

## **Perceptions of Parents and Teachers Regarding Policies Related to Fathers' Engagement in Children's Early Education**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing from ecological system theory, the focus of this study was on the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education. A descriptive survey research was used to obtain primary data for the study using a sample of 309 participants comprising 94 teachers, and 215 parents of children in the selected schools. A structured questionnaire instrument was used for data collection for the study. Data were analyzed using mean, multiple regression and t-test statistic. The study found that both parents and teachers had positive perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education. Additionally, it was found in the study that demographic characteristics had no significant influences on the mean perception ratings of parents and teachers on policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education. The researchers recommended that the South African government should ensure full implementation of ECCE policies that lay out concrete commitment and guidelines for fathers' engagement in their children's education.

**Keywords:** Children's early learning, Fathers' engagement, Parents and teachers, Perceptions, Policies

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## **Introduction**

There is a paucity of literature on specific policies to get fathers properly engaged in the early education of their children, not minding the fact that early childhood education provisioning demands the total involvement of multiple partners. In line with the above, the policy document on early childhood development appears to be silent on specific programs to get fathers involved children's education (Government of South Africa, GSA, 2015). The document only emphasizes the need for adequate care and support for pregnant women in the workplace. A study by Khewu and Adu (2015) reveals how prevalent fathers are absent in the lives of their children in South Africa. This is especially noticeable among Black fathers, ranking South Africa number one in terms of the rate of fathers' absence world-wide (Richter et al., 2012).

The reality that most children in South Africa do not live with their biological fathers (Statistics South Africa, 2013) results in the lack of fathers not carrying out their fatherhood roles especially fathers who are still school-going (Clyde, 2016; Mufutau, 2015), Clyde (2016), Mufutau and Okeke (2016) noted that this makes it difficult for most young fathers to actively participate in the lives of their children's educational matters. Apart from this, Okeke (2014), Change (2015), Mashiya et al. (2015), Noel et al. (2015), Mathwasa and Okeke (2016), Okeke, Ugwuanyi and Mufutua (2020), Okeke, Okeke and Ugwuanyi (2020) observed that there are negative consequences of fathers' absence on the overall development of the children.

Given the need for the involvement and engagement of fathers in the complete development of children, a study of this nature is necessary. Thus, this study explored the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education.

### **Theoretical background of the study**

This study was anchored on Ecological System Theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), for one to study and learn about human development, there is the need to consider the entire ecological system surrounding the growth. The theory

looks at a Child's development from the perspective of the system of relationships which encompass the child's environment. In other words, child's development is affected by the complex layers of the environment. Thus, the success of the child's development is dependent on his/her immediate family, environment, and the societal background.

This theory implies that children need conducive environment that promotes cordial relationships between the children and the members of the immediate environment. Thus, the researchers explored the parents and teachers' perceptions of fathers' engagement in children's early education. In a similar study using the same theory, Mathwasa and Okeke (2016) recommended adequate collaborations between school and teachers in order to create an environment that welcomes and promotes families support in the education of their children. Mncanca, Okeke and Fletcher (2016) stated that fathers' participation comprises of proximal processes taking place between fathers and children.

### **Review of related empirical studies**

As espoused by See and Gorard (2015), although systematic reviews of evidence on interventions to improve attainment and other learning outcomes via supporting fathers' engagement are inconclusive, the reality that fathers' engagement is beneficial to children's learning is widely acknowledged.

Studies have noted that the interventions targeting at encouraging fathers' engagement in the education of their children are lacking (Kim & Quinn, 2013; Kim et al., 2016, 2017). Mncanca and Okeke (2016) found that children of fathers who are actively involved in their early education live in cognitively stimulated homes. Studies have shown that fathers who interact with their children are most likely to benefit from some input on knowledge and skills from teachers before or during home-based summer learning programs (Maxwell et al., 2014; Kim & Quinn, 2017; Stein, 2017). Nazneen and Chopra (2016) found that in the Philippines, a policy related to the provision of cash assistance to poor fathers helped them to be actively engaged in the education of their children. Engaging fathers through summer holiday practices can help in reducing the decline in children's reading development that can occur during summer holiday times (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017). Adequate communication with the fathers over the summer holiday may be beneficial in supporting

children's learning during the summer (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017).

Lack of appropriate initiatives by schools was identified by Axford et al. (2019) as a causative factor for the non-involvement of fathers in the early education of their children. Axford et al. (2019) found that schools in England use a wide range of activities to support fathers' engagement in their children's school-based learning such as providing parents with information or materials. As shown by See and Gorard (2018), there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which schools can promote fathers' engagement to improve the development of children. The strategies for positive transition to fatherhood transform social and gender norms, improve laws and policies and put individual fathers' care into action (Van der Gaag et al., 2019). Such measures include counselling and training on relationship skills as well as media campaigns that emphasize the importance of emotional, physical and financial connections of fathers to their children (Tollestrup, 2018).

### **Gaps in literature**

There is a gap in literature in terms of fathers' lack of active engagement in the education of their children in South Africa as noted by some studies (Richter et al., 2012; Okeke, 2014; Khewu & Adu, 2015). In spite of these studies, the new early childhood development policy document has not focused on how fathers may be engaged in the children's early education (GSA, 2015). Instead, literature on fathers' engagement in children's learning specifically in South Africa focused on the financial responsibility, neglecting the actual fathers' involvement in their children's learning (Marphatia et al., 2010). Along the same lines, policies that support fathers' participation in literacy development of children find limited robust evidence from resource-constrained countries (Cao et al., 2015; Snilstveit et al., 2016; Spier et al., 2016; Unterhalter et al., 2014).

Based on the gap in literature on the South African context on the perceptions of parents and teachers regarding related policies for the active engagement of fathers in the early education of their children, a study of this nature is necessary.

### **Objectives of the study**

The following objectives were pursued by the researchers.

1. To determine how parents and teachers vary in their perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education.
2. To determine how demographic characteristics influence parents and teachers' perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education.

### **Research questions**

1. How varied are parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education?
2. To what extent do demographic characteristics influence parents and teachers' perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education?

**H<sub>01</sub>:** Parents and teachers do not vary significantly on their perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** Demographic characteristics do not significantly influence parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education.

## **Method**

### **Research design**

This study adopted descriptive survey research within the quantitative research approach. This design enabled the researchers explore the opinions of the participants on policies related to fathers' engagement in the children's early education. This design has been used by Eze et al. (2020), Ugwuanyi et al. (2020), Okenyi et al. (2021), Ezema et al. (2021), Ezeaku et al. (2021), Okeke, Ugwuanyi and Mufutua (2020), Okeke, Okeke and Ugwuanyi (2020) in similar studies.

## Participants

A sample of 309 respondents comprising 94 teachers, and 215 parents participated in the study. This sample was drawn from a population of teachers, fathers and mothers of pupils in Preschools (0-4years) and Grade R aspects of foundation phase in King William’s Town Education District in the Eastern Cape Province. The foundation phase in this context implies the early childhood program meant for children within 0 to 9 years of age. Unlike United Kingdom, the United States of America, New Zealand that have fatherhood initiatives such as Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngster, there is no fatherhood initiative in South Africa. In composing the sample for the study, eight schools across the four satellite jurisdictions in the district were sampled using stratified random sampling technique. Secondly, three teachers each from a class of 0-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years and Grade R were drawn using simple random sampling technique, making a total of 94 teachers from the sampled schools.

Lastly, 215 parents of children in the selected schools were sampled purposively based on the following criteria that: 1) the parent must be ready to participate; 2) able to read and respond to questions independently; and 3) have at least a child in preschool or Grade R. Tables 1 and 2 show the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. *Age, marital status and race of the teachers*

Demographic Variable		Freq.	%	$\chi^2$	p
Age	< 30 years	12	12.8	35.93	< .05
	30 years +	82	87.2		
	Total	94	100.0		
Marital Status	Married	61	64.9	41.89	< .05
	Not married	33	35.1		
	Total	94	100.0		
Race	Black	66	70.2	121.06	< .05
	White	3	3.2		
	Indian	4	4.3		
	Coloured	21	22.3		
	Total	94	100.0		

Table 1 revealed that 87% of the participants were above 30 years of age while only 13% were either 30 years old or below. It further showed that there was a significant difference in the age of the participants,  $X^2(1) = 35.93, p < .05$ . Also, 65% of the participants are married while 35% are not married. Thus, there was a significant difference in the marital status of the participants,  $X^2(1) = 41.89, p < .05$ . Again, 70% of the participants are Black teachers, 22% are Coloured, 4% are Indians and 3% are White teachers. Besides, there was a significant difference in the race of the participants,  $X^2(3) = 121.06, p < .05$ .

Table 2. *Level of education, occupation and position of the fathers and mothers*

Demographic Variable		Freq.	%	$\chi^2$	p
Level of Education	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree +	49	22.8	23.52	< .05
	Diploma	55	25.6		
	Technical	22	10.2		
	Certificate	45	20.9		
	Matric	44	20.9		
	Total	215	100.0		
Occupation	Public workers	132	61.4	23.52	< .05
	Self-employed	47	21.9		
	Artisan	12	5.1		
	Unemployed	24	11.2		
	Total	215	100.0		
Position	Fathers	121	56.3	9.06	< .05
	Mothers	94	43.7		
	Total	215	100.0		

Table 2 showed that 26% of the parents' participants obtained diploma certificates, 23% obtained first degrees, ever, 21% obtained certificate qualifications, 20% obtained Matric while 10.2% obtained technical certificates. Thus, there was a significant difference in the educational qualifications of the parents' participants,  $X^2(4) = 12.89, p < .05$ . Similarly, Table showed that there were significant differences in the occupations and positions of the parents,  $X^2(3) = 23.52, p < .05$ ;  $X^2(1) = 9.06, p < .05$ .

## **Measure**

A questionnaire on policies and practices in fatherhood initiatives was used for data collection. This questionnaire was developed by the researchers based on available literature on policies and practices in fatherhood initiatives across the globe. The questionnaire consisted of 22 clustered items without sub-scales. The items were all linked to literature (Carter, 2017; Alan-Michael, 2019; Axford et al., 2019; Kigobe, 2019; Mathwasa, 2019) that focused on father's involvement in children's early education, with emphasis on policies that promote active participation of fathers in their children's early education in different countries. A modified 4-point Likert rating scale of Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Disagreed (D), and Strongly Disagreed (SD) was used.

Copies of the instrument were given to experts for their constructive criticisms to ensure its face validity. The instrument was also trial tested in a field study. To ensure the reliability of the instruments, the field test of the instrument was conducted. The internal consistency reliability index of the items of the instrument was obtained to be 0.83 using Cronbach's alpha method.

## **Procedure**

In order to collect the required data from the participants, ethical clearance was obtained through the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) of the sampled University. The researchers endeavored to act within the ethical principles and rules during the study.

After ensuring the required ethical considerations, the researchers visited each of the sampled schools and parents for the administration of the copies of the questionnaire. The copies of the questionnaire were administered to participants at their respective locations.

## **Analyses**

Percentage, mean, multiple regression analysis and t-test of independent samples were used to analyse the data. Percentage was used to analyse the demographics of the participants; mean was used to answer the research question one while multiple regression analysis was



used to answer research question two and test hypothesis two. Hypothesis one was tested using t-test of independent samples at 5 percent probability level.

## Results

**Research Question One:** How varied are parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education?

Table 3 shows that the mean perceptions of both parents and teachers of policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education are varied. The analysis reveals that both parents and teachers have positive perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education. This is evident in the mean ratings of parents and teachers in most of the items which are more than the 2.50 criterion mean.

On the other hand, the overall standard deviations of 0.29 and 0.27 indicate that the variation in the individual ratings of parents on the items is higher than that of the parents. Along the same lines, the overall mean ratings of 2.70 and 2.85 for the parents and teachers respectively indicate that teachers have higher mean perception rating than parents.

**H<sub>01</sub>:** Parents and teachers do not vary significantly on their perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education.

Table 4 shows that there is no significant difference in the mean perception ratings of parents and teachers regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education,  $t(262) = 1.421, p = .079$ . Thus, the null hypothesis was not rejected at  $p > .05$ , implying that both parents and teachers do not vary in the mean perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education.

**Research Question Two:** To what extent do demographic characteristics influence parents and teachers' perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education?

Table 5 shows the multiple regression analysis of the influences of demographic

Table 3. *Mean Analysis of the Perceptions of Parents and Teachers of Policies Related to Fathers' Engagement in Children's Early Education*

Item statement	Group	n	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Working out education policy on parents' support	Parents	215	2.80	1.08
	Teachers	94	3.00	1.16
2. Implementing policy on parents as co-educators/caregivers.	Parents	215	2.89	.87
	Teachers	94	2.95	.92
3. Having government policy on family learning program	Parents	215	2.75	1.14
	Teachers	94	2.90	1.12
4. Having policy that allows fathers to have inputs into school activities	Parents	215	2.60	1.00
	Teachers	94	2.50	.98
5. Making fathers to be aware of favourable policies for fathers' participation	Parents	215	2.65	1.12
	Teachers	94	2.48	1.10
6. Allowing language policy in school	Parents	215	2.90	.78
	Teachers	94	2.94	.80
7. Making the school policies known to the fathers	Parents	215	2.80	1.19
	Teachers	94	2.93	1.16
8. School having written policies on fathers' engagement	Parents	215	2.80	1.12
	Teachers	94	2.38	1.20
9. Making fathers to feel they have benefited from collaborative approach used by the school	Parents	215	2.60	1.15
	Teachers	94	2.45	1.25
10. School, teachers and fathers working together harmoniously	Parents	215	2.80	1.06
	Teachers	94	3.00	1.04
11. Ensuring that school goals are in line with the wishes of the fathers	Parents	215	2.79	.99
	Teachers	94	2.99	.96
12. Providing adequate support for fathers of children who have difficulty in their learning will encourage fathers' engagement	Parents	215	2.83	.90
	Teachers	94	2.91	.93
13. Schools making fathers important encourages them to get involved	Parents	215	2.90	1.11
	Teachers	94	3.00	1.02
14. Skills and knowledge shared by the school encourages fathers' involvement	Parents	215	3.01	1.14
	Teachers	94	3.05	1.18
15. Making practices that improve a sense of identity as priority for fathers	Parents	215	2.53	1.19
	Teachers	94	2.62	1.19

Table 3. Mean Analysis of the Perceptions of Parents and Teachers of Policies Related to Fathers' Engagement in Children's Early Education (continued)

Item statement	Group	n	Mean	Std. Deviation
16. Schools having clear and formidable rules that get fathers engaged	Parents	215	2.20	1.28
	Teachers	94	2.32	1.24
17. The schools visiting the parents' homes at regular intervals	Parents	215	2.00	.98
	Teachers	94	2.10	1.07
18. The schools sharing good news about children with the parents	Parents	215	3.04	1.11
	Teachers	94	3.02	1.21
19. Fathers having a clear understanding of teachers' roles	Parents	215	2.90	1.04
	Teachers	94	3.12	1.03
20. Fathers being aware of home/school agreement regarding the education of their children	Parents	215	2.73	.91
	Teachers	94	2.79	.84
21. Fathers having adequate knowledge on their rights and responsibilities towards their children's education	Parents	215	2.80	.89
	Teachers	94	2.95	.91
22. Adequate creation of awareness on needs of fathers by the school will encourage fathers' engagement	Parents	215	2.95	1.08
	Teachers	94	3.02	1.04
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>.29</b>
	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>2.85</b>	<b>.27</b>

Table 4. t-Test Analysis of the Difference in the Mean Perceptions of Parents and Teachers

Respondent	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	p	Decision
Parents	215	2.75	.29	262	1.421	.079	NS
Teachers	49	2.85	.27				

NS = Not significant

characteristics of the parents and teachers on their perceptions of policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education. The analysis reveals a low negative relationship between their age and perception ( $\beta = -.086$ ), a low positive correlation between teachers' marital status and mean perception ( $\beta = .331$ ) a low negative correlation between teachers' race and mean perception ( $\beta = -.348$ ). Table 5 also reveals a low negative correlation between parents' level of education and their mean perception ( $\beta = -.018$ ), a low negative relationship

between parents' occupation and their mean perception ( $\beta = -.108$ ) and a low positive correlation between parents' position and their mean perception on policies related to fathers' engagement in the children's early education ( $\beta = .073$ ).

**Ho2:** Demographic characteristics do not significantly influence parents' and teachers' perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education.

Table 5 reveals that teachers' demographic characteristics (i.e., age, marital status and race) as well as those of the teachers (i.e., level of education, occupation and position) have no significant influences on their perceptions regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education,  $t = -.803, p = .424$ ;  $t = 1.664, p = .099$ ;  $t = -1.774, p = .079$ ;  $t = -.100, p = .920$ ;  $t = -.885, p = .377$  and  $t = .473, p = .637$ . This implies that the mean perceptions of both parents and teachers regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education are not influenced by their demographic characteristics.

Table 5. *Multiple Regression Analysis of the Influences of Participants Demographic Characteristics*

Model	Demographic characteristics	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.790	.183		15.208	.000
	Teachers Age	-.075	.093	-.086	-.803	.424
	Teachers Marital Status	.199	.120	.331	1.664	.099
	Teachers Race	-.078	.044	-.348	-1.774	.079
1	(Constant)	2.756	.069		39.927	.000
	Parents Level of Education	-.004	.036	-.018	-.100	.920
	Parents Occupation	-.032	.036	-.108	-.885	.377
	Parents Position	.044	.093	.073	.473	.637

a. Dependent Variables: Teachers' and parents' scores

$\beta =$  Standardized Coefficients (Beta)

## Discussions

From the above, it can be seen that both parents and teachers have positive perceptions

regarding policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education. The perceptions of parents and teachers regarding policies that can improve fathers' engagement in children's early education include working out education policy on parents' support; making policy on allowing parents as co-educators/caregivers; having policy on family learning program; having policy that allows fathers to contribute to school activities; making provision of language policy in school; school policies being made known to the fathers; school, teachers and fathers working together harmoniously; ensuring that school goals are in line with the wishes of the fathers; providing adequate support for fathers of children who have difficulty in their learning will encourage fathers' engagement and schools making fathers important encourages them to get involved among others.

Findings from this study are consistent with other studies (Kim & Quinn, 2013; Chopra, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2014; Nazneen & Chopra, 2016; Wilder research, 2016; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017; Kim & Quinn, 2017; Kim et al., 2016, 2017; Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017; Stein, 2017; Tollestrup, 2018; Axford et al., 2019; Van der Gaag et al., 2019). For Chopra (2014), having programs that give men responsibility of ensuring that they take children to school can encourage the active engagement of fathers in children's early education. This can be best practices for fatherhood as such an initiative actively engages fathers during their early years (Wilder research, 2016). In the Philippines, Nazneen and Chopra (2016) found that providing cash assistance to poor fathers and having discussion about their children's education are related policies on the fathers' engagement in children's education. According to Tollestrup (2018), fathers' engagement in the early education of their children can be improved through counselling and training on relationship skills. As opined by Van der Gaag et al. (2019), putting individual fathers' care into action is an effective strategy for positive transition to fatherhood.

In England, interventions designed to prevent or address this are not used widely, but they show some promise in international studies (Kim & Quinn, 2013; Kim et al., 2016, 2017). As revealed by Axford et al. (2019), schools in England use a wide range of activities to support fathers' engagement in their children's school-based learning such as providing parents with information or materials. Allington & McGill-Franzen (2017) revealed that engaging fathers through summer holiday practices can help to reduce the decline in children's reading development that occurs during summer holiday times. Studies have

shown that fathers and children are likely to benefit from some input on knowledge and skills from teachers before or during home-based summer learning programs (Maxwell et al., 2014; Kim & Quinn, 2017; Stein, 2017). Texting fathers over the summer may be beneficial in supporting such activity (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2017).

The above findings have educational implications for the upbringing of children. Some of the benefits of these findings are that they will equip stakeholders on the necessary policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education based on the perceptions of parents and teachers. Such policies will lead to the holistic development of the children at an early age.

### **Limitations**

The fact that only eight schools of Foundation Phase classes were involved is a limitation. Thus, future researchers can replicate the study by increasing the number of schools for adequate coverage. Also, some respondents were reluctant to fill the copies of the questionnaire and probably may have faked their responses.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Findings from of this study reveal that both parents and teachers have positive perceptions of policies related to fathers' engagement in children's early education. The study is premised on the wish that fathers are to be their children's first teachers by helping their children to learn on a daily basis. Educational practitioners need to use available resources and methods to make fathers engaged in their children's education and to let them realize the crucial roles it plays. It is imperative that government should make efforts to ensure that policies related to fathers' engagement in the early education of the children. Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are put forward: 1) Schools should implement policies that have direct focus on the fathers' engagement in the early education of their children; 2) Symposia, lectures, workshops and seminars should be organized for fathers to enable them to understand best practices that can actively engage them in their children's early education.

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