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Parental Involvement as a Convergence of Understanding by Teachers and Parents

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Abstract: This qualitative interpretative study aimed to investigate parents' and teachers' understanding of parental involvement and its implications for improving relations between schools and parents. The study employed the theoretical framework of Community Cultural Wealth, which emphasises the importance of listening to and including multiple educational stakeholders in order to leverage their expertise. This framework helped us analyse the existing literature on parental involvement and the responses we received from participants. For data collection, we conducted individual interviews with three parents and three teachers who were purposefully selected from three different schools in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality, Free State, South Africa. We prompted participants to articulate their understanding of parental involvement using an open-ended question. Through thematic analysis, we found that both teachers and parents perceive parental involvement as encompassing communication, parenting, participation in extracurricular activities, and assistance with learning activities. Based on our findings, we recommend that schools and parents engage in ongoing discussions to (re)negotiate and (re)formalise their understanding of parental involvement to enhance collaboration and efficiency between schools, teachers, learners, and parents.

Keywords: Parental involvement, community cultural wealth, interpretivism, teachers understanding, parents understanding.

1. Introduction

Education has benefited from parents' involvement in their children's education for years. It is considered a critical factor in children's academic outcomes (Lara & Saracosti, 2019). This involvement is even more successful when there is a shared understanding of parents' role. However, a lack of clarity on what needs to be done and how to do it often leads to unnecessary conflicts between parents and schools, which negatively impacts students' overall performance. Therefore, it is important to explore whether teachers and parents in the selected area have the same understanding of parental involvement and expectations. According to Lara and Saracosti (2019), a partnership between parents and schools allows for the conceptualisation of roles and relationships, which has a broader impact on children's development. Families and schools are the main actors in defining their roles and forms of involvement, resulting in new and varied actions to relate to each other based on the specific educational context (Christenson & Reschly, 2010).

Parental involvement has been defined differently by various scholars. Initially, Dor (2012), later supported by Ribeiro et al. (2021), stated that a lack of a consistent and accepted definition of parental involvement has led to activities being grouped together as effective parental involvement in children's education. Smith et al. (2020) classify parental involvement into structural intervention and relational elements. Structural elements involve engaging parents in children's learning through

activities, behaviours, or strategies. Relational elements focus on strengthening relationships and meaningful interactions between parents and teachers (Sheridan & Kim, 2016). This new understanding of parental involvement builds upon Epstein's (2018) seminal work, where she combined psychological, educational, and sociological perspectives to define parental involvement. Epstein identified six types of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community.

Tan et al. (2020) distinguish between two types of parental involvement: involvement that takes place at home and involvement initiated by the schools. At home, parents can be involved by assisting children with homework, parenting learners, showing awareness of their children's schoolwork achievements, supervising schoolwork, reading with and to their children, and communicating about schoolwork and activities. Parents can also be subtly involved by emphasising the value of education and having high expectations for their children's academic achievement (Coutts et al., 2012; Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013; Mncube, 2010).

On the other hand, schools initiate parental involvement through various activities, such as inviting parents to school functions, facilitating individual interactions with teachers, inviting parents to parent-teacher conferences, conducting home visits, maintaining regular communication with parents/guardians, involving parents in parent-teacher organisations, encouraging parents to share their knowledge and experiences in the classroom, and fostering a partnership approach that includes mutual decision-making opportunities (Antipkina & Ludlow, 2020; Barger et al., 2019; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Poon, 2020; Schueler et al., 2017).

Parental involvement benefits teachers, students, parents, and schools in various ways. Parents have the opportunity to transmit their worldviews, attitudes, and preferences (Tan et al., 2020), and they can also contribute their own resources – physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual – to motivate and encourage their children to excel in their schoolwork (Barger et al., 2019; Kartel et al., 2022). When students perceive support from their parents, it enhances their confidence, motivation, and emotional resilience, enabling them to face challenges better. Consequently, their academic performance, knowledge, and skills improve, and they develop a strong commitment to their schoolwork (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014). Teachers and schools benefit from the subject knowledge and experiences that parents bring, which strengthen and provide context to class discussions, ensuring better discipline, providing resources and skills, promoting effective school governance, and sharing networks with the school (Maldonado et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2020). Parental involvement also yields many advantages for students and educators, such as reducing absenteeism, increasing class engagement, fostering motivation to learn, and improving academic grades (Yee Von, 2022).

It will thus be crucial to ascertain, within the numerous ways of defining parental involvement, whether parents and teachers share a mutual comprehension of the concept and role clarification to ensure its seamless implementation and application. Teachers' perceptions of involved parents often centre around those who are consistently present and visible at the school, frequently overlooking or undervaluing parents' engagement in their child's education within the home and community contexts, as observed by Posey-Maddox and Haley-Lock (2020). Moreover, prevalent models of parental involvement, such as those proposed by Epstein, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, Hill and Tyson, and Jeynes, typically focus on structural activities, investigating what parents do to support their children, rather than emphasising the relationship that develops between parents and teachers as a result of their shared or divergent understanding of parental involvement. Consequently, this study endeavours to contribute to the expanding body of knowledge on parental involvement by examining how parents and teachers perceive the concept.

1.1 Problem statement

The definition of parental involvement is broad and varied, with different players in the education sector having their own understanding of it. The way parental involvement is defined and conceptualised creates specific expectations for everyone involved. When parents and teachers have different interpretations of the concept, there can be conflicting expectations that lead to unnecessary conflict. This paper aims to explore the meanings and expectations of parents and teachers regarding parental involvement. By understanding their differences, we can identify interventions to bridge the gap and establish a common understanding. Thus, the study examines the meanings and expectations of parents and teachers regarding parental involvement.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in the Community Cultural Wealth Theory, which focuses on the shared responsibility of teachers, parents, and learners in achieving educational success. The theory emphasises the importance of recognising the perspectives and abilities of all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and learners, in improving schools (Yosso, 2005). This is particularly relevant to this study because, in the past, schools did not consider parents as equal partners who should have a say in issues affecting their children's education, such as parental involvement. Instead, parents were often seen as lacking in knowledge and skills (Hood et al., 2023). According to Yosso (2005), communities possess various forms of cultural knowledge, language, experience, skills, abilities, and connections, which can be categorised as "capital." This capital draws from the knowledge found in homes, parents, schools, and communities and can be incorporated into the classroom. The CCW framework includes six types of capital: social, navigational, linguistic, resistant, familial, and aspirational. Social capital refers to the networks of people and community resources that individuals rely on to navigate society's institutions.

Navigational capital encompasses the skills necessary to navigate social institutions. Linguistic capital involves the multiple language and communication skills possessed by community members. Resistant capital is based on a history of challenging inequality and includes the knowledge and skills used to confront it. Familial capital encompasses the cultural knowledge passed down through families. Aspirational capital represents the culture of resilience that fosters the belief in achieving goals despite obstacles (Yosso, 2005). All these forms of capital contribute to our understanding of the various ways in which parental involvement can manifest, thereby deepening our comprehension of parental involvement. These different forms of capital can be connected to both home-initiated and school-initiated understandings of parental involvement, as parents and schools must collaborate and respond to each other. The understanding that teachers and parents have their own capital influences their perspectives on what they can contribute to the school and what they expect from it. Singer et al.'s (2016) insights into culture also contribute to our understanding and relevance of the concept in our study. Singer et al. (2016) define culture as the shared schema that group members internalise to define reality and give personal and communal meaning to life. In the context of this study, culture pertains to the meaning that parents and teachers attach to parental involvement based on their lived experiences.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative interpretive approach due to its emphasis on how individuals derive meaning from the phenomena in their environment. Proponents of the interpretive paradigm argue that there is no singular reality or truth, necessitating the interpretation of reality in order to obtain multiple realities based on subjective lived experiences (Gichuru, 2017; Ryan, 2018). Aspers and Corte (2019) assert that qualitative research aims to comprehend individuals' experiences and reflections on those experiences. It also seeks to explore how realities are constructed and understood by individuals, thereby generating new insights (MacDonald et al., 2016).

In this paper, teachers and parents provided their own subjective perspectives on parental involvement. These viewpoints were informed by their unique experiences and knowledge, representing their own realities, truths, and lived experiences. The study adopted a case study research design and utilised open-ended interviews to gather data. The interview process was viewed as a conversation between researchers and participants (Muthiah et al., 2020). The objective was to obtain in-depth information on individuals' opinions, thoughts, experiences, and sentiments regarding the meaning of parental involvement. Three teachers and three parents were purposefully selected from three different schools in the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality, Free State Province, South Africa. The interviews took place outside of school hours and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university (UFS-HSD2022/1748/22) and the Department of Education to conduct the study. Participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure anonymity, the names of the schools and individuals were concealed. Parents were identified as P1, P2, and P3, while teachers were identified as T1, T2, and T3.

For data analysis, this study employed Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify and analyse patterns in qualitative data. The collected data were organised into themes based on similar or related ideas, which were then interpreted and described using codes developed by the researchers (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Given that multiple participants were interviewed, their similar ideas were thematised and interpreted by comparing participants' views on those ideas (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This approach facilitated a logical and systematic structuring of the analysis and subsequent discussions (Guest et al., 2014).

4. Presentation of Results

This section aims to demonstrate parents' and teachers' understanding of the concept of parental involvement. In response to the question, "What meanings and expectations do parents and teachers have about parental involvement?" the respondents provided comprehensive responses that generated the following sub-themes: parental involvement as communication, parental involvement as participation in extracurricular activities, parental involvement as assisting with schoolwork, and parental involvement as parenting.

4.1 Parental involvement as communication

Communication is considered a crucial aspect of parental involvement in schools. When parents are able to receive and respond to messages from the school or when they take the initiative to communicate with the school, it is seen as an active form of parental involvement. This is because communication helps bring parents and teachers closer together, allowing them to work together to address the needs of the students (Tan et al., 2020). Both the literature and the responses from participants indicate a general consensus regarding the importance of communication in understanding parental involvement.

The parent (P1) in School A responded by saying:

> *"I think parental involvement is when I can keep regular communication with my Childrens' teachers and the principal of the school. Regular letters are sent to us as parents to tell us or ask us about issues relating to our kids. The school can communicate to the parents by means of letters inviting them to school to discuss about the progress of learners and their behaviour in general."*

The teacher (T3) in School C supported the above response and responded to the same question by saying:

> *"For me, when a parent is actively involved in their children's education, he responds to communication and is always there when the school needs him. There is nothing as frustrating as a parent who does not respond to messages from the school."*

It is interesting to note that some of the responses from the parents also concurred with the teachers' answers on communication, as displayed in this response from a parent (P2) in School B:

> *"Parental involvement is when I am called to go to school, and I respond positively. If the school sent a letter telling me about a meeting to discuss school issues, I must attend to show that I am participating."*

A parent (P3) in School C responded by saying:

> *"For me, I keep regular contact with the registered teacher of my child via WhatsApp; she insists that we respond to the messages and even discuss our kids' performance."*

Based on these responses, it can be deduced that communication is considered a part of parental involvement. The responses also recognised that communication can take different forms - written, verbal, or electronic, such as through WhatsApp or emails. However, the concern lies in how communication is initiated and controlled. It appears that parents are always on the receiving end. They have to wait for messages from the school, respond to specific messages, and rarely initiate a conversation. This contradicts the principles of community cultural wealth, which aim to empower parents and acknowledge their knowledge.

On the other hand, when communication does occur, it opens up possibilities for closer collaboration between the school, teachers, and parents, as well as the students who often act as messengers between the school and their parents. The ability of parents to communicate with their children allows them to share their perspectives, knowledge, skills, and attitudes - all of which are encompassed in linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). This observation aligns with the findings of a study by Leenders et al. (2019), which revealed that teachers rarely communicate to discuss parents' reciprocal roles, goals, and expectations in student learning or involve parents in decision-making processes related to student learning.

4.2 Parental involvement as participating in extra-mural activities

The literature suggests that participating in extracurricular activities is a way for parents to understand the concept of parental involvement (Mncube, 2010; Poon, 2020). This can take different forms, such as parents attending their children's activities, volunteering to train, or actively participating in them (Coutts et al., 2012). When parents volunteer at schools, it helps improve the school's performance in cultural activities, as they can assist educators by demonstrating their skills in different activities (Sheridan & Kim, 2016).

One example that supports the literature on parental involvement in extracurricular activities is the response below from a teacher (T1) at School A:

> *"Parental involvement is being able to participate in your children's extra-mural activities and to make sure that they have the necessary resources."*

Similar sentiments were echoed by the teachers from Schools B (T2) and C (T3). Parent (P2) at School B illuminated it further by adding that:

> *"I see it as parental involvement when I have to contribute towards extra-mural activities, at times also having to watch matches and practice sessions or even to just drop off and collect my child from the games."*

Parent (P3) made a significant contribution by indicating that:

> *"…parental involvement for me is taking part in cultural activities."*

Teachers' responses on the conceptualisation of parental involvement seem to agree with the responses from the parents. Teacher (T1) mentioned that:

> *"…parental involvement is when parents are able to pay for their children's participation in the extra-mural activities."*

Teacher B added to this response,

> *"…parental involvement is when parents are able to buy attire for sports when they are requested to do so."*

Teacher C's response acknowledged the parents' knowledge and skills when he said:

> *"…parental involvement is when parents help in training learners and preparing things and even participating during sports and cultural events."*

Teachers' and parents' responses indicate that parental involvement at school is understood as the extent to which parents are involved in extracurricular activities. The responses suggest that parents understand the importance of supporting their children's participation in sports and other activities organised by the school. An interesting point that emerged from this subtheme is the teachers' acknowledgement that parents should also be invited to contribute their expertise and make contributions to the schools. In other words, parents should be encouraged to share their knowledge, skills, and resources with the children and the schools (Yosso, 2005). Therefore, parents can volunteer their time, knowledge, and skills to the school without waiting for an invitation from the school.

4.3 Parental involvement as assisting with schoolwork at home

The concept of parental involvement is better understood when parents are able to assist their children with schoolwork. This assistance can take the form of helping with homework, readings, and other activities that learners are expected to do at home. Additionally, parents may also share their knowledge and experiences with the learners to support curriculum implementation. Research has shown that this type of involvement often leads to improved learner performance (Maldonado et al., 2022).

From the responses received, P2 said that he understood involvement as:

> *"…filling an expectation to help their children with homework and assignments to make sure that they succeed at the end of the day."*

P3 added:

> *"It is when I help my children at home and help them with homework and help them to find the resources for them to succeed."*

Perhaps even a more comprehensive response was T3, who viewed:

> *"Parental involvement is seen as the participation of parents in every facet of children's education and development from birth to adulthood, recognising that parents are the primary influence in children's lives as they have to help their children with the homework every day."*

This perspective on parental involvement acknowledges the potential role of parents in facilitating students' acquisition of new and meaningful knowledge. This is consistent with Yosso's (2005) contention that parents, regardless of their educational background, possess aspirations and cultural capital that, if effectively utilised, can bring multiple benefits to schools. Pushor (2007) views this as a natural outcome, given that parents have historically been involved in teaching and nurturing their children from birth and beyond, drawing upon their skills and knowledge. Therefore, it is only

logical to allow parents to contribute to their children's learning. Unfortunately, the parental role is often perceived solely as an extracurricular and after-school activity rather than as something that can also contribute within the classroom, thereby informing and enriching the teaching, learning, and assessment processes. Inviting parents into the classroom can significantly enhance the teaching and learning experience. A study conducted by Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) demonstrates that parents can actively engage in school affairs if they are consistently invited to be part of the educational setting. Alternatively, according to Berkowitz et al. (2021), parents would benefit from ongoing feedback, interpretation, and action based on their perspectives concerning critical issues in the school and their own needs.

4.4 Parental involvement as parenting

Parenting is a crucial aspect that contributes to the understanding of parental involvement. This particular form of parental involvement entails the establishment of a nurturing home environment that caters to the various needs of the child (Epstein, 2018). Examples of such involvement include purchasing books, covering school expenses, and providing learners with financial, emotional, and psychological support (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Additionally, parents have the ability to serve as exemplary role models and mentors for their children, consistently motivating and encouraging them in their academic pursuits (Tan et al., 2020).

The following are the responses from parents and teachers regarding their understanding of parental involvement:

P1 had this to say:

> "I think parental involvement is when I, as a parent, can provide for all the things that my children need at school, like paying school fees and buying school uniforms. Most importantly for me, I want to be able to instill discipline and positive behaviour in my children so that they do not have problems at school."

In addition, P2 agreed with P1:

> "I think in addition to financial support, I also need to be there for my child. Provide moral and emotional support as they do their schoolwork to keep them motivated."

The responses from the teachers seemed to concur with those of the learners. T1 asserted that:

> "Parental involvement for me moves beyond the parent's ability to pay fees and buy stuff for the kids but also being able to keep them motivated and interested in their schoolwork."

T2 echoed the same sentiments as T1 when saying:

> "Being there for their kids and keeping them disciplined. Helping the school in disciplining their children."

From the responses received from the participants, it is clear that emotional and psychological support plays a critical role in the academic achievement of learners. Both parents and teachers expressed factors that demonstrate an understanding of the importance of parental involvement. It is essential to provide support to both parents and teachers in order to enhance the academic performance of students. T2's response highlights the interdependent relationship between the school and parents in shaping a child's development. According to Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) and Tan et al. (2020), schools can work closely with parents to increase their capacity for effective involvement by sharing specific ways for parents to be engaged. This includes discussing with parents the impact of their involvement on student learning, familiarising them with curricular goals, providing feedback on the effects of their involvement, and supporting parent-teacher networks within schools. Through parenting, parents can utilise familial capital to enhance their children's self-understanding and strengthen their resilience in the face of challenges they may encounter in school

(Yosso, 2005). Therefore, understanding parental involvement is considered to be one of the ways to achieve this.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The responses from parents and teachers appear to be in agreement. They share a common understanding of parental involvement, using the four subheadings that emerged from their responses and aligning with similar classifications found in the literature. Both parents and teachers agree that parental involvement encompasses communication between the school and parents, assisting with schoolwork, participating in extracurricular activities, and parenting. We believe that this shared understanding demonstrated by teachers and parents will foster better relationships between them and ultimately benefit the students. A noteworthy finding from the study is that both the teachers and parents provided their responses separately. We wonder how these responses would have been explained, defended, and supported by the participants if they had been in a focused group setting that included both teachers and parents. Therefore, we recommend that schools regularly engage in discussions with parents to clarify and formalise their mutual understanding of parental involvement, rather than assuming that parents already know what is expected of them in a specific school.

6. Declarations

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