Parents’ participation in their children’s school activities is an important facet of successful education. Children gain better scores and improve in academic achievement when their parents work hand-in-hand with the school. RONNIE MMOTLANE, LOLITA WINNAAR and MBITHI WA KIVILU did a survey on who the parents are that get involved in their children’s schools.

Children’s educational experience is enhanced when parents get involved in the education of their children, creating a partnership between the school and the home of the child. Specifically, parents’ participation in activities at their children’s schools not only elevates the cultural identity of their children, but also facilitates their socialisation, attitudes and behaviour towards those around them.

Our main objective in this study was to investigate the extent to which personal traits predict parents’ participation in activities of their children’s schools.

PARENTAL PARTICIPATION

Low parental participation in activities of the school has been detected in South African black schools. In our study, parental participation implied that parents get involved, participate and attend their children’s school meetings, sport activities, leisure activities and social activities. In broader terms, parental participation implies that parents fulfil the mandate of being responsible for their children and participating in school activities.

Data collection and analysis

For our study we developed questionnaires to measure respondents’ attitudes, beliefs and opinions about participation in activities of their children’s school. These were used in face-to-face interviews with 1,364 participants who had at least one child in school.

Low parental participation in activities of the school has been detected in South African black schools.

Apart from biographical information, respondents were asked to respond to the question of how often they participated in the activities of their children’s school on a four-point scale of: very often=1, often=2, sometimes=3, and almost never=4, and further divided into high participation (very often and often=1) and low participation (almost never and sometimes=0).

Profile of survey parents

Of the 1,364 parents selected for analysis, 30% (n=954) were female and 70% (n=410) male, with a small minority (4%) between 16–24 years old, 20% between 25–34 years, 43% between 35–49 years and 33% in the 50+ year-old age group.

Factors that influence parental participation are multidimensional; however, few studies have made the effort to integrate these factors, or explain how they affect parental participation.

Parents who were married were 1.4 times more likely to participate in schooling activities than those who were never married, and this group were also more likely to participate than a single parent.

Overall, respondents’ age category, marital status, gender and LSM were the only predictors that had a significant influence on levels of participation in activities of their children’s school.

Participants in the 16–24 years age group had the lowest chance of participating in their children’s schooling, the middle age category of 35–49 years were 1.5 times more likely than those in the 50+ category to participate in their children’s schooling activities, whereas respondents in the 25–34 years category were 1.3 times more likely than those in the 50+ category to participate.

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NOT SO DIFFERENT, AFTER ALL

The results of this study are consistent with international research findings, namely that mothers are more involved in their children’s lives than fathers; and married fathers are less likely to be involved in their children’s education than fathers in single-parent families. When fathers are separated from their spouses, they are also most likely to withdraw their involvement from their children. Although some of the fathers measured in this study showed permanent involvement, the tendency for low participation in other groups still showed father involvement as a problem.

In this study we did not formulate a hypothesis to test differences between age groups, we found that parents who were within the ages 35–49 were more likely than the younger age group to participate in their children’s schooling. Race did not seem to play a role in this regard, but the fact that men were more likely to be employed than women is considered to be a factor.

The finding that respondents in the high LSM are more likely to participate than those in the low and medium LSM is also consistent with existing literature which suggests that socioeconomic class determines parental participation.

One suggestion that emerges from these findings is that there is a need to increase parental participation in order to improve on children’s education.

The study has also shown that married couples are more likely to participate in their children’s school activities than those who have never married. Marital status of parents signifies not only changes in the fertility and marriage patterns among South Africans, but is a significant predictor of the level of parental participation, a finding also consistent with research elsewhere.

Whereas the focus was traditionally put on socioeconomic status rather than any other personal characteristics as the most significant variable predictor, the results in our study show that multiple factors have an impact on parental participation.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

One suggestion that emerges from these findings is that there is a need to increase parental participation in order to improve on children’s education. This means an increase in parent participation, direct impact programmes, and interventions aimed at enhancing relationships between parents, pupils and teachers other than their governance. Making parents more aware of the need to improve their children’s education not only increases their participation in their children’s schools, but can also promote and improve the image of schools and the standard of education in general.

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