



Mothers' Constructions of their Roles in the Literacy Education of their Children

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a study that examined how mothers from a middle-income neighbourhood conceptualized their roles in their children's literacy education. Based on interviews and observations focussed on ten mothers involvement in their children's literacy education, a framework that expounds typical characterizations of parent involvement was developed which supports practices that are both traditionally visible and invisible to the school and highlights how parents act as 'intellectual resources' in their children's literacy education. The findings show that traditional understandings of parental involvement may overlook ways that middle-income parents deliberately involve themselves in their children's education. Challenges that these parents face in relation to their involvement in their children's literacy education were identified.

Key Words: Literacy education; Mothers' involvement; Invisible support systems

Résumé

Cette étude présente les conclusions d'une étude portant sur la manière dont les mères issues d'un quartier de la classe moyenne ont conceptualisé leurs rôles dans l'éducation de base de leurs enfants. Sur la base d'interviews et d'observations portant sur l'implication de dix mères dans l'éducation de base de leurs enfants, un cadre qui expose les caractérisations typiques de l'implication des parents a été élaboré, prenant en charge des pratiques traditionnelles visibles ou invisibles à l'école, et souligne comment ces parents agissent comme « ressources intellectuelles » pour l'éducation de base de leurs enfants. Les conclusions soulignent le risque de voir l'implication des parents -au sens où on l'entend traditionnellement- ne pas prendre en ligne de compte cette forme d'implication volontaire des parents issus de la classe moyenne. L'étude a identifié les défis confrontant ces parents pour leur implication dans l'éducation de base de leurs enfants.

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that for children to maximize their potential from schooling, they need the full involvement of their parents (Desforges and Abouchar 2003; Baker and Soden 1998; Muller 1993; Reynolds 1993; Stevenson and Baker 1987). Parents are children's first and best teachers, and parents can do a variety of things to support their children's literacy development. Parental involvement with children and the school are a critical factor that can produce great benefits for everyone concerned (Henderson and Berla 1997). A substantial body of evidence confirms the benefits of parental involvement in children's education and literacy activities (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez and Bloom 1993; Desforges and Abouchar 2003; Denessen 2007). Research shows that parental involvement has more positive effect on the education and literacy development of their children than other family background variables, such as social class, family size, and level of parental education (Flouri and Buchanan 2004); that it improves student emotional well-being (Allen and Daly 2002; Desforges and Abouchar 2003; Epstein 2005); that parents reading with their children at home yields positive results on language comprehension, reading achievement, and expressive language skills (Gest, Freeman, Domitrovich and Welsh 2004); and that parent involvement leads to improved educational performance, greater cognitive competence, and greater problem-solving skills and fewer behavioural problems (Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, and Van Voorhis 2002; Fan and Chen 2001; NMSA 2003; Van Voorhis 2003). More research also shows that parents' involvement in children's learning positively affects the children's performance at school (Fan and Chen 2001; Morrison 2007; Feinstein and Symons 1999); improves pupils' interest in reading, attitudes towards reading and attentiveness in the classroom (Rowe 1991); fosters better student classroom behaviour and fewer behavioural problems at school (Fan and Chen 2001; NMSA 2003; Melhuish, Symons, Siraj-Blatchard and Targgart 2001); and that parental involvement in their children's reading is the most important determinant of language and emergent literacy (Bus, van Ijzendon and Pellegrini 1995).

Parental involvement is the participation and support of parents at school and in the home, which directly and positively impacts the educational performance of their children. Dixon (1992), Desforges and Abouchar (2003), and Gonzalez-Mena (2011) define parental involvement as a combination of commitment and active participation on the part of the parent to the school and child. There are two broad categories to parental involvement namely: parents' involvement in the life of the school and parents' involvement in support of the child at home and school. The term parent

involvement is used when schools are the unit of analysis and children's academic achievement is the primary focus (Lawson 2003). Lawson argues that research on parent involvement looks at how parents are engaged in activities that are designed by the school and their involvement tends to be classified along a 'schoolcentric' continuum. On this continuum, parents have little power over school decision-making processes, and their involvement ranges from participating in extra-curricular school-sponsored activities to serving as classroom assistants or participating on a school council serving as partners in problem solving. Epstein (1996) created a typology that characterizes six categories of ways that schools can be involved with parents. He offered these types of school and family connections as a framework that schools can use in developing programmes to encourage relationships with parents. This widely accepted framework is proposed as a guide to help educators develop comprehensive family-school partnerships.

The six types of parental involvement identified by Epstein (1996) include:

- (i) parenting (helping families with child-rearing and parenting skills);
- (ii) communicating (developing effective home-school communication);
- (iii) volunteering (creating ways that families can become involved in activities at the school);
- (iv) learning at home (supporting learning activities in the home that reinforce school curricula);
- (v) decision-making (including families as decision-makers through school-site councils, committees, etc.) and
- (vi) collaborating with the community (matching community services with family needs and serving the community).

Epstein's typology validates the work that parents do in the home as well as the school in support of their children's schooling. But the types of connections identified privilege the school's role in determining what counts as parents involvement. However, it is not evident that this characterization of parent involvement begins with exploration of what parents do already for their children, in ways visible and invisible to the school.

Because parent involvement is most often evaluated from the school's vantage point, parents whose activities do not look like the traditionally accepted behaviours associated with parent involvement or are not visible in the school are often classified in the literature as being minimally involved and most often, low-income parents are classified in this way (Lawson 2003; Lareau 2000; Lightfoot 2004). Researchers vary on the ways they frame low-income parents' minimal involvement. Lareau (1987) identified three perspectives taken in the literature. Some subscribe to the culture of

poverty thesis, arguing that lower class culture has distinct values and forms of social organization, and thus lower class families do not value education as highly as middle class families. Others accuse schools of institutional discrimination, claiming that they make middle class families feel more comfortable than lower class families. Finally, some researchers argue that institutional differentiation, particularly the role of the teacher leadership, is a critical determinant of parental involvement in schooling. While these stances are different from one another in critical ways, they all operate from the schoolcentric model. That is, they seek to explain low levels of involvement among low-income parents from the vantage point of the school.

Building on this perspective, this research explored the ways parents can and do act as resources for their children's education. Through examining the activities of ten mothers, we asked the following questions:

- (a) How do Nigerian mothers in a middle-income neighbourhood conceptualize their roles in their children's education?
- (b) What are the challenges they face in enacting these roles?

Our purpose is to use concrete examples of parents' practices in relation to their children's literacy education to construct a framework for examining parent involvement and to illustrate ways that parents serve as intellectual resources for their children's learning. Our findings are not representative of all Nigerian mothers.

Methods

Ten mothers living in a middle-income neighbourhood located in Onitsha, Onitsha North Local Government Area in Anambra State, South-East Nigeria, whose children attend a public primary school in the area, participated in the study. It is important to note that while we speak to issues related to parent involvement, all of our data come from mothers. This is in line with Gadsden's position that mothers are often the default category in parent-child studies (Gadsden 2002). Although the mothers live in the same neighbourhood, there were distinct variations in their demographic variables such as age, level of education, employment status and household description (their ages ranged from 27–52 years, seven have Bachelors Degree, while three have National Certificates in Education; five had full-time employment while the rest are unemployed and eight lived in a two-parent household with two living as single mothers).

Data for the study were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the interview was to get specific and in-depth information from a representative of Nigerian mothers on their thoughts and experiences with their own and their children's literacy education, both in school and

out of school as well as details about their relationship/interactions with their children's school and teachers and the challenges, if any, they face in enacting this role. Each mother was interviewed for approximately 45-60 minutes using a predetermined set of questions. Eight out of the ten interviews took place in the homes of the participants which allowed the researchers to observe practices and artefacts related to the parents' descriptions. The remaining two interviews took place in the school as requested by the two participants. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

We started the analysis by first reading through the interviews and field notes from home observations to identify the salient cross-cutting themes and patterns in the parents' perspectives and practices. Later, we looked for themes across parents. Our analysis of the themes shed light on a number of patterns in the ways these parents were involved in their children's literacy education that may not have been discovered using the 'schoolcentric' approach. We examined these themes in the light of Epstein's six types of involvement, looking for overlap, conflicts and additional types of involvement.

Results

The results of our study showed that some of the ways the participants were involved in their children's literacy education may not fit the 'schoolcentric' definitions of parental involvement, given that the ten mothers interviewed were highly involved in their children's education. We found that all the mothers played clear roles as advocates for their children's education and made personal efforts to identify and create opportunities for their children's learning outside of school. First, we explore the forms that their advocacy took and then consider the different ways the parents positioned themselves as advocates. Second, we look at the ways they created learning opportunities for their children outside of school.

Mothers as Advocates for their Children's Education

All the mothers interviewed took their roles as advocates for their children's education seriously. They showed evidence of thinking proactively and strategically with great expectations about their children's futures and the kinds of opportunities they wanted them to have. Some mothers indicated that they expected their children to grow up and become prominent people in society. A participant aged 39, who is a mother of three children aged eight, ten, and twelve said, 'I look forward to seeing my children becoming prominent men and women in the society. I want them to be doctors, lawyers, engineers or university lecturers'. Specifically, these mothers clearly expected their children to do well in school and become university graduates and get

good and well paying jobs. This position is supported by (Sailor 2004) who stated that majority of the parents want their children to perform well in school academically and behaviourally. However, most of them admitted that meeting this goal is an uphill task and would require overcoming considerable barriers. For instance, a participant aged 44 and a mother of two children aged eight and eleven said 'finding a good school for the kids, being able to pay the school fees, providing books and materials required and meeting up with school runs are quite a challenge'. This is why they all acknowledged the importance of education in the aspirations of their children.

The desires of these mothers were not limited to success in school. Several parents were clear about their responsibilities in raising their children in their particular social context. Independence was a strong theme in the voices of these mothers. A participant aged 40 and a mother of four children aged six, eight, ten and twelve said, 'I want my children to become independent so as to be able to do things on their own with or without help. I give them responsibilities for household chores as early as five/six years like sweeping the house, washing of plates, fetching water, emptying dust bins etc. They all indicated the importance of independence and self-reliance and expected their children to become independent and self-reliant from an early age. This informed the way they reared the children – some gave their children responsibilities which included household chores as early as possible.

The aspirations these mothers had for their children's futures made them play an advocacy role in their children's education. While only four of the mothers we interviewed were able to spend considerable amount of time at the school, all ten found ways to monitor their children's progress through checking daily school work to ensure daily note copying, assignment copying and passing of assignment for marking. They checked for teacher errors sometimes, writing notes to teachers, visiting the classroom, discussing with the teachers and, assisting with homework, navigating the terrain of an unfamiliar approach to teaching literacy by discussing with the teacher in order to understand and learn a particular approach. They did so in order to teach it to their children and also ensure that they were doing it right, and found information or resources they needed to address gaps in their understanding through using encyclopaedias, CD software on reading and writing for children and also employing a paid teacher for extra lessons at home for their children.

Monitoring Progress

We noted how closely the mothers in this study monitored their children's progress in school. They had all developed strategies for gathering information about their children's school work on a regular basis and seemed to know

how well their children were doing at school and where they were having difficulty. A greater number of them used homework or some other activities to monitor their children's progress. A participant explained how she uses note writing to the teacher to clear up confusion over homework.

Good morning, Aunty Nkem, Ugonna came back with his homework on reading comprehension, but did not understand exactly what he is asked to do with it. Could you please be specific so he will be properly guided?

Some mothers were able to spend time at school to monitor their children's progress while others explained that they used homework or other activities at home to monitor their progress and still some others used conversation and shared reading to monitor their children's progress and usually write notes to teachers to clear up confusion over homework.

Homework Assistance

As shown earlier, the participants indicated that they played a great role in assisting their children with homework. It was evident that most mothers had routines and structures associated with homework. They explained that they encouraged their children to do their homework alone, without assistance, and then they mark and correct them. Sometimes they hire a private lesson teacher at their expense to help with the school work when it became too difficult. That is, the participants employ a private teacher to teach their children difficult school work they do not have the capacity to handle at home after school on a number of agreed days in a week at a specific time.

Provision of Learning Opportunities Outside of School

Another pattern that cut across the entire participants is the extent to which they provided learning opportunities for their children outside of school that may not be visible to the school and may not be understood as parental involvement in the 'schoolcentric' definition. These opportunities took the form of daily, household, or family activities that the mothers saw as educational examples, teaching children certain words and pronunciation through games like Scrabble, Monopoly, and chess; through family activities like birthdays; Mothers and Fathers Day, cultural festivals like New Yam festival, Christmas and New Year celebrations where children are asked to write up a plan and their expectations for the party and a speech for the occasion; and during cooking, where children are asked to spell and read out the cooking instructions including ingredients and method of cooking. Some of these opportunities were spontaneous, while others were calculated and included purchase of educational materials. It is worthy of note that

these mothers provided distinct learning experiences such as pronunciation, spelling and meaning of words and sentences for their children in reading and writing, as well as other experiences that were not subject-specific; for example, taking them to the state library and zoo. All these examples are ways that enhance the literacy development of children which the home offers but not quite recognized as 'schoolcentric' activities.

In creating informal learning opportunities outside of school, three mothers explained that they ask their children to spell the various items in the home in general, writings on billboards and pronounce them properly to improve the literacy education of their children. They also buy books (for example, the Ladybird series), educational games and materials such as scrabble, give them books as gifts on their birthdays, watch literacy-related television programmes such as Sesame Street and purchase educational CDs and DVDs on reading and writing that fit the mould of school-based activities.

Discussion

This paper has looked at how Nigerian mothers in a middle-income neighbourhood conceptualized their roles in their children's literacy education. We found parents to be involved in their children's education in a variety of ways. Yet, the forms their involvement took were not typically recognized as parent involvement, particularly when articulated by those working in schools. The aspects of parental involvement of the ten mothers interviewed include involvement in children's learning and involvement in children's schooling.

By involvement in children's learning, we mean the ways that mothers work to structure, foster, support their children's learning in a variety of contexts, not just those that are related to school. All the ten mothers in the study engaged substantially in this form of involvement. For example, as mentioned earlier, some mothers reported using various items in their homes to improve the literacy education of their children. This is not in line with Lawson (2003), who observed that parent involvement when used by the schools is understood as activity that is visible to school officials and teachers, such as volunteering in the child's classroom or attending school meetings. However, this finding is supported by Epstein (1996), who included both schools and homes as sites for involvement.

Involvement in children's schooling refers to the ways mothers took active roles in supporting their children's progress in school. This includes assisting with homework and communicating with the teacher when difficulties arose. All ten mothers engaged in this sort of activity, but to differing degrees and in different forms and were able to monitor children's

progress in school, whether through the traditional modes of communication (such as volunteering in a child's classroom, notes between the teacher and parent, or report cards) or alternative avenues to check up on a child's progress.

Another finding that needs to be mentioned here is their active involvement in Parent Teachers Association (PTAs) which may be referred to as involvement in children's schooling. The ten mothers interviewed have an active presence in the school through volunteering and attending school functions especially during PTA meetings. We also identified significant challenges that parents faced with respect to being involved in the literacy education of their children. These include confusion in teaching the right spelling and pronunciation to their children by some unqualified teachers, work schedule, lack of time, taking care of other children, a dearth of reference books and how to help with their children's homework when it becomes difficult.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research was carried out to examine the ways mothers acted as intellectual resources in their children's literacy education. The findings revealed that these mothers acted as advocates for their children and created opportunities for their children to be literate through every day realistic situations for learning, even though some of their activities are not actually seen as school parental involvement based on some of the literature on parental involvement.

Parents are already making significant contributions to their children's development. It is the responsibility of schools to help parents expand upon what they are already doing. We therefore challenge administrators, educators and families to make education a genuine community enterprise. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that further research be carried out to understand the knowledge parents draw on in undertaking this work and to consider ways that the work of parents can be supported within schools. It would also be useful to survey student learning outcomes based on two study groups – one of parents who are involved in their children's education and those who are not. This would allow for some clarification on the efficacy of parental involvement on student learning outcomes.

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