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PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE GA EAST DISTRICT OF GREATER ACCRA REGION OF GHANA

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Abstract

The concern for the home to play a more active and complementary role in promoting quality education of children is on the increase in many societies throughout the world, including Ghana. The purpose of the study was to examine the level of parents' involvement in the education of their children in primary schools in the Ga East District of Greater Accra Region. The research design was phenomenological. Fifty respondents made up of 10 headteachers, 20 teachers and 20 parents were involved in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the heads and teachers of the schools while simple random sampling was used to select the parents. Unstructured interview was the only instrument used to elicit information from the respondents. The study found among others that most of the parents in the district were highly involved in the education of their wards. It was suggested that parents, especially working mothers should be encouraged to play a more meaningful role in the education of their children by providing them with a quiet place to study, helping them with homework, being firm about bedtime, monitoring their academic and social behaviours and providing them with their school needs, among others.

Introduction

It has long been known that the school, home and community are each important players in a child's education (US Department of Education, 1986). When parents, community members and teachers work cooperatively, children's lives are improved (Epstein, 1995). Children who see a variety of concerned adults, especially parents working to help them improve their school performance respond positively, leading to increased achievement (Fuller & Olsen, 1998). There is no question that parents' involvement pays off in better educational outcomes for children (Brewer, 2007).

Literature Review

Forming partnership with parents is a process of sharing information and establishing relationships. It involves enhancing the total experience of children through increased interactions between the home and the school, and enriching the programme through parents' participation and contributions (Catron & Allen, 1999). Parents' involvement in the education of their children helps to meet the needs of children, families and the programme. Children have the opportunity to interact with an expanded group of adults with diverse occupational interests, educational and cultural backgrounds and ideas. Children feel supported and secure in classroom

environment while parents also feel supported by teachers who listen to them, share information about their child, offer help with child-rearing problems and encourage them in their role as parents (Catron & Allen, 1999). Thus, the goal of parents' involvement is to produce a climate of shared responsibility for student learning. Schools in which parents are partners stand in stark contrast to those in which the school assumes sole responsibility for student learning (Sandfort, 1987).

Musaazi (1982) held the view that the school, through the headteacher, staff and pupils could harmonize parents, school and community interests, resources, agencies, materials and institutions for the benefit of both the pupils and the community. He further added that education is an activity which involves the co-operation of teachers, parents, children and the community as a whole. Parents are naturally interested in the education of their children and would want to know who is doing the teaching, what is being taught and how well it is being taught.

Epstein (1984) indicated that if teachers had to choose one aspect of the policy on parents' involvement to stress, they will definitely go in for the aspect that deals with teachers involving parents in helping their children in learning activities at home. He emphasized that when parents get involved in helping their children in school activities their readiness to do homework increases and so is their academic performance. Krein and Beller (1988) believed that when

parents are actively involved in every aspect of their child's school life, the child will perform at a much higher level than his or her counterparts who lack parental involvement since parents are by and large the child's first teacher.

In the USA, one of the eight goals of *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* was that "By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of children" (Early, 1994, p. 3). This goal stresses the need for parents to play a major continuing role in their children's education after their children start school.

In a review of research literature on parents' involvement, Hawley and Rosenholtz (1983) identified parents' involvement as one of the four factors in effective schools that improve children's academic achievement. Hawley and Rosenholtz (1983) stressed that children have an advantage in school when their parents continuously support and encourage them in the performance of their school activities. This view was also supported by the findings of the National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE) in 1981 in USA after reviewing 35 studies on the subject. The findings of all the studies were positive; parents' involvement in almost any form appears to produce measurable gains in student achievement. In 1987, the NCCE under Henderson examined 18 new studies that together with the earlier research studies strongly suggested that involving parents in the education

of their children can make a critical difference. It asserted that parents should not be left on the periphery of the educational enterprise, that their involvement is neither a quick fix nor a luxury; it is absolutely fundamental to a healthy system of public education.

Coleman (1966) maintained in his study that if schools do not make the effort to include parents in the learning process, children can find it difficult to integrate the separate experiences of home and school. William and Stallworth (1984) found that parents were eager to play a variety of roles at school, ranging from tutoring their children or helping in the classroom to sitting on committees that decide such matters as disciplinary policies or changes in curriculum. While some parents feel that some activities such as helping their children with home work should have a higher priority, others feel that all roles are important.

A study in 1983 by Johns-Hopkins University on effective schools found out that students whose parents help them with homework do better in school and have a more positive attitude towards education than students who do not receive such assistance. It has also been noted by researchers like Clark (1983) that the following behaviours are present in families whose children succeed in schools: parents (a) frequently initiating contacts with the school; (b) playing a major role in children's schooling; (c) demonstrating that they value education; (d) providing regular instruction and coaching; (e) monitoring school work on a firm and consistent basis; (f) giving positive

reinforcement of school work and interests; (g) having regular routines and meal times; and (h) encouraging good use of time and space. The report strongly suggested that parents' involvement and support of education are critical and that students whose parents closely monitor their academic progress and their general whereabouts perform significantly better in school.

In a related study carried out by Baku and Agyeman in 1997 on parents' participation in access and quality of education in four African countries, they found out that parents' participation in one form or the other exists in all communities but the level of participation was generally low. Baku and Agyeman (1997) however concluded that there is a strong positive relationship between parents' involvement in their children's education and quality of education

The researches provide some guidelines that can help keep schools on track. First, it is abundantly clear that everyone benefits when parents are involved in their children's education; second, individual children and their families function more effectively and there is an aggregate effect on the performance of students and teachers when schools collaborate with parents. Third, parents' involvement—whether based at home or at school has significant long lasting effects. These effects vary directly with the duration and intensity of the parents' involvement; the more the better.

There are many reasons however that make parents not to get involved in school activities. Such reasons may

include (i) parents having negative experiences in school; (ii) demands from other commitments; (iii) parents not knowing how to help their children; (iv) regarding involvement as an infringement on the teacher's authority; (v) logistical problems; (vi) lack of understanding of the school system; and (vii) lack of interest.

In Ghana, the issue for parental and community support for schools has become decidedly proactive especially during the Educational Reforms of 1987 and 2007. Educators are now asking parents to support the schools. Parents are being requested to help enforce the rules of the school, assist with homework, maintain their children's health, feed and clothe them, establish a positive home environment for learning, oversee the use of internet and promote good study habits. Schools should see themselves as an institution linking the home and the community. Though children rarely think of the home as a place of learning, conscious attempts are being made to let them understand the complementary role of the home to the school.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the involvement of parents in the education of their children in primary schools in the Ga East District of the Greater Accra Region. Specifically, the study sought to examine critically the various ways that parents are involved in the education of their children, the level of commitment and the challenges that they face in doing so.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- a. What are the basic obligations of parents to their children?
- b. What are the various forms of communication between the school and the home?
- c. How are parents involved in teaching/learning activities of their children at school?
- d. What roles do parents play in the learning activities of their wards at home?
- e. What roles do parents play in school level decision making and advocacy?
- f. What are the challenges that parents' face in the education of their children?

Methodology

Research Design

The study was qualitative and employed the phenomenological approach. Judging from the main thrust of the study, this design was the most appropriate as it sought to have a deeper understanding of lived experiences of the phenomenon which is parents' involvement in the education of their children.

Participants

Fifty respondents in Ga East District constituted the sample. This was made up of 10 headteachers, 20 teachers and 20 parents. Ten primary schools where the headteachers spent at least three years were purposefully selected. The headteachers whose schools were selected became automatic participants. Two teachers who had stayed in each school the longest were

purposefully selected. It was assumed that these teachers possess rich experiences dealing with parents in their communities. Two parents were randomly selected from each participating school.

Setting

Ga East District is one of the peri-urban areas in the Greater Accra Region. It shares its southern boundary with Metropolitan Accra. Most of the people who live there are literate and work in Government Departments. Few however are farmers, traders and blue-collar workers. Ga East District can boast of many basic schools and two secondary schools.

Instrument

An unstructured interview was the only instrument used to collect data. The interview was used in order to have an in-depth knowledge and understanding about the phenomenon under study. The interview was unstructured and the headteachers, teachers and parents were those who shared their lived experiences.

Data Collection Procedure

Permission was sought from the District Director of Education for Ga East to conduct the study. A preliminary visit was then made to each participating school to explain the rationale for the study to the respondents and to solicit their assistance and cooperation. Specific dates were set for the conduct of the interview in each school. All efforts were made to establish good rapport with the three stakeholders before the interview began. All the interviews with heads and teachers took place at

the school while that of the parents took place in the parents' homes. It was face to face and one-on-one interview. With the permission of the respondents, the interview was tape recorded. Field notes were also taken and facial expressions were captured in course of the interview. At the end of each interview session, respondents were asked for additional comments or concerns which were not covered during the interview process. The interviews were comprehensive and each session took one to two hours to conduct. In all 26 days were spent in collecting the data.

Validity

Member check was used to determine the accuracy of the findings. The transcribed scripts and the final report were sent to the participants to determine their accuracy and to comment on the findings. Again, the prolonged time spent in the field enabled us to develop in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Results and Discussion

Six themes of parents' involvement in the education of their children emerged and were examined critically. These are: parents' basic obligations to their children, school-home-school communications, parents' involvement at the school level, parents' role in the learning activities of their wards at home, parents' involvement in the school level decision making and advocacy, and challenges that parents' face in the education of their children.

Basic Obligations of Parents to their Children

It is important that parents meet the basic needs of children such as food, clothing, shelter, health care and safety. It is equally imperative that parents perform the early-child-rearing obligations such as formation of good habits and prepare the children for school.

It was found out that some parents provided their wards with food, shelter clothing, health care and safe environment. They gave their children home training in good manners, respect for authority and taking of responsibility. They also provided school supplies such as school bag, textbooks, mathematical set, exercise books, pens, pencils, supplementary readers and workbooks. Few parents however stated that they provided their children with positive home conditions for learning. These parents indicated that they laid the groundwork for pupils' success in school by building in them self-confidence, self-concept and self-reliance. They created space at home for studies for their wards and gave them sufficient time for their studies. They provided a home devoid of conflict and petty squabbles; they were warm, loving, caring and affectionate and created the impression that the children were accepted and secured at home. Most of the headteachers and teachers however disputed many of the claims made by the parents. The headteachers and teachers held the view that very few parents were highly responsible and made sure that basic needs were provided; others reneged on their obligations of providing their wards the much needed basic needs such as

nutritious food and healthcare. School bags were hardly provided likewise textbooks and supplementary readers, as they claim their income levels were low.

According to the headteachers and teachers, workshops on parenting, child development, nutrition, discipline, homework, viewing of television, the use of community resources and other relevant topics on child rearing practices that affect pupils' success in school were organized for parents. Handouts and flyers which list things parents should do at home to help their children learn at home were also given out to them at such workshops. Though these activities were rarely done and only at PTA meetings, they were found to be effective. One headteacher commented: "Parents have a right and responsibility to safeguard and nurture the physical, social, emotional and spiritual education of their children and to lay a sound foundation for responsible citizenship". Another headteacher stated: "If home training of the child is not completed before the child starts school, such a child enters school with a deficit which is difficult to redeem.

The finding is in line with that of Epstein (1987) that the most basic involvement of parents is providing for their children's basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, health care, safety and general well-being. She emphasized the school supplies and space needed for school work to complete homework and get to school on time.

School-Home-School Communication

It was observed in the study that although schools differed in the form and frequency of school-home-communications it was established that at one time or the other each school sent home report cards, newsletters, notices of special events and calendars of the academic year. All the respondents stated that the commonest medium of communication to parents and from parents was the school children themselves. Few teachers ever spoke to parents on the phone about their wards, while many of them interacted with parents either at church or at the market place. Most of these teachers discussed issues which centre on discipline and academic performance. One teacher remarked: "I always discuss my pupils' academic progress and disciplinary issues with their parents anytime I meet them. Usually, they feel excited hearing about their wards' academic progress and praise me for the good work that I am doing". Another teacher stated that: "Written notices are sent to all parents about upcoming events such as Open Days, sporting activities and cultural festivals". A headteacher remarked "I always send newsletters to parents at the beginning and at the end of each term. The newsletters highlight plans, achievements and challenges of the term". Other means of communicating with parents, as indicated by respondents, were through Parent-Teacher-Associations (PTAs) meetings and Open Days. Open days offer opportune time for parents and guardians to interact with teachers and discuss their children's performance.

Home visits are important but are hardly carried out by headteachers and teachers because they do not have time, although most parents expressed interest in home visits by headteachers and teachers.

The finding agrees with that of Baku and Agyeman (1997) and Epstein (1987). One suggestion made by Baku and Agyeman (1997) for effective involvement of parents in schools in Ghana is to link the PTA leaders and the school so that school problems would be laid bare for immediate solution. Epstein (1987) also states that the school has an obligation to inform parents about school programmes and their children's progress and parents are expected to act on the information received from the school.

Parents' Activities at School

Programmes that involve parents in the schools do play a significant role in creating a desirable context for teaching and learning. It was found out in the study that few parents were used as resource persons in all the schools. Parents who are pastors preached to pupils during school worship, linguists/elders taught the history, traditions, and cultural practices of the people of the community, local craftsmen imparted their skills to the students; professionals such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, engineers, and accountants also participated in career awareness programmes. Drama troupes and artists also performed drama and demonstrated their talents.

Parents attended Open Days to examine their wards' school work and to interact with teachers on their children's academic performance and

social life. Few schools extended invitations to parents during sporting events, cultural activities, carols nights, and speech and prize-giving days. At such functions, headteachers hyped on the achievements and challenges such as truancy, delinquency, drug abuse and alcoholism and seek assistance from them. All the head teachers remarked that the presence of parents and the support they offer decrease conflict between the staff and the community and apathy toward the school. Parents also help in fund-raising activities to help improve facilities such as electricity supply, water supply, furniture and infrastructural development. This they do through the organization of mini harvests, special appeals to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), past pupils and prominent citizens in the area.

This finding confirms the views expressed by Epstein (1987) and Gestwicki (2000). Epstein (1987), states that when parents' involvement at the school level is well organized, teachers and the school staff provide better educational services to the students during the school day. Gestwicki (2000) observes that bringing in other adults with unique talents and abilities also adds to the excitement of the classroom and often leaves teachers feeling more satisfied with their work. Participation also benefits children by providing an enriched classroom environment.

Learning Activities of Wards at Home

It was observed that few parents in Ga East District played meaningful roles in the learning activities of their wards at home. These parents provided well-

lighted area at home as study places, drew time tables for their studies, monitored their studies, make sure all homework are completed before going to school the next day and monitored viewing of televisions. They also encouraged their wards to make effective use of community libraries.

The finding is in agreement with what Becker and Epstein (1982a) and Baku and Agyeman (1997) found in their studies. Becker and Epstein (1982a) reported in their study that involving parents in learning activities with their children at home is one kind of parents' involvement that teachers find particularly useful as the activities benefit student learning.

School-Level Decision Making and Advocacy

All the schools have Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs) that most headteachers regularly interact with. All the headteachers indicated that both the PTAs and SMCs played meaningful roles towards the progress of the schools. These bodies helped to solve problems, make decisions, and develop policies that make the school system more responsive and equitable to all families. They also played advocacy roles. In the study, the heads indicated that even though some members of the SMC showed apathy towards meetings, generally they helped in shaping policies and directions of the schools. They helped in crafting the vision and mission of the schools. The PTAs ensure that the schools meet the hopes and aspirations of parents and pupils

Challenges that Parents Face in the Education of their Children

Some of the parents had strong desire to influence school programmes and activities, yet felt unwelcome and powerless to do so as their efforts are perceived to be at variance with the rules and regulations governing the schools as laid down by the Ghana Education Service (GES). For instance, where some parents point out the wrong doings of some heads, the situation generally degenerates into conflicts and affects the school adversely. Some parents have also constituted themselves into “watch-dogs” on the implementation of GES policies and are quick to point out some of the wrong doings on the part of the school head. This usually degenerates into conflicts that adversely affect the schools. In few cases, some heads simply do not want parents to be present in their schools to interfere in the implementation of policies by the GES. They simply see the activities of parents as nuisance and people who have nothing worthwhile to contribute toward the improvement of the school.

In some schools, parents view Parent-Teacher-Association (PTAs) meetings as being designed by school authorities to levy parents. In this respect, parents do not have the desire to get involved in school activities. Almost all the headteachers confirmed that most parents who are market women hardly get involved in school programmes because they are too busy to do so.

Implications for Schools and Parents

The study has demonstrated that, parents' involvement in primary

schools in Ga East District is generally encouraging. This has some implications for schools and parents.

Communicating with parents should continue as is being done in the district. Parents should be invited to the school at the beginning of every year to learn about the school's philosophy, policies and programme, meet staff and have opportunity to ask questions. A calendar could be published in each school year and given to every family with information on sporting and special events. It may include the school's motto, list of personnel in the school and important telephone numbers. Headteachers are encouraged to send termly newsletters to parents, stating achievements/progress made within the term and challenges facing the institution. Schools are also encouraged to create their own website for the public, especially for parents' use.

The headteachers and teachers must take the initiative to reach out to “hard to reach parents” and to devise a variety of strategies for them to participate in school activities and the education of their children. This means going into homes to meet with families, having meetings with parents in less intimidating settings and occasionally talking with parents at churches and other gatherings about the school and the need for parents to get more involved. He or she should also listen to parents' concerns. The important thing is that schools must take the initiative and adopt strategies needed to break the barriers and establish trust.

The school should encourage more parents to serve as resource persons in areas where they have the expertise. They may teach local history, dance, culture and traditions. They may also give lectures on topical issues like the AIDS, substance abuse, alcoholism, human rights and careers. This will enable the children to see other people as playing significant role in their lives.

Television is a great information and entertainment medium. However its potential to interfere with learning is enormous. Parents should intensify the monitoring of watching television by their children.

Homework usually keeps children busy at home. It is therefore imperative that homework is frequently given to children and parents entreated to supervise such work. Parents should be encouraged to supply their children with school needs such as school bag, school uniform, shoes, textbooks, pens and other relevant materials.

Parent-Teacher-Association meetings should not be viewed as the time or opportunity designed to levy parents; for such a practice would thwart parents' interest in the school, resulting in parents trying to avoid PTA meetings. It should be the occasion when issues concerning the progress of the school and welfare of the staff and children should be discussed. Through PTA meetings, parents should be made to believe that they have a right and responsibility to safeguard and nurture the physical, social, emotional and spiritual education of their children and to lay a

firm foundation for responsible citizenship.

Local media should be encouraged by school authorities to educate the public about home as a special learning place. The school should also produce a flyer that should list, for example, things parents can do to help their children learn.

Parents should be encouraged both formally and informally to comment on school policies and to share in the decision-making. School heads should build public awareness on issues that affect children such as drug and alcohol abuse and child abuse.

Parents' participation in a well-structured and well-managed programme can help eliminate harmful stereotypes that staff members may harbour about the community served by the school. By actively getting involved in the activities of the school, parents develop a sense of ownership of the school and responsibility for its outcomes. The presence of parents and the support they offer decrease conflict and apathy in the school. All these changes help to create a desirable school climate which makes teaching and learning more permeable. The improved student performance that results gives teachers hope and professional satisfaction and leads to a spiral of ever-better performance by students, staff members and parents.

Conclusion

The importance of working cooperatively with parents and communities cannot be overlooked in quality educational programmes for children.

Indeed, parents have spent and will continue to spend far more time with their children than teachers can ever do.

It is therefore imperative that teachers recognize this fact and work with parents and families to make sure that children have the best opportunities for growth and development.

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