School, Teacher and Parent Collaboration: A Neglected Gold Mine in Early Childhood Education Programme

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Abstract

Collaboration between Parents, School and Teachers towards achieving success for the education of young children in school is of utmost importance. This is because parents' involvement produces higher educational outcomes for children. Parents are expected to work together with school directors and teachers for the smooth running of school and serve as the extras; hands, listening ears and watchful eyes these children need. To achieve individualised attention which each child craves for, parents must be actively involved. This paper takes a look at what collaboration entails, why parents fail to collaborate, and the need to collaborate with school. It also considers the implications of such collaborations for teachers and parents. Strategies to be used for encouraging parents to be involved such as regular visits by parents to school and teachers to homes; acting as volunteers in the school; getting involved in school activities; engaging in home activities like projects that extend beyond school work and teacher communicating to parents through phone calls, bulletins, handbooks; and the need for the school and teachers to keep the lines of communication with parents open were explored. Recommendations were then made.

Introduction

Parents in our culture see schools and teachers as highly respected figures of authority that must be held in high esteem, whose words are laws. To parents, teachers of their children must not be challenged, advised or corrected so that their children may not suffer from their hands but pass with high grades. To them, they prefer to be passive rather than be involved. The idea parents have is that schools and teachers see their interest in the activities going on in schools and their attitude as overbearingnon-respectful or show of pride. Hence parents are not giving attention or room to "meddle" in the affairs of schools so to speak.

Yet the need for parental involvement in the education of young children isvery important for the success of the children in school (Marcon, 1999; Feuerstein, 2000; Jones, 2001; McWayne, Christine, Virginia, Fantuzzo, Cohen and Sekino, 2004). Oduolowu (2011) stressed that children tend to have improved self-concept when parents and teachers combine efforts on them. And as such would want to keep on pleasing themby aspiring to do better. Hampton and Mumford (1998) discovered that children whose parents have infrequent participation in school activities still perform remarkably betterthan those who are not participating at all. However it was found out thatchildren whose parents participate actively and are very much involved in theirschooling, are more successful in school, achieve high grades, have betterattendance, exhibit positive attitudes and behaviours, graduate

withhigh gradesfrom high schools and get admitted for higher education (Bempechat, 1990|;Henderson and Berla, 1994; Steinberg, 1996). This indicates that there mustbe a level of participation or involvement however minimal. The findingsby McFarland (2000) that the pattern for home-school communication and family involvement are set during the first years of schooling emphasize the importance of establishing collaboration during the early childhood years.

The age long rivalry between parents, school, and teachers may be solved when they realize that although they are different yet they are alike and need one another. They are similar in that they all have the same goal which isthe academic achievement of their wards, children, or pupils as the case may be.What both of them need is the information and understanding tothis effect. How can this be achieved was the crux of this paper.

What is Collaboration?

Collaboration has been defined by Cook and Friend (2010) as a style professionals select to employ, based on minimal goals; parity; sharedresponsibility for key decisions; shared accountability for outcomes; shared resources; and the development of trust, respect, and a sense of community. This indicates that collaboration is a joint effort. To Amendt (2008) collaboration between parents and educators is progressive along four ways, beginning from informing to involving to engaging and finally to leading. All the four ways are expected to foster two-way meaningful communication, inviting parents to be part of a course and getting them engaged in it permanently as a norm.

What Collaboration entails

Collaboration entails understanding. Different families have an idea of how far they want to be involved, how long they would be willing to be included,and on things they want to participate in. Hence, parents' consent must be sought. There must also be variety. All parents need not participate at the same time, the same way and to the same degree (Epstein, 2002). Parents must be intimated with the kind of contact they would be expected to have, the format it will take, the purpose, who initiates, where it will occur and how frequent. They should also be familiar with the types of parental responses that are necessary for the learning objectives to be realized, the resources and how to generate it. Again, parents must know they may contribute according to preferences, talents, resources and degree of comfort (Berger, 2003).

Regular focused contact is also necessary to promote trusting relationships. It will also make parents feel they are a fullyrecognized part of their children's education. They will really feel valued, welcomed and expected (Kostelnik, Soderman and Whiren, 2007). In collaboration, programmes that address individual family differences are organized and such needsas child care, transportation needs, and employment obligations, economic, psychological or physical stress are met. This personal touch makes parents feel that the school is theirs and every effort will be put in place to see the school grow. In that situation, parents themselves become free advertisers.

Why Collaborate?

The need for collaboration goes beyond settling rift but establishing a state of equilibrium where one party is not better or stronger than the other but see each other as working towards a common course. All parties must recognize each other's importance in the life of the child. They should see each other as distinct entities performing complementary, interconnected functions (Berns, 2004).

They must recognize each other as experts in the field. Partnership should be the watch word wherein schools with parents value each other as child experts and freely combine their areas of expertise.

Teachers have been trained as specialists in the field, who are very conversant with the knowledge of child development, programme content, educational strategies and have the experience to have known many children, yet parents seem to also know their children better than anybody else, and how to handle them better since they are closer and love them more. Consequently, if they cooperate and combine as partners, there would be a better learning outcome. Epstein (2002) and Brewer (2004) agreed that when there is open communication between the two parties, it will enhance children's learning.

Why Parents Fail to Collaborate?

It is generally assumed that parents who have low incomes, are members ofethnic minority, and have limited formal education do often have little concernabout education or that they place little value on school. Research has howeverindicated that this is not the case (Brewer, 2004). Among the reasons identifiedare that some parents believe that it is the duty of the school to invite them to participate in school programmes, some have had negative experiences withtheir children's schools and as such would not want such to repeat itself, while othersfeel they are inadequate or incompetent and so will not want to expose their ignorance. To some, the pressure of their personal challenges may be overwhelming that they feel reluctant to add more to it. Some have some healthchallenges. Some do not actually know how to come in to be involved. For parents in some cultures who see teachers as respected figures of authority, it would be perceived as an infringement on the teacher's authority to take an active role in school (Politis, 2004).

Some teachers feel that some parents make unrealistic demands and as such do not give them listening ears. Teachers also feel that when parents do not turn up, the education of their children is not so much important tothem to take some time off work to attend open day or other activities in school. Hence, they speak rashly to them. This scares the parents off completely from subsequent meetings. Discussions involving children's development and schools' progress always generate emotional stress where tensions are usually raised all for the best interest of the children. Since some teachers do not also trust and respect some parents, the needed relationship cannot be established. Also, when schools fail to organize activities parents are not happy.

Perhaps one major barrier that does not encourage parents' frequent visit to schools is the lack of provision of school bus to bring children from home to school and to take them back(Estes, 2004). As this induces parents stress so also does it reduce the number of times parents enter the school buildings and as such reduces opportunities for informal communication to occur.

Parents' Role in Collaboration

When there is collaboration, parents have the chance to be very active partners and participants. This is done by parents attending events in school, volunteering theirtime to help teachers in the classroom, or even assist in teaching, they could be involved in decision, be resources persons, be judges in competitions. Theycould also help their children in their home works, preparehands on materials for the school, organize field trips, and act as projects assistants.

Furthermore they may help to read aloud to their children at home, help to reinforce teacher's effort on where the pupil is weak at home through information passed to them from the school. Parents must be available, show concern and utilize their talents to help with school projects, ensuring thatchildren have supply of school needs, help with assignments, and give guidance and opportunity to children to practice emerging skills at home.

Teachers' Role in Collaboration

The major role of teachers in collaboration is to supply specific information to parents about why parent's involvement is important. Communication is very vital. The line of communication with parents must be kept open at all times. Communication on individual children and about the programme of the school must be on a regular basis. All parents must be given attention. Communication could be through newsletters, telephone calls, home visit when a child is reported ill, school handbooks,letters, notes, parents-teachers conferences, formal meetings, and casual notes. Most especially informal contacts when parents come to pick children from school do it faster and easily.

Also teachers should let the parents feel that they care by being friendlyenough, being polite and giving them their regard. Every sense of jealousyshould be erased. Teachers should see the importance of parental involvementand so work at removing all the barriers that may be keeping parents fromgetting involved in the school activities. Teachers should establish rapport with parents tofind out from them their areas of interest, fields of specialization and see how they could be of help to the school as resource persons. This could be done with the use of questionnaire.

School's Role in Collaboration

The school is expected to be responsive to provide involvement options that will allow parents to collaborate and participate using their talents, resources, and time for the school. Communication and relationship could be fostered in such a way that there should be greetings at arrival and departure times daily since it encourages informal communications with families to give insight about a child's particular development and school progress. Waves and smiles in early childhood education are significant to the children, families, and teachers involved. It forms the bases for strong home-school-teacher relationship and between parents. Schools may also organize parent-teacher conferences to exchange information, ask questions, and make informed decisions about children's current and future care and education. Experience of parents who are professionals may also be harnessed for medical, educational, therapeutic,rehabilitative and even vocational knowledgeto impact both parents and children.

Educational Implications for Collaboration

Some parents, no matter how much teachers try to incorporate them in the scheme of things, still exhibit signs of inactivity. These are the type Delgado-Gaitan (1991) identified as deficit model. They have deficit perspectives which depict them as inactive, incompetent, unable to help their children because they speak different language, work long hours, belong to different ethnic groups or are not just interested. When parents collaborate with the school, the needs of both the school and the parents are met. Teachers are in a betterposition to notice children's special need and as such may serve as referral agents to schools that take care of such children. Hence such children would be attended to adequately.

All parties tend to benefit from collaboration. Parents and teachers unite intheir effort to provide optimal care and education for the children parents are up-to-date about their children's school progress and development and have opportunities to seek guidance from trained school personnel to assist them with concerns on their children'smatter. The school also benefits because with established communication, they are able to learn about pupils' home lives, and have a better view of parents as partners.

Strategies to get Parents to Collaborate

Although it may not be easy for teachers to get parents to collaborate easily, yet it is an important part of the work of a teacher. Its importance in helping children to succeed through participation in classroom and other activities calls for encouragement of parents by the teachers. Benson and Martins (2003) made the following seven recommendations:

1. Focus on pupils'successes and achievements
2. Send personalized information, specific on their children and directed to parents.
3. When possible, use extended family to support pupils.
4. Extend frequent invitation to parents.
5. Use school staff and parent volunteers in creative ways to organize programmes.
6. Coordinate planning with administrators, parents and teachers.
7. Serve refreshments, provide name tags, reimburse parents transportation, planning events on different times and days, meeting in room conducive to health and communication, using pupils as hosts/guides at meeting and recognizing parents and staff for their efforts.

Conclusion

It should be noted that if teachers are non-judgmental, parents could be of immense benefit to the school and that when a firm foundation of involving parents has been put in place, parents are more likely to continue their involvement by playing active roles in children's schooling and a long lasting relationship established between parents and teachers which would invariably influence children's achievement positively.

Recommendations

For collaboration to be effective, schools must design programmes that must meet peculiar needs of the parents they are serving. Teachers must be sensitive to different family structures that are represented in their classes and use appropriate words. Terms and labels like broken homes, single-parent child or divorced family, fatherless, motherless, orphan, adopted child, must not be specifically used. Rather each child should be celebrated and made to feel very special and important. Also, workshops should be organized for all school employees on how to treat parents with respect, consideration and at the same time be sensitive to whatever they may know parents are passing through. There is also the need for policy makers to formulate guidelines that will support and mandate parental involvement.

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