

# **The Influence of Parental Involvement on the Learning outcomes of their Children: A Case study of Primary School Children in Matabeleland Regions**

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**Abstract:** *Parental involvement in their children's education has been proven by research to improve the children's confidence, interest and performance at school. A qualitative case study to evaluate the influence of parental involvement was conducted. The study sample was purposively sampled and consisted of 20 school heads, 20 teachers and 20 pupils. The researcher was the main research instrument during data gathering. She assumed the role of the interviewer and an observer. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings showed that, parents who had children enrolled in rural and public urban schools were less committed to their children's learning. Further, they were not worried much about their children's school environment. They consulted less with the teachers and did not supervise their children's home work. Parents whose children were in private schools had better communication and interaction with their children's teachers. There were various models that were used to improve parent-teacher relationship for the betterment of the children's learning needs. The study recommended -devolvement of engagement strategies, improved communication channels, supervised parental involvement in school activities and monitoring and evaluation measures to assess performance, progress, outcome and impact of engagement strategies.*

**Key words:** *Parental Involvement, Motivation, Communication, Participation*

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## **I. Introduction**

Matabeleland regions have the lowest pass rates for primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe, with some primary schools in Matabeleland North recording 0% pass rate in 2010 and 2011 (Coltart, 2011). As quoted by the District Education Office Matabeleland North, there is a high school drop-out rate for secondary schools in Matabeleland North province compared to the Matabeleland South and Bulawayo provinces. The regions had the lowest Grade 7 pass rate recorded at 41.65% in 2010, and the lowest school completion rate at 69.3% (Zimbabwe National Strategic Plan for the Education of Girls, Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children, 2005-2010). An unpublished baseline survey by Muchuchuti (2012) indicated that Matabeleland regions have a low adult population, with more women than men. The rural Matabeleland provinces are faced with a plethora of challenges ranging from man-made hazards, natural hazards, severe under development and marginalisation. The regions have 7 borders leading to South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Botswana. There is intense mobility due to cross border trading. There is migration of youthful and productive population leaving very old and unproductive population. Matabeleland regions have also recorded the lowest adult literacy rate in many years.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

- i. What are the parent's level of commitment on their children's education in Matabeleland regions?
- ii. Which strategies do teachers use to engage with parents on the need for their involvement in education?
- iii. What are the benefits of parental involvement for children in Matabeleland primary schools?

### **1.2 Review of Related Literature**

Various definitions of parental involvement have been proposed. Reynolds and Clements (2005) defined parental involvement as parental behaviour with, or on behalf of children, at home or at school. It is the expectations that parents hold for children's future. For an elaborate understanding, Ho and Willms (1996) define parental involvement through four constructs - home discussion, home supervision, school communication and school participation. Dimock, O'Donoghue, and Robb (1996) proposed a range of dimensions that include: school choice (that is, parents select the education institutions and experiences for their children); involvement in school governance and decision-making (parents participate in formal school structures). They also suggest involvement in teaching and learning activities in the classroom and at home (parents volunteer in the classroom, converse with teachers outside of formal meetings, help with homework and discuss school-related issues with children). Finally they propose communication between home and school (parents contact the school and receive communications from the school).

Gray and Smart (2008) state that, parents are their children's best advocates. Parents know their children better than anyone else. That is why parents are so important when a child needs specific education. Engaging families in the education of their children at home and at school is increasingly viewed as an important means to support better learning outcomes for children. When schools and families work together, children have higher achievement in school and stay in school longer (Henderson and Mapp, 2002). Although there has been considerable research on how parents influence children's development, less is known about the specific ways in which parents socialise their children in terms of school-related behaviours. While extensive research indicates that there are important links between parenting and children's academic and behavioural competence at school, there is less research on academic socialisation, which is conceptualised as the variety of parental beliefs and behaviours that influence children's school-related development (Taylor, Clayton, and Rowley, 2004).

A study conducted by Mahoney and Wiggers (2007) indicates that, there are at least 3 major reasons why parents are mandated to play a more active role in the developmental services their children receive. First, is the federal legislation authorizing early intervention services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004). The second reason is related to opportunities parents have to influence their children's learning and development, particularly when compared with preschool and related educational service professionals. The third and most important reason involves the potential of parents improving child success in early intervention programmes. This effect is accentuated by the fact that most parents are typically a constant presence in their children's lives throughout the early childhood years.

Taylor et al., (2004), highlight that a greater appreciation of the beliefs that underlie parents' decisions about becoming involved in their children's education is needed. They further contend that, the way in which parents feel about schools and the emotional connections that they have to school may influence the kinds of attitudes to school and learning that their children assume. However, Boethel (2003) indicates that variation in levels of parental involvement in children's learning at home and at school is strongly influenced by family socio-economic status (SES). He states that, parents in families with lower SES often have fewer years of education and, possibly, have had more negative experiences with schools. Parents' communication with schools and parental involvement are also influenced by school characteristics (Feuerstein, 2001). Research indicates that parent participation leads to a host of positive outcomes for children, including greater generalisation and maintenance of treatment gains (Koegel, Leibold, and Ryan (1999). It also fosters greater continuity in intervention programs, higher levels of parent satisfaction and more effective strategies for resolving problems in schools (Newmann and Wehlage, 1995). According to theories of social capital, parental school involvement increases parents' access to social networks and information (Coleman, 1988, 1991; Lareau, 1987; Lareau, and Horvat, 1999). Social capital is represented by parental contact and involvement in the organisational and social aspects of the life of the school (Bailey and Wolery, 1989).

Spann, Kohler and Soenksen (2003) indicate that parent participation leads to a multitude of positive outcomes for children. Along with these research findings, Spann, Kohler and Soenksen (2003) make multiple recommendations for how schools can develop partnerships with families. These include engaging in quality communication, inviting parents to participate in school activities, soliciting parents' input on decisions about their child's education, and empowering parents to take action that addresses their own needs. Research has shown that the most consistent predictors of children's academic achievement and social adjustment are parent expectations of the child's academic attainment and satisfaction with their child's education at school. Parents of high-achieving pupils set higher standards for their children's educational activities than parents of low-achieving students (Parent Teacher Association, 2008). Decades of research show that when parents are involved pupils have higher grades, test scores, and graduation rates; better school attendance; increased motivation, better self-esteem; lower rates of suspension; decreased use of drugs and alcohol; and fewer instances of violent behaviour.

Relationships between home and school can be improved by increasing appropriate communication between teachers and parents. Spann et al., (2003) conducted a study that examined the home-school relationship and ways that communication impacted this relationship. The researchers found that the most functional home-school communication occurred on a regular basis and typically consisted of communication that involved the child's teacher or paraprofessional. Michigan Department of Education, (2001) states that, families whose children are doing well in school exhibit the following characteristics:

- Established daily family routine, (providing time and a quiet place to study, assigning responsibility for household chores, being firm about bedtime and having dinner together);
- Monitored out-of-school activities, (setting limits on TV watching, checking up on children when parents are not home, arranging for after-school activities and supervised care);
- Modeled value of learning, self-discipline, and hard work, (communicating through questioning and conversation, demonstrating that achievement comes from working hard);

- Express high but realistic expectations for achievement, (setting goals and standards that are appropriate for children's age and maturity, recognising and encouraging special talents, informing friends and family about successes);
- Encourage children's development/ progress in school, (maintaining a warm and supportive home, showing interest in children's progress at school, helping with homework, discussing the value of a good education and possible career options, staying in touch with teachers and school staff; and
- Encourage reading, writing, and discussions among family members. Examples: Reading, listening to children read and talking about what is being read.

Rowley and Schulenburg (2007), state that there are obstacles in the process of involving parents in their children's education programmes. They highlight that, school activities that develop and maintain partnerships with families decline with each grade level, and drop dramatically at the transition to middle grades. They also state that, teachers often think that low-income parents and single parents will not or cannot spend as much time helping their children at home as do middle-class parents with more education and leisure time.

Ramey and Ramey (2000) describe too little parental involvement as a practice when parents do not create time to read notes from the teacher, review what a child brings home, or attend parent activities at school. They state that the child is likely to suffer the most. Ramey and Ramey (2000, on line) highlight that:

***Very young children cannot remember that this is the week to bring in something for "the letter D," the topic of autumn, or something with the colour red to help with a class activity. They also cannot be expected to reliably remember which days school ends early, or when parents need to return a signed permission slip so they may go on a field trip.***

When parents do not meet these obligations, Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, and Crowley (2005, online) highlight that, their children are embarrassed and often become detached and sometimes are prevented from participating. They contend that: "... this can happen in families from all walks of life. They warn that being a parent who is constructively involved in your child's education takes commitment, forethought, and time."

All parents can do this well, if they are open to suggestions (especially from their child, the teacher, and other parents). This is with the view that the reasons, processes, advantages and benefits of parental involvement are more beneficiary for parents rather than the children. This is mostly because parents may understand or know the language, behaviour or habit of their child better than the teacher. This may make working with the child a little simpler if interpretation of behaviour is left to those who understand it - it reduces time and process of working with the child.

### **1.1.1 Types of Parental Involvement**

Epstein (2003) developed a framework for defining five different types of parental involvement. She states that the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life.

Her work also describes the challenges inherent in fostering each type of parent involvement as well as the expected results of implementing them for students, parents, and teachers. The first type is personal development - which is meant to help all families establish home environments that support children as pupils. This includes parent education and other courses or training for parents, family support programmes and home visits at transition points to pre-school, elementary, middle, and high school. The second is communicating - this involves designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programmes and children's progress. It allows time for conferences with parents and sometimes regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications. The third one is volunteering - which deals with recruiting and organizing parent support; school/classroom volunteer program to help teachers, administrators, pupils, and other parents as well as parent room or family centre for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families.

The fourth type is learning at home - this deals with providing information and ideas to families about how to help pupils at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. This may include information for families on skills required for pupils in all subjects at each grade. It also involves sharing information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home and family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work. The last type is decision making - which entails including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives. It also involves ensuring active Parents-Teachers Associations or other parent organisations, advisory councils, or committees for parent leadership and participation. This encourages independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements.

## **II. Research Methodology and Design**

The study adopted a qualitative approach. Gall et al., (2003) note that the strength of the qualitative research is its ability to provide complex descriptions. Steven and Hoboken (1998), argue that qualitative method is also effective in identifying factors such as social norms, traits, beliefs, gender, attitudes, ethnicity and religion whose role in research may not be explicit. The case study design was deemed the ideal design to use within the qualitative methodology because it facilitated exploration of the phenomenon within its context, using a variety of data sources (Trellis, 1997).

### **2.1 Population and Sample**

The population consisted of children from Bulawayo, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South Regions' primary schools. This also included the school heads and teachers of the children from the private, public and rural primary schools from Matabeleland Regions. The sample consisted of 60 participants purposively sampled from 20 schools (5 private schools, 5 public schools, 5 Matabeleland North Schools and 5 Matabeleland South Schools). William and Trochim (2006) state that purposive sampling can be very useful for situations where one needs to reach a targeted sample quickly and where sampling for proportionality is not the primary concern. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select data rich sources (Gall et al., 2003). Children who were sitting at the bottom 10 of the class were purposively selected for generation of required data. The researchers started with a large sample and employed a screening process until children with the required characteristics were identified. The selection criteria excluded children who had specific learning needs, children whose parents were sick, out of the country or not staying with them.

### **2.1 Data Collection Instruments**

#### **2.1.1 The researcher as an instrument**

The research took the form of interviews of school heads and teachers, lesson observations and document analysis for the children under study. The researcher assumed the role of interviewer during individual interviews and a non-participant observer during lesson observations.

#### **2.1.2 Interview guides**

Gall et al., (1996) define an interview guide as a set of questions drawn to help elicit data during interviews. Interview guides were therefore designed which focused on participants' perceptions on the parental involvement, school involvement and the learning behaviours of children. This included children's motivation towards school, their performance and attitudes towards learning. In the interview guides, the researcher included the main themes that were likely to emerge in the discussions of the questions.

### **2.2 Data Collection Strategies**

In-depth interviews with school heads and teachers were conducted. The teachers were interviewed first and part of their responses assisted in developing the interview guide for school heads.

Document analysis and naturalist observations were done. The document analysis included children's school books, test books/papers, school registers (for school attendances) and the children individual school records.

The researcher also observed the children in their normal learning environments. This exercise involved sitting in a classroom during the children's lessons and observing their behaviour during lessons without interaction or interruption. To reduce the 'Hawthorne Effect', the researcher attended 5 lessons so that the participants would familiarise themselves with her and develop confidence so that their behaviour would not be altered by the presence of a stranger as propounded by Stoner and Freeman (1992). The first 3 lessons were for familiarising with the children, the 4<sup>th</sup> lesson was for collecting data and the 5<sup>th</sup> lesson was for validating the data. The validation process was done immediately after the 4<sup>th</sup> lesson to avoid coming back at a later time when the pupils would have forgotten the researcher and the joining becomes a process again. The researcher was assessing the presence of the coded behaviour. The learning sessions for each child were spread over two weeks and the selection of days was in no order of priority for each school.

### **2.3 Data Processing**

The approach involved an interim analysis, which refers to the cyclical process whereby data generated are analysed prior to additional data collection (Mafa, 2003). This approach was employed throughout the study. Use was made of memoing, which refers to reflective notes written by the researcher recording ideas generated during data analysis (Johnson and Christensen, 2000). The data collected were constantly reviewed, categorised, labelled and analysed to form themes and patterns. This has the advantage of identifying issues that had not been included in the initial data collection procedures (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

### **2.3.1 Segmenting**

Segmenting involved breaking the data into meaningful and useful analytic units. This was done by carefully reading the transcribed data line by line, deriving the meaning behind the statements. Each segment was bracketed, that is, words, sentences and several sentences as a way of indicating their starting and ending points. The researcher took cognisance of the following questions:

- Is there a segment of this text that is useful for this research?
- Does it differ in any way from the text which precedes or succeeds it?
- Where does the segment begin and end?

### **2.3.2 Coding**

According to Miles and Huberman (1982) in Johnson and Christensen (2000) codes are labels used for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive and inferential information compiled during a study. Coding is the process of marking these units of meaning with symbols, descriptive words or category names. Meanings of the discussions were drawn, coded and categorised into themes using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The responses from interviews were analysed into concepts and related concepts were categorised into families. The sequence of events in the analysis of the findings were to look at the documents/transcripts or notes that were formulated during the interactive stages of the research. It involved looking for indicators of categories in the events and behaviour during interviews or observations. These were named and coded on the documents. The codes were compared to check for consistency and differences.

#### **2.3.2.1 Compiling a master coding list**

All category names developed, together with other symbolic codes, were placed on a master list. The codes on the master list were reapplied to new sections of the text each time appropriate sections were discovered. New categories and new codes were added to the new master list as the need arose.

#### **2.3.2.2 Identification of Broad categories**

Data from interviews, lesson observations and document analysis were then sorted into broad categories that addressed the level of parental commitment, the value parents put on education, strategies teachers used for engaging parents and benefits of parental involvement on children performance.

## **III. Findings and Discussion**

### **3.1 The level of parental commitment on their children's education**

Most parents whose children were attending public and rural schools were not attending school activities or meetings. They rarely attended consultation days or had voluntary discussions with either the teachers or the school heads. Teachers from the public schools felt that most parents were less committed to their children's schooling. One teacher spoke so strongly about one pupil and his mother who were both participants in this study:

*He stays very far and comes to school very late. His homework is never done. His mother works night shift so really no one helps him. ... I am not quite sure of his background. . . . Secondly; the mother is very busy and he has no one to help him with the homework literally. The father is a money trader as well. So I guess with school it's just a formality otherwise no one takes responsibility. I used to call the mother and talk to her and I told her several times to transfer the child to a nearby school. But I guess she has other feelings....*

This statement does not only reveal the parent's lack of involvement but it also shows that the relationship between the teacher and the parent is wounded. At the end of the day, the child loses from both sides, that is, the part which the school thinks the parent ought to play and the part which the parent thinks the teacher has to play. Unfortunately, these two do not communicate their expectations to each other and the gap or communication breakdown impacts on the child's experiences in school. The child suffered the consequences of the break in the communication of his teacher and parents. Asked about their relationship with parents one of the teachers from the public school responded "*... I have never seen the parents.... I remember I wrote a letter asking the mother to come and discuss a certain issue with me, but she told the child that, she is busy in the flea market. It's almost Christmas and she does not want to lose business.*" The relationship between the parents and the teachers was also poor. Some of the teachers were generally unconcerned about the poor achieving pupils as they also cited that the parents are not forthcoming or bothered about the poor performance of their children.

In contrast, an appreciable number of teachers in private schools pointed out that most parents whose children were enrolled in private schools showed a lot of commitment. They attended consultation days, meetings, supported school activities such as sporting and prize-giving days, volunteered to perform certain duties in the school, supervised their children's homework, responded positively to invitations by teachers to come and discuss their children's problems. In one private school, some parents even observed teachers teaching. There is a gulf of difference between levels of commitment of parents attending different school types. Possible reasons could be that parents who send their children to private schools need value for their money since they pay more in terms of school fees and levies. Secondly, most of these parents whose children attend private schools could be better educated than those who send their children to rural and urban schools. As a result, they are aware of the impact their involvement has on their children's education. The findings on the level of parental involvement are consistent with Boethel's (2003) observation that there is a positive correlation between parental involvement and their socio-economic status.

### **3.2 The strategies that teachers use for engaging parents on their children's schooling**

Some rural schools had mass consultation days once a year. Parents sat in one class and discussed issues together hence it was difficult for the teachers to realise whose parent did or did not attend. Though the schools highlighted that they had an open-door policy, whereby parents were encouraged to walk in any time a need arose. In most rural schools the dominant form of engaging parents was through word of mouth, where teachers or school heads will tell children to inform their parents to come to school for certain activities such as meeting. In rare cases were parents given written letters. In urban public schools, children were normally given circulars to take to their parents.

Some rural schools had tried to alleviate some of the issues that confront communities and prevent parents from affording schooling for their children. The following passage is an extract from one of the statements from the rural school teacher:

*We have even devised a model whereby parents work on school projects for a fee. However, we do not give those cash, but we credit school fees for their children. We have allowed some to pay in kind, that is, with goats, chickens. We now have a goat pan and at this point we have 3 goats.*

Asked if that model had improved school attendance, he highlighted that to a great deal it had. Generally, children from the rural region had very poor school and home environment.

On the contrary, private schools used an array of strategies to engage parents. Frequently mentioned strategies were circulars, school calendars, emails, telephoning, texting messages, newsletters and inserting messages in the newspapers. Most of the private school teachers explained that pupils had diaries where the parents and the teachers wrote each other messages concerning the children or any other information that was key to the stay of the children at school. In one school, the teacher had reserved Friday afternoon for a one-on-one meeting with parents who felt their issues needed face to face discussions. At the end of each school break (except weekends and end of term), private schools had consultation days which started soon after lunch. The teachers had attendance registers, in fact each child's name was recorded and the teacher will mark each attendance against the child's name, hence those that do not attend are known. Parents, who could not come for consultations for whatever reason, were allowed to come when convenient for them.

Findings are conclusive that most public school teachers did not have reasonable strategies to engage with parents. However, in private schools there were clear communication channels between the schools and the parents and that improved the performance of the children to a reasonable margin. From my observation, it is evident that parental involvement is greater in private schools than in rural and public urban schools. This could be enhanced by the many forms of engagement that private schools use. This being the case, perhaps those schools, in which parental involvement is low, should pull a leaf out of the private schools' strategies of involving parents. It also appears that some of the obstacles to parental involvement highlighted by Rowley and Schulenburg (2007) were rife in rural and public schools. There is need to unmask these obstacles and address them for the children's educational benefit.

### **3.3 The benefits of parental involvement of children performance**

Most children whose parents were less involved in their schooling and school activities performed very low. Similar results were reported by Spann, et al., (2003) and Stoner, et al., (2005). The worst performers were the children from rural schools, especially those whose parents were from low socio-economic statuses. On the contrary, many parents who had children attending private schools were actively involved in their children's schoolwork. This could be attributed to various strategies that private schools had put in to foster teacher-parent relationship and teacher-pupil relationship.

Literature on the impact of parental involvement in their children's learning is unequivocal (Koegel, et al., 1999; Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Gray and Smart, 2008). In this view, teachers and school heads should

leave no stones unturned in finding ways to effectively engage parents in their children's education. As succinctly argued by Taylor et al., (2004), the belief underlying parental involvement need to be unmasked so as to enable school heads and teachers come up with ways to involve this very important constituent of children's learning.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Basing on the above findings, it can be concluded that: First, the level of parental involvement is higher in private primary schools than urban public primary schools. However, in rural school there was poor parental involvement, poor parental commitment and poor teacher-parent relationship which impacted greatly of children school performance. The level of commitment of parents in rural school was affected by poverty, literacy level, distance from schools and attitudes. In private primary schools the increased parental involvement was attributed to the high cost of education in private schools, literacy level of parents, and their socio-economic status. It was apparent that parents from private schools were keen in monitoring the value for their money and the outcomes of learning for their children.

Secondly, private schools have more strategies of engaging parents as compared to rural and urban primary schools. Strategies used in private schools include computers and information technology, which was deemed a challenge in rural schools due to lack of development. Rural schools had no electricity and all of them had no computers. No teacher had ever shared their private cell phone number with parents for whatever reason. There was recognisable communication breakdown between the schools and the parents, which impacted on children's learning outcomes.

Thirdly, the impact of parental involvement on children education was acknowledged by teachers and schools irrespective of the school type. However, there was commitment to improve the channels of communication between school and families by teachers from rural and public primary schools.

#### **V. Recommendations**

The research therefore recommends that:

- Schools develop and maintain allies between schools and communities for better children performances;
- Schools devise models of supervising and ensuring parental involvement in school activities and schooling for their children;
- Schools come up with Monitoring and Evaluation measures to access performance, progress, outcome and impact of engagement strategies;
- Parents be educated on the importance of their involvement in the education of their children. Such education could be accomplished through Parent-Teacher meetings, engaging traditional leaders and councilors;
- With the availability of computers, urban public schools produce school calendars for each pupil to take to their parent. The calendar should highlight major school events such as consultation days. As the occasion draws nearer, class-teachers send parents reminders;
- Newsletters and circulars be sent to parents;
- Make use of Information technology – schools use cell phones to text parents and parents are emailed; and
- In extreme cases, teachers visit the homes of children at risk and discuss with children's parents.

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