidelines or programmes in schools to guide teachers in planning and implementing partnerships with the community and other stake holders in pursuit of children's academic achievement.

Henniger (2005) suggests that schools should involve the community in the initial planning and preparation of academic activities in schools. Dodge, Colker and Heroman (2002) note that "initially, parents and family members have much to offer the school in terms of support, insights and skills" (p. 145). For education to be worthwhile, teachers and parents must together alleviate learning barriers and share in the responsibility for educating children. In turn, the community's knowledge must not be undermined, as those we term 'illiterate' in reading and writing can still offer important ideas and impart practical skills in areas such as arts and crafts, home economics, and design and technology.

Given the above, the purpose of this study is to investigate the causes of limited parental involvement in children's academic work. There are currently limited academic publications addressing this subject. The study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent have parents been trained or prepared on school-community partnerships with regards to the education of their children?
2. What approaches or programmes do schools use to involve parents/communities in children's academic work?
3. How well do parents/communities understand their role in the education of children?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental involvement, according to Oakes and Lipton (1998), is "organized parent participation in school decisions or classroom instruction" (p. 33). This can be combined with Jones's (1993) idea that "a parent is anyone who has parental responsibility for a child, and this could go beyond the biological parents" (p. 43) so that any family member, relative or otherwise, biologically attached or not, is the parent provided that they hold parental responsibility for the learner.

Significance of Parental Involvement for Learners' Academic Performance

Each year it is important that teachers acquire insights into the developmental and academic history of their learners. William and Cutler (2000) note that "ignoring the home greatly increases the chances of failure because children spend far more time with parents who could easily counteract the schools influence" (p. 134). Thus, it is advisable that teachers aim to access and use parents' knowledge to better understand learners. In turn, parents need to be informed of and empowered by the schools' expectations, goals, mission statement and vision. Research confirms that a strong

connection between school and home help learners adjust and learn effectively. “Parents influence their children’s academic achievement by exposing them to intellectually stimulating experiences, directly teaching them and monitoring their homework” (McNergney & Herbert, 2001, p. 201). It is within this context that schools should devise effective means for involving parents in their children’s academic endeavours.

Possible Approaches to Parental Involvement in School

One of the factors identified by researchers which made Botswana private schools, especially English Medium Primary Schools, surpass government schools was active parental involvement. This is articulated in the Report of the National Commission on Education (RNCE, 1993) which notes that “comparisons were made between state schools and the English Medium schools and a large proportion of people had a conviction that the better performance of private schools was due to active parental involvement” (p. 129). As a result, the Ministry of Education encouraged primary schools to establish effective parent-teacher associations in order to improve children’s academic performance. This idea was adopted by the government and included in the RNPE (1994) to be implemented by government primary schools. The initiative was meant to encourage parents to support their children’s educational activities, promote parent-school relationships in educating the child, provide a plan for interaction with the community and parents concerning problematic issues of learner-discipline and academic underachievement, and raise funds for school projects. McNergney and Herbert (2001) have identified parent-teacher conferences, school open houses and PTAs as effective approaches to draw parents into school activities to then assist with problems that arise.

A number of scholars have highlighted distinctive ways of involving parents in schools. The New York City Department of Education (<http://schools.nycenet.edu/offices/teachlearn/ell>, retrieved 10th December, 2012) outlines four different types of involvement as follows:

- Parenting: Helping families to create home environments to support children as students.
- Volunteering: Recruiting and organising parents to assist children at school and home.
- Decision making: Giving parents and community members opportunities to participate in decisions about how the school functions.
- Collaboration with the community: identifying and using community resources to strengthen school programmes.

Involving parents in schools, however, remains a big challenge in part because most parents have respect for teachers and still believe that teachers are sources of all information. These parents are consequently hesitant to approach or question teachers about issues pertaining to the school. It is therefore important that teachers create mutual relationships with parents and the community by engaging them to make them feel at ease and win their confidence. These actions by teachers will render both the community and parents more likely to respond in a positive fashion when their help is needed. As Henniger (2005) points out “this outreach strategy has [also] shown to be highly effective in teaching parents skills that they can use in working with their children” (p. 182).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research design in the form of a case study. A qualitative strategy was adopted because it allowed researchers to observe phenomena in a natural environment (Creswell, 2003) yielding results that are more true to life and generalizable. It also provided researchers with the ability to take an in-depth look at a small segment of society thereby providing a deeper and more complex understanding of what is going on (Yin 2003). In addition, this approach takes into account context, quality and meaning (Burns, 2000). Using this approach thus enabled the researchers to arrive at a deeper understanding of school-parent relationships, or formative data, because of the opportunity to probe for more information and clarify questions as needed. This approach was used to explore barriers possibly hindering the effective involvement of parents in their children’s academic work.

Twenty-four participants (twelve teachers and twelve parents; fourteen females and ten males) were interviewed. Eight of the parents had children presently attending primary school while the remaining four did not. These four parents were deemed parents according to Jones’s (1993) and Oakes and Lipton’s (1998) definition of ‘parent’. The sample was drawn from the Central North region of Botswana and covered remote, remotest, sub-urban, and urban locations. Random sampling was used to select teachers for participation while parents were identified with the help of village headmen.

Botswana education policies and school regulation or guideline handbooks were also examined to determine the extent to which these documents promoted community-involvement and whether or not they suggested programmes that schools could adopt to more effectively involve parents in primary school education. The data gathered from teachers and parents were recorded, transcribed and analysed separately so as to arrive at a clear picture of the individual groups. This data was later discussed in relation to themes derived from the research questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study are presented, analysed and discussed below according to themes developed from the research questions. The sub-sections that follow include: respondents' biographic data, data from teachers, data from parents and discussion.

Teacher's Interview Data

As noted, twelve teachers were involved in this study. Data from teacher interviews is presented, analysed and discussed below under the following themes: parents' preparedness to contribute to their children's academic work, school-parent teamwork approaches, and schools' expectations of parents with reference to children's academic work.

Parents' Preparedness to Contribute to Their Children's Academic Work

When asked about the structures put in place to prepare or sensitise parents to the importance of involvement in their children's academic work, their role and expectations of them, five teachers (42%) stated that they often organised workshops for parents to inform them of these issues, two (16%) spoke with parents about these matters on 'open' days while the remaining five (42%) addressed these topics during PTA meetings, although attendance at these meetings is often poor. Teachers were concerned, that despite these efforts, parents continue to ignore their requests for participation in school activities. An additional question was asked with regards to recommendations around children's academic work. Respondents who had held workshops or attended other forums with parents noted that most parents committed to working with schools when possible, although some contended that they were not trained to teach and so teachers should do their job.

Parent-teacher conferences or forums are an effective communication tool as they bring parents into the classroom. Gordon and Browne (2007) explains that "when instituted well, the conference builds positive rapport with parents, as the teacher and parents discuss the child's strength, progress and possible areas of improvement" (p. 263). Macleod, Hookey, Frier and Cowieson (2000) thus suggest that conferences for parents should be scheduled at specific times during the year with information reaching parents well in advance.

When asked whether there was any change after the workshop, all twelve concurred that very few parents continued to attend PTA meetings and 'open' days. Five (42%) teachers further commented that the few active parents only participated in sports and music competition preparations and school funds raisers and were not comfortable with greater involvement in the classroom. A follow-up question was asked to determine what teachers did to further stimulate parents' involvement after low participation in the organised forums. Responses included: we meet with them concerning their children's performances, we have consultation days for parents to view learners' work, we call parents individually to discuss each child's work and offer suggestions for assisting them at home.

The overall results of the activities undertaken to more actively involve parents in their children's academic work shows that an effort was made by some schools to educate parents on the value of involvement. Nonetheless, low attendance at schools and a preference for participating in extra-curricular activities (sports and music) over academic work remained. Despite the interventions parents still seemed to understand little of their responsibilities and the value of education to their children.

Given the continuing resistance of parents to embrace academic involvement, it is important that all education stakeholders, education ministers, member of parliaments, counsellors, and chiefs team up to educate parents on the importance of this involvement and work with parents to develop effective programmes that can improve school performance (Mannathoko, 2009; Samberg & Sheeran, 2000).

Educationists, like Robinson (1982), have long advocated for community involvement in children's academic work from curriculum planning and development through to its implementation. This approach may motivate parents as they would feel greater ownership of the lesson content and be more prepared to take part in its implementation.

Macleod, Hookey, Frier and Cowieson (2000) believe that teachers do not always discuss with parents the range of ways in which they can become involved in their children's education. Other studies have likewise shown limited effort by schools to encourage parents to contribute and/or inviting parents to contribute only to activities such as sports and funds raising (Mannathoko & Major, 2012). Given this, programmes should be established to help teachers acquire new methods for drawing-in and working with parents.

School-parent Teamwork Approaches

The first question under approaches sought to determine the structures or programmes schools had in place for school-community partnerships around children's academic work. Respondents indicated that they communicated with parents through PTA chairpersons who were always a member of the community. Eight respondents (67%) said that the chairperson assigned the secretary to write letters to invite parents to meetings while the remaining four (33%) concurred that announcements were made to students during morning assemblies and their classes to inform parents about meetings. According to the case study teachers, although the chairperson was not always someone who had children studying in the school, parents who were invited to meetings were only those with attending children.

A follow-up question was asked to determine if there were programmes or guidelines articulating what was expected of PTAs and parents. Participants noted that although nothing was available in written form, the association knew what to do and parents who attended PTA meetings were informed of their roles. When asked what the Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE, 1994) said about school-parent teamwork, the teachers seemed to not understand the question and were not aware of information within the RNPE on school-parent teamwork or relationships. Six participants (50%) were not even aware of the RNPE. Four (33%) added, however, that their schools had school guidelines handbooks which each parent was issued that outlined school rules. The handbooks, according to the participants, were developed by teachers without the input of parents or PTAs. When asked what the handbook included, all four concurred that it communicated the type of uniform, students' expected behaviour and disciplinary action, school development funds and other school fees, extra-mural activities, school attendance expectations and the need for parents to ensure attendance.

It is evident from the results that there were no appropriate programmes in the case study schools that articulated the academic activities that parents could participate in with teachers, co-teach or help students with. The school handbooks which included only teachers' input did not include academic programmes aimed at parent-school partnerships. Cornwell (1988) argues that it is not always clear what the parental role in education is. If schools are not organised enough to develop clear goals and attainment targets which can in turn guide teachers and parents in the development of annual programmes, they will not succeed in attracting the active involvement of parents in schools. The effective input of parents in schools is thus determined by good school organisation in creating academic activities to engage the community. Wade and Moore (1993) advise schools to take the initiative to educate parents on how they can effectively assist in their children's academic work and Jenkins (1997) reiterates the value of this action, "...it is a long recognised bond between parents and schools to turn children into productive children" (p. 68).

Schools' Expectations from Parents with Reference to their Children's Academic Work

Under this theme, teachers were first asked to share the roles they expect parents to play in schools. Responses included: help with sports and music, help with other school activities, raise funds for the school, donate funds to the school, help children with homework, attend meetings to discuss children's academic work, and visit the class teacher during the term to discuss their children's performance. When asked whether they believed that parents were aware of their roles in terms of their children's academic work, nine (75%) of the respondents felt parents were aware, one (8%) said parents were not aware, and the remaining two (17%) were not sure whether parents understood their role in school. The nine participants who felt that parents were aware explained that they were informed through PTA meetings and school-parent conferences. Respondents were then asked if parents participated as per school requirements. The consensus was that only a few of the parents adhered to the requirements by attending school meetings, accompanying children to sports activities, and assisting children with their homework.

Respondents were also asked what they thought was the cause of limited parental contributions to their children's education. Responses included: parents do not relate well with us because they feel we are the cause of their children's poor performance in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), parents claim to be very busy and have no time for their children's school work, parents say we are paid for the job and shouldn't bother them with it, most parents here are illiterate and cannot help their children, some parents spend most of their time brewing and

drinking alcohol, often with their children and will tell you they should not be bothered, some parents do not know the value of education and so do not care about encouraging their children, and most parents do not attend meetings and are therefore not aware of their roles in education. A follow-up question sought to determine the efforts made by schools to encourage parental involvement in children's academic work. Nine (75%) said conferences were organised to sensitise them to the importance of involvement in their children's academic work while the remaining 3 (25%) noted that they called meetings to remind parents of their school roles. When asked if this led to any improvement, all of the respondents stated that few parents responded positively and demonstrated committed to their children's work.

A general and final question within this theme required teachers to share what they thought could be done to encourage the effective participation of parents in their children's academic work. Responses included: encourage parents to help their children and to work hand-in-hand with their children and the teachers, invite parents to 'open' days and awards ceremonies to view their children's work, sensitise parents to the importance of involvement in their children's academic work through workshops and motivational talks, and involve parents in general school planning to help them feel like an authentic part of the school.

It is evident from the above discussion that most teachers are informed about the role parents play in schools so as to improve their children's learning. What was lacking, however, were clear programmes for specific academic activities that specific parents could commit to do. These could include, for example, forums where parents could commit to work with teachers on specific topics to plan and present lessons to students or opportunities to engage in special projects with groups of children and their class teachers. Sensitising parents to the importance of school involvement without clear structures (who, what, when, where, why) will not help schools to meet their intended goals. In addition, while teachers seemed to focus on the community's capacity to help children with homework and attend ceremonies and meetings, they paid less attention to the primary purpose of attending school and the possibility that community members could prepare content and co-teach lessons. Deventer and Kruger (2003), cited by Mannathoko and Major (2012), advise that "for the relationship to be successful, schools should involve ... the community at large in the planning, implementation and review of the agreed programmes..." (p. 64). Teachers' responses were subsequently triangulated with parents' responses to increase the validity of data.

Parents' Interview Data

Twelve parents took part in the study. As in the preceding section, data is presented, analysed and discussed below under three themes informed by the research questions. These themes are: the community's preparedness to contribute to children's academic work, school approaches to involve parents in children's academic work, and possible barriers to parental involvement in children's academic work.

Parents' Preparedness to Contribute to their Children's Academic Work

Participants were first asked how they were sensitised by schools to involvement in their children's education. Responses included: encouraged during PTA meetings and 'open' day ceremonies to help children with homework and visit schools to check on their progress, encouraged to take part in school activities such as sports and to help in disciplining our children. Seven (58%) added that they were sometimes called by individual teachers about their children's misconduct and low performances at which time they were advised to help their children at home. Among the remaining five (42%), three mentioned that they were reminded of the need for involvement in social events. All respondents denied being invited to workshops by teachers when asked if they attended other forums such as workshop organised by schools.

These responses concurred with the responses of three teachers (25%) who said parents were told about the importance of involvement during PTA meetings and 'open' day ceremonies, and through individual classroom calls/meetings. This contrast with the nine teachers (75%) who stated they held workshops for parents. Calls for parental involvement in schools excluded class-teaching whereby community experts could help with class projects in various disciplines thereby assisting teachers with topics they were less well-versed in. This might include, for example, Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA) topics for primary schools that many teachers are not familiar with (Phibion 2006 and Phuthogo 2008). Cleave and Sharp (1986) note teachers must act as intermediaries between schools and the community so as to create a strong relationship that will benefit children academically.

One of the effective approaches which could be adopted in schools is the 'Artist in Residence' scheme recommended by art educationists such as Lancaster (1990), Robinson (1982, 2005) and Gelsthorpe and Burnham

(2003). This programme involves inviting and engaging experts of various topics from the community in the planning and teaching. They can work with students in schools or learners can visit them to learn certain processes depending on the topic at hand. This approach is commonly used in Britain and America and researchers proved that it has borne fruits for many schools which practice it.

Schools' Approaches to Involve Parents in their Children's Academic Work

The first question within this theme sought to determine how schools involved parents in curriculum planning, development and evaluation. All respondents indicated that they were never asked to become involved in curriculum development, evaluation or planning and teaching. A follow-up question was asked to find out how the community members contributed to the school. Here, some respondents gave more than one answer. Two (17%) said they bought puzzles for schools, ten (83) raised funds for schools, five (42%) volunteered for school cleaning campaigns, three (25%) contributed money for new school developments and two (17%) did not contribute. When asked how they think the community should be involved in schools, responses included: parents should encourage their children to work hard, check children's work regularly and revise with them as needed, help their children as needed and read school work with their children. The subsequent question asked respondents if, according to their observations, the community attended to their children's work. Three (25%) felt that some did, seven (58%) said they did not, and the remaining two (17%) were not sure whether parents were involved in their children's work.

These responses show no evidence of formal programmes in schools created to guide school-community projects. They also show no evidence of community involvement in planning and teaching children in a classroom environment or donating materials to be used for specific topics. These results correspond with those of the teachers which showed that parents only assisted their individual children on work offered by teachers as homework or attended to extra-mural activities. When looking at these results, it is not that parents valued those activities more than class-teaching services, but that their role in the school was not clearly defined. Henniger (2005) and the government of Manitoba (www.edu.gov.mb.ca > Education, retrieved December, 2012) thus advise schools to make parents aware of the full range of their possible roles and involve them in the initial planning and preparation of the curriculum and its implementation.

Possible Barriers to Parental Involvement in Children's Academic Work

Parents were also asked about possible causes of limited parental involvement in their children's academic work. Responses included: ignorance, lack of knowledge of what to do, work commitments, negligence, reliance on house maids, not being empowered in terms of what to do and how to do it, poor relationships between teachers and parents due to low PSLE results, a general lack of involvement in their children's education, not being aware of their role, not knowing the value of education therefore not valuing it and not getting involved, spending most of the school days taking alcohol and other drugs with their children, and unwelcoming teachers who see parents as uneducated and useless. A final question was asked to find out what participants thought should be done to more effectively involve the community in their children's work. Recommendations included: schools should invite parents to schools monthly to meet class-teachers, and parents should be invited to regular workshops and seminars about the value of education, their children's education and their role.

When surveying these responses, it is clear that a number of issues have been highlighted as inhibitors of active community involvement in children's academic work. Many of these relate to a lack of knowledge, by both parents and teachers, on the ways in which parents can participate in schools. Not surprisingly, there were no appropriate formal programmes developed to guide schools and communities on how to improve community involvement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The benefits of community involvement in school programmes are supported by several educationists who advocate for the development of formal programmes by both the school and the community. This in turn requires that both local schools and education regions adopt specific strategies for developing effective school-community partnership programmes. There is also need to involve parents/the community in schools starting at the planning and policy level. All of these actions are recognition of the shared responsibilities by schools and communities for children's high academic performance. Such shared responsibilities will also strengthen school and community capacities for future

mutual collaborations. All of the above will most directly be achieved with the support of government and other stakeholders, who can, for example, allocate funds to support the development of school-based, goal-oriented parent involvement.

The results of this study reveal that not having a formal defined programme was the main barrier to community involvement in schools. It is also evident that teachers and the community were not well versed in effective school-community teamwork programmes. Neither teachers nor parents in this study identified 'teaching' as one possible parental role, hence the poor relationships between the two parties given that student failure was blamed solely on teachers. This is a consequence of not understanding the many possible roles for parents in schools. Teachers must view the community as one source of children's education because undermining community knowledge leads parents to disown their children's failure and blame teachers. This finding demands a stronger collaboration between education policymakers, schools and communities so as to establish appropriate programmes to help schools and communities work as partners in pursuit of quality education and high student performances.

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