

# The Impact of Parental Involvement on the Academic Performance of Early Childhood (ECD) Learners in Zimbabwe's Rural Schools

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**Abstract:** The research study examined the level of parental participation and its impact on the academic achievement of ECD learners. The qualitative research approach and the case study research design were utilized to gather data from one research site, the school head, teacher in charge (TIC) and two parents whose children were ECD learners. Purposive sampling was done to come up with the four participants. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were the research instruments that were used to collect data. The results from the study provide schools with knowledge on how to serve parents and in addition to close the gap in communication links between home and school. The results indicated that there was a relationship between parents' participation in their children's education and their academic performance. ECD learners who got parental support exhibited high academic performance whereas those who lacked parental support had low performance. Schools must encourage parental involvement in the education of their children through varied activities such as communicating between the home and school, learning at home, volunteering and participation in decision making.

**Key terms:** Early Childhood Development, Parental Involvement, Impact, Academic Performance

## I. INTRODUCTION

More children in Zimbabwe now attend Early Childhood Development learning than ever before because of the government's policy which instructed schools to have ECD classes at each primary school. This means that parents now pay fees for their children from ECD level up to Grade Seven as compared to the past where most children joined the primary school level at grade one stage. This calls for high parental involvement in children's learning particularly at the ECD level which is the children's entry point to formal schooling. Durisic and Bunijevac's (2017) argue that such early stages of children's learning need strong academic support from their parents. Furthermore, research on effective schools show that they have a strong and positive school-home relationship.

Manhall Primary school in Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe has implemented the government policy and has enrolled children to ECD classes. However, the level of parental involvement at Manhall Primary School is questionable, even though scholars recommend parental involvement in the education of Early Childhood Development learners for high academic achievement by the learners. Voorhis *et al.* (2013 p. iii) advocate that, "Family involvement

is important for young children's literacy and math skills. The majority of studies, including some randomized control trials (RCTs), demonstrate this positive link." Despite this, parental involvement at Manhall Primary school is low.

According to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022, key actors in the teaching and learning of children are the learners, teachers, school heads, School Development Committees (SDC), parents, professional associations, industry and commerce, education partners such as UNICEF, Learning Area Panels and Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC). The curriculum framework further points out that parents engage and collaborate with schools in setting educational standards, they support their children by providing financial resources and through timeous payment of levies to enable the smooth operation of school budgets. Parents must also actively support their children through volunteering services to the school. This provides good models to the learners. Parents must ensure that learners have a conducive working environment at home that enables them to do their homework. They must encourage learners to work independently, to interact with teachers and should spend quality leisure time with their children. All these crucial roles by parents are very little if not non-existent at Manhall Primary School.

The period of early childhood (0-8years) is a developmental stage; thus children need the most care and support from parents and other education stake holders. This is a time when cognitive stimulation, nutrition and emotional attachment all work together to shape the identity, intelligence, and problem-solving abilities necessary for children to be well-attuned adolescents and adults. Such children's early abilities determine their further learning. This is only possible with the much-needed parental involvement. Voorhis *et al.* (2013) advocate that when parents are given direction, they can become more engaged with their children, and when parents are more engaged, children tend to perform better academically. An analysis of records of levy payments at Manhall primary school showed that most ECD learners had arrears in the payment of fees thereby suggesting a slackened parental involvement. This study therefore sought to examine the impact of parental involvement in the academic achievement of ECD

learners at Manhall Primary School in UMP District in Zimbabwe.

*Research questions*

Given the above background, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the academic performance standard of ECD learners at Manhall Primary School?
2. How does parental involvement affect the level of academic performance of ECD learners?
3. How can schools increase the participation of parents to promote the academic performance of children at Manhall Primary School?

**II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

This section reviewed related literature to develop a deep understanding of the study. The literature was reviewed under the topics; the concept of parental involvement and the impact of parental involvement in the academic achievement of Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners.

*The concept of parental involvement*

Parental involvement is an important factor for children’s learning both at home and at school. Epstein (2018) views parental involvement as characterized by parent-teacher relationship, parents’ communication with children, voluntary time spent at school or parental involvement in school activities such as conferences, parents’ meetings, dispose by school or helping the child with homework. Schools and homes are two main important institutions where children spend most of their time at. Therefore, a two-way communication between the school and family with high parental involvement determine learner success (Ateş, 2021). Lopez and Stoelting (2010) advocate that parental involvement takes many forms, such as volunteering at the school, communication with teachers, assisting with homework, and attending school events such as performances or parent-teacher conferences. The literature thus points at parental involvement including supporting student academic achievement and participating in school-initiated functions. Epstein (2010) point out that high parental involvement in their children’s learning significantly impact their learning outcomes. Epstein (2010) developed a framework for defining six different types of parental involvement in their children’s learning. The table below shows the six types of parental involvement namely parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community. Parents are ECD learners’ first teacher and continue to play an active role in their education and life. Thus learners’ academic achievement has always been shaped by their life outside the school, hence the importance of parental involvement.

Table 1: Epstein’s (2009) Six Types of Parental Involvement

1. Parenting	Assist families with parenting skills, ‘family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding family backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.
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2. Communicating	Communicate with families about school programmes and student progress. Create a two-way communication channels between schools and home.
3. Volunteering	Improve recruitment, training activities, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school.
4. Learning at home	Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum related activities. Encourage teachers to design homework that enables students to share and discuss interesting tasks.
5. Decision-Making	Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organizations.
6. Collaborating with the community	Coordinate resources and services for families, students and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities. Enable all to contribute to service to the community.

Source: Epstein (2010). School, Family and Community Partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools.

The above model portrays the role of parents and how they can be involved in the education and academic achievement of learners. The model point out that parental involvement is important in the academic achievement of learners from ECD level. It thus shows that parental involvement has a great impact on the academic achievement of ECD learners.

*The impact of parental involvement on ECD learners*

Damien (2015) posits that parental involvement has a strong, positive effect on student achievement. He further shows the extend of influence of parents’ involvement for higher levels of children’s achievement by suggesting that for schools to produce the same learning gains alone without parental involvement, schools would have to spend about \$1000 more per student to achieve the same learning gains. This explains how crucial parents’ involvement is in the learning of their children. In line to this, Mattson, S. (2010) indicate that students with parents who actively participate in their learning, regardless of their socioeconomic status or demographic culture background, earn higher grades and test scores than those whose parents participate lowly in their school activities. As people say charity begins at home, Lee and Bowen (2006) advocate that parental involvement in the education of their children should also begin at home with the parents providing a safe and healthy environment, appropriate learning experiences, support, and a positive attitude about school. Keith (cited in Fagbeminiyi, 2011:46) advocates that, “... children of involved typically display higher levels of achievement, more acceptable behavior, and greater motivation in school.” Research indicates that parents who are interested in their children’s learning support their learning activities, such as rhyming and shared book reading from an early age. Lee and Bowen (2006) further commends that parental involvement is an effective strategy to ensure student success. Parental

involvement can be noticed through activities where parents nurture their children, instill cultural values, and talk to their children.

Westmoreland *et al.* (2009) is of the view that parental involvement requires volunteering in the schools, shouldering the additional responsibility of providing supplies requested by the school which include not only traditional classroom supplies such as pencils, paper, and folders, but also supply items for school events. De Fraja and Oliveira (2010) notes that once the parent establishes an effective motivational approach to elicit academic achievement, it is important that they become active participants in the learning process, to ensure that their children have the tools and support necessary to be effective and efficient learners for the long term. Thus, the efforts of parents who get practically involved in the education of their children are rewarded by the high academic achievement of their children. Epstein (2018) points out that it is well established that parental involvement is correlated with school achievement at all levels of children's education.

De Fraja and Oliveira (2010) advocate that parents play a significant role in nurturing their children's interests, values, and goals. A lack in the parents' support thus implies that learners' interests and values would be negatively affected. Children are naturally curious early in life, they are inquisitive and often ask questions about the different things they see around them. As parents respond to children's questions, it helps in brain stimulation and motivates the children to participate in various conversations and activities, thereby boosting their mental development. Thus, parents play a pivotal role in motivating their children to learn from an early age.

Lopez and Stoetling (2010) point out that parental involvement can take many forms such as volunteering at the school, communicating with teachers, assisting with homework, and attending school events such as performances or parent-teacher conferences. When parents fail to attend consultations and parents' meetings in schools this tends to negatively affect the academic performance of ECD learners since such platforms are important strategies used by schools to share information about the performance of learners with their parents. As viewed by Ateş (2021), it is important to note that the presence of parents in the school is an important factor in their ECD learner's adjustment to school because it represents a link between home and school. Puccioni (2018) thus states that a lack of parental support has a negative effect on the academic performance of ECD learners since it leads to lower test grades and poor socio-emotional development at Early Childhood Development (ECD) level.

Parents must motivate their children in their academic journey. They must tell their children right from the ECD level, the value of obtaining good results at school and in any activity they undertake. Sociologists have pointed out that lower class parents desperately want their children to go ahead in life hence they do their level best to provide for their children's education. In return the learners tend to do best in their academic performance if parents are interested in their academic

progress. Lopez and Stoetling (2010) pointed out that when parents seem not to show interest in their children's academic performance this demotivates the children. De Fraja and Oliveira (2010) contend that parents play a pivotal role in developing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in their children. Hence, it is important to note that motivation or the lack of motivation is a learned behavior. Motivation is also dependent on the student's perception of their own competence nurtured by parents. Therefore, if a student is competent in his/her abilities, then they are more likely to be motivated to engage in that task. On the other hand, the moment learners are demotivated, they tend to perform below standard.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### *Research Design*

Creswell (2012:20) defines a research design as, "... the specific procedures involved in the research process, data collection and data analysis and report writing." The researcher employed the qualitative research approach to gather data about the impact of parents' involvement in the academic achievement of ECD learners. Qualitative Research design is useful for studying a limited number of cases in depth, as well as describing complex phenomena as they are situated and embedded in local contexts allowing flexibility. This approach enabled the researcher to collect data and answer the research questions for this study.

#### *Case Study*

The researcher employed the multiple case study design to gather data to answer the research questions. These teachers and parents were studied in their natural settings because "--- qualitative researchers observe people in their natural setting so that they can learn from them about what they are thinking, and more importantly, why they think and act the way they do" (Minichiello and Kottler, 2010:12). The multiple case study design enabled the researcher to focus on participants as separate individuals, rather than groups (Creswell, 2013). It also allowed the researcher to investigate every aspect of the phenomena and see patterns and causes of behavior in investigating the impact of parental involvement on the academic performance of ECD learners.

#### *Target Population*

The population comprised the teachers at Manhall Primary School, and the parents of the learners at that school. From this population a sample of four participants were selected. Purposive sampling was employed. Patton (2002) observes that the logic and strength of purposive sampling is in its selection of "information rich cases" for in-depth study. The participants were comprised of the school head, the teacher in charge (TIC) of the Infants Department and two parents whose children were in the ECD grades. These were selected because they were involved in the education of ECD learners and had the information the researcher wanted for the study.

### Research instruments

For this study, the researcher made use of structured interviews and document analysis.

### Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school head, TIC and two parents at Manhall Primary School in Zimbabwe. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to get immediate feedback and to follow up leads. The researcher used an interview schedule to elicit information from respondents. The interviews with each of the participants was audio-recorded. The interviews enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the participants' feelings on the impact of parents' involvement in their children's ECD learning.

### Document analysis

Document analysis was used to gather data since documents contain knowledge (Tang, 2014). The documents analysed in this study included the fees register, attendance registers and the learners' written work. The fees register provided information on the patterns of fees payments by parents for their children. From the attendance registers I analysed the patterns of the learners' attendance to school. The learners' written provided information on the performance levels of the children including how they performed on their homework tasks. Through the analysing documents I was able to verify the data that I had gathered through interviews.

After collecting the data, I interpreted and analysed it to reveal outstanding trends, themes, and to classify the data. After going through all the transcribed data, I assigned codes. "Coding is the ascription of a category label to a piece of data, decided in advance or in response to the data that have been collected," (Cohen *et al.*, 2018:668). I therefore assigned similar codes to code the data that was similar.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine the impact of parent involvement in the academic achievement of ECD learners at Manhall primary School in Zimbabwe. The demographic data is presented below both as a table and in narrative form and the findings are presented as a detailed narrative after the demographic data.

### Demographic characteristics of participants

Table 1: Participants by sex ( $N=4$ )

Sex	Female	Male	Age
Head	-	1	56
TIC	1	-	50
Parent 1	1	-	40
Parent 2		1	45
Total	2	2	

The participants were made up of two males and two females. The school head and the TIC were in the fifty and above age

group whereas the two parents were in the forty to forty-five age group. This signified that all the participants were mature people. The school head held a first degree in education whereas the TIC held a diploma in education. Parent 1 and 2 were both ordinary level holders.

### Actual Findings

In response to the extent to which parents assisted their children with their homework all the participants indicated that there was low level parent participation when it came to assisting their children with their homework. The major reason that was cited was that most parents were not knowledgeable of the content and activities that children wanted assistance in. This therefore meant that parents could not fully assist their children with their homework. Epstein (2018) point out that homework supervision promotes academic performance from early learning hence parents must monitor their children's homework. Thus, if parents could not assist their children with their homework because of lack of content mastery, children end up writing what they think answers their questions.

When asked about the rate of attendance with which parents attended consultations on days they were held particularly parents of learners in the ECD department, the head and the TIC indicated that only one consultation day per term was set aside at the school where parents would come and discuss the progress of their children with the teachers. This scenario thus demonstrated that there were few consultation days at the school, particularly for ECD learners who need much support from their parents at that early age. Suffice to say the school did not cater fully for the needs of ECD learners. In explaining on why the school had only one consultation day in a term both the head and the TIC pointed out that they reached that decision after realising that the attendance of the parents to consultation days was very low. Thus, by making it a one-day event a term the thought was that since it was the only day in a term all the parents would come for consultation so as not to miss for that particular term. This was however not the case since only a few parents came for consultations. The attendance registers for consultation days that I analysed also confirmed this. The rate of attendance by parents were in contrast to MoPSE Curriculum Framework (2015-2022) which stated that parents are key stakeholders in the education of ECD learners and therefore must participate in such school activities as consultation days. Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) believe that successful students have strong academic support from their parents. Hence, effective schools, where students learn and achieve, despite being in low social and economic neighborhoods', have strong and positive school-home relationships through parents' conferences. Failure by parents to attend consultation events at schools resulted in the parents missing on the information and important strategies of helping their ECD children that would have been shared by other parents during parent-teacher consultations. The data gathered from attendance registers about consultation days indicated that very few parents attended these. When asked, the parents also confirmed that they seldom went to school on consultation days unless they had other children in junior grades rather than the ECD class



only. The two parents asked indicated that they rarely attended consultation meetings because of their busy schedules at home. This showed how the parents valued consultation meetings with teachers.

On the aspect of whether parents valued ECD Education, the head and TIC indicated that most parents did not place value on ECD education and that they did not provide ECD learners with educational materials. The head and TIC explained that the parents always said ECDs go to school to play and do not write, hence they did not want to pay school fees for them. Even if they paid their fees, they would pay for those other children in the junior grades if they had them and lastly those in ECD. They went on to explain that it was common practice that learners might even go up to grade 4 while having ECD school fees arrears. The fees registers analysed indicated fees arrears by some learners in the ECD classes. When the two parents were asked about the reasons for the lack of payment of fees for ECD learners they blamed economic hardships as driving ECD parents not to pay ECD levies and opt to pay for those who had started grade one. Another reason that came up among the parents was that some parents did not value ECD learning much hence would concentrate on paying fees for their children in grade one than in ECD. This showed the little value they placed on ECD learning. Hornby and Blackwell (2018) explain that some parents do not get involved in school because they feel unwelcome in school, they lack interest or care, time constraints of working parents and feeling that their involvement is not a big deal to their children's education based on teachers' attitudes. This signals that the school administration must work towards changing parents' attitudes towards their ECD children's learning through educating them on the importance of ECD learning. In line to this Voorhis *et al.* (2013) advocate that parents from diverse backgrounds, when given direction, can become more engaged with their children, and when parents are more engaged, children tend to perform well academically.

On the aspect of whether the academic performance of ECD learners whose parents supported their learning was different from those that were not supportive, the head and the TIC indicated that ECD learners whose parents were supportive of their learning performed better academically than those whose parents showed little concern. When the two parents were interviewed, they concurred with the head and TIC that parent involvement was crucial to their children's performance at school. In line to this, Fagbeminiyi (2011) pointed out that learners with parents who were involved in their learning, typically display higher levels of achievement, more acceptable behavior, and greater motivation in school. Westmoreland (2009) adds on saying learners who excel academically, often have parents who are interested in their learning from an early age and they support their learning activities, such as rhyming and sharing book reading.

Parent school communication is important for the academic development of learners particularly at the ECD level thus, the head and TIC were asked as to how they could improve parents' involvement in their children's learning besides paying fees for

them only. They pointed out that parents could be involved through assisting ECD learners with their homework when at home, providing educational materials such as crayons and pencils, timeous payment of school levies and encouraging parents to support ECD sporting activities. The parents indicated their willingness to support their ECD children if they are educated on what is to be done. This showed the willingness of parents in improving their children's learning if they are taught what to do, thus bringing in an important aspect of adult education where parents can be educated on the current trends in education. This goes in line to Epstein's (2018) call for the promotion of parental involvement through equipping them with parenting skills, homework supervision techniques, two-way communication, parental participation in decision making, volunteering their services to school and collaborating with the community.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were made from the study:

- Parental involvement in the learning of their children has an impact on their academic performance, however the parents were oblivious of this, thus leading to the low performance of ECD learners at Manhall Primary School.
- It was noted from the study that children tend to perform better academically when their parents support them.
- A relationship exists between learner poor performance and parental involvement at ECD level at Manhall Primary School.
- Low parental involvement at ECD level leads to poor socio-emotional development and poor learner academic performance.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the findings and conclusions, the researcher made five recommendations as follows:

1. Schools should increase teacher-parent communication through holding consultation meetings at least twice a term for the benefit of the ECD learner.
2. Teachers must encourage parents to assist children with their homework. By so doing they become part and parcel of their children's learning. This also promotes cooperation between homes and schools.
3. Schools must increase the frequency of parent-teacher conferencing especially parents with ECD learners. This might improve the negative attitudes that parents might have towards school.
4. Parents must attend general meetings when called upon to at schools. It is at these meetings that they are informed of how school funds are used. An understanding of how school funds are used might encourage parents towards paying levies for their children on time.

5. Schools must educate parents on the new trends in education to increase their involvement in their children's learning.

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