Chapter 9

Challenges, barriers, and recommendations to parental involvement

Parent involvement is a dynamic and ever-changing phenomenon that has a significant impact on children's lives. Therefore, it has different dimensions to be considered meticulously. As it has witnessed decades of research and practice, there are several challenges and barriers faced by parents, teachers, children, and other stakeholders to improve the applications and get the utmost benefit. These challenges and barriers are related but not limited to, 1) communication and language issues, 2) parent and family matters, 3) efficient programs meeting individual and contextual needs, 4) policy-practice divide, and 5) involving non-parent adults. Besides, parent involvement needs to be redefined considering evolving changes in the connected variables and roles in the family across the contexts and the new information obtained by the related research. Otherwise, it would not be possible to provide suggestions for better practice of parent involvement. For example, parent involvement about sustainability and its implications will be discussed. Therefore, this chapter attempts to provide recommendations and solutions to those contemporary challenges and barriers from an up-to-date perspective.

Research across contexts, cultures, and disciplines has documented several challenges and barriers to parental involvement in children's learning development (Badrasawi, Yahefu & Khalid, 2019; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022; Wong, et al, 2018). However, the noted barriers and challenges varied across countries (Garvis, et al., 2022), educational systems, and cultures (Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022; Wong, et al., 2018). Other literature has grouped them in school-related, home-related, and policy-related.

(i) Communication and language-related barriers

Effective communication and language barriers are some of the most stumbling challenges of parental involvement (Badrasawi, Yahefu & Khalid, 2019). It is more so when the official medium of instruction at school is different from the language spoken by children and parents (Hu, 2022). Communication may take the form of direct or indirect, verbal or non-verbal, and sometimes can be visual depending on context, need or purpose,

and urgency (Hu, 2022). In rural Malaysia, Badrasawi, Yahefu, and Khalid (2019) examined challenges to parental involvement among children of ethnic minorities. Findings showed that parents' limited mastery of Putonghua – the official Chinese language of instruction, was the main obstacle to their involvement.

Similarly, parental involvement especially of immigrant parents is mostly limited by their race and immigration status (Antony-Newman, 2019; Hajisoteriou & Angelides 2016). Some findings indicate that in countries where immigrants were of a similar race to the host communities, parental involvements were reportedly active compared to countries where immigrants belonged to a different race (Hajisoteriou & Angelides 2016). These findings suggest that immigration status and race created a sense of inclusion and exclusion among immigrant parents which shaped and influenced their involvement in school-related activities.

(ii) Parents and family-related barriers

Various research has consistently indicated that parents with lower socioeconomic status may be unable to provide a supportive home learning environment and/or be less involved in their children's learning and development (Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022). Further, parents from lower SES have been reported to be less involved in children's development and learning due to busy schedules and having relatively large family sizes (Ejuu, 2022; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022; Saracostti, et al., 2019; Yamauchi, et al., 2017). In a context with limited or poor social security systems, large family size has implications on resources distribution within the family including attention time and food set for children. However, there are some exceptions given the dominant parental beliefs and expectations towards their children's education and development.

Equally, it happens that family cultural beliefs and parental expectations do not align with overall school philosophy and practices about child-rearing and development. In such circumstances, some empirical findings indicate that parents either withdraw their involvement or decide to move forward to implement their approaches to child-rearing and learning (Antony-Newman, 2019; Yamuachi, et al., 2017). For instance, with their tiger parenting approaches, most of the immigrant Chinese parents in the U.S. found it difficult to reconcile and align their authoritarian parenting with more liberal school approaches. As such, they chose to be less active in school-related activities (Antony-Newman, 2019). The same is true for the Norwegian context. In more recent years, through their

humanitarian efforts to support families and individuals from war-stricken countries along a general trend of global diaspora, Norway's population has seen a rise in diversity of ethnicities and cultures in society. Having a diverse population has repercussions on early childhood education care and parental cooperation. There is a proliferation of research on inclusion and integration efforts in kindergartens, some of which are discussed below.

There are more theses on this topic on parental cooperation with parents of minority background in kindergartens with themes on parent's experiences and communication processes and efforts to get to know parents who have just moved to Norway and shed light on immigrant parent experiences of meetings with Norwegian kindergartens (Sadownik & Ødegaard, 2018; Sadownik, 2021; Sønsthagen 2018; Weymar, 2016; Wolf, 2019; Isaksen, 2021; Helgesen, 2019; Pladsen, 2021; Linn, 2022; Spikkeland, 2022). In a systematic literature review on parental cooperation between minority families and kindergarten staff, it has been found that parental cooperation is sometimes dependent on attitudes and that while there can be extensive contact, there could be little cooperation (Tveitereid, 2018). In addition, the review revealed that there is a tendency to overly focus on cultural and economic differences and lack of language skills as reasons for parental cooperation not to work which ultimately affects the inclusion and integration of immigrant and refugee families (Tveitereid, 2018). Instead, some researchers are proposing that cultural differences be used as a contact point for parental cooperation. As an example, diverse religions could be used for holiday markings and festivities in kindergartens (Krogstad & Hidle, 2015; Grandahl, 2021). Further, it has been pointed out that while a good number of research focus on just parent cooperation, research should also pay attention to the importance of kindergartens in parents' social belongings (Eidsvåg, 2022) especially since parental cooperation is essentially a regular dialogue where the different parties participate (Pesch, 2018). In light of this research, the concept of belonging seems to also be an emerging theme within this topic.

Some reports from various parts of the world indicate that while existing rules and regulations in most countries require that parents be involved in their children's learning and development, some schools do not comply (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). In Tanzania for instance, Ndijuye and Tandika (2022) found that that while the country's existing policies, laws, and regulations require that schools establish a practical partnership with children's families, in reality, parents were reportedly not welcomed in most of the schools, especially at decision-making levels. Similar findings were

reported in Hong Kong (See Hu, 2022), Turkey (Kahraman et al., (2017), and Argentina (Jeynes, 2017).

While such practices deny parents their rightful and practical opportunities to contribute to their children's learning and development, also bring to the fore the question of power relations and loyalty between various ECEC stakeholders (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022). Specifically, most existing policies and regulations do not specify who between parents and school authorities decides about family involvement, and to what extent should families be involved. Given the significant role of family involvement in children's learning and development, it is vital to have well-articulated power relations among various stakeholders (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018).

In an earlier report on the status of knowledge on kindergartens funded by the Norwegian Research Council, the section on parental cooperation focused on a different aspect of diversity—gender. The report discussed a couple of projects that highlighted the role of parents' gender in parental cooperation with kindergartens (Gulbrandsen, Johansson & Nilsen, 2002). In the projects they have discussed, they have found that both fathers and mothers in Norway participated in and attended various activities and meetings in kindergartens, which is validated and welcomed by the teachers and managers of kindergartens. While the kindergarten leaders pointed to some differences between how parents and mothers participated, the report described positive communication and parental relations where the projects were conducted (Gulbrandsen, Johansson & Nilsen, 2002).

There can also be barriers to the time parents can devote to their children. In one study on parents' work schedules, they made cross-country comparisons among four different countries—the United States, Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom (Hook & Wolfe, 2013). They have found that while American fathers who work the evening shift spend more time interacting with their children, they have found no evidence from the Norwegian data to support this. They have linked this finding to the already existing provisions of childcare support of the government, which enables parents to be involved in their children's lives (Hook & Wolfe, 2013).

(iii) Policy-practice divide

Further, research has identified gaps related to parental involvement in the existing early years education policies and guidelines in various countries. Evidence from mostly developing countries indicates no or weak parental involvement policies and guidelines (Ackah-Jnr, 2022; Ejuu, 2022; Ndijuye

& Tandika, 2022; Saracostti, et al., 2019). This led to limited parent-school collaboration which mostly had to rely on individualized understanding and partnership. Even in developed countries with solid parental involvement policies and guidelines, there are empirical findings that suggest the exclusion of some groups of parents such as immigrants and minorities due to issues related to language barriers (Hu, 2022).

While available reports indicate that most of the countries have included parental involvement in their educational policies, empirical evidence indicates that most of the schools don't have clearly defined implementation plans for the noted policies (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Hu, 2022; Saracostti, et al., 2019). This results in schools relying on and adopting traditional approaches to parental involvement such as teachers and parents' meetings instead of higher-level parental engagement with the children's learning and development (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). The extent to which the existing parental involvement policies might be on their own is not essentially important, rather the interpretation and implementation of such policies at school and classroom levels are what matters (Garvis, 2022; Hu, 2022).

Further, in Norway, Solberg (2019) raises the question of the role of kindergarten staff and the parents in parental cooperation, and whether the daily meetings such as in daily pick-up of the children to and from kindergartens could be analyzed as a framework for participation and cooperation. It is during the time of pick-up of children in kindergarten that parents and teachers often have to opportunity to chat and build relations daily, hence this is a prevalent theme in existing research (Solberg, 2019; Nubdal, 2018). In addition, many books are pointing to the important role of early childhood educators in kindergartens in having good parental cooperation with the children's parents (Drugli et al, 2020; Omdal & Thygesen, 2018; Malmo & Stemshaug, 2022; Johannessen & Mikkelsen, 2021; Hofslundsengen & Bøyum, 2021; Kinge, 2009). Literature documented the essential role of dialogues in making parental cooperation stronger and able to overcome difficult tensions (Aamodt & Hauge, 2013; Drugli & Onsøien, 2022), such as teachers asserting their professional role in the cooperation with parents (Bæck, 2010).

(iv) Involvement of non-parent adults

One notable aspect of parental involvement is the role of other non-parent adults in children's development and learning (Settles, 2014; Xie & Li, 2019). These other non-parent adults include grandparents, aunties, uncles, and even next-door neighbors (Ejuu, 2022). Such kind of parenting is

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common in collectivist cultures in Asia and Africa where broadly speaking, child-rearing is a shared responsibility across the entire community (Ejuu, 2022; Xie & Li, 2018). In these cultures, other non-parent adult plays a vital role in children's development and learning including their involvement in school and community-related activities (Ndijuye, 2020). However, not much is empirically known about the actual contribution of this group from and in the context of Western countries.- This is even though grand-parental care is not a new social phenomenon, given the current extended lifespans and transformations in family arrangements, such as decreased family sizes and increased maternal employment, which have accentuated grandparents' roles as caregivers globally (Bol & Kalmijn, 2016; Dunifon et al., 2018; Schatz & Seeley, 2015).

The most common group of non-parent adults that has reportedly been involved is that of siblings (Diab, Guillaume & Punamaki, 2018; Ndijuye & Tandika, 2022). This group is well known to be involved in their young brothers and sisters' development and learning by engaging in their home-work, and care and in some contexts – especially in poor countries, are key breadwinners who provide family's daily bread (Ejuu, 2022). Sibling involvement has been linked to children's academic achievements (Diab, et al., 2018), emotional development, setting aspirations, and emotional attachments (Dunfon, et al., 2018). For instance, examining the mediating roles of school, family, and child characteristics between academic achievement and both traumatic war experiences and stressful life events in war-torn areas, Diab et al (2018) found that even after traumatic experiences, siblingship functioned as protective factors for children's academic achievement in war conditions.

Stepparents and divorced single parents are two other important groups that are often overlooked in children's development and learning (Diab et al., 2018; Oswald, et al., 2018). There are reports of lower involvement of divorced single parents due to limited time and interest in participating in school activities or support their children with home and community activities (Oswald, et al., 2018). Similarly, stepparents are reportedly less involved due to their perceived roles in the family (Arat & Poortman, 2021), and conflicting ideas of what should be their roles in the stepchild's life (Oswald et al., 2018). Further, empirical findings in the West have consistently reported the 'popular perception' among stepchildren to characterize the role of a stepparent to be more of a 'friend to get along with' than a 'parent to be involved' (Arat & Poortman, 2021; Oswald, et al., 2018). There are some reports that stepparents might be involved in other children from

the previous marriage and hence remain with limited time to participate in their stepchildren's education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).