



ISSN: 0975-833X

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**ENHANCING PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIP TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA**

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 14th November, 2011
Received in revised form
27th December, 2011
Accepted 10th January, 2011
Published online 29th February, 2012

Key words:

Enhancing,
Teacher-Parent Partnership, Challenges,
Early Childhood Education Curriculum
Development.

ABSTRACT

Educational curriculum development is a shared responsibility amongst parents and teachers, especially in ECDE, where both must work very closely to lay a firm foundation for the child. This paper examines the challenges faced by pre-school teachers and parents in curriculum development process, and ways in which parents and teachers can enhance a partnership in early childhood curriculum development. A descriptive research design was adopted. The data sources were: a parental involvement questionnaire for pre-school teachers, a parental involvement interview schedule for the pre-school parents, and document analysis. Simple random and saturated samplings were employed for the pre-school parents and teachers respectively. Multiple data analysis methods were used. Although pre-school parents and teachers wanted to be involved in early childhood curriculum development, teachers did not know the specific activities of involving parents. Furthermore, the partnership was hampered by barriers to parental involvement in early childhood curriculum development emanating from both parents and teachers. The study recommended: employment of pre-school teachers by the Teachers Service Commission and of Quality Assurance and Standards Officers with the knowledge base on early childhood to enforce practice of early childhood education policy and review of the pre-school teacher.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been recognized that ECDE is very crucial in laying the foundation for the future development of the children. Effective ECDE Programmes are a matter of partnership between parents and teachers. As outlined in the Children's Act (Republic of Kenya, 2001), parents are expected to maintain and provide the child with adequate diet, shelter, clothing, and medical care, including immunization, education and guidance. This implies that parental role does not end at home but extends to their children's educational institutions. Nevertheless, the Children's Act does not state how parents should contribute to this education. Yet, for effective ECDE programmes to take root, parents need to be involved in their children's schooling further by participating in curriculum development activities. However, the nature of this involvement is not clear with regard to parents. The focus on the role of parents in ECDE comes at a time when early childhood education programmes increasingly involve children from single parent homes, recombined families, foster parent homes, extended families with relatives, orphans and vulnerable children and children in various difficult circumstances. In such circumstances parental role in ECDE may not be well defined or recognized. This study is intended to shed light on the role of parents in ECDE programmes and

the extent to which they work in partnership with teachers in Mumias Town.

Levels of Curriculum Planning and Development

Asli (2006) has reported that if a curriculum programme of a school is to be co-ordinated, systematic or unified in any way, then curriculum planning is crucial. Curriculum planning refers to all the activities of organizing what should be taught, at what time, to whom and by whom. The sequence, scope and integration also must be considered. Marsh and Willis (1999, p. 186) have identified three levels of curriculum planning and development: macro, intermediate and micro levels. Some participants in curriculum planning and development are interested primarily in general policies (macro level), some in programmes (intermediate level) and others in specific lessons (micro-level). The macro level of curriculum planning and development is concerned with general policy. Teachers may or may not have been participants in the formulation of policy statements.

Macro Level (Policies)

At this level, official documents produced by the central curriculum development agency may contain policy statements about the curriculum that either limits the ability of schools to make their own policies or encourage them to do so. These

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policy statements pertaining to the curriculum may also be master plans for specific subjects or groups of subjects (Martin, Saif & Theil, 1987 as cited in Ramirez, 1996). The policy statements give direction to the curriculum. In Kenya, a National Early Childhood Development Policy Framework (MOEST, 2006) has just been launched. It provides a coordination mechanism and defines the role of parents, communities and other stakeholders in provision of ECDE services. It aims at investing in children in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of Poverty Reduction, universal school enrolment, reduction of child mortality and morbidity, maternal mortality, and creation of gender equality. The policy, therefore, emphasizes child survival, growth and development. It aims at all children realizing their full potential in life. To ensure proper implementation of the ECDE Policy Framework, the Ministry of Education has come up with Early Childhood Development Service Standard Guidelines For Kenya (MOEST, 2006). These guidelines aim at operationalizing the National ECDE Framework and the Children's Act (2001) by providing service standard guidelines which will ensure that all ECDE service providers, including parents, communities, government ministries, Faith Based Organizations, Universities and the private sector, provide quality, accessible and equitable ECDE services. The guidelines include a checklist for registration of an ECDE centre, monitoring tool for ECDE training centre for ECDE trainers, procedure for establishing educational and training institutions, screening tools for children with special needs, and application forms for establishing an ECDE centre. How these policies are interpreted at the local ECDE centre in as far as parents and teachers collaborate is the subject of interest to this study.

Intermediate Level (Programmes)

The planning of programmes is the intermediate level of curriculum development. At this level, planners choose the subjects, allocate time, specify objectives, content and assessment measures and identify procedures to be followed for monitoring standards in schools and methods of teaching (Marsh & Willis, 1999). Curriculum guidelines are also analyzed at this stage. These contain detailed lists of goals and objectives, complete structure and sequence for the content to be taught, specific, highly detailed teaching units including tests and quizzes, and background information for teachers about the subject to be taught, including follow-up references. In Kenya, the Ministry Of Education, through Kenya Institute of Education, has provided guidelines for Early Childhood Development Education (NACECE, 2001; Oluoch, 2003). It outlines the National Goals of Education in Kenya, Objectives of ECDE, Rights of the child, children's needs, role of the family, importance of early years, major aspects of growth, development and learning, and general information for caregivers. It outlines the curriculum and teaching methods for children below 3 years and 3-6 years. Specific subjects and their requirements are also outlined. Thematic teaching method is recommended. The daily timetable, classroom plan, sketch plan for an ECDE centre are given. The roles of administrators, teachers, parents, PTA and their partnerships are outlined. The ECDE guidelines recommend that parents

should be involved in deciding the activities and services of the ECDE centre to ensure children receive appropriate care and that their development is enhanced. However, the extent of their involvement is still unclear and hence the need for the study.

Micro Level (Classroom Lessons)

Whenever policies and programmes have originated from above, teachers must plan their activities around them for periods of time ranging from a full year course to a daily lesson of a few minutes. In individual schools and classrooms, teachers typically consult programme guides provided and then draw up their own specific curriculum plans in the form of lesson plans. A lesson plan is a document summarizing things lesson objectives, content, activities for students, methods of instruction and forms of evaluating the students (Marsh & Willis, 1999). The lesson plans may be drawn up to cover not only daily lessons but also the entire flow of classroom activities for a week, a month or even the entire year. It is at the micro level that general macro-level policies adopted by the country and the intermediate level programmes agreed upon by the school are transformed into the specific practices of individual teachers. This means that the teacher's interpretation of the policy dictates how much s/he conducts her/himself in the classroom.

The teacher's level of education, training and attitude greatly determine their interpretation of policy (Berger, 2000). The teacher's willingness to cooperate with parents to deliver quality services to their children is crucial. Without proper training, teachers will not know how to use thematic teaching methods or involve parents in the development of play and learning materials or other relevant parental involvement activities (Ong'ong'a, 2004). Teachers should be fully in control of classrooms, but be willing to welcome positive criticism from parents. The teacher needs to ensure that child-centred activities are put in place, whereby the child is left to explore their own environment as teachers direct them. However, in implementing ECDE policy in classrooms, pre-school teachers should contextualize it without altering the original policy. How this is done in the ECDE centres is the subject of this study. From the foregoing, it appears that stakeholders may get involved in curriculum planning at one level or the other. The above analysis of levels of curriculum planning provides a basis for analysis of parental involvement in curriculum planning and development in ECDE. Do they participate at the macro, intermediate or micro levels? What is the nature of the participation, if any?

Partnership between Pre-school Parents and Teachers

For partnership in curriculum development of ECDE programmes, parents must find time to participate in their children's education while schools must provide support necessary for them to be involved. These partnerships will increase student achievement and promote better co-operation between home and school. Partnership is enforced better through good communication between parents and teachers. Some studies have expressed the benefits of the participation

of parents in local schools (Fullan, 1991; Halford, 1996; West, 1993). Still other accounts place parents' participation in a negative light (Fine, 1993; McLaughlin, 1992). For example, Bryk, Lee and Smith (1990) suggest that parents possess a variety of skills, talents and interests that can enrich the curriculum; no matter how talented their children's teachers may happen to be. Fine (1993) contends that parents are usually invited by schools to criticize curriculum development. Swick (1992) provides insights on teacher and parent attributes that lead to successful teacher-parent partnership: that parents and teachers work together effectively when both exhibit warmth, sensitivity and a feeling of competence. Manacker, Hurwitz and Weldon (1988) add that teachers should involve parents in curriculum development, but in their study, they did not point out the level of involvement. It is important to note that not everyone in school will be comfortable with increased parent-school collaboration. Epstein (1986, p. 277) points out two conflicting theories. One encourages parents and schools to work together because they share the same goals for the students. The other theory argues that schools can achieve their goals to education most efficiently when school and home remain separate; that professional status is in jeopardy if parents are involved in activities that are typically the teachers' responsibilities.

Parents bring different attitudes into the home-school relationship depending on their backgrounds and past experiences and current pressures. This study examined varying views about parents and teachers attitudes towards inclusion of parents in curriculum development. Some were already highly successful at parent involvement and some wanted to keep parents as a group separated from the school set-up. However, the school climate dictates the attitude parents will have towards their involvement in curriculum development of their children. As Berger (2000) says: The spirit of the school should invite parents into the school. Some schools say "come enjoy with us these exciting children. We will return them to you each evening, but in the meantime, lets each keep our responsibilities". Whereas others say "you are infringing on my territory, send us your children" (p. 146).

Reviewed literature reveals that parents from low socio-economic status often shy away from participating in curriculum planning in most schools (Schwenhart, 1988; Cornbleth, 1996; Jackson & Cooper, 1989). They therefore need encouragement from teachers to participate. Parents concerned with mere subsistence have little energy left for self-fulfilment or for meeting their children's emotional and educational needs. Parents contending with unemployment inflation and social change need special understanding. The school and teachers must support them instead of looking at them as failures. Parents love their children, and if the teacher "feels this same love" then parents are your friends. To touch the child is to touch the parent; to criticize the child is to hit at the parent (Haynes, 1996, p. 4, as cited in Berk, 2002). Various reasons may keep parents away from the school, for example, bad experiences with schools, feelings of pressures. On the other hand, some parents tend to dominate and are compulsively involved with the school. Between these two extremes are:

- a) Parents who need encouragement to come to school.
- b) Parents who readily respond when invited to school.
- c) Parents who are comfortable about coming to school and enjoy some improvement in the education process.

Literature also reveals that few parents volunteer to be involved in school activities (Aronson, 1986), and yet most of them have expectations of what teachers should and could do for their children. Teachers too are unwilling to discuss the specifics of their teaching with parents, yet they expect parents to support them (Hartley & Owen, 1986; Lareau, 1996). Parents and teachers should consider partnership in curriculum development. This study determined the perception of teachers (views of teachers) about parental participation. It examined how the economic status of parents affects their participation in curriculum development. The study intended to find out the perception of parents about their involvement in curriculum development (views of parents). It examined what the expectations of parents and teachers are to each other in ECD curriculum development.

Swick (1991) states that teacher-parent partnership foster mutual support for teacher and parent roles; increase parental involvement in various school activities and lead to positive growth of students. Epstein (1995, p. 707) points out that the involvement of families in schools leads to overlapping spheres of influence between the home, school and community. Comer and Hynes (1991) support partnerships between teachers and parents and add that the school should create a welcoming climate to encourage parent involvement. By creating a conducive environment in which parents and families are regarded as partners in learning, schools can make parent and family involvement a reality. This study investigated how a climate for welcoming parents in Mumias town pre-schools is created by the pre-school teachers.

Schweinhart (1988) and Henderson and Berla (1994) recommend that early childhood staff should form a partnership with parents through home visits, frequent communication and a welcome attitude towards, volunteering and classroom observation. Epstein and Dauber (1993) indicate that frequent parent-teacher communication makes parents to become involved in their children's academic performance. Children benefit from good communication and effective working relationships between schools and home. Parental involvement is associated with better attendance, more positive student attribute and behaviour, greater willingness to do homework and higher academic achievement (Beecher, 1984; Epstein, 1993; Haynes, Comer & Hamilton-Lee, 1989; Henderson, 1987; Rich, 1988). Communicating with parents creates friendly relations between teachers and parents that benefit all the stakeholders. The communication helps understand the student's home circumstances like the literacy levels of the parents, abusive marriages and ability of the child. It updates parents on how their children are doing. Communication involves parents in academic issues of their children, disciplinary expectations and parental support to assist children with academic difficulties.

Positive home-to-school communication in the form of phone calls, progress reports, conferences, personal notes, newsletters and home visits make parents to become more comfortable with the school to work with teachers. The Centre on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's learning (1995) reports that parents are more likely to participate in curriculum development where they receive information from teachers about classroom activities the progress of their children and how to work with their children at home. Epstein (1984) adds that thinking of schools as an extended family can help create a positive school climate and counteract parental resistance to participate in curriculum development (Burden, 1995). This study intended to examine ways in which teachers communicate with parents and create partnership to foster curriculum development.

Teachers and schools need to increase their understanding and respect for student and family diversity, creating a more caring school climate (Epstein, 1995). The school-family partnership defines goals, expectations and responsibilities of schools and families in educating children. It is in the family that the child learns school readiness; the family gives social and psycho-social-emotional development. The family takes care of the child's welfare (Berk, 2001; Krogh, 2001; Tijus, Santolini & Danis, 1997). This study also investigated how a child's family background affects the parents' level of curriculum involvement and also how the parents' literacy level, marital status or income affect their level of participation in early childhood curriculum development.

Many educators agree that a child's chances for success in later life are maximized when both the home and the school are involved in the child's education (Olmsted, 1991). When parents come to school regularly, it reinforces the view in the child's mind that school and home are connected and that school is an integral part of the whole family life (Henderson, 1997). When parents participate in their children's education, the result is an increase in student achievement and an improvement of students' attitude. Increased attendance, fewer discipline problems and higher aspirations also have been correlated with an increased in parent involvement (Katz, 1996).

Several studies examined the impact on achievement when parents participate in decision-making roles in the educational programme. Henderson (1997) has reviewed 66 studies involving parent involvement and student achievement and found that, when parents are involved in their children's education at home, they do better in school. When parents are involved at school, their children go father in school and the schools they go to are better for their involvement. Student achievement improves in a home environment which encourages learning; Walberg (1997) concluded from an analysis of over 2,500 students on learning that an academically stimulating home environment is one of the chief determinants of learning. From these studies, Walberg selected 29 which were conducted during the last decade. He found commonalities, which he called a "curriculum of the home" which has an average effect on achievement that is twice as large as family socio-economic status.

Successful parent-teacher collaboration includes many opportunities for parents and results in better attendance, fewer discipline problems and higher scores. Ames (1995) found that parents' overall evaluation of the teacher, their sense of comfort with the school, and their reported involvement in school activities was higher when parents received frequent and effective communication from teachers; that the teachers should initiate activities to involve parents and this partnership should be developed early in the years. This study found out specific curriculum activities that teachers involve parents in, which were similar to Ames' findings.

Collaborative activities between parents and schools have been useful in Kenya, where trainers, teachers, parents and local communities routinely cooperate in developing early childhood curriculum and teaching materials. They collect stories, riddles, poems and games which are produced to serve the local communities. Such joint efforts enhance the quality of teaching materials, available and increase community satisfaction (Kipkorir, 1993). As observed by researchers, many pre-schools have adopted the establishment of a collaborative partnership involving all the relevant partners (home, school, service providers) in planning and monitoring services for children as to addressing a host of problems that threaten the health and well-being of children and families (Kagan, 1992; Hoffman, 1991). Community collaborative partnerships represent one of the most effective means for creating flexible comprehensive system that meet the needs of children and families.

Hughes and MacNaughton (2001) reiterated that collaborations and partnerships involving parents and teachers result in better communication, which is a necessary condition for better parental involvement in programme delivery and success particularly in early childhood care. It is a pre-requisite for high quality care and education of young children. Furthermore, collaborations involving school staff and parents allow parents' involvement, hence their better understanding of appropriate educational practices, which helps to improve children's cognitive and social development. Parental commitment to schooling is also improved through staff-parent collaboration fostered through effective communication between parents and teachers, (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001).

Given that collaboration is aimed at providing a good pedestal for improved childhood care and development of children, it is said to contribute to national development (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001). At the same time it benefits business through creating a more literate and productive workforce. Parent-school collaboration bring the strengths of the home and the expertise of the school into a working partnership. Separation of the child from the family is impossible, because every child is socialized into a family culture. Children bring the ideas, feelings strengths and weaknesses of the home into their life at school. If homes and schools are connected through the children, clearly a working partnership will strengthen the effectiveness of the school (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Challenges of Parental Involvement

Connection between school and family is an important part of children's success. Parents often encounter barriers to their

involvement and may lack resources to overcome these obstacles on their own. Achieving effective school-family partnerships is not easy. Barriers to family involvement in schools arise from many different sources. These barriers could be parent-centred and staff/school centred barriers. Parent-centred barriers include lack of time on the part of parents, lack of parent education to help with homework, economic constraints, lack of transportation, lack of appropriate childcare, language and communicating barriers, diverse linguistic and cultural practices and that work schedules of parents limit ability to attend meetings during school hours. Some parents may become resistant to become involved in their personal fears, frustrations and apprehensions. This is especially true if the parent had a negative experience with school, is anxious about their child or dropped out of school. Parents may also mistrust the educational system and school where the child goes. Others have marital problems and lack of support from their spouses (Coleman & Churchill, 1997; Haynes & Comer 1996).

Teachers and schools may also have attitudes and beliefs that inhibit them from promoting parental involvement in their schools. For example, teachers may be unaware of how they can encourage parent involvement (Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Some teachers may assume that promoting parental involvement may be too time-consuming (Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Some teachers may believe that parents are troublesome in the classroom or that they do not have the skills to assist in their child's education (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Ramirez, 1999). Lewis and Henderson (1997) state that many teachers would agree that it may be easier to deal with silence from parents than with pushy, demanding well-educated parents who think they are just as capable of making professional teaching judgments as teachers themselves. Teachers may equate parents' lack of involvement with lack of interest in their child's educating (Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Furthermore, teachers may have limited views of the ways in which parents can be involved (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Thus they lack training in working with parents.

Wheeler (1992) and Ramirez (1999) have demonstrated that at often times, there are barriers to parental involvement that stem from the teachers themselves. These barriers come in the form of stereotypes that teachers may have concerning lower socio-economic parents single-parent families, children in foster care, and at risk families. When teachers were interviewed for the Ramirez (1999) study, over 50% were apprehensive about parental involvement, and wanted parental participation to be limited. They felt that parents were not professionally able to serve on a curriculum committee. Communication barriers between the school staff and parents were also a major theme. Ramirez states that communication is an essential component to develop a sense of trust between schools and parents. It is clearly a challenge for parents and school staff to work together to guarantee academic success. His study determined that teachers reported little contact with parents of average students and did not prefer more contact with such parents. The data showed that 63 percent of the teachers reported initiating contact with "almost none" or "few" parents while only 15 percent initiate contact with "most" or almost all" parents.

Williams and Stallworth (1984) have reported that principals and teachers favour more traditional parental involvement activities, such as bake sales or attending class plays, but a majority of them do not see more active forms of parental involvement, such as decision-making, as useful or appropriate. Menacker *et al.* (1988) have reported that less than half (47%) of inner City teachers surveyed believed in strong parental involvement, while 30% think that parents should not have a lot to say about how this school is run Dorn Bush & Ritter (1988). Many parents may be surprised to learn that most teachers, especially those new in the profession, are unwilling to meet with parents. Most teachers have received very little training in fostering parent-teacher relationships, but with the growing understanding of the importance of parental involvement, they may worry about doing everything they can to encourage parents to feel welcome (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Svenson (2005) states that sometimes parents become so anxious about their children's education that they feel they have to run the school in the same way they run their homes. Several major issues related to parental involvement were discussed in the comments added by over one thousand teachers to a survey of teacher practices. Epstein and Becker (1982, p. 107) have summarized the issues saying that there is no denying the different reactions of teachers to the parents with whom they have worked. The honest differences in teachers' opinions reflect three perspectives on parent-school relations: 1) Parents care but cannot do much to help the school or their children in actual learning; 2) Parents care but should not help with school learning; 3) Parents care and can be of great help if they are shown how to. There was no disagreement, however, about the fact that successful parent-involvement programmes require the teachers' commitment and the parents' commitment. This study examined if the pre-school parents' views on various aspects of their own involvement in ECDE curriculum development differed with those of the pre-school teachers in Mumias Town.

Craig (1988) has reported the problem of too much parental involvement in the classroom and states that parents can be empowered so much so that students and teachers experience a loss of control. It is recommended that parents should not be permitted to assist in classes containing their own children and that volunteers be accountable to teachers, students and the department. Katz (1996) also suggests that it is important for teachers and parents to remember that they know the child in different contexts, and that each may be unaware of what the child is like in the other content. It is also useful to keep in mind generally that different people often have distinct perspectives on the same issue. When parents and teachers disagree about curriculum, assignments, peer relationships, homework, or teaching approaches, a pattern of open communication can be invaluable for resolving differences (Marsh & Willis, 1999). This study investigated both the teachers' and parents' perception on the role of parents in early childhood curriculum development and compared the difference in the perceptions of both. The myriad problems of collaborations involving parents and staff include the following; staff struggle to know how best to communicate with parents (Hughes & McNaughton, 2001); staff and parents disagree on what is appropriate education for young children, leading to a belief by teachers that parents need education to

improve their capacity to help in their children's learning (Berger, 2000). Some other problems emanate from cultural differences between teachers and parents (Coleman & Churchill, 1997). Therefore, collaborations are not always smooth sailing in schools. Many common difficulties involving parents and teachers occur, such as differences in prior knowledge, training or experience that make it difficult for members to communicate and work together and lack of time to meet and plan together (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001).

There is a large body of research linking parental involvement in their children's education with greater learner achievement in terms of grades, student attitudes and behaviour. Few educators have described or analyzed the lived experiences of parents, teachers and pupils who work closely together in classrooms and schools. In a perfect world, parents and teachers would be in accord over instructional techniques and materials. In the real world, however, some parents and educators find themselves at loggerheads over classroom practice, with parents determined to protect their children from practices they consider harmful and educators equally determined to defend their professional judgement (Marsh & Willis, 1999). Some of the teachers and administrators fear parental involvement activities or see little benefit from them. This study also examined specific challenges of parental involvement in Mumias Town pre-schools.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a descriptive survey design. A parental involvement questionnaire was adapted from Epstein (1988) and adopted for this study. Documentary analysis was done in schools and education offices on parental involvement in ECDE. A questionnaire was administered to parents using face-to-face interview method. The questionnaire collected data on the socio-demographic characteristics of parents, levels of curriculum development, levels of parental involvement in early childhood curriculum development, and perceptions of parents of their own involvement in pre-school curriculum development. The researcher used purposive and multistage sampling technique to select 14 pre-schools for the study in categories of public and private pre-schools in Mumias town. A total of 153 parents formed the research sample. They were biological parents and guardians of pre-schoolers, excluding house helps. The researcher organized to interview them during parent-teacher conferences and when they brought children to school or picked them. Data collected was analyzed by the Statistical Package of Social Scientists and findings reported according to the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Pre-school Teachers and Parents in Early Childhood Curriculum Development

The last research question was designed to investigate challenges that pre-school parents and teachers faced in the process of developing early childhood curriculum development. Participants were asked to state the reasons

teachers did not encourage more parental involvement in their classrooms and pre-schools. The research findings were summarised and the results were as follows:

- a) Lack of time on the part of the teachers and the parents.
- b) Parents do not respond and lack interest.
- c) Teachers are intimidated by parental involvement.
- d) Lack of adequate knowledge by the teachers on how to effectively work with the parents or involve them.
- e) Bad teacher attitudes towards poor parents.
- f) Marital problems
- g) Teachers feel that parents have no knowledge of the curriculum and they are ignorant of what is expected of them.

These findings agree with those of Coleman and Churchill (1997), Comer and Haynes (1991) and Moyles and Adams (2002). On the challenge of lack of time on the part of the teacher or the parent, both parents and teachers emphasized that there is no time because of different explanations, like:

"Some parents do not have time or do not know how to help their children and the teachers do not know how to encourage them."

"Some parents do not have the time to help their children with the homework, so they do the homework for the children."

"Parents have to work to provide for their children in these hard economic times, they hardly have the time to look at their (children's) work."

"I think the teachers are always too busy to have time to work on parental involvement. Also some teachers might be a little uncomfortable having parents in their classes."

"They (teachers) have other things to worry about; they don't need to spend most of their time trying to get parents involved. Parents are busy at work or with other things."

"Because some teachers want to do everything on their own and they don't want to take time to explain to parents."

These findings support Leitich and Tangri (1999) who say that some teachers may assume that promoting parental involvement may be too time-consuming. They also agree with Comer and Haynes (1991) and Ramirez (1999) who suggest that some teachers believe that parents are troublesome in the classroom or they do not have the professional skills to assist in their children's education. On the challenge of teachers not encouraging parental involvement in curriculum development because of lack of interest, several explanations and views were given such as:

"The teachers think that parents will not come to school when invited so they do not bother inviting them."

"Many parents may complain to the teacher if they feel that too much is being asked from them."

"Parents tend to believe that it is the teacher's responsibility for the child to learn."

"Many parents do not care to be involved in the learning of their children."

“Teachers get no responses from the parents.”

“Perhaps the parents do not act interested enough or are too busy for the teacher to ask.”

“It is difficult to communicate with parents because they do not even read newsletters.”

This kind of behaviour from the parents was due to the illiteracy of the parents or their ignorance in what is expected from them. It was also as a result of them looking at pre-school education as a time for the child to play and not be bogged down with class work. Some may be looking at pre-school teachers as caretakers of their children if they do not have house helps. They may also be looking at pre-schools as places to keep their children safe with someone to oversee them and play with them. Some of the parents had not had any pre-school education and so found the teachers call for their involvement in curriculum development rather irksome. Such parents are ignorant about the benefits of Early Childhood education and need to collaborate with the teachers for maximum academic excellence of their children. These findings support Berger (2000) who has reported that illiterate parents and those who never attended pre-school education have low regard for ECDE.

In regard to the challenge of pre-school teachers being threatened and intimidated by the parents, both pre-school parents and teachers gave their views such as:

“Some parents get too much involved till they start instructing teachers on how to teach their children.”

“Some rich parents expect miracles from us especially if their children do not grasp the concepts.”

“Sometimes some parents get in our way, even though they think they are helping, some teachers may not like this.”

“Teachers are afraid of the parents getting too involved to the extent that it’s the parent running the class instead of the teacher.”

“Too much involvement in the classroom can be distracting to the children. Some parents may want to favour their children or demand that teachers give much attention to their children.”

These opinions of the pre-school teachers and parents support Lewis and Henderson (1997) who state that it may be easier to deal with silence from the parents than pushy demanding well-educated parents who think they are just as capable of making professional teaching judgments as the teachers themselves. Parents who get involved in their children’s classroom learning need to be instructed on the degree of involvement. Another challenge that emerged from the narrative responses dealing with the teachers was lack of knowledge and understanding on how to implement parental involvement strategies. These were explained as:

“Teachers don’t know how to use parents.”

“I think that would be because the teachers don’t know how to approach parents.”

“It is easier to do something yourself than explaining to a parent how to do it.”

This supports Christenson and Sheridan (2001) who argue that teachers may have limited views of the ways in which parents can be involved. They lack training on the strategies of working with parents (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). In regard to the challenge of bad teacher attitudes towards poor parents, many parents gave different explanations like:

“Teachers feel that poor parents have nothing to offer because they have problems with fees payment and do not add teachers any money for taking care of their children”

“For someone like me who has no shoes and with bad clothes, teachers cannot invite me to their classes. They think I will embarrass my child.”

“Poor parents are too demanding and stubborn. Most of them are illiterate, so what will they be doing in the classroom?”

This study established that some teachers have formed opinions about poor parents. It is therefore supports Wheeler (1992) and Ramirez (1999) who state that some barriers to parental involvement come in form of stereotypes that teachers may have concerning lower socio-economic parents, single parent families, children in foster care and at risk families. Marital problems, was a challenge that emerged as one of the barriers to parental involvement. This affected both the teacher and the parents and had spill over effects on the children. Pre-school teachers and parents gave their views, like:

“A spouse may be stubborn, a drunkard or womanizer. He may not pay fees for the child or provide other needs required by the child.”

“Separation of parents or continuous fighting may make the teacher not to know whom to communicate with.”

This supports Coleman and Churchill (1977) and Comer and Haynes (1991) who say that lack of parental involvement in class could be due to the parents having marital problems or lack of support from their spouse. Pre-school teachers were asked whether their training should include a course on parental involvement or home-school relationships. Their responses were as follows:

“Just from my experience in this school, I have learned the importance of communication with parents. It is so important to train on parental involvement.”

“I think it all comes with time and experience. I do not think a class can teach it to us”

“All courses at all levels should include parental involvement. Workshops and seminars by ECD personnel should stress this aspect.”

“Yes, because parental involvement can really help to enrich a classroom environment”

“Yes, because every teacher will have some parent involvement at one time or another.”

“Yes, because parental involvement is so beneficial. Without it, we won’t know how to handle the pre-schoolers.”

From the foregoing arguments, it is clear that teachers need training on parental involvement in ECD curriculum

development due to the ignorance on how to handle parents. Parent involvement needs to be an integral part of the teacher preparation (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; McBride, 1991; Chavkin & Williams, 1988). In order to work effectively with parents, teachers need knowledge, skills and confidence to direct the involvement process. Teachers felt that it was important to prepare pre-school teachers on the importance on the role the parents play in the children's learning. However, a few that experience felt is the best teacher and therefore with time and experience, they would know how to involve parents in their children's learning.

Ways of Enhancing Parent-Teacher Partnerships in Early Childhood Curriculum Development

In the fifth research question, the researcher sought information on ways in which parents and teachers could enhance a partnership in early childhood curriculum development. Both pre-school teachers and parents responded to a variety of items.

Parent-Teacher Collaboration

Pre-school teachers were asked to give their opinions on collaborating with the parents. The mean rating of the teachers' perceptions of the collaboration with the parents was 3.21. This meant that teachers held favourable perceptions of partnerships with the pre-school parents. However, some items elicited significant positive perception than the others. Among them were that teachers:

- a) View parents as a great resource (4.34).
- b) Feel that a close working relationship is necessary for optimal child growth (4.50).
- c) Look forward to parent-teacher conferences with pleasure (4.60).
- d) Feel that the parents want to be passive participants to ECD programmes because they lack time (4.67).
- e) Send newsletters to the parents (4.03).
- f) Show parents when a child does something well (4.30).
- g) Show parents examples of the child's work (4.27).
- h) Accept differences among parents (4.20).
- i) Encourage both father and mother to attend conferences (4.52).
- j) Consider parents as partners in the educational process (4.24).
- k) Invite parents to help supervise children on field trips (4.80).
- l) Welcome the parents to participate in decision-making about class size, daily schedules, enumeration of teachers, teacher recruitment and staff development (4.50).
- m) Make parents feel free to come to school to discuss any issue (4.50).

Other items scored relatively low mean ratings, like, teachers:

- a) Feel tense when parents enter my room (1.62).
- b) Prefer to work alone (1.36).
- c) Feel threatened by parents' presence (1.43).

- d) Feel pleased when parents are gone (1.38).
- e) Feel that teachers should plan all learning/teaching materials without involving the parents (1.80).

Interestingly, these items with low mean scores were on teachers' opinions about collaboration with parents in the classroom. It means that teachers prefer dominating the class and see the parents' involvement as interference. This supports Harley and Owen (1986), Ames (1995) and Lareau (1986) who suggest that teachers are unwilling to discuss the specifics of their teaching with the parents yet they expect the parents to support them. However, teachers held positive opinions about making parents feel comfortable to come to school to discuss any matter (4.50). This means that teachers in Mumias town create a welcoming climate for parents to be involved in curriculum development of their children. Comer and Haynes (1991) recommend that creating a welcoming climate at school for parents makes parental involvement a reality. Pre-school parents were asked to state whether or not parents should cooperate with teachers for better excellence of the pupils. Majority, 98.1% (152), of the parents answered in the affirmative. They also supported the idea of teacher-parent partnership in curriculum development. When asked on ways in which parents could collaborate with the teachers to ensure maximum academic outcomes for their children, they listed 6 areas, namely provide teaching and learning materials, pay school fees, participate in feeding programmes, collaborate in health and hygiene issues of their children, support homework and child discipline. The findings reveal that parents are willing to collaborate with the teachers on payment of fees for their pre-school children, 70.5% (105); feeding programmes, 59.3% (89); hygiene and health of the children, 61.1% (92), and to provide teaching and learning materials, 51.3% (77). However, supporting the child's discipline, 14.7% (25), and homework, 28.7% (43) scored the lowest. Teachers are more authoritative and in a better position to instil discipline in children in pre-school than the parents. It could be that parents are simply abdicating their duty. As far as homework is concerned, the parents felt that pre-schoolers are too young to be strained with the rigours of work at home. Both parents and teachers have responsibilities in the curriculum development and if both of them took their responsibilities, as their perceptions towards collaboration in this study attests, the partnership would be effective. However, teachers have a greater responsibility to initiate the collaboration. They are the ones who should direct parents on how to get involved and partner with them for greater academic achievements of their children. This has not gone on smoothly since there are obstacles that both teachers and parents meet as they strive to collaborate.

Parent-Teacher Communication

Effective partnerships in pre-schools between parents and teachers can only be realised when teachers communicate effectively with parents. Pre-school teachers were asked ways in which they contact pupil's families. The highest mean rate was communication by memo or by letter (3.30) given to the children to take to their parents, followed by talking informally at school (2.93), then meeting formally at school conferences

or meetings (2.57). The lowest mean was contact by phone at 2.03, followed by visits at the child's home at 2.47. This supports the Centre on Families Communities Schools and Children's Learning (1995) and Halsey (2001) who stressed that positive home-to-school communication in form of phone calls, progress reports, conferences, personal notes, newsletters and home visits makes parents more comfortable with the school to work with the teachers. Communication by phone was unpopular because not all parents own phones. A home visit by the teachers to check on the progress of the child was unpopular if the parents do not welcome teachers into their homes. Some parents are not keen on teachers knowing the child's background lest they should despise them. Effective communication between parents and teachers should be holistic and two-way. They should listen to each other and work together for quality ECDE delivery of services.

Pre-school teachers were also asked how often they communicated with the parents and how beneficial the communication was to the teachers, parents and the children. Majority of the teachers, 93.3% (28), responded in the affirmative while a mere 6.7% (2) denied frequent communication with parents. The pre-school teachers enlisted the benefits of communication to the parents as follows:

- a) It helps them solve problems.
- b) It helps them to identify the problems.
- c) Improves the child's performance.
- d) It helps them to understand the child.
- e) It helps them to share experiences.
- f) It helps them to give information about the school or the child.
- g) It helps them to learn from each other.
- h) It helps them to persuade parents to get involved in curriculum activities.
- i) It promotes personal relationships between parents and the children.

Pre-school parents were also in agreement with the above benefits of communication with the teachers. Both the teachers and the parents were asked what they communicate to each other about. They gave similar reasons which were:

- a) Progress of the child.
- b) Building of new structures in the school.
- c) The school feeding programme.
- d) The child's hygiene and health (immunization or disease outbreaks).
- e) A sick child or with special needs.

The pre-school parents were asked how often they communicated with the teachers on their child's progress or welfare in a term. The results revealed that slightly above half the pre-school parents, 57.6% (88), communicated with the teachers once a month. A quarter, 24.8% (38), did so weekly while the lowest percentage of 3.9% (6) communicated only twice in a term. An explanation to this could be that the parents who communicated with the teachers monthly were either checking on the progress of their children or are being notified. They were also being reminded to pay school fees every end of

month. Those who communicated twice a term were those who brought the child on the first day to attend the opening assembly and they would pick them at the end of the term to pick the progress report. Frequent communication, even on a daily basis, establishes a healthy teacher-parent-child partnership required for better quality ECDE delivery services. Pre-school teachers should initiate the communication and create a welcoming school culture and climate for parents to get involved in ECDE curriculum development.

CONCLUSION

The most important role of a pre-school teacher in Early Childhood Curriculum Development is to communicate with parents and teach. Communication is the focus of a partnership between parents and teachers in early childhood curriculum development. It motivates both teachers and parents as co-producers of a successful child. Communication by word of mouth and letters/memos was the most frequent means. It helped them solve problems, identify problems, improve the child's performance, give significant information about the school and persuade parents to be involved in Early Childhood curriculum development. Communication between pre-school parents is initiated by teachers on a limited scale. Parents prefer frequent and informal communication with the teachers as parents want to receive information about programmes and activities at school, information about the school itself and how they can be involved in curriculum development. Pre-school teachers communicate with parents through telephone, newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, home visits, media and informally. It was, however, noted that collaboration between parents and teachers in classrooms still scored low mean ratings. Pre-school teachers in Mumias town want to be recognized as professionals and in charge of curriculum. They only want parents to give their children support in their work. Pre-school parents and teachers in Mumias town wanted to collaborate in six areas, namely provide teaching and learning materials, pay school fees, participate in the feeding programmes, collaborate in health and hygiene of the children, support homework and discipline. In regard to the challenges facing pre-school teachers and parents, the study concluded that:

- a) Both lack time.
- b) Teachers have little knowledge or understanding on how to effectively work with parents.
- c) There is lack of proper communication between parents and teachers.
- d) Bad teacher attitude towards poor and illiterate parents.
- e) Marital problems are a barrier to parent-teacher partnerships in early childhood curriculum development.
- f) Teachers feel that parents are a bother and have no knowledge of the curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- a) The pre-school teachers should be employed by the TSC and given a scheme of service.
- b) There should be gender balance of the teachers hired.
- c) Quality Assurance and Standards Officers should be trained in ECDE to ensure quality.
- d) There should be a revision of the entry points into ECDE teacher training institutions.

Parents should be fully involved in ECD curriculum by doing the following:

- a) Assist children in cognitive development when at home.
- b) Serve as volunteers in the classrooms or pre-school sections.
- c) Organize school meals for children with contributed food materials from their farms thus provision of snacks.
- d) Construct play and instructional materials needed for children's physical and cognitive development from available materials.
- e) Assist in creating the environment of the school to achieve high hygiene and sanitation.
- f) Monitor, evaluate and deal with other learning concerns.
- g) Provide security to oversee the safety and security of school property.
- h) Be a part of growth monitoring group.
- i) Be involved in decision-making on issues concerning improved service delivery in pre-schools.
- j) Report to the teachers the progress of the child at home.
- k) Establish a board of trustees in the schools within the community.
- l) Share observations with staff concerning children's developmental patterns and behaviour, to help individualize the approach in the home visit and in the program setting.
- m) Endeavour to be part of curriculum reforms for children
- n) Assist in development and implementation of curricula, which for infants and toddlers is based on relationships, routines and daily experience.

In view of the fact that teachers held positive perceptions towards parental involvement in the children's early childhood curriculum development, teachers as staff of the pre-school have a lot of responsibilities in making collaboration effective. In this regard, the study recommended that pre-school teachers should:

- a) Make use of local materials with parents to provide play instructional material needs of children through direct involvement.
- b) Introduce formal and informal communication with parents so as to give the progress of the child at school.

- c) Be involved and present in the organization and attendance of parent-teacher association meetings.
- d) Discover individual needs of children and provide the necessary assistance.
- e) Know the resources available in the community, particularly the services, projects, and programs geared towards educational and case successes.
- f) Act as members of the board of trustees when elected to do so.
- g) Be aware of other possible collaborative bodies and consultative bodies in the community.
- h) Understand the way some parents behave (e.g. why some parents not attend meetings with staff).
- i) Team up with various partners to share responsibilities for children's success and socialization.
- j) Establish regular home visits to monitor development of children as well as foster better understanding and communication with parents.
- k) Recognize parents as indispensable partners as well as respecting their views or childrearing practices available within the community.
- l) Mobilize the community towards achieving the objectives of the collaboration.
- m) Undertake capacity-building opportunities provided by the collaboration.
- n) Supply a variety of materials and planned activities designed to encourage individual and group play. Support the efforts of parent in the holistic development of their children at home.

In the light of the findings, the pre-school teachers should create an environment where parents feel welcome. When parents feel welcome in a school, they are more likely to relate well with teachers and in turn the children's academic performance improves. The study recommended that:

- a) Teachers should develop attitudes that welcome parents and conduct activities that invite them into the school. This can be done by introducing parental involvement course in the pre-service and in-service teacher training curriculum. Teachers therefore should be in-serviced on how to do this; for example, greet parents and talk to them warmly with friendly smiles. There should be a room or section of the pre-school with seats for parents to feel comfortable.
- b) Pre-school teachers should provide opportunities for parents and staff to interact in informal ways; for example, having graduation parties for the pre-scholars and have an open-door policy. The pre-school leadership and management should be competent in ECDE curriculum development so that it steers the pre-school towards high parental involvement that leads to quality ECDE programmes.
- c) The Parent-Teacher Associations of all pre-schools should be strengthened so that they are

the parental voice in the partnership process. As a result, early childhood education policy will be better informed, of higher quality, have a greater acceptability among the public and achieve greater participation. However, in the light of arguments earlier stated, genuine partnership is essential for effective ECDE. Nevertheless, in promoting participation by parents in their children's education, it will be important to strike a balance between the needs of teachers, parents and, most importantly, pupils.

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