EXPLORING CHALLENGES IN TEACHER−PARENT RELATIONSHIPS IN RURAL FOUNDATION PHASE CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Sound teacher−parent relationships are essential for young learners' holistic development. Teachers and parents should share information about learners' academic and social difficulties to enhance the school curriculum. However, developing sound teacher−parent relationships in rural areas is challenging because of embedded socioeconomic and cultural factors and parents' low literacy levels. This study aimed to explore the barriers that hinder the cultivation of positive teacher−parent relationships in rural foundation phase classes. The study employed Epstein's Theory of Six Types of Involvement to assess what makes it difficult for teachers to cultivate such relationships. The study adopted a qualitative, multiple case study design within an interpretivist methodological paradigm. It employed purposeful sampling to select teachers in the foundation phase with more than three years' teaching experience and parents of learners in the foundation phase. The data were collected using focus group discussion, document analysis and thematic analysis. The findings confirm that sound teacher−parent relationships are lacking, especially in rural foundation phase classes and that context-based strategies must be developed for teachers to cultivate positive relationships with the parents of learners in the foundation phase. The findings of this study highlight that teacher in rural areas and the education community at large are aware of the challenges faced by teachers in cultivating positive teacher−parent relationships in rural foundation phase schools. By understanding these challenges, teachers and parents can develop approaches to eliminate at least some of the challenges and cultivate positive teacher−parent relationships.

Keywords: foundation phase, learner, parent, rural areas, teachers

Introduction and Background

Sound, regular and open teacher−parent relationships are important in education. Recent studies have shown that teacher−parent relationships play an important role in the academic and social lives of learners. However, in rural schools, where there is a lack of resources, teacher−parent relationships do not thrive. According to the study conducted by Lemmer (2018), teacher−parent relationships enhance the academic and social development of learners. In the foundation phase, which is an integral part of the learners' development, sound teacher−parent relationships are especially important and should be enhanced. In his study, Okeke (2014) reports that when teachers and parents collaborate, the learners benefit. It is against this background that this article focuses on the challenges that teachers in rural areas encounter in cultivating positive and effective teacher−parent relationships.

Research Question

What are the challenges that rural foundation phase teachers experience in cultivating positive teacher−parent relationships?

Research Aim

To identify and explore the challenges or barriers that teachers in rural schools encounter in cultivating positive teacher−parent relationships.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is defined as a lens through which a researcher views the research and its findings. The theoretical framework that underpins this study is Epstein's Six Types of Involvement Theory. The six types, comprising parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community, emphasise the important role that teachers and parents need to play to enhance relationships that will benefit the learner. The theory allowed me to understand the aspect of "parenting" by highlighting how factors such as socioeconomic statuses, unemployment, literacy level and geographical factors hinder sound teacher-parent relationships in the foundation phase, particularly in rural areas.

Literature Review

Sound, regular and honest/open teacher−parent relationships in the foundational phase are crucial for a learner's educational achievement and social development. International studies consistently show that successful collaboration between teachers and parents enhances the learners' academic and social development (Okeke, 2014). However, despite the substantial evidence endorsing the significance of these linkages, obstacles persist to achieve such communication or relationships. The inability to foster robust partnerships between family and school, whether stemming from socioeconomic inequities, cultural divides, or misplaced expectations, can significantly affect the learners' future.

The indispensable influence of teacher−parent relationships

The essence of effective early childhood education is the collaboration between parents and teachers. Research from the United States of America (US), including Epstein's (2001) foundational study on parental participation, emphasised that robust, continuous connection between home and school markedly enhances learners' educational outcomes. This assertion was corroborated by Emerson et al. (2012) in Australia, who proposed that the incorporation of parents into the educational process positively alters the learning environment. It transforms it into a collaborative network that is focused on the learner's achievement rather than the school being merely a space for instruction. However, cursory involvement of parents is insufficient. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) contend in their UK study that genuine engagement necessitates a transformation in the perception of parental involvement by schools. Parents' involvement is not merely about passive assistance with homework or participation in meetings; it concerns establishing an inclusive relationship, in which parents are

essential to the educational process. Such enhanced interaction could transform the foundation phase, rendering it more attuned to the learners' requirements.

Challenges: Socioeconomic and cultural obstacles

The advantages of robust, sound teacher−parent connections or partnerships are evident; however, their attainment is often complex. Socioeconomic and cultural obstacles typically impede these collaborations, resulting in teachers' frustration and parental disengagement.

Socioeconomic disparities: The inaudible underminer

While it can be assumed to be a given expectation that all parents ought to participate in their child's education, this assertion neglects the strongly influential economic limitations encountered by some households. In low-income neighbourhoods, where parents often hold multiple jobs or lack reliable transportation, involvement in their child's school presents significant logistical challenges (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Research in the US and Brazil indicated that when teachers implement flexible communication methods—such as telephonic outreach or home visits—they engage parents more effectively, especially those who may otherwise be disengaged (Olmstead, 2013). This highlights a broader concern: Schools (and teachers) must exhibit greater adaptability and reduce their inflexibility regarding family engagement expectations. By providing many alternative avenues for parental involvement, schools can initiate the dismantling of socioeconomic barriers that hinder substantial participation.

Linguistic proficiency and literacy: The neglected obstacle

The question of language is equally significant and frequently neglected. In multilingual nations, for example Canada and South Africa, linguistic limitations can provide a considerable obstacle to efficient communication between parents and teachers. When schools do not offer information in a language the parents can understand, they effectively marginalise those parents from their child's educational experience (Lemmer, 2013). To surmount this obstacle, schools must promote bilingual communication, ensuring that all parents can obtain the necessary information to support their children.

Discrepancies in expectations: A cultural conflict

In several cultures, for example in China and Japan, parents see teachers as the paramount authority on education, and parents adopting a more passive role (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011). This sharply contrasts with Western methods, in which family involvement is regarded as a crucial component of the educational process. Cultural disparities in job expectations may generate friction if teachers and parents lack a mutual comprehension of their separate roles and duties. Schools must proactively address these disparities, fostering an environment where all sides perceive their contributions as valued and fulfilling their specific roles

Solutions for Enhancing Teacher−Parent Relationships

Purposeful teacher−parent conferences

Teacher−parent conferences may frequently appear as mere formalities; nonetheless, they represent a potent mechanism for enhancing collaboration—when conducted effectively. Research from Sweden indicates that these encounters ought to be well organised, intentional, and concentrated not solely on academic achievement, but also on the learners' emotional and social welfare (Björkman, 2019). When parents and teachers exchange knowledge regarding the child from many perspectives, they are more effectively positioned to provide comprehensive assistance for the child. Parents should provide information about the home environment, specific challenges and the child's fears, strengths and medical requirements. This will allow the teachers to better understand the learner's behaviour and performance at school.

Utilising technology for ongoing engagement

In the digital era, technology ought to be utilised to enhance teacher−parent connections. Digital platforms, such as Seesaw and ClassDojo, have been transforming teacher−parent communication in the US and Australia (Olmstead, 2013). These technologies facilitate real-time information on a learner's progress, allowing parents to remain informed and engaged, irrespective of their physical presence. In South Africa, where cell phone ownership is high even in rural communities, this form of communication should be enhanced.

Promoting parental engagement beyond the classroom

It is important to consider alternatives to the conventional roles of parental engagement. Norwegian schools promote parental involvement in classroom activities, volunteer opportunities, and decision-making bodies (Baeck, 2010). This not only fortifies the teacher−parent relationship, but it also fosters a sense of collective responsibility for the learners' achievement.

Strengthening Connections

The research is unequivocal: Sound and robust teacher−parent interactions in the foundational phase are essential for cultivating a supportive and productive learning environment for the learners. However, cultivating these partnerships necessitates adaptability, and a readiness to confront the obstacles that impede progress. Schools that emphasise communication, trust, and cultural responsiveness will enhance their collaborations with parents and establish a foundation for the learners' enduring success.3

Research methodology

According to Maree (2012), a research methodology is a systematic development of the research on how a research question is answered.

Research approach

This study employed the qualitative research approach within the interpretivism paradigm as data was collected in words (Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was chosen to gather insightful experiences of teachers and parents on the challenges experienced in cultivating positive teacher−parent relationships in the foundation phase, unlike the quantitative approach, where data is statistically analysed (Yin, 2018).

Research design

This study employed the multiple case study design by exploring the challenges that teachers and parents face in rural schools, especially in the foundation phase, when they aim to cultivate sound teacher−parent relationships (Yin, 2018). The schools were chosen based on their geographic location and their proximity to the researcher.

Sampling technique

Data were collected from 10 participants (six teachers and four parents). Two schools were selected as the research site, based on their proximity. From each school, three teachers in the foundation phase were purposefully selected with the assistance of the school principals. From each school, two parents of learners in the foundation phase were purposefully selected with the assistance of the principals. For clarity and anonymity, schools were named school A and B, teachers were named SAT1, SAT2, and SAT3, respectively, and parents were named SAP1 and SAP2, respectively.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected by using focus group discussion. The focus group discussions of the teachers and the parents were conducted separately. During the focus group discussions, participants were asked questions that followed semi structured questions. The questions were probed to explore the challenges that teachers and parents experience in cultivating sound teacher-parent relationships. The interviews lasted for 60 minutes and followed semi-structured interviews, which allowed the participants to express their perceptions and experiences regarding the topic of teacher−parent relationship. Data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis, which allowed the emergence of the themes that will be discussed in the findings section.

Ethical issues

Permission to conduct the research was sought from the University of Pretoria Ethics committee and the Department of Basic Education. Participants signed a consent form outlining their roles (Silverman, 2000). Participants were made aware that their participation in the study was voluntarily and that they could withdraw at any time without any penalty. Participants were also made aware that their names will not be published in the study and that pseudonyms would be used to replace their names.

Results

Sound, regular and honest teacher−parent relationships in the foundation phase are important for the learners' academic and social development. These relationships enhance collaboration between teachers and parents, and they build a strong bond for both parties. According to the literature, teacher−parent relationships bridge the gap

between the learners' home and the school. They place the learners at the centre and allow their holistic development. Therefore, the development of the learner in the foundation phase depends not only on the two aspects in isolation (home and school), but also on how the teacher and parents collaborate. The discussions below show the challenges that are faced by teachers in rural schools that impede the important cultivation of sound teacher−parent relationships.

Lack of enthusiasm or commitment by parents

Teachers have indicated that one of the challenges they come across in their schools is the lack of enthusiasm for or commitment by the parents when dealing with anything that concerns their children's education. This is seen when parents are called to meet up with the teacher, especially when the learner is unable to read or write in the classroom. One teacher lamented that as these learners are in the foundation phase, they need the full support of their parents. When the teacher calls a parent to discuss how best they can assist the learner at home, they can see by the parent's facial expression that they are not interested in assisting. Sometimes, teachers can also hear it in the parents' voice that they are not willing to assist their child.

Often, teachers see that parents are not enthusiastic about providing any support when they do not assist their children with homework. In many cases, learners come to school without having written the homework. When asked why they did not do their homework, they report that their mothers did not help them. The lack of parents' enthusiasm, or commitment is therefore a challenge for teachers in cultivating sound teacher−parent relationships.

Lack of support

According to studies, parents who were never supported at their young age tend to repeat the same pattern with their children. Parents who lack(ed) emotional support at home and at school tend to not give their children the support they need either academically or socially. According to studies (Malatji, 2021), these are childhood traumas that were never dealt with by means of specialised counselling or any other form of therapy. Teachers are faced with learners who lack emotional (and academic) support from parents because of such factor. As a result, teacher−parent relationships are negatively affected because many parents do not want to become involved with anything related to education. That is seen when children get to school, with some showing signs of withdrawal, others wanting to get closer to teachers, while others are misbehaving to attract the attention of teachers and parents. The disturbing factor is that some learners are unable to cope with the neglect they experience at home and they do not perform well in the classroom.

Dysfunctional families

Rural schools are faced with many families that are dysfunctional. Such families are often child-headed or grandparent-headed households, single parents, unemployed families, and parents who are living together but are unable to provide for their children. There are also families that struggle with the disciplines of child-rearing or the emotional capacity to raise children. Some households are subjected to drug or alcohol abuse, gender-based violence and crime. These dysfunctional families impede the formation of

sound teacher−parent relationships in the foundation phase. At times, a child who is heading a family is unable to attend meetings for their siblings because they are also still at school. Teachers find it challenging to cultivate meaningful teacher−parent relationships when the caregivers or siblings are unavailable. Studies show that grandparents often struggle in having positive relationships with teachers because they are old, often have not had any schooling and unable to actively relate to the teachers (Malatji, 2021). Often, grandparents are unable to read or write, and unable to comprehend any communication in the form of letters that are sent to them by the teachers. Even where both parents are living with the learners, an element of dysfunctionality still occurs, where alcohol or drug abuse led to such parents being not available to form relationships with teachers that can assist in the education of their children. These parents are "always out" or when they are at home, they are involved in violent acts. Teachers report that those parents are not considering their impact on the children or on their education. They also do not attend meetings with the teacher.

Conclusion

In concluding, according to literature, teacher−parent relationships are important for the learners' academic and social development. A study conducted by Okeke (2018) reports various strategies teachers can use to enhance collaboration with parents. Epstein's Six Type of Involvement serves as guideline for teachers on how they can collaborate with parents to enhance the young learners' academic and social development. While this will not overcome all the barriers teachers experience when aiming to form closer relationships with the parents of learners living in rural areas, there might be some innovative approaches that could assist them to open the doors to better communication with the parents. This study explored the challenges faced by teachers in rural areas that impede the cultivation of positive teacher−parent relationships. The challenges are more contextual to rural areas and require context-based strategies that teachers can use to cultivate positive teacher−parent relationships.

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