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Family Engagement in Education in Times of Uncertainties: A Case of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Family engagement in education refers to parents and school personnel working together to the classroom, local, and system level to support and improve learning. This kind of engagement helps learners to feel connected, safe, secure, supported and therefore ready to learn. It also helps parents and other caregivers feel connected and tuned into their children's education. The purpose of the study was to determine how families can be engaged in their children's learning by working closely with teachers and the school personnel. Family engagement in education has successful outcomes. It leads to increased parent/guardian support for their children's learning experiences at home, especially in times of uncertainties. During the COVID-19 period, children stayed at home for a long period of time with their parents/guardians. The objective of the study was to determine the importance of family engagement in education and how schools and families can work together to enhance the education of the children during times of uncertainties such as the COVID-19 pandemic case. The study adopted the interpretivist research design in which qualitative data was generated from the phenomena and analyzed in an interpretive manner as per the themes of the study during the COVID -19 pandemic period. Through family engagement in education, children realize benefits like improved academic performance and good social-emotional development. Families' involvement in their children's education in times of uncertainty helps to enhance their responsibility, heightens their accountability for learning and improves their communication and strengthens parent-child relationship. It is recommended that active family engagement in education be enhanced in times of uncertainties so as to enhance learning and help learners to excel academically.

Key words: Family engagement in Education; Times of Uncertainties; COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

The Education system faced an unprecedented challenge due to the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, there was dire need for engaging parents, guardians and care-givers in children's education. Schools were closed down due to the pandemic, and children forced to stay at home with their parents or care-givers. This created an urgent need for parents and care-givers to take up the role of the teacher to ensure that learning continued. A meaningful engagement of families in their children's learning supports healthy growth and academic success (Henrich & Gadaire, 2008).

Many families do not know how to support their children to succeed academically. They have also never been invited into a classroom to learn how to support their children in finding academic success. In most cases children are given homework from school with no method of guaranteeing family feedback. Most families work with teachers on behavior based goals in classrooms, but not on academic based goals. Families feel comfortable helping teachers with behavior based rather than academic based goals because families view the teacher as the expert in that area Hall (2020). Academic success can be found if families and teachers work together on academic based goals for children.

As a means for supporting family engagement in children's learning during the pandemic, it was crucial that schools implement strategies for developing partnerships with families. According to Henderson & Mapp (2002), these strategies should be appropriate for a diverse population. Consistent two-way communication should be facilitated through multiple forms of communication such as social media (Face book, twitter, WhatsApp) Zoom, Classroom, Google Meet and many more software based applications depending on family preference. Halgunseth and Peterson (2009) state that communication should be both school and family initiated, timely and continuous, inviting conversations about both the child's educational experience as well as the home related matters. Families should create a home environment that values learning and supports children. Schools and families should also collaborate in establishing goals for children both at home and in school. Achieving a strong family-school partnership requires a culture that supports and honors reciprocal relationships, commitment from families and schools, leadership, a vision shared by staff and families, opportunities to develop the skills needed to engage in reciprocal relationships and practices and policies that support meaningful family engagement (Halgunseth and Peterson 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Many learning institutions and families do not have organized educational programmes to fall back to in case of uncertainties such as the COVID- 19 Pandemic which led to children staying at home for a long period of time with their parents/guardians. As a means of supporting children's learning during such eventualities, it is crucial that schools implement strategies for developing partnerships with families so that they can effectively work together to enhance children's education.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to establish the importance of family engagement in education and how schools and families can work together to enhance the education of the children during times of uncertainties such as the COVID 19 pandemic.

Literature Review

In order to foster family engagement in learning, the Ministry of Education has to come up with programs that will enable an active engagement between families, children and the school. The Ministry must focus on strategies that promote children's learning and are perceived as beneficial. According to Halgunseth and Peterson (2009), These strategies can either be tangible or intangible. They include providing network for active online learning, enabling teachers to conduct home visits with a keen observation of the Ministry of Health regulations on COVID-19, schools promoting respectful two-way communication with all families; and schools identifying resources for extending learning experiences at home.

To encourage family engagement, schools must provide a welcoming environment to families. Constantino (2008) states that, a welcoming environment implies that schools have focused efforts on maintaining an atmosphere that is inviting to families and honors their presence. The programs that schools come up with should also be welcoming to families. For example, having staff interact with families through social media; such as messaging, face book, twitter and other platforms such as zoom, classroom, meet and google where parents can mingle and also find information on child development and educational programs. To ensure that all families feel welcomed, intangible benefits that result from a welcoming environment such as feeling accepted and appreciated should be considered. (Constantino, 2008).

There should also be good communication among the parties (school, parents and children). Communication is the basis for any strong relationship and especially important with respect to family engagement in education. According to Carlisle, Stanley & Kemple (2005) communicating with families is often the school's first step towards increasing engagement. Teachers and administrators can communicate with parents through a variety of means including newsletters, e-mails, translated materials, web postings, telephone calls, home visits, videos or photo albums that depict a day in the class and face-to-face communication. Shared decision making between families and schools should also be considered. Halgunseth and Peterson (2009) state that a very important but often over-looked form of family engagement is the concept of shared decision making between families and schools. Schools need to provide families with an opportunity to voice their opinions and share in the decision making of program practices and policies that affect their children.

Families should be enlightened on activities and materials to use at home or in the community to enhance learning of their children. Schools can facilitate home learning by videotaping the classroom to show what is being taught and to demonstrate instructional techniques that parents could use at home. They can also conduct photo projects, encourage journaling, cooking activities at home and incorporate interactive homework assignments (Bailey, 2006). By enlightening families on resources and activities that enhance learning among children, teachers help families feel more connected to their children as well as to the schools.

A rich home learning environment for children is another important feature to family engagement. Bouffard & Weiss (2008) state that families who reinforce educational concepts introduced in programs at home increase their children's chances for academic success. Families that promote learning at home, structure the environment to support children's learning take time talking with children about their school activities are more likely to have children with high academic functioning, great academic achievement and high academic motivation (Halgunseth and Peterson, 2009). In addition, home-learning stimulation and parental responsiveness are significantly related to motor and social development, language competence and high achievement in test scores. Harris & Goodall (2008) found that parent engagement in child learning at home predicted greater academic achievement in children than any other form of parent involvement.

A number of scholars have come up with models that suggest ways of family engagement in education. They explain why engaging both parents and teachers in children's learning is very crucial. These models include the following:

Parent-initiated behavior Model

The Parent-initiated behavior model refers to tasks parents perform with their children at home. These tasks are often referred to as "Parent Involvement" and include: discussing the school day with the child, direct and regular contact with teachers, planning or attending school activities or events and actively promoting learning at home (Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005). Henderson and Mapp (2002) highlight the importance of family by recognizing that in some cultures, multi-generational households are common, and extended family members and fictive kin have important roles in caring for and raising children. In this case, all family members; siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and fictive kin who may be friends or neighbors, often contribute in significant ways to children's education and development.

Epstein's Model

This model refers to the school's role in promoting family engagement. According to Epstein (2001) this model identifies activities that schools can adopt to facilitate parent involvement. It recognizes that diverse needs and expectations exist across families and children and that what may work in the life of one child may not work for another (Halgunseth and Peterson 2009). This model calls for families and teachers to work together, to develop goals, and to establish the best possible practices that are meaningful and appropriate for children to learn. Epstein (2001) further comes up with six elements to model. The first element is **parenting**. This has to do with helping all families to establish home environments that support children as learners. The second element is **communicating**. It refers to designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to school communications about school programs and the children's progress. The third element is **volunteering**. It is recruiting and organizing parents' help and support to schools and their children. The fourth element is **learning at home**. It means providing information and ideas to families about how to help children at home with homework and other curriculum related activities, decisions, and planning. The fifth is **decision making**. It refers to including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives. The sixth and last element is **collaborating with community**. It

means identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

Integrative model

Weiss, Caspe & Lopez (2006) came up with the integrative model of family involvement in education. This model is linked to positive child outcomes in education. It focuses on three important categories: parenting, home-school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes. Parenting focuses on the attitudes, values, and practices that parents use in raising young children, which include nurturing parent-child relationships and child-centered practices. Home-school relationships refer to both formal and informal connections between families and young children's early childhood education programs. It also involves regular communication with teachers and efforts by teachers to increase contact with families through activities such as home-visits. Responsibility for learning outcomes point at how parents can support the language and literacy development of their children through direct parent-teaching activities such as reading together and engaging in rich conversations with their children.

This study focused on the fact that families should be actively engaged in their children's learning especially in times like those of the COVID-19 pandemic. This engagement helps to prevent children from engaging in unproductive activities and enhance their learning for academic success. The issue, however, lies in the ability of schools to engage families so that they can effectively work together on behalf of children. Lopez, Kreider & Caspe (2004) suggest that high levels of engagement often result from strong school-family partnerships that are co-constructed and characterized by trust, shared values, ongoing bidirectional communication, mutual respect, and attention to each party's needs. In this case, the Ministry of Education can come in to devise ways in which families and schools engage to promote academic success for children. Constantino (2008) in Halgunseth and Peterson (2009) states that family-school relationships are the foundation for real or meaningful family engagement. In line with Constantino (2008), The National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) established six principles of effective family engagement in education. Number one: schools should invite families to actively take part in making decisions concerning their children's education in that teachers and families jointly set goals for children's education and learning both at home and at school. Number two; schools should allow for initiated communication that is timely and continuous focusing on a child's

educational experience as well as the larger program. Number three; teachers should engage families in ways that are truly reciprocal such as families benefiting from shared resources and information with schools, schools inviting families to share their unique knowledge and skills and encourage active participation in the life of the child, teachers seeking information about children's lives, families, and communities and integrating this information into their curriculum and teaching practices. Number four; schools should provide learning activities for the home and the community. Number five: schools should invite families to actively participate in program-level decisions and wider advocacy efforts and number six; schools should implement a comprehensive program- level system of family engagement.

Methodology

The study adopted interpretivist research design that generates data through a review of existing literature, observation and phenomenology to get multiple realities from parents, teachers and learners.

Theoretical Framework

The study was informed by the Piagetian constructivist theory advanced by Piaget (1972). Constructivism is an epistemology, a learning or meaning-making theory that offers an explanation on the nature of knowledge and how humans construct knowledge and meaning from their interactions and experiences. According to this theory, learning is characterized by active engagement, inquiry, problem solving and collaboration with others. The teacher/educator or the "knowledgeable other" who in this case is the parent/guardian only comes in as a guide or facilitator to encourage learners to question, challenge and formulate their own ideas, opinions and conclusions.

Key Findings

When families are involved in their children's education, children take more responsibility for their learning, and accountability is heightened. Communication also improves within the family when students reach out for help. Family engagement therefore strengthens parent, child and school relationships which lead to good performance due to enhanced learning.

No matter their income or background, students with involved parents are likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, show confidence in performing academic tasks and adapt well to school.

Family engagement also helps children feel connected to their caregivers, families and communities. Children who are connected feel safe, secure, supported and are ready to learn.

Family engagement leads to connected adults. It helps parents and other caregivers feel connected and tuned into their children's education and development. When adults are tuned in and feel supported by schools and other agencies, they feel connected to their children and more prepared to support them.

Family engagement also leads to connected schools or institutions. When schools or other agencies are connecting and engaging with families and children, they get valuable information about what families and children need, what strengths families have and how their programs are working.

Family engagement is Fun. Family engagement events and activities are supposed to be engaging and therefore a source of fun. When families spend time together, they create strong bonds and build trust together.

Conclusions

Family engagement in education has been found to have positive short and long term effects for children. It has been associated with higher scores for children whose families are involved in their education. These children are found to have greater engagement in literacy activities and are more focused. (Logan & Feiler, 2006).

Family engagement in education provides opportunities for teachers and families to connect in an informal setting, to prevent and resolve problems in a more succinct and efficient manner, and to expand the teacher's knowledge of children's home life and cultural backgrounds (Sanders 2008). Logan and Feiler (2006) also found family engagement to be beneficial to parents in that it was associated with greater confidence in parents' interactions with children's educational programs and improved communication within the family and with teachers.

Through family engagement in Education, parents learn ways to enhance their relationship with their children and use techniques that promote learning. They also manage to keep children on positive tracks that help them avoid engaging in unproductive activities.

Recommendations

Based on the reviewed literature, the following are recommendations of the study: Active family engagement in education should be encouraged especially in times of uncertainties so as to engage learners and help them excel academically.

Schools should devise ways that allow parents to engage in their children's education. The ministry of Education should promote family engagement in education by coming up with policies that promote the process.

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