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## Impact of Parental Involvement (PI) in the Education of Children with Intellectual Impairment in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

This study assesses the impact of a lack of parental involvement (PI) on the education of children with intellectual impairment in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. The study aimed to assess how a lack of parental involvement impacts the education of children with intellectual impairments. The study deploys a qualitative research approach congruent with the case study. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory informs this study. The gap that this study seeks to show is that there is inadequate research on the impact of a lack of parental involvement in the education of children with intellectual impairment in Bulawayo Province. The study sample comprised the school

head, seven teachers, and four parents. Focus group interviews and unstructured interviews were used to generate data. The findings from the study established that parents have limited knowledge of parental involvement and its benefits. Furthermore, it emerged that most parents with financial constraints have little involvement in their children's education. The study recommends the need for capacity development among teachers and parents on parental involvement and its benefits. There is also a need for the central government to support parents with financial constraints through the provision of capital to start income-generating projects.

**Keywords:** *Assessing Impact; Lack; Parental Involvement, Children, Education, Intellectual Impairment; Bulawayo Province, Zimbabwe.*

## **Introduction**

Mariga, McConkey, and Myezwa (2014) posit that parental involvement (PI) in schools has a powerful influence on children's achievement, while educators also play a 'loco parentis' role and thus determine learners' success. Hence, parents' contribution cannot be underestimated. This is so because they have first-hand information about their children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development or any other pertinent information the school may not know (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2006). This implies that parents stand as the child's first teacher, whose involvement in school programmes can positively impact the performance of learners in various disciplines. Epstein (2009) emphasises that parents are privileged partners concerning their child's educational needs and, to the extent possible, should be accorded the choice in the type of educational provision they desire for their child. Good parent involvement should keep less visible parents 'connected' and stimulate and tap the potential of highly visible parents (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2006). Chakuchichi, Nyaruwata, and Chataika (2012) affirm that school and the home should have a mutual relationship that benefits the child. The above views all point out the fact that if there is non-involvement of parents in children's education, their academic performance is also affected.

In third-world nations, the importance of parent-teacher partnerships has been emphasised, and various models of such collaboration have evolved (McGuire, 2011). On the other hand, developing countries such as Zimbabwe have also adopted the noble idea, but the question is, "To what extent is the theory being translated into practice?"

Parents who partner with schools will likely have an idea of inclusive education, which has become a global trend. Chakuchichi, Nyaruwata and Chataika (2012) give an account of communities participating in inclusive schools through moulding bricks, carrying pit sand, river sand and water for the construction of ramps, toilets, and enlargement of doors. From the facts raised above, it becomes apparent that PI in children's learning has to be mandatory. Despite these substantial facts, one wonders why there is low PI in the education of learners with intellectual impairment.

## **Literature Review**

There is emerging evidence that PI is critically important for children's academic success (Epstein, 2009). The more parents participate in schooling in a sustained way at every level, the better for student achievement (Sanders and Sheldon, 2009). To put it more succinctly, Pang (2008) asserts that it is the PI of learning activities in the home that is most closely associated with better cognitive attainment in the early years. Concerning that, Pushor (2007) conducted a survey and established that the reading level of grade three students improved when their parents taught them to read for two consecutive years. A similar study conducted by Sanders and Sheldon (2009) showed that students' scores on mathematics achievement tests improved when their teachers assigned homework that required the student to show their math skills to a family member. However, this study employs a case study, which allows the researcher to gather in-depth information on the issue under study.

McClosely (2010) emphasises that home-school partnerships facilitate academic achievement. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, which identifies the home and the school as the central aspects of PI that influence positive academic outcomes. In addition to improvements in academics, schools and families have reported improvements in school attendance, higher educational aspirations, and reductions in retention, suspension, and behaviour problems (McClosely, 2010). McGuire (2011) also observes that parents

may not be able to increase children's IQ scores, but they can monitor their children's educational progress and intervene when their children get into trouble at school. These studies emphasise the effectiveness of home-based PI in facilitating academic achievement and are silent on behavioural improvement. Thus, this study sought to find out how the home and school have an impact not only on academic achievement but also on behavioural improvement.

Epstein (2009) establishes that, through involvement in their children's learning, parents have also benefited from being involved in their children's schooling. The author further notes that parents have learned how to effectively help their children with schoolwork, become more aware of what teachers do, what their children are learning, how the school functions, and develop more positive feelings towards their children's teachers. In addition, Gibbs (2009) points out that parents who are involved feel useful and have a better understanding of how they can help their children succeed in school. When parents are involved, teachers feel more comfortable asking other parents to be involved, and they also feel that their classrooms are managed more effectively (Epstein, 2009). Staples and Diliberto (2010) identify partnerships with parents as a tool for increasing student achievement. Thus, home-school partnerships have a powerful impact on children's learning, following the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner.

In different observations, Staples and Diliberto (2010) observe that the most significant outcomes of PI in children's education are the parent's contribution to the child's sense of efficacy in doing well in school. In that regard, Gibbs (2009) confirms that PI works indirectly on school outcomes by helping the child develop a pro-social, pro-learning self-concept and high educational aspirations. These studies reflect that children's self-esteem and self-concept are boosted if their parents are involved in their education. Subsequently, their academic achievements improved.

On the other hand, Pang (2008) conducted a similar study of college students from various universities and found that PI did not correlate with grade point average for high school and college students. Pang's study differs from this one because it focuses on college students who are mature enough to work on their own with little supervision from

either home or school. Whereas, this study hopes to cover that gap by specifically focusing on children with intellectual impairment who need maximum support from both home and school since they have cognitive deficits. Tissot (2011) argues that PI is not a sufficient condition for school success because other variables, for example, the child's intrinsic interest in the material being taught, and the teacher's ability to teach effectively, are also strongly implicated in the child's academic success. This means that although PI is a major issue that contributes to children's academic success, there is a need to look into other issues that are likely to influence their success.

Most of the research cited above was conducted in American schools. Due to differences in contextual settings, research findings are not likely to yield similar results. More so, these studies centred on PI in the education of non-disabled students, as opposed to this research. Hence, it is this geographical and population gap that this research hopes to close by focusing on a Zimbabwean school that caters to children with intellectual impairment. Thus, this study will establish the impact of PI on the perceptions of parents in Zimbabwe.

## **Methodology**

This study was carried out in one special school for learners with intellectual impairments, and it employed a qualitative research approach. It is confirmed that such an approach allows the researcher to gain first-hand information about the perspectives of participants and thus understand human and social behaviour from the insider's perspective (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). In other words, it enables the insider's perspectives to be expressed clearly. Additionally, the qualitative methodology was relevant for this study because it provided an in-depth understanding of the impact of a lack of PI on the education of children with intellectual impairment. The study adopted a case study design. A case study design is an in-depth study of a social phenomenon that aims to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, where numerous sources of evidence are employed (Best and Kahn, 2016). It is determined by 'why,' 'how,' and 'what' (Swanborn, 2010), as reflected in this study's research questions. The case study design helped to gather data that was useful in establishing why most parents are not involved in the education of children with intellectual impairment; what the impact of non-involvement of parents is, and how parents can be involved in their children's learning. Largely, it allowed the researcher to

use various data collection methods, such as unstructured interviews and focus group interviews. This increased the validity and credibility of the results.

The population of this study, which was purposively sampled, consisted of the school head, teachers, and parents of learners with intellectual impairments. In purposive sampling techniques, information-rich participants who can provide insights and understanding into the study are selected (Swanborn, 2010). Purposive sampling was most helpful in selecting the most appropriate group of people who were likely to have authentic knowledge about the research topic. Unstructured interviews were used to interview the school head as well as parents, while teachers were engaged in focus group discussions. Interview schedules, which contained open-ended questions that were aligned with research questions, were used in data collection. The data were analysed thematically.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is informed by the ecological model, which was proposed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979. Within the ecological model, a child functions within multiple systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasises the need to look beyond the child to examine the settings, such as home and school, in which children are directly involved. For example, a child functions within the microsystem of their home and their school and the ecosystem of their neighbourhood. The ecological model asserts that the home, the school, are important because the child travels between home and school, experiencing the cultural values, norms, beliefs, and expectations in each microsystem. Thus, the family and school influence each other and have a powerful impact on a child's development. The ecological model fits well with this study because it posits a shared responsibility between teachers and parents for children's learning, thereby enhancing PI.

## **Results/ Findings**

### ***Perceptions of the Impact and Importance of Parental Involvement***

Participants gave different views on the impact and importance of PI in the education of children with intellectual impairments. One of the teachers in the FDG expressed that PI promoted the acquisition of self-help skills.

PI promotes improvement in self-help skills such as dressing, toilet training, self-feeding and bathing. This implies that self-help skills taught at school should be taught at home so that the child can function independently (Teacher A).

Concurring, one of the parents had this to say:

I liaise with the teacher of my child so that I am aware of what she is taught at school. I take my time in teaching Samantha (not her real name) the same skills she learns at school. Now I am very happy because she has improved in various skills of daily living. For instance, she used to bed wet but she no longer does so. Additionally, she can now feed and dress herself properly although she still has problems in bathing herself. This means that, if I had not assisted my child in training her in self-help skills, she would be lagging in most aspects (Parent A).

In a similar vein, another parent expressed her perceptions as follows:

If I do not provide my child with reading material or read to him, he will grasp reading skills at a very slow rate. Thus, his performance in reading will not improve. This means that if he gets support from both the school and home, her acquisition of reading skills improves (Parent B).

The same parent further stated that:

Apart from providing James (not his real name) with reading material, I supervise his homework and also attend school events if they do not clash with my work schedule. What parents should know is that children are motivated to learn if they realise that parents are interested in their education.

This parent seemed to understand that it takes time for a child with an intellectual impairment to grasp concepts since they have cognitive deficits. The researcher learned that she was a teacher by profession. For that reason, she seemed to understand the importance of PI, especially in the education of children with intellectual impairments who require maximum support in learning. One of the teachers in the focus group interviews also echoed similar sentiments:

As long as parents show interest in their children's education, they (children) develop a high self-esteem. A child with high self-esteem is emotionally stable. Once one's emotions are stable, learning becomes easy and enjoyable (Teacher B)

Another teacher gave a typical response:

I have observed that the involvement of parents in children's learning promotes improved school attendance. For instance, children whose whereabouts are monitored by their parents have regular school attendance (Teacher C).

While this teacher's response is valid, in turn, the school should also inform parents if a child is absent from school. Unanimously, the school head gave his comprehensive response as follows:

PI is not only important because it leads to improvement in self-help skills. It brings numerous positive outcomes. For instance, children with intellectual impairment display undesirable behaviours which have to be managed by both teachers and parents. Thus, PI results in behavioural change and improvement in academic performance. It also promotes the development of the school as well as the maintenance of infrastructure.

This response indicated that the school head understood the importance of PI in the education of children. The school head and some parents also conceded that PI creates a good working relationship between parents and teachers, resulting in teachers being motivated to teach



children. This implies that if PI is lacking, no relationship is built between both parties.

In sharp contrast to the above views, this was said by one of the parents when asked about the impact of non-involvement in the education of children:

Even if I assist Chipso (not herreal name) with homework, it will not make any difference at all because she rarely grasps anything he learns. So why should I waste my time instead of concentrating on other important things (Parent C).

This response reflected that Parent C had a negative attitude towards educating children with intellectual impairments.

### **Discussion of Findings**

It emerged from the participants' responses that PI was viewed from different angles. While some parents seemed to be quite knowledgeable about what PI entails, others showed that they had a limited understanding of the subject. Those who were clear on the importance of PI understood the impact of the non-involvement of parents in children's education. Parent B explained that PI is a shared task between teachers and parents, as pointed out by Bronfenbrenner (1979). This is also confirmed by Staples and Diliberto (2010), who regard home-school partnerships as a tool that increases student achievement. Parent's B responses indicated that she was aware of the impact of non-involvement in children's education when she stated that non-involvement of parents in children's education results in non-improvement of children in various aspects. This parent argued that children with intellectual impairments need maximum support from both parents and teachers since their learning rate is low. Parents of such calibre contribute a lot to the development of the school because they are neither pushed nor forced to engage in school events or functions.

Parents who had less knowledge of PI were not aware of the impact of their non-involvement in the education of children. Their responses also showed that they thought PI was more inclined to train in self-help skills. However, PI is a broad term that refers to the participation of parents in home-based and school-based activities aimed at promoting children's success (Coots, 2007). Thus, parents whose understanding of PI was deficient gave unfavourable responses during interviews. Such

parents are also likely to turn down invitations to school events due to ignorance.

It was shocking to note that responses from some parents showed that they had a negative attitude towards children with intellectual impairments. It is quite difficult to convince such parents that they understand that their involvement in their children's education contributes to the success of their children. As long as parents perceive children with intellectual impairment negatively, they will never understand the impact of their non-involvement in the education of their children. For instance, parents C and D perceived their children as uneducable because they found it hard to grasp concepts or skills. Such parents do not understand that children with intellectual impairments can learn just as well as other non-disabled students as long as they get maximum support. What this simply means is that if a parent cannot appreciate or accept disability, it becomes difficult for him or her to fully commit himself or herself to the education of their child with a disability. Teachers who participated in the focus group interview had mixed views on the impact and importance of PI. While some held positive perceptions of PI in children's learning, others regarded it negatively. According to Teacher C, PI is important because it promotes regular school attendance, as confirmed by McClosely (2010). Teachers with similar perceptions have a good rapport with parents. In addition, teachers who recognise the value of PI are competent teachers who not only regard their professional expertise as pertinent to the learning of children but also give recognition to parents.

On the other hand, focus group members who seemed to disregard PI argued that they were equipped with professional skills and knowledge on how to teach children with intellectual impairments. For that reason, they thought they did not need the help of their parents. What this means is that such teachers may not take parents' advice, which may contribute to the success of their children. Subsequently, the performance of children in various aspects is compromised. However, parents are supposed to be full and equal members of their children's education (Berthelsen and Walker, 2008).

The school head showed a clear understanding of the impact and importance of PI in children's education. This is so because he gave

knowledgeable and optimistic responses throughout the interviews. Nonetheless, his knowledge of PI is fruitless and non-productive because the research findings show that there is a lack of PI in children's learning. The researcher boldly states that because she gathered that during data collection. This showed that the partnership between the school and home lacked, as opposed to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this study was on the impact of a lack of parental involvement on the education of children with intellectual impairments. The empirical evidence from this study indicates that parents' limited understanding of parental involvement has an impact on their participation in their children's education. Specifically, most parents with limited education were unaware of the benefits of parental involvement in their children's education. Hence, a low level of education correlates with a limited understanding of concepts. It also emerged that parents' socio-economic status correlates with their involvement in their children's education. On that note, it follows that parents with financial constraints have low involvement in their children's education.

### **Recommendations**

To enhance parents' understanding of parental involvement, schools should establish staff development workshops for teachers and parents on parental involvement and its benefits. Additionally, schools should create an inviting school climate as well as establish income-generating projects for parents who have financial constraints. Furthermore, the school head and teachers should employ various communication modes to improve communication between the school and home.

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