

Chapter 8

Parent Involvement Programs in Early Childhood Education

Given the proven and documented benefits of parent involvement in young children's education and development, many programs around the world, most of them being applied in Western countries, namely the USA and the UK. This chapter attempts to cover the essentials and provides a synopsis of profound parent involvement programs, not only from the Anglo-Saxon contexts but also the other parts of the world. Special attention is also given to discovering the programs in Norway. While the discussed programs are not necessarily the best examples or most successful, they still provide an overview of the existing efforts and strategies that so far, have been in place to get parents involved in their children's learning and development. Successes and challenges faced by the discussed programs may serve as a lesson, basis, and benchmark on which future parental involvements could be set and executed.

Because of the established benefits and the importance of parental involvement, there have been efforts in various countries to launch parent and school partnership/collaboration programs (Tekin, 2011; Wright, Stegelin, & Hartle, 2007). In the United States of America for instance, the well-structured parental involvement programs though begun much earlier gained momentum in the 1960s with the implementation of the Head Start program (Wright, et al., 2007). With all its associated benefits, this program was specifically designed for children from disadvantaged backgrounds with perceived parents with limited educational skills (Gestwicki, 2007; Wright, et al., 2007). In this program, parents and teachers were co-partners with shared expertise on children's learning and development. Individual parents had an opportunity to decide their levels of involvement that suited their commitments and schedules (Gestwicki, 2007).

The Head Start program has been criticized on various grounds including the cost and benefits view which establishes that while the financial investment in the program is on an upward curve, the educational returns do not reflect the investment made (Bailey, Sun & Timpe, 2021; Gestwicki, 2007). The National Reporting System which is administered by the Head Start program twice per year has been criticized for limited provision of in-

formation about children's social-emotional growth, physical development, science, social studies, the arts, and literacy. While educational authorities require preschool teachers to demonstrate the impact of the Head Start program on children and families, the existing evidence suggests that most educators still rely on norm-referenced, general assessment practices, and early learning standards that are difficult at best to translate into well-formulated progress-monitoring information and child outcomes (Grisham-Brown et al., 2008).

In the United Kingdom, until recently, each of the member states of Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and England has its policy of parental involvement. Following the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the government of the United Kingdom introduced a Sure Start policy in 1998. The policy linked education, health, and social care services into one service for families (Carroll-Meehan, 2022; Goodall, et al., 2011). There have been local efforts in specific member states to implement this policy such as the Education Endowment Fund in England, the Scottish Parental Involvement Act in Scotland, the Getting Ready to Learn program in Northern Ireland, and the Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan in Wales (Carroll-Meehan, 2022). All these programs and legislations aim at creating a tripartite relationship involving children, parents, and schools in the United Kingdom. The UK approach to parental involvement has been critiqued because the decision to translate what works in specific member states may bring different outcomes (ibid)

In Tanzania, the existing Education and Training Policy (ETP) and Integrated Early Childhood Education Program (IEEP) mandate the establishment of parental involvement programs at each primary school in the country (MoEST, 2016). While the ETP states in its generic terms of family involvement in ECEC, the IEEP details what and how schools should implement parental involvement. Specifically, parents are obliged to play active roles in Parental-School Association/Partnerships (PTA/P) in which they participate in various school-related activities ranging from preparation of meals to membership in school boards.

The main purpose of the PTA/P is to create practical and effective communication and linkage between families/parents and schools to maximize children's developmental potential. As such, schools provide some academically and socially related activities in which parents are expected to participate actively. However, given such challenges as overcrowded classrooms (Ndijuye, 2020), scarcity of educational resources, low quality of teaching force, and pervasive poverty (Kafle, Jolliffe & Winter-Nelson,

2018), it is questionable about the extent parents are actively taking part in school-related activities and building a sense of ownership.

In Hong Kong - China, while there is no specific parental involvement program, however, the existing policy and curriculum guidelines involve parents at various levels and roles (Hu, 2022). Parents are regarded as close school partners in enhancing children's development and learning as role models and clients (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2017). As active clients, parents are involved through engaging in children's home assignments, parent-child reading, and building morals (Lau & Ng, 2019). To achieve this goal, preschools establish regular and frequent channels of communication with parents. Communication could take various forms such as one-on-one contacts, telephone calls, parents' newsletters, regular parent-school meetings, home visits, and interviews (Pang, 2011). Normally, effective communication leads to such activities as parents volunteering as teaching assistants, and administrators, designing activities, and compiling parents' newsletters (Hu, 2022).



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The Hong Kong approach to parental involvement seems rather vague due to its lack of a clearly defined involvement policy (Hu, 2022; Lau & Ng, 2019). This leads to barriers such as language and limited time of parental involvement which impacts children's learning and development (Lau & Ng, 2019). Further, the lack of clearly defined parental involvement policy

and guidelines is more detrimental in a Confucius culture where power relations between teachers and parents are imbalanced (Hu, 2022; Ng, 2017) asserts that in the Confucius culture, there is still a phenomenon whereby “teachers regard themselves as experts and professionals and maintain control over parents” (p. 268). This may potentially make it difficult for parents to have equal status when it comes to participating in their children’s education (Hu, 2022).

In Australia, while there are no clear overall guidelines across states on parental involvement, the existing family involvement program emphasizes on building and maintaining collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and communities (Goff & Phillipson, 2022). Parents are urged to participate in children’s lives and learning at home, school, and the wider community. Normally, parental involvement is through school-family partnership programs such as the National Partnership Agreement on Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities (Goff & Phillipson, 2022).

In Norway, laws are often translated into practice within local government bodies. Municipalities all over Norway support different organizations to organize and implement different programs that would benefit children and families. As an example, the Bergen municipality has different offers for families in terms of cultural activities and well-being. These programs include, but are not limited to the following:

PopLAB-creative family activity (PopLAB - kreativ familieaktivitet), which is implemented by the Bergen Barnas Kulturhus (Children’s Culture House). This activity is just one of the many theatre, music, dance, visual arts, and film workshops, festivals, and activities that this center offers for children and their families every weekend, after classes, or seasonally (Bergen Kommune, n.d.).

Family counsel (Familieråd) is offered by the commune through the Agency for Children and Families (Etat for barn og familie) which is responsible for child protection and family services (Bergen Kommune, n.d.). This program is primarily concerned with children’s and families’ well-being. This program is parallel to child and family assistance for mental health well-being, as well as offers music therapy for children and their families, in collaboration with Barnas Kulturhus (Bergen Kommune, n.d.).

While these offers are open to all residents of the local municipalities, these offers are targeted to cater to families that need support more than others.

As already mentioned earlier, the Directorate for Children, Youth and Families (BufDir) also has some efforts to support parents through the

website “Foreldrehverdag.no.” On this website, there are numerous resources that parents can access to help them with interacting with their children better. There are different kinds of tests that parents can take to find out their parenting styles, which are also dependent on the ages of their children. These tests have been formulated from a systematic scoping review of systematic reviews that Bufdir commissioned the Norwegian Institute of Public Health to conduct. In their report, they utilized Baumrind’s parenting style model with two axes of warm-cold and control chaos creating four parenting styles “authoritarian”, “authoritative”, “permissive”, and “neglectful” (Blaasvør & Ames, 2019). In their systematic review, they found that the “authoritative” parenting style is associated with increased children’s well-being while the “authoritarian” and “neglectful” parenting styles are associated with negative outcomes in children (Blaasvør & Ames, 2019).

In addition, there are different video courses, as well as podcasts that parents can listen to. In a report where the website was evaluated (Viana, Gundersen & Nygaard, 2021), it was found that parents appreciate having tools and resources to cope and be more confident with their role of being parents. Overall, the website is deemed a positive source of support for finding tips and guidance for parents in Norway. However, Bufdir still aspires to have more online/digital offers for parents. To create more programs in the future, they have conducted a systematic review of different strategies and parental interventions in different formats (Nøkleby, Flodgren & Langøien, 2019). They also hope to cater to Norwegian and immigrant parent populations.

While the most relevant organization for parent-kindergarten cooperation is organized by Foreldreutvalget for barnehager (FUB/FAU), several non-governmental organizations work for the benefit of families in Norway. Some include Rød kors, Frelsesarmeen (The Salvation Army), Kirkensbymisjon, etc. Most times, these organizations collaborate in planning and implementing projects. Non-governmental organizations often make use of public spaces such as community libraries or churches to hold their events. Often, they have volunteers to work in these events, as well as in the different programs to support families and children. These non-governmental organizations seek funding from their local municipalities for support and funding of the different projects they implement such as Kirkensbymisjon’s Home Start Familiekontakten (HSF) program that aims to support families with young children by having volunteers visit families with young children under school age for 2-4 hours each week. In doing so, the program

provides guidance as well as respite from the stress of parenting when the families may not have relatives nearby or if they need someone to talk to for advice or guidance on child-rearing or challenges with having chronically ill children (Kirkensbymisjon, n.d.; Frelsesarmeen, n.d.). From this program alone, the 2017 annual report shows that around 1,082 families have received support all over Norway (Frivillighetnorge, n.d.).