Parental Involvement in Open and Distance Schooling:
A Case Study of Parental Perceptions at NAMCOL, Namibia

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Abstract

The Namibian College for Open Learning (NAMCOL) is a fully fledged institution mandated by Government to address the needs for open learning. It mainly focuses on learners who did not successfully complete their grade 10 or 12 in the formal education system. Unlike conventional educational delivery methods, there are limited structured face-to-face contacts between the students and the tutor. Instead, high quality, self-directed, learner-centered instructional materials are made available to students with blocked contact time with teachers. Many of the learners enrolled range between 15 and 18 years and are still under the care of their parents or guardians. This study explored the perceptions of parents towards open and distance learning (ODL) as well as their involvement in the education of their children. A mixed method approach was adopted for this study. 200 questionnaires were distributed and 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents or guardians of grade 10 learners. Random sampling was used. Frequency analysis for quantitative data and thematic analysis for the qualitative data were developed. The study revealed that parents are inherently interested in the education of their children regardless of the mode of instruction. There are barriers such relationships between the institution and parents, lack of knowledge about where to get such facilities as well as a lack of initiatives on the part of the parents. There is a need to establish a more structured platform for engagement between NAMCOL and parents to effectively manage the process of ODL.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, home-school partnership, parental involvement

1. Introduction

Open and distance schooling in Namibia provides learning opportunities for those who cannot always take part in the conventional classroom. It also serves as a safety net for those learners who fell through the formal education system by not successfully completing either grade 10 or 12. Open and distance schooling has become a means of meeting the demands for mass education in Namibia in an affordable manner considering the country's vast geography and widely distributed population (Rumble and Koul, 2007). Every year about 3000 students enroll with the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) to further their education (SAIDE, 2012). Many of these learners in the open-schooling system are drop-outs and are faced with anxiety and uncertainty (Rumble and Koul, 2007). The needs of learners in open schooling, however, do not differ considerably from those in the conventional system. In India students from open-schooling systems get inadequate student support on institutional and family structure levels. Hence they are likely to experience a second round of failure (Mitra, 2009). Learners in open-schooling still need systems of support and motivation and quality learning tools similar to their counterparts in the formal education system (Brown, Haufiku and Paavo, *2014*). Considering that most children in the open schooling mode in Namibia are still under the care of their parents because of their age, parental involvement is a core element of support.

2. Perceptions on Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is viewed as a key construct in the education of children since parents are perceived to have a vested interest in the education of their children (Driessen, Smit and Sleegers, 2005). Research indicates that parental involvement has the potential to positively affect students' academic achievement and success (Wolfendale, 1989; Fan and Chen, 2001; Beveridge, 2005).

Parental involvement is a concept that includes a variety of activities. Different interpretations on parental involvement have an impact on how this role is perceived and what it entails (Altschul, 2011). Parental involvement, in its simplest form, encompasses interaction of parents with school and their children towards the success of the children's educational and social well-being (Hill and Tyson, 2009). To further unpack this concept of parental involvement, Epstein (1995) developed a theoretical framework to explore six areas of parental involvement. These are parenting, learning at home, communicating, volunteering, and decision-making and collaborating with community. This is based on the rationale that home and school share the same mission for children's learning and development and these overlapping spheres of influence warrant partnership (Lemmer and van Wyk, 2009).

Epstein (1995) explains these types of parental involvement as follows; parenting entails supporting families with skills to create an environment that would foster effective learning for children and also understand parents. Communication refers to sharing of information from school to home and home to school on various programmes and learner progress. Learning at home focuses on activities of learning with curriculum linked activities. Volunteering is defined at the participatory involvement of parents in activities that support school programmes. This is normally common in the form of Parent Teacher Associations (Mncube, 2007). Decision making is perceived as the active involvement of parents in partaking in the decisions taken at school. Collaborating with community refers to activities where parents are involved in services for families, learners and school operations that improve the education of learners.

Ideally this framework serves to address the confusion that exists around the operationalizing of the concept of parental involvement (Georgiou, 1997; Fan and Chen, 2001). This concept however is not exempted from challenges. A growing body of literature on challenges in home-school partnership purports that social and economic factors prevent numerous parents from active participation in the schooling of their children. There is evidence than parents from a working class and those with little educational background are less involved in the education of their children (Pang, 2004; Altschul, 2011). In South Africa, it was found that parents with low literacy levels, particularly from former black schools, felt inferior to teachers (Haystek, 1999; Mcube, 2009; Msila, 2012). The demands of the job environment create challenges in finding the time to regularly partake in the education of their children (Georgiou, 1997; Altschul, 2011). Concerns about the unequal relationships between schools and parents have been raised in research. Pang (2004) discovered that parental involvement is perceived more from what schools need from parents. Parents are only informed by schools of what is expected and dialogue lacks in terms of reciprocal processes that are ideal for the education of their children. Despite these challenges, it is essential to promote parent participation in active problem-solving and decision-making about the education of their children (Lemmer and van Wyk, 2009).

3. Background

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) is a state-supported institution of learning providing educational opportunities to adults and out-of-school youth (SAIDE, 2011). It was established by an act of the Namibian Parliament and funded through the Ministry of Education. NAMCOL has a mandate to broaden access to education by designing, developing and offering programmes of open learning that address the diverse educational needs among adults and out-of-school youth (SAIDE, 2012). Its core programmes focus mainly on the Junior Secondary Certificate (Grade 10) and Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSCO). Learners from these two programmes offered through NAMCOL are not performing as well as their counterparts in the mainstream school system (Murangi, 2009; SAIDE, 2005; SAIDE, 2011). Students who did not successfully complete any of these two levels are eligible to select modules that they would prefer to improve on at NAMCOL. Registered learners receive a full set of self-study materials for each subject. Additionally, they are provided with academic support which includes face-to-face sessions with tutors. Based on an option, students are also provided with three to four hours of tutorials. Those who cannot attend these sessions attend workshops that are scheduled twice per year. Learners at NAMCOL sit the same examination as their conventional school based counterparts set by the Ministry of Education. Although NAMCOL presents these learners with numerous orientation platforms to cope with distance learning, it is not yet empirically established how well learners, as young as 16 years old, are mentally prepared for this mode of ODL.

4. Research Problem

Traditional research on parental involvement mainly focuses on aspects of formal schooling, school administration and parents, challenges of parental involvement in the mainstream school and parents of children with special education needs (Wolfendale, 1989; Fan and Chen, 2001; Beverdige, 2005; Ngidi and Qwabe, 2006; Mcube, 2007; Bower and Griffin, 2011; Stringer and Hourani, 2013). A high proportion of learners joining the NAMCOL are those who did not meet the minimum requirements to be integrated into the formal system or to pursue further studies at institutions of higher learning. Considering that learners are enrolled in open schooling in Namibia because of *failure* and drop-out in the conventional schooling system, parental involvement becomes a notion that is worth exploring in order to avert a second experience of failure. This study therefore explores how parents experience parental involvement in an open schooling system.

5. Methodology

This study used of a mixed method approach which combines the strengths of both questionnaires and interviews (Cohen, 2000). The approach was exploratory and descriptive in order to develop a better understanding of the ODL problem. The purpose was to explore parents' views on their involvement in the education of their children who are registered with the Grade 10 programme at NAMCOL. Grade 10 learners are on average aged 16 years and still under the care of parents or guardians. Researchers are mainly working with the Northern, Central and Southern Region students so a sample was selected from the Otjiwarongo, Windhoek as well as Oshakati centres. These towns have the largest number of registration (approximately 3000 annually) of learners in this phase within the respective regions. Questionnaires were developed along the theoretical model of Parental Involvement (Epstein, 1995) with a specific focus on academic involvement and communication. A likert scale was developed to show the extent of agreement. For many parents open and distance learning could be a new concept hence the options of 'not sure' was added to the scale. The same is done with the two levels of disagreement. This adaptation was meant to deal with the confusion that could arise due to uncertainty between intervals. The intervals of agreement and disagreement are indicated in the tables as displayed in this article. Students in open and distance learning have limited contact with the institution. 200 questionnaires were distributed to learners randomly to hand to their parents or guardians. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon and poor return rate, face-to-face interviews were co- opted to explore the matter in depth. Parents who took part in questionnaire and provided their details for further investigation were randomly contacted via telephone and appointments were established with those who participated. 30 parents were interviewed.

6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data was cleaned and coded and analyzed using SPSS. Qualitative data was simultaneously coded during the data collection. The data was organized according to the focus areas, namely, types of activities and communication. Themes were later formalized.

7. Findings

The return rate of the questionnaires in this survey was 114 (54%) out of a distributed 200. This could be a result of the one language approach with the questionnaire design and/or learners who do not live with their parents. The number of respondents per question varies because of non-responses. Missing data are not indicated as a result, only the valid percentages are indicated in tables.

The first three questions in the questionnaire deal with perceptions about NAMCOL and the notion of open and distance learning. Brown, Haufiku and Paavo (2014) and SAIDE (2012) found that often NAMCOL is often perceived a second rate option of learning, an institution of failures or a dumping zone of the unsuccessful ones from the conventional schooling system. The researchers intended to establish whether parents' involvement could be influenced by such views.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not sure
1. NAMCOL will help my child to have a better future one day.	(64) 56%	(47) 41%			
2. I want my child to be in a normal school and not study by him/herself.	(25) 22%	(25) 22%			(3) 3%
3. Studying through NAMCOL makes my child lazy.			(16) 14%	(8) 7%	(3) 3%
4. I know how to help my child to study well through NAMCOL.	(30) 26%	(42) 37%	(17) 15%	(8) 7%	(17) 15%
5. NAMCOL is a good punishment for my child.	(25) 22%	(8) 7%	(38) 33%	(30) 26%	(13) 12%
6. NAMCOL is a second opportunity for the education of my child.	(76) 67%	(38) 33%			
7. I always check the learning progress of my child who is studying through NAMCOL.	(43) 38%	(37) 32%	(17) 15%	(5) 4%	(12) 11%
8. My child is doing well in his/her learning task.	(38) 33%	(60) 53%	(8) 7%		(8) 7%
9. I assist my child with his/her learning task.	(25) 22%	(39) 34%	(22) 19%	(8) 7%	(20) 18%
10. I visit the NAMCOL centre to enquire about the learning of my child.	(12) 11%	(30) 26%	(43) 37%	(12) 11%	(17) 15%
11. I am invited by NAMCOL tutors for meetings.	(17) 15%	(21) 19%	(41) 36%	(22) 19%	(13) 11%
12. I attend meetings arranged by NAMCOL staff and tutors.	(30) 26%	(22) 19%	(34) 30%	(20) 18%	(8) 7%
13. I find NAMCOL staff very supportive in the learning of my child.	(63) 56%	(51) 44%			
14. I find NAMCOL staff supportive in sharing information with me about the learning of my child.	(25) 22%	(25) 22%	(22) 19%	(8) 7%	(25) 22%

Parents seem to have a positive attitude towards the learning opportunity at NAMCOL. In total 97% of the participants are of the view that the open schooling will enable their child to have a better future. Only 44% of the participants indicated in item 2 that they would want their children to be accommodated in the conventional school. 50% who did not respond to this item? The notion of open and distance schooling Namibia is only settling in with communities. This response could be due to the reservations that some parents may have about the concept of open schooling (NAMCOL, 2007; NAMCOL, 2011). A mere 24% of participants do not support the view that NAMCOL or the concept of self-study would make their child lazy for learning in item 3. This view was held by parents who took part in the interviews.

> "It is a good thing actually; he got a second chance to go to school instead of just staying at home and walk[ing] around. It really is a good idea." Parent in Windhoek

> "I honestly feel it is a second chance or opportunity for her to improve and get a qualification because she failed grade 10 full time." Parent in Oshakati

> "I feel happy that my son is with NAMCOL, at least it's a second opportunity."Parent in Otjiwarongo

Although very insignificant, there are 11 % participants who are not sure whether open schooling will make their children a lazy. This is worth noting when the nature of open learning is communicated to the public. Often the negative perception of open schooling is caused by a lack of understanding (Brown, Haufiku and Paavo, 2014).

> "I don't believe that NAMCOL is a good thing, it's a waste of time as my child keep[s] failing . She is busy at home the whole morning and when she comes in the afternoon, she is tired and cannot focus" Parent in Oshakati

A total of 63% of the participants indicated that they know how to support their child within the open schooling system. If we are to combine the disagreed indications and not sure, data shows that 30% of the participants do not know how to support their children within the open schooling system.

"NAMCOL really have good materials, but I am not sure whether my daughter has assignments and what marks she received for her assignments. Unfortunately I have not attended any parent meetings." Parent in Otjiwarongo

"I am not involved in the education of my child as she is old enough to take care of herself." Parent in Windhoek

Item 5 was introduced to check the consistency of parental attitudes to open school learning. A total of 59% indicated that they disagree that open schooling is a form of punishment for their children who were unsuccessful in the conventional schooling system. There are parents (26%) who believe that the open schooling system is a punishment. 19% from these parents indicated that they do not know how to support their children. This again yields the idea that a lack of understanding to the open schooling system could lead to misconceptions about it. Again, it is worth noting that perceptions of failure could negatively influence the scaffolding relationships required to support children within these modes of learning.

Literature shows that parents have an inherent concern for the wellbeing of their children (Carpenter, 2000; Khong and Pak, 2005; Altichul, 2011). Regardless of the misconceptions about NAMCOL and the open school system (Brown, Haufiku and Paavo, 2011; NAMCOL, 2012), parents still think NAMCOL is a second opportunity in life. It creates a platform for learners to address past failure in learning. This view is a bonus to open schooling as it paves a path to further solidify relationships between home and school. This item solidifies the consistency with item 1 which indicated the positive view held by parents.

Amongst the most common parental involvement activities is the monitoring of academic activities (Baeck, 2010). This study found that 70% of the parents claim to check how learners perform in the various tasks given to their children. It is still a concern that 30% of the parents are not involved in this activity considering that their children experienced failure in this grade that is repeated. Although only 70% indicated that they monitor progress a total of 81% of the participants indicated in item 8 that their children are doing well. A further 52% indicated that they assist their children with the actual learning activities given to their children. It is not clear on what basis they participate in such knowledge learning. This inconsistency is further fuelled by the fact that only 37% visit the centres where children are attending classes. This rate could be due to the fact that tutorials are offered at night when parents return from work. Most of the results are also available online and can be accessed through smart phones.

"I always ensure that my daughter attend[s] classes as she must keep track on her timetable. During mock exams I monitor whether she is writing all subjects." Parent in Otjiwarongo

"I provide moral support to my son. I make sure that he is at ease and provide a conducive environment to study. I also try and obtain additional material for him." Parent in Oshakati

"I am not really involved as I only pray for her to pass and always encourage her to study. I however do not think she will pass as NAMCOL is not really a good opportunity" Parent in Windhoek

Although 60% of the participants indicated in item 11 that they are invited by tutors for meetings only 45% indicated in item 12 that they do attend these meetings. 80% indicate that they are happy with the support that the tutors offer to their children but it is not clear how they measure this if they do not monitor tasks or attend meetings. 44% participants claim that they are satisfied with the information that tutors share with them about the learning activities of their children.

"I have never been invited to a Parent Meeting but I have noticed that talking to my child that she is taught in a different way than at the formal school." Parent in Otjiwarongo

8. Discussion

Parents of learners enrolled with NAMCOL have positive attitudes towards the education of their children. Many perceive their children to have been granted a second chance. Their levels of involvement are however questionable.

8.1 Perceptions on open and distance learning in relation to home-school partnership

Regardless of the positive perception of the new opportunities of education of their children, this study revealed that participants are not supportive of the open and distance schooling model. This coincides with earlier findings from (Brown, Haufiku and Paavo, 2014) indicating parents believe that learners would not be committed to their learning tasks,

they would focus on other activities and lack motivation and subsequently do not succeed with the absence of daily direction by a fulltime teacher. Despite their non-supportive stance, participants from this study are appreciative of the provision of education provided through NAMCOL. Although they would want their children to attend the conventional schooling system, parents are appreciative that their children are provided with some form of education.

These views are critical towards the level of motivation to become involved in a system that does not resonate well with parents. Lemmer and van Wyk (2009) is of the view that understanding of the system and what is expected from parents would be an ideal departure for a more active involvement in the education of their children. Findings from the interviews indicated that their children are happier with the style of teaching by NAMCOL tutors compared to what they were provided with in the conventional education system. Carpenter (2000) claims that it is inherent in all parents to long for a brighter future for their children. This hope for a brighter future is captured in the initial phase of simply ensuring access to an educational institution. Ngidi and Qwabe (2006) discovered that after ensuring a space in a school, parents often shift all educational related needs of their children to the school.

8.2 Levels of commitment

Although parents indicated that they are involved in the education of their children, it is not clear how since less than 50% visit the centre where their children are studying or attend meetings. Parents who were involved in interviews indicated that they are not involved as the tutors are delivering outstanding services. It appears that parents solely rely on the information that is provided by the children. One of the parents indicated that his child is old enough to take care of her own education and there is no need to be involved.

8.3 Academic Involvement

Parents indicated that they are involved in monitoring performance, see that tasks are completed, provide stimulating environments for learning and simply encourage them throughout the process. No participant indicated that they actually assist in the actual assignments of the enrolled subjects. Altichul (2011) is of the view that parents from a working class background are less likely to be involved in the academic tasks of schooling because of a lack of skills. Although this study did not explore the backgrounds of parents, this could be a contributing factor.

8.4 Communication dilemma

Data reveals that there is a poor culture of attending meetings arranged with tutors although some parents claim that they have not been invited to do so. Ironically, participants claim that tutors are helpful with information but the same group indicated that they have not met the tutors of their children. This is an indication that parents rely on information from their children. Less than half of the participants indicated that they receive information from tutors and that it is helpful. This contradicts with qualitative data that claims that the only information they receive is from communication with the children.

Literature suggests that parental involvement is multifaceted and the term in itself is not very clear (Wolfendale, 1989; Lemmer and van Wyk, 2009; Beveridge, 2005). This study discovered that there are pockets of involvement of parents in the education of their children. What is most promising is that parents are positive about the education opportunity offered to their children through open schooling. This provides an ideal platform to develop a more structured and focused approach to parental involvement in open schooling.

9. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to explore perceptions and experiences of parental involvement of their children who are enrolled through open and distance schooling mode. One of the major contributions towards parental involvement is a positive attitude. There is a need to address the question of what type of support is required by parents to support children enrolled in an open school mode. Parents are involved but use their own discretion on what they are to be involved it. Due to the nature of limited contact within the open school model only factors related to direct academic involvement and communication were explored within Epstein's'(1995) framework. NAMCOL will have to explore if there is need to consider the various types of parental involvement.

This study did not explore whether there is a formal approach to parental involvement at NAMCOL. Future

research will have to explore what strategies are in place at NAMCOL to involve parents in the learning of their children. It is critical to explore the institution's understanding of the concept home-school partnership in the context of open and distance learning.

Home-school partnership is not about the parents and schools only but at the pinnacle of this triangle would be the most important stakeholder, the child (Wolfendale, 1989). Although parents claim their involvement and desire for a successful learning opportunity in schools, it would be ideal to explore from their children what support they would need from their parents.

Tutors should be involved to investigate what challenges they experience with learners and what support they expect from parents. It is also very critical that NAMCOL, more particularly tutors, should establish platforms with parents to guide them in this process.

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