Parental involvement in early childhood learning: Douala, Littoral Region, Cameroon

Introduction

Increasingly, parental involvement in early childhood education is seen as positively influencing children’s holistic development which embodies the physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development. This article forms part of a larger doctoral study aimed at understanding parents’ and teachers’ perceptions on parental involvement in early childhood learning for children’s holistic development in Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon. It highlights the ways in which parents engage in children’s learning at home and at school, as well as the challenges faced by parents when engaging in children’s learning. The study of childhood development and upbringing within the Cameroon context is also explored, especially the ways in which cultural awareness is promoted in terms of literacy and communication. Most African countries after independence, adopted the language of their colonial masters as their official languages. Cameroon for instance adopted English and French as its official languages after gaining independence from Britain and France. Over 279 ethnic languages are spoken in Cameroon presently. The study found that sound parent-child relationships, effective communication and participation at home, school and society leads to positive outcomes, such as: good communication skills; literacy development; positive social interaction; improved comprehension and expressive skills. Therefore, the family plays a pivotal role in a child’s growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Current conceptions in the early childhood discourses in recent years highlight the importance of parent’s involvement in the children’s early learning years. “In the earliest years of life, the most influential force in children’s development is the family” (Garcia et al., 2008, p. 207). Parents play an important role in children’s learning, especially in the early years. Nsamenang (2010b) classifies parents as first educators because they notice developmental delays and strengths and possess first-hand information about their children, unlike educators or professionals who have limited time to spend with children. Parental involvement in early childhood learning might include consistent parent-child communication, helping and follow-up with studies at home; accepting child’s interest and providing prompt responses, participating in early childhood learning such as visiting, open days, maintaining parent-teacher communication. Laup. et al. (2012) classifies these forms of parental involvement into home-based and preschool-based parental involvement. Home-based involvement which includes home assisted learning and parent-child communication and preschool-based involvement whereby parents give opinions and aid with different preschool activities. Parent involvement in children’s education can be linked with the improvement of education programs and climate, increased retention, and increased academic performance (Epstein, 1995; Winder & Corter, 2016). Winder and Corter affirms positive outcomes associated with family involvement in children’s education and therefore emphasize a collaborative relationship between educators and parents. “In order to effectively
prepare ECE students to work in partnership with families, it is critical that we understand some of the beliefs and prior experiences they bring to their training that might influence their relationships with families” (Winder & Corter, 2016, pp. 133–134). Home-based and pre-school based parental involvement is essential for children’s education and the process of preschool-based involvement aids parents as they learn other skills to improve on their home-based involvement. However, teachers’ beliefs about involving parents in children’s learning is an important feature that influences parents’ actual involvement, thus there is a need for a mutual relationship and respect between teachers and families to make the learning process effective.

Barriers to parental involvement in children’s learning

Various recent studies show that particular social conditions affect the levels and kinds of parental involvement. These include, level of education, low income, children from a single parent or children from divorced or separated parents, parents working conditions, and parents’ perception affect the quality of care and result in inadequate parental involvement (Hornby & Laface, 2011; Lau et al., 2012; Li & Fischer, 2017). The level of parent’s education in most cases affects the degree of involvement in children’s learning. For Dickson et al. (2016), “Parents with high levels of schooling provide a better childhood experience and educational environment and consequently, their children do better in school” (p. 1). In addition, “when both parents work there will be less time available for both home-based and school-based PI” (Hornby & Laface, 2011, p. 41). A low-income family or a single parent may be forced to work longer hours to meet up with certain life conditions. Parents from disadvantaged backgrounds may face more challenges volunteering long hours at ECE and donating money (Li & Fischer, 2017), including fewer monetary resources, less work flexibility, and a greater likelihood of being a single-parent family. According to Patrikakou et al. (2000), parents’ perception about the involvement opportunities in learning presented by their child’s teacher affects parental involvement both at home and at the ECE setting. “Parents who perceived that the school had a positive, inviting climate with teachers who were applying proactive strategies were less likely to report barriers to involvement” (p. 106).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is shaped by sociocultural views of childhood and development. It includes Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural views on children and childhood, Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological model, Dewey’s concepts of democracy in education and child development from the African perspective. Vygotsky’s (1978) views imply that children learn by interacting within the social and cultural context of a society. He emphasizes that with assistance, children can learn beyond their developmental level. Bronfenbrenner (1986) advocates that the child’s immediate environment as well as other external settings which he classified into microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems impacts their development. Dewey (1916) stresses a learner-centred philosophy and construes learning as a means of the social continuity of life through the intersection of the natural life of children and the social custom of adults. In addition, African conceptions highlight the collective upbringing of children, sibling caretaking and peer mentoring cultures as important aspects of children’s development. Thus,
Research methods

The study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate parents’ and teachers’ understandings of parental involvement in children’s learning in two preschools in Douala, Cameroon. Jarvie (2012) describes qualitative research as that which involves in-depth analysis of an issue, event, entity, or process, and explains complex issues which are impossible by experimental or quantitative methods. The main research question investigated parents’ and teachers’ conceptions about parental involvement in early childhood learning in Douala. Factors which may affect parental involvement in early childhood learning were also investigated. In addition, the study aimed to understand child development and upbringing characteristics unique to these families. This study took place in two English nursery schools (one private, one public) in Douala, Littoral region of Cameroon. The private nursery school is an inclusive institution including children with special needs and employs teachers trained in special education studies. Tuition at this nursery school is estimated at 1,200,000–1,300,000 CFA/year (including books, uniforms, and parent forum levy) which is approximately 3,400 New Zealand dollars. The public nursery school on the other hand is a bilingual institution. It has both the Anglophone and Francophone sections controlled by two different head mistresses (principals or school heads), one Anglophone and the other Francophone. The study was carried out in the Anglophone section of the public nursery school. Tuition fee is approximately 50,000 Francs CFA (135 NZD) per academic year including PTA levy and books and it is still a challenge for some parents to pay. The nursery schools are separated in two parts, nursery one and two and the age range of children falls between 4- to 6-years-old.

In qualitative research, the focus is on analysing and making sense of rich data which is detailed information from participants using field notes, photographs, recordings, and interviews with participants from relatively few selected cases (Denzin & Lincoln 2013; Murray, 2010). Thus with qualitative research, information can be collected using a variety of methods. For this study, data was collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observations, review of documents and informal conversations to understand parents’ and teachers’ conception on parental involvement in early childhood learning. The study involved parents, children, and teachers of nursery one and two, all nursery school parents responded to a questionnaire, while eight of these parents in each school were interviewed. Nursery one and two teachers were interviewed, and children were observed alongside their parents and teachers.

Data analysis

After carrying out interviews, observations, informal conversations and review of document portfolios, scripts were organised and labelled according to each category of participants (teachers or family members) for transcription. Questionnaires were analysed using Qualtrics, whereby participants’ responses were classified and merged for each category of questions. Responses from the questionnaire mainly classified the types of parental involvement represented in the private and public nursery schools. Analysis of data also drew on Dewey’s democratic concepts of
education and African theoretical framework underpinning the research. Themes from interview transcripts, review of documents, observation analysis as well as field notes were developed through colour coding and the themes illustrated parents’ and teachers’ approaches to involvement in children’s learning as well as child development and upbringing characteristics particular to families involved in the study.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethics is to be considered in any research especially that which directly involves human beings. Abed (2015) suggests ethics are moral principles guiding conduct and should not be considered only at the beginning of the research or fieldwork but should be revisited throughout the entire research process. Approval to conduct research was obtained first from the University of Waikato, Division of Education Research Ethics Committee, from the Regional delegation of Basic Education Littoral and finally the research participants.

**Findings**

The study participants for the private nursery school included 13 parents who responded to the questionnaires and eight of these parents agreed to take part in the interview. All four teachers in the nursery school participated in the interviews and interviewed parents were observed alongside their parents and teachers. For the public nursery school, only English-speaking parents (or families in which one of the parents was an anglophone) were targeted for the study and so a total of 28 parents completed the questionnaires, eight of these parents responded to the interview questions, and all four nursery school teachers were interviewed. Interviewed parents were observed alongside their children and nursery school teachers. The observations were carried out for two weeks (one week in each class) and lasted throughout the nursery school session which runs from 7.30am to 1.30pm. Findings revealed two types of parental involvement, home-based involvement and school-based parental involvement. The challenges faced by parents when engaging in children’s learning was explored as well as child development and upbringing indigenous to families in the study.

**Types of parental involvement**

Two types of parental involvement were eminent in both the private and the public nursery schools, though at different levels. The level at which parents were involved in children’s learning greatly varied between the private and public nursery schools. Examining the responses given by the parents of both public and private nursery schools, parent involvement at school particularly was lesser for the public-school parents. Thus, more opportunities are provided by the private nursery school administration and teachers for parents to be engaged in children’s education. Table 1 below details the types of parental involvement evident in the two nursery schools.
Table 1: Types of Parental Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Parental Involvement</th>
<th>Private Nursery school</th>
<th>Public Nursery school</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home-based parental involvement</td>
<td>Homework.</td>
<td>Homework.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Extra educational materials.</td>
<td>Extra educational materials.</td>
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<tr>
<td>School-based parental involvement</td>
<td>Parent-teacher children activities (circle time, science fair, volunteer teacher, thanksgiving ceremonies, open house, cultural week, end of year ceremonies).</td>
<td>End of year and graduation ceremonies.</td>
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<td>Parent-teacher/school administration meetings (parent forum, parent-teacher conferences).</td>
<td>Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings.</td>
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<td>Communications and class observations.</td>
<td>Communications and class observations.</td>
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Barriers to parental involvement in children’s learning

Private and public nursery school families reported barriers that prevented them from fully engaging in their children’s learning. Private school parents face difficulties like tight work schedules, single parenting, some parents had difficulties with the homework given to their children, while others complained of the economic situation of the country, high cost of living and traffic jams which prevented them from dashing out of their offices quickly to attend school meetings. Challenges faced by the public school parents from being fully engaged in their children’s learning ranged from financial difficulties, work-life, language barriers, single parenthood, as well as the present political crisis in the country that has led to mass internal migration of families from the English speaking regions of the country to Douala and other French-speaking towns.

Child development and upbringing characteristics common to both private and public nursery school families

Child upbringing methods specific to the families involved in the studies included raising children collectively, encouraging sibling caretaking, and developing children’s agency and independence by assigning chores.

**Collective Upbringing:** An important aspect to note about most African cultures is the influence of the external community on children. The study revealed the joint efforts of parents, grandparents and other relatives in children's education and upbringing. Other families reported living together
with grandparents and relatives, some grandparents assist financially in children’s upbringing and contribute in teaching the traditional language. One of the research participants reported:

I share the responsibility for caretaking with my wife, other relatives at home and the nanny who assist in taking care of the children. For instance, my children go home with the school bus after school and our other relatives at home receive them because my wife and I are still working. We have a healthy relationship with our extended family members. The external family members play a great role in holding conversations, the grandparents especially are old school, and they focus on discipline, while other family members play a role in diversification, the kids can talk to other people apart from their parents (SH’s dad).

Sibling Caretaking: Siblings together with other relatives facilitate learning by caring for children after school hours, doing school drop-offs and pickups, assisting with homework, showering, dressing and feeding. Figure 1 below shows a picture of an older sibling dropping off a younger sibling at school.

Figure 1: Older Sibling Doing School Drop Offs.

Traditional language practice: Learning and practice of traditional languages was a challenge at the nursery school as the children and teachers hail from different ethnic groups. Traditional languages were best practised at home among family members and relatives. Participants in the study acknowledged traditional language as an important part of the Cameroon culture that needs to be practised and preserved. They emphasized that the traditional language was important in preserving the African culture and identity, and to convey secrets, especially when in public.

Self-skill acquisition: A glaring aspect when it comes to self-skill acquisition in the African context is the idea of “peer culture” where the child develops “agency” by learning and carrying out tasks supervised, corrected and mentored by elderly peers or siblings and not necessarily by
their parents (Nsamenang, 2010a). In this light, Ensor (2012) presents an image of childhood that does not pay attention to what children lack but emphasizes their skills, competence, agency, autonomy, rights and opportunities. Parents in the study encouraged their children to carry out some task at home to promote self-reliance and responsibility. Tasks ranged from fetching water, cleaning up after meals, washing, assisting in the kitchen and caring for younger siblings. A parent participant reported “Yes, my child does chores, she dresses up herself and arranges her shoes in the cupboard without supervision, she cleans up and I supervise when we work in the kitchen. She helps me peel the garlic when I cook (KE’s mum).

Discussions

The role of the family, siblings and extended family in the life of young children cannot be overemphasized. Socio-cultural and African conceptions emphasize the important role of parents in children’s learning and development. Epstein (1995) suggests many ways in which parents can get involved in children’s learning such as home learning activities, volunteer tutoring, field-trip supervisors, communicating with teachers, and collaborating with the community. Vygotsky’s scaffolding concepts according to Smith (2013) implies that parents, teachers and/or caregivers need to interact and continuously guide children to learn above their present levels acquiring new skills and knowledge. The findings showed that parents engaged in children’s learning at home and at school at different levels in the private and public nursery schools. Private school parents engaged in their children’s education in a variety of ways both at home and at the nursery school. They provided extra materials for study at home and assisted children with their homework. At the nursery school, parents attend parent-teacher children activities and parent-teacher/school administration meetings. Public school parents on the other hand participated in children’s learning both at home and at school though school participation was lesser when compared to private school parents. Furthermore, the public nursery school provided limited opportunities for parents to be involved in the nursery school. It is imagined that parental involvement will increase when parents perceive opportunities for involvement from the nursery school. In addition, when parents believe that home and school involvement may improve children’s learning and development, they develop a positive attitude about parental involvement.

Communal upbringing and sibling caretaking were key concepts of child development evident in both private and public nursery school families. These concepts offer a conceptual framework for interpreting the importance of family and external family in children’s development. The study revealed the joint efforts of parents, grandparents and other relatives in children's education and upbringing. African children’s daily routines involving community participation, especially child-to-child sociability and peer-mentoring cultures all aim in developing skills, competency, agency and autonomy, rights and opportunity. Educators should be aware of these key developmental aspects and incorporate them into their curriculum.

Conclusion

In summary, the connections between parents and children in the family, external family and the community are significant in child development and learning from an African perspective. The
study concludes that parental involvement is associated with improvement in learning outcomes for children and a positive educational climate in terms of the relationship between teachers and families. Thus, it is important for teachers and families to maintain ‘healthy and reciprocal relationships’ and engage children in learning emanating from their everyday experiences. Parents’ and teacher’s approaches to involvement in children’s learning and especially child upbringing characteristics reported in this study demonstrate other views of childhood learning and development to other contexts with individualistic child-rearing practices. It may also add a comparative aspect to the other countries with similar contexts. The research will also further teachers’ and parents’ understanding about parental involvement in early childhood learning and other parenting styles for children’s holistic development.

References

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