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Parental Involvement In English Literacy Homework With Primary School Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore parental involvement within an English Literacy intervention programme focusing on a group of Grade 4 primary school learners. The study postulate that active involvement of parents in their children's education can enhance learning, and argues that in order for learners and parents to actively engage with the learning processes they should become more emancipated in the process. Therefore the main focus is that parents can be assisted by educators, to scaffold the learning processes of their children. The study is framed by a qualitative approach, to which the parents of identified learners were invited. The programme was implemented to investigate the benefits of parental involvement in after school homework activities. A small multilingual focus group was formed to determine the success (es) of this programme. A research paradigm was used to lean towards a critical theory paradigm framed by an action research model.

Key words: Emancipation, partnership, parental involvement, homework, intervention programme

Introduction

Background And Context Of Research

Teachers contend that parental involvement in assisting children with homework has always been lacking. Wolfe dale (1992:6) supports this view and argues: "in textbooks on the history of education, parents are conspicuously absent: they appear to exist only in relation to their primary legal duty to send children to school." What has also become more noticeable is that parents find it increasingly challenging to assist their children with homework, often due to variables such as learner characteristics, lack of knowledge and education and integrative orientations (Brown, 2007: 170). In recent years, educators have opted for various alternatives as a way to involve

parents in the schoolwork of learners, but with no or little success. As a result, parents often disclosed various factors, which include their inability to assist their children either due to their level of schooling, or their unfamiliarity with the varying materials and methodological approaches to scaffold the lessons presented in the classroom. This is in contrast with the expectations relayed by the Department of Education (DoE) that requires a greater degree of parental involvement in children's educational development (Mestry & Grobler, 2007:176). Outcomes Based Education (OBE) demands educators to afford learners homework that would engage parents more with their child's educational endeavours, and to serve as a platform for parents to collaborate with educators in the educational undertakings of their children. Van Der Horst and McDonald (1997:6) review the mission of a change to OBE where the focus is on the learner and his/her needs. Acknowledgement of human diversity (learners' differences must be accommodated). A move to participatory, democratic decision making in education (teachers, parents and learners have a say in how they experience education). Emphasis on accountability (responsibility). Allowing all learners to achieve their full potential (different levels according to individual ability).

The Purpose Of The Study

This study aims to conduct research into an intervention programme, involving parents of a selected group of Grade 4 learners through a series of English literacy homework sessions; to ascertain whether such a form of intervention would then enable parents to assist learners with the then-afforded homework activities. The homework programme, which was implemented, comprises of listening and language homework activities. An action research approach was used to frame observations during the various stages and sessions of this programme. For this study, the level of parental involvement was crucial as parents needed to become much more supportive, helpful and more compassionate to complement the learning processes of the child. A strong bond or partnership between the school and the home were essential for the learner's holistic development. It was evident that parents needed to display a more hands-on approach and to work collaboratively with the teacher to meet the expectations from learners and to yield more meaningful ways on how parents could effectively assist their children with their homework activities. The purpose of the language homework programme was to provide an academic and strategic link between the school and the home, as well as to create a collaborative space for further engagement between parents and learners. Furthermore, the aim was to develop a more transparent level of communication between home and school, as a way to support parents with the necessary knowledge and skills to assist learners with homework, especially as parents are seen as the child's foremost educators. In this study, the language programme was used as an instrument to enable parents to be more supportive towards their children's schooling as well as for parents to reflect on their involvement and their contributions within the learner's learning processes. The intention behind the language programme was to illustrate to parents that effective parental involvement can be beneficial to all stakeholders i.e. learners, parents, educators etc. especially when it comes to defining the roles of the different stakeholders such as

DoE, community and Non Governmental officials (NGO's) in order to improve and assist with parental involvement, and by assisting parents to become emancipated.

Background To The Homework Programme

The framework provided by Van Niekerk (2007) serves as research instrument for the study. This programme, devised by Van Niekerk (2007) is specifically designed as an instrument to foster greater collaboration between the school, parents and learners. The homework programme is divided into various themes. In her programme, Van Niekerk (2007:3) integrates various themes to complement activities and skills within the classroom and at home. The outline below charts these topics as covered during the six sessions with the participants.

Research Question

In order to strengthen the relationship between home and school and simultaneously improve the English literacy skills of the Grade 4 learners the study focused on addressing the following questions:

1. How can parents be supported to assist their Grade 4 children with English literacy homework?
2. What strategies can be implemented to involve parents of Grade 4 learners with English literacy homework?

The parents were supported in assisting their children with homework by putting the intervention programme into practice and to improve the relationships between the home and the school. This was done through regular contact sessions with parents and/or other family members of the learners. The researcher had regular communication with parents or representatives of the learners through telephonic communication to remind parents of meeting dates and/or written communication via letters and circulars. Home and school liaison books to discuss the progress of learners afforded parents with feedback on the learner's performance. Report cards were also used to inform parents how their child/ren performed during the term. The researcher forwarded SMS's to the parents if learners failed to complete homework or if parents did not sign the homework sheet. The following approaches were applied to involve the parents with English literacy homework intervention. The aims were to eliminate barriers between the school and home, such as the language barriers due to the multilingual range of languages spoken among the research participants. English was used as a tool to level the equity caused by the language diversity. Another approach was to strengthen relationships shared between the teacher and the parents especially among foreign nationals who were regarded as 'aliens' in the immediate social setting. These existing power relationships were turned around by initiating the building of trust between parents and teachers and parents of different cultural backgrounds as well. Time management skills were integrated as parents set aside certain slots to assist their children with their homework. Such homework timeslots were instrumental in building family relationships as

well and provided a platform for parents to interact on a neglected terrain that is the education of their children. Time management facilitated a specific form of discipline and routine in family life that further added value to the importance of linking home as informal learning environment and school as formal learning environment. Transport was provided as parents were brought to the school environment where the learners spent most of their time. Learning opportunities were created via the homework programme where parents were informed on how to help their children with homework and finally an empowering atmosphere was established by means of the homework programme to strengthen relationships amongst parents and children thus familiarized parents with insights into what their children experienced daily. The approach that was most beneficial for the group was the language barriers that were broken down between the home and the school, as all the parents who participated in the intervention programme understood the English used in the intervention. There was also a better level of understanding between the parents and the educator as the parents began to understand how they could assist their children with their schoolwork.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Critical theory

The research approach used in this study leans towards the critical theory paradigm, as the entire study is underpinned by the action research model. According to Duffy and Scott (1998:184) critical theory has been dominated by Jurgen Habermas since 1971. They further view that the central aim of Habermas's critical theory model was to obtain a concept of civilization with a realistic aim that could lead to the liberation of people from supremacy. In other words, individuals are able to view life critically and objectively as a way to create opportunities which would allow them to be free from domination and oppression, so that they would be able to think more critically and become independent. For this reason the intervention programme was implemented as a way for parents (or the representatives) and learners to become emancipated from the difficulties experienced with homework assigned at school. In his framework, Habermas (as cited in Duffy and Scott, 1998: 184) has specific viewpoints to outline how one can understand what social reality, technical, practical and emancipation mean. In the study conducted by Horkheimer (1982), the study largely centered on the parents' inability to assist their children with homework. Horkheimer is also of the opinion that critical theory must be realistic in its meaning as it is imperative that it identifies the actors of change. These actors of change allude to the intervention programme that was offered so that the parents or the representatives could be empowered, and to be of assistance to the children. In addition, Critical Theory should also afford clear direction and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (Horkheimer, 1982). In essence, derived from Horkheimer's view, Critical Theory can therefore be seen as a theory which can be radical and emancipatory (Kemmis, 2001:92), as it brings along change through research. The transformation that is referred to by Kemmis came to fruition in this study as parents became

self-sufficient in assisting their children with homework. In the research of Lilly and Green (2004:4), they relate to the notion of critical theory, through a different focal point. They propose that critical theory is defined through the societal and ethnic milieu that accompanies children when they start attending school. The central purpose of this study is to introduce and evaluate the effects of a homework programme to emancipate the parents in assisting learners with homework.

Action Research

In order to gauge the effect of such a programme, Riding, Fowell, and Levy (1995:1) cautions that “a methodical, iterative approach embracing problem identification, action planning, implementation, evaluation, and reflection” should be considered and that the insights gained from the initial cycle, should then feed into the planning of the second cycle, for which an action plan should be modified and the research process repeated again.

Planning

Planning is the first stage within the Riding, Fowell and Levy (1995) cycle and involves an analysis of the problem before a strategic plan of action is compiled (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988:11). During the planning stage of this study, the researcher evaluated the current situation and noticed that parents struggled to assist learners with their homework. The researcher therefore planned ways on how to have a constructive influence that would be beneficial to both the parent and learner.

Acting

This stage involves the implementation of the strategic plan (Kemmis and Mc Taggart, 1988:12). The homework programme was implemented which consisted of six sessions of one hour each. During these sessions, parents were equipped with ways on how to assist their children with homework. Parents were encouraged to interact with both teacher and learner during the implementation phases of the programme.

Observing

During this phase, the observer (educator) should be consistent with the monitoring-aspect, and take notes on what was implemented and to do pro-active planning (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1988:13). The educator observed how the parents interacted with the programme through monitoring. Observations of how the learners responded to the programme were done in class context and learners' performances were monitored accordingly

Reflecting

This stage reflects on the outcomes (results) of the evaluation (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1988:13). The researcher planned the next sessions in advance and made the necessary adjustments (based

on observations) accordingly, to allow parents a better opportunity to interact with the content and scaffold the learning processes of the learner.

Methods

Figure 1. The action research cycle (Riding, Fowell, & Levy, 1995)

This chapter focuses on a qualitative research design framework as a means to ascertain how the parents of Grade 4 learners could be supported to assist their children with English literacy homework assignments. This was done by offering an intervention programme for parents using English literacy as a vehicle to establish common ground. This chapter includes a further discussion on the research design and methodological framework used by the researcher to which the process of obtaining the relevant data will be explained. Furthermore, this chapter will highlight key points of action research as it relates to the critical theory paradigm used in this study.

The Research Site

The research site is a primary school which was started in 1910 in the Cape Peninsula. There were originally four schools in the area. The research site is the only one that remained. The other three schools were closed down. The school comprises of Grades R to Grade 7 learners with only one class per grade. The family composition of the learners range from single parenting, nucleus families and extended families. Parental involvement at the research site was practically non-existent prior to the intervention programme. The reasons (as shared by parents) were mainly due to different parenting patterns, low self-esteem with regard to subject knowledge, low education levels (of parents), and that most of them were not acquainted with the OBE framework and expectations. The parents also mentioned their work related issues such as long hours during harvesting time on the wine farms. Other parents who resides outside the area stated that they must use different modes of transport and that the lack of finances in many instances played a negative roll which influenced their participation and involvement in their children's school work. Each theme was followed by exercises in the form of comprehension, vocabulary, memory activities as well as sentence constructions. The researcher dealt with each section by reading the content to the parents. In information sessions conducted, it was also explained to them how to go about completing these exercises with their children. The researcher encouraged the parents to establish a routine to interact with the learners' homework programme on a daily basis. The parents had to tick next to each exercise as they completed it in order for them to mark where to follow on the next time. They had to indicate all the activities that their children struggled with or were unable to complete. The purpose for this was so that the parents could consolidate the work before continuing with the next theme or exercise. Parents were encouraged to praise their children for all the work completed and/or attempted. Parents were reminded to sign and date all completed work. In addition to the aforementioned, parents were

encouraged to interact with the researcher while the sessions were in progress, to eliminate any uncertainty regarding the homework programme.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires (See Appendix F, p 128) were used to gather qualitative data and in doing so the researcher was able to give a well described description of the involvement of parents of the Grade 4 class. The questionnaires were given to all the parents before the intervention programme started. parents before the intervention programme started. This was done to see whether the parents were capable of helping their children with homework.

Planning Of The Focus Group

For this research study, the researcher had to have a clear idea of the specific information that was needed and why the information was important, before the focus group was conducted. It is for this reason that a group of nine multilingual individuals were chosen. The participants were “pre-screened” via the telephone by letter and orally. This was done to ensure that they would be representative of the various diverse cultural groups. The table below indicates the various language groups of the participants of the focus group. In response to this, Anderson (1987:203) suggests that “the participants must have some common characteristics related to what is being focussed upon.” In this case, the aim of the focus group interview was to determine whether or not the homework intervention programme was beneficial to the participants. The focus group interview was conducted using open-ended questions. This was done in order to stimulate an environment in which participants could feel free to discuss their concerns and issues regarding their children’s progress and their own involvement in assisting the children with their home work. For this, the researcher occupied the role as the group moderator/ mediator. Anderson (1987:204) affords the following suggestions for the group moderator. According to Anderson, the moderator must be comfortable with the group processes and that s/he must encourage the respondents to participate in the discussion. The moderator must balance the contributions of those who form part of the focus group. Anderson (1987) cautions and advises the moderator to listen both actively and attentively to all the verbal contributions of the respondents to paraphrase and to summarise of what was said.

The moderator must be innocent, empathetic and sensitive and must function as a facilitator and not a performer. The moderation must be aware of past, present and future perspectives during the session. It is vital that the moderator must keep the discussion moving, focused and must know when to wrap up. It is recommended that the moderator must use silences, pauses and probes effectively. The mediator should exercise mild control, but avoid leading participants. Furthermore, s/he must remain flexible and adaptive and must stay in the background because it is the views of the participants that are important. The mediator must suspend his or her personal prejudice and acknowledge individual contributions and should control those individuals that are dominating the interview. In terms of time management, the moderator must always be

conscious of time and respect the participants and believe their contributions are important regardless of their background, experience or education. The moderator must have adequate background of the topic and have effective communication skills and must understand how to use humour and naïve questions. In essence, the role of the moderator is very significant. Good levels of group leadership and interpersonal skill are required to conduct a group successfully. With permission of the respondents these interviews were recorded on an electronic recording device. The responses were recorded to ensure that the information collected was true and accurate. The focus group constituted of grandparents, sisters and other family members. Each representative was asked to sign an attendance register every time that they attended one of the homework sessions

How Parents Can Help Their Children

There are many ways in which parents can be of assistance to their children. Parents can continue to build a good rapport with their child's teacher, seeking guidance and suggestions for learning. It is further recommended that parents ascertain an invariable routine with their child for completing homework, including a regular study time and location, and encourage their child to maintain the routine. Parents can make a point of it to discuss school work, successes, concerns, and interests with their child. In addition to this parents can encourage their child to "exercise" his or her mind by doing crossword puzzles, brain teasers, and word searchers. Moreover parents can involve relatives and family friends to help support their child's learning.

Application Of Blooms Taxonomy At Home

It is recommended that parents, being partners in their children's' education, can implement the different learning activities and levels of questioning at home and assist their children to develop critical thinking skills apt to the classroom. It is for this reason that parents were constantly motivated to maintain the different levels of questioning to develop critical thinking abilities. Garland (2011:5) suggests the following as reference to Bloom's taxonomy:

When children are moved beyond Bloom's lowest level, remembering, to the next level of understanding, they are answering questions which ask them to organize previous information, such as: comparing, interpreting the meaning, or organizing the information.

According to Garland, children are mainly just reiterating the information verbatim. Garland (2011:5) furthermore argues that critical thinking abilities are not developed if learners repeat the information word for word. Parents were urged during the homework sessions to encourage their children to reason for themselves and to avoid pressure of their age group (Garland, 2011:5).

It was noticeable during the intervention programme that parents want their children to have the necessary skills to listen, analyse and interpret the information that will be a continuous fragment of their lives. Recollection and insight are part of this process, but to succeed in further processing this flow of knowledge, requires a higher level of thinking and reasoning techniques especially in view of Blooms Taxonomy. Garland (2011:5) encourages parents to continuously implement the following while assisting their children with homework.

Analyzing: It is recommended that parents ask their child/ren to identify motives and/or causes from real-life stories as was the case with the shopping list that parents and children encountered as part of the homework programme. Parents can encourage their children to conduct an interview or survey. They can also have their child make a flow chart, family tree or role play a real-life situation.

Evaluating: It is suggested that parents ask their child to form and defend an opinion on a subject. Children, especially teens are pretty good at this one for example children can be encouraged to write a letter to an editor or evaluate a character's actions in a story. During one of the homework sessions the learners were asked to write a poem about the educator on one of the activity sheets.

Creating: Parents are advised to ask their children to put together several bits of old information to form a new idea. They can be asked to create, design or invent a new item, proposal or plan. This requires a bit of creativity and their ability to think in the abstract Garland (2011: 2) continues by urging parents to help their children to utilise their critical thinking skills and to practise their minds so that their level of thinking will improve drastically. These higher level thinking skills are required especially from learners that are in Grades 1 to 6 as well as learners who are in Grade 9 to master the provincial and national testing which takes place in the form of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) and the Systemic testing from learners in Grades 3, 6 and 9. It is for this reason that the researcher recommends to parents to implement and follow Bloom's taxonomy to improve their children's level of thinking as the parents are regarded as partners in their children's schoolwork.

According to Garland (2011 :2) teachers point out that with the enormous pressure of the departmental testing and the pressure to teach to the test, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to be able to take their time and teach at a higher level.

The Focus Group

What is recommendable of a focus group is the interaction between the researcher and the participants. The researcher selected a group of nine participants whom she thought were the best equipped to discuss what was experienced during the intervention programme. It was evident that the participants shared certain characteristics that were relevant to study such as the importance of doing homework and their eagerness to assist their children with homework. Through the focus group interview the parents are allowed to express their views on the

importance of homework and the vital part parents can play in it. In this way the researcher can obtained responses from non verbal cues such as facial expressions or body language. This can consequently be used to collect information to assemble qualitative data. Parents subsequently indicated that they were willing to help their children, but that they found the standard of the work demanding. The researcher can ask focused questions to create and stimulate an environment that is supportive and to encourage discussion. This can also be done to encourage the expression of different viewpoints and opinions of the various respondents. Focus group interviews are further recommended because it is a popular way for gathering information in almost every area since the design is effortless. It consists of a selected group of respondents which the researcher selects. The group that are chosen are the best equipped to discuss what aspects the researcher hopes to investigate or explore.

The Questionnaires

It is suggested that the questions must be clear so that the respondents find it easy to understand so that they can easily interpret the questions as the sequence of the questions should be straightforward to follow. This can result that the participants could answer the questions to the best of their abilities. The researcher will have an indication of the levels of competency of the parents before the intervention programme started.

How Parents Assisted Their Children

There are many ways in which parents can assist a child with literacy homework for example by letting them do comprehension, reading, crossword puzzles, brain teasers and word searchers. Parents can continue to build positive working relationships with the researcher by seeking advice and ideas on how to implement further learning through telephonic conversations and SMSs. Parents can also establish a consistent routine for completing homework with their children, including a regular study time and location that is beneficial for learning. In addition, parents can encourage their children to maintain the routine and also complimenting their achievements, and voicing their uncertainties. Parents can involve relatives and a family friend to assist in supporting their child's learning endeavours.

The Diversity Of The Class Population

It is recommended that the educators use diversity as a resource within the classroom, especially given that learners possess many talents. These strengths can be used as a motivation to the other learners. On the other hand, learners (especially those studying in an additional language) also need added support to deal with linguistic challenges. This can be very demanding and consideration should be afforded to stimulate the use of second language classes more often.

School Visitations By Parents To View Learner's Work

This should motivate and encourage parents to become involved in their children's schooling and it will motivate learners to progress in school. Parent and educator meetings must therefore be encouraged. Hornby and Lafeala (2011:40) state "schools which are welcoming to parents, and make it clear that they value parental involvement, develop more effective parental involvement than schools that do not appear inviting to parents." It is therefore recommended that parents and educators meet on a regular basis for parents to be acquainted to what is needed in their child's educational setting.

Parent Support Group

Support groups such as SGB's or parent support committees should encourage parents to have regular contact with the school and for children to become involved in the school. Some parents might experience problems whereby they are unable to pay the school fees, or they might have a complaint about an educator and the support group could be there to assist or advise them accordingly. Parents might find it difficult to assist their children with school work due to various reasons like low education levels of parents and language diversity. It is highly recommended that these support groups are representative of all racial groups in multi-cultural schools. Parents of multi-cultural communities may need further assistance with parenting tasks. Carrasquillo and Clement (1993:216) suggest that by assisting parents or other interested members of the community to understand the school curriculum and by providing literacy training in the school, parents can tutor their children in their native language and the skills can then become transferable to which positive results can be achieved in diverse linguistic and cultural settings.

Written communication

Coleman (2013: 266) reckons that: "communication is often characterized as a dual responsibility." There should be constructive communication between the sender and the receiver of the message. Schools should therefore have language translators to assist families, as needed. Teachers may consider to send home weekly or monthly folders of student work for review and comments by parents. Educators can arrange for parentstudent pick-up of report cards, and plan conferences on improving grades. A regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters and other communication can be implemented. The school can provide clear information on all school policies, programmes, reforms and transitions. Walker, Ramsey and Gresham (2004: 286) reckon that: "positive communication with parents needs to begin on the first day of school. Schools should always make the first move; they should never wait until something goes wrong to establish school-home communication." They refer to classroom calendars, newsletters, good news notes and phone calls as ways to communicate effectively with parents and guardians of children. Written communication is a permanent product that requires careful consideration regarding format and content. The goal is to organise concise, accurate information so that parents will read and understand it. Newsletters are commonly used to share written information with a parent community. Consistent application of several specific

strategies can make classroom and school newsletters even more effective communication tools. Educators can also make use of different colours of paper when sending written correspondence home. Teachers should incorporate the same colour, quality, and paper size for all newsletters to create a communication “set”, use everyday language and ensure grammar, spell checks, and proofing of the information. Schools can also develop an eloquent pamphlet to provide helpful information for new families moving into the school community. Teachers can also use a variety of school notes as a tool of communication between the school and home.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study at the school was obtained from the WCED. This pertained to a description of the research project, copies of the questionnaires the name of the school where the research was conducted and the duration of the research. Permission was also granted by the principal for the use of the school facilities as research site. In addition to this a permission letter was obtained from a member of the Westlake United Church Trust for the use of their hall to accommodate the parents and guardians from the Grade 4 learners that took part in the study. All participants received explanations of the aims and purpose of the research. Everyone that were part of this project and who agreed to participate namely the parents and guardians were assured of the fact that all the information which they shared, would be dealt with confidentially. They were assured that feedback would be given to them. All parents were requested to complete an informed consent form granting permission for information collected to be used for research purposes by the researcher. Participants therefore gave their approval that the researcher could use the collected data which formed part of the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite various challenges faced within the schooling system, this chapter highlighted key areas to serve as key recommendations especially in structuring support mechanisms to parents to assist them in supporting their children’s academic endeavours.

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