



# Experiences of parents regarding a school-readiness intervention for pre-school children facilitated by Community Health Nursing students



Mari Prinsloo\*, Marianne Reid

University of the Free State, P.O. Box 339, Internal Box 99, Nelson Mandela Avenue, Bloemfontein 9300, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

A school-readiness intervention, facilitated by Community Health Nursing (CHN) students, was conducted as an effort to provide parents with the skills to contribute towards their preschool children's early childhood development. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of parents regarding this school-readiness intervention.

The research followed a qualitative, descriptive, exploratory design. Focus group interviews gave the parents the opportunity to share their experiences of the school-readiness intervention. The data of the pilot interview as well as of the three focus groups interviews were analysed according to guidelines set by Creswell (2009).

Experiences of the parents were categorized into: emotional-, awareness-, and impact experiences. The category on emotional experiences was divided into five themes: fear, pride, trust, gratitude and relief. Awareness as category had two themes, namely difficulties and responsibilities. Awareness was further divided in sub-themes: discipline, challenging behaviors and parental involvement. The category impact was divided into themes describing the skills of the participants as well as the development noticed in the child. Development was divided into sub-themes of cognitive as well as social and emotional development.

When CHN students engage with communities through service learning, a school-readiness intervention may serve as a powerful tool to provide parents with the support that is needed to empower them with the skills to contribute towards their children's early childhood development. It may improve the parent-child relationship which is critical in the development of children.

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## 1. Introduction and background

Parental involvement is widely believed to be critical for children's early academic development. There is little doubt about the essential role of the family in early childhood when children learn at home how to take their place in the world (Durand, 2011). In disadvantaged communities, children are exposed to multiple risk factors. When one of these factors is low levels of stimulation, social and cognitive development is at risk and may result in a child not being able to develop to his/her full educational potential (Grace, Bowes, & Elcombe, 2014).

The area of research was an urban, low socioeconomic township, Heidedal, in Bloemfontein, South Africa. It is one of the oldest traditional Coloured suburbs in Bloemfontein and is situated to the southeast of the city. This mainly Christian community is plagued

by unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence and teenage pregnancies. Single-parent households operate in an area where HIV/Aids and crime are common. High room density commonly occurs. The median educational level of residents in 2012 was Grade eight. Over the past decade, the previously Coloured community has changed to a community where other cultural groups have also moved into the area (Pienaar & Van der Merwe, n.d.; Online; Walsh, Dannhauser, & Joubert, 2003). As in the rest of South Africa, early-childhood development (ECD) services, in the form of preschools, are rendered mostly by non-profit organisations (NPOs) in this area. However, parents in this community do not seem to be interested in the preschool activities of their children (Kaars, 2009).

Parents' involvement and sensitive responsiveness towards the child are crucial for preschool development (Aboud, 2007). For many years, people have been aware of the importance of parental involvement. In several studies by Epstein (1985, 1986), parental involvement refers to learning activities related to the child's schoolwork.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +27 051 4019170/0722686382.

E-mail addresses: [prinslmm@ufs.ac.za](mailto:prinslmm@ufs.ac.za) (M. Prinsloo), [reidm@ufs.ac.za](mailto:reidm@ufs.ac.za) (M. Reid).

These activities are carried out by the parents to assist their children at home and are requested by the teacher in order to share the responsibility for the education of their children with families. Fantuzzo, Tighe, and Childs (2000) support these views, calling the activities home-based involvement activities. Parental involvement also influences the relationship between parent and child, and it is through this relationship that a child develops his/her educational aspirations and desire for engaging in school. Studies show that students reported an interest in learning, a feeling of greater competence in their work and increased efforts when their parents were involved in their academic endeavours (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005; Mo & Singh, 2008). Involved parents are likely to help build positive relationships between children and their teachers, foster positive feelings about school in their children and generally support children's social and academic development – all of which may facilitate learning (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008).

Parenting in Heideidal is largely, lacking and the benefits normally derived from parenting are reduced. According to Murray, Zentner, and Yakimo (2009) parenting is a process that continues for years. Parenting is a concept that includes ideas about how parents affect their children's cognitive and behavioural development. The parenting role includes the needs of the child to be cared for (physically and emotionally), as well as the socialisation of the child. There seems to be consensus that parenting is one of the most difficult jobs that exist (Moran, Ghate, & van der Merwe, 2004). Therefore Pugh and De' Ath (1984) stated many years ago that society should provide sufficient support to enable parents to fulfil their parenting role. Parenting support is described by Moran et al. (2004) as any intervention of parents or carers aimed at reducing risks and/or promoting protective factors for their children in relation to their social, physical and emotional well-being.

Various parenting interventions have been implemented around the world, some of which specifically focus on fostering conditions that optimise child growth and development. Educational interventions aimed at parents foster more parent–child interaction and thus assist in the stimulation of children (Aboud, 2007). *Head Start*, for example, is a parenting intervention aimed at increasing parental involvement, improving parental skills and fostering better parenting. The goal of *Head Start* is to increase the school readiness of young children in low-income families. It originated as a catch-up summer school programme for low-income children and now forms part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services programmes (Chang, Park, Singh, & Sung, 2009). Other countries make use of similar parenting interventions. In a parenting intervention in rural Bangladesh, one of the aims is to foster more mother–child interaction in order to improve stimulation and nutrition of the children (Aboud, 2007). In the southern area of Northern Ireland, the *DELTA* parenting intervention, Developing Everyone's Learning and Thinking Abilities, focuses on a multidisciplinary basis using a "Parents as Partners" model (Jones, 2006). The Dutch *Opstap Opnieuw* intervention, targeting disadvantaged children between four and five years of age, is aimed at improving the cognitive and social-emotional quality of mother–child interactions in order to enhance children's cognitive and language skills (Van Steensel, 2003; Van Tuijl & Leseman, 2004). It is one of the most-used home-based programmes in the Dutch context and was originally adapted from the Israeli Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (*HIPPY*) programme. However, a limited number of interventions focused entirely on preparation of capacities required for schooling and on helping families to understand their involvement in their children's preschool education (Biersteker, 2007).

In South Africa, various government departments have responded to the right of children to education and parental support as entrenched in the Constitution of the Republic of SA

(South Africa, 1996). An array of early-childhood development (ECD) interventions developed in South Africa and was assessed and analysed by UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). This analysis reviewed home and community-based ECD intervention programmes supporting the poor, vulnerable babies and young children in South Africa. Programmes of this type operate in some South African provinces. In 2012, the majority of these programmes were run in the Western Cape (17), Eastern Cape (12) and Gauteng (12). These community and home-based ECD programmes were found to be flexible enough to accommodate to the needs of their target populations, including multiple elements and a broad approach to meet the needs of the young child in the context of the family. An example is the *HIPPY* programme with two model sites, at Diepsloot and Winterveldt, which assist mothers to master skills and attitudes to gain confidence in their ability to help their children to learn (Hippy, 2012).

If the parents were not provided with some kind of intervention to support their children, these children would possibly not meet their first educational goal – being ready for school (Starkey & Klein, 2000). The lack of opportunities for stimulation and learning that must be created at home puts children at risk of, among others, a lack of language and cognitive development. If interventions can be implemented in communities to improve educational opportunities, especially investing in the crucial early years, it "can break the cycle of deprivation" (Jones, 2006). This cycle of deprivation includes a lack of language and cognitive development.

Against this backdrop, the School of Nursing at the University of the Free State places nursing students in community organisations where they learn and develop through active participation in service activities. These nursing students register for a one-year Advanced Diploma in Community Health Nursing (CHN) in the post-basic programme at the University of the Free State. This programme is aimed at students who have completed their undergraduate studies and want to obtain an additional qualification in CHN. One of the roles of CHN students as part of the Primary Health Care team is to initiate community-based primary health-care outreach services in crèches and day-care centres (South Africa, Department of Health, 2011). Service Learning is used for community engagement, where the academic curriculum of the student is combined with service to and in the community (Osman & Peterson, 2013). In the study that is reported here, the CHN students introduced the school-readiness intervention to the parents of children in the preschool of a non-profit organization (NPO), Reach our Communities Foundation (ROC).

The aim of the intervention was to foster more parent–child interaction and assist parents in the stimulation of their preschool children. The school-readiness intervention was aimed at providing parents with the skills to contribute to their children's educational and intellectual development. This intervention took place between 2010 and 2012, consisting of initial assessments of the children's readiness for school, followed by home visits to the specific children's parents. In order to prepare the children for school readiness, intervention plans were compiled, based on individual assessment and literature recommendations. Lecturers discussed these planned interventions with students before the students visited the parents again to implement the interventions required.

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of parents regarding this school-readiness intervention for preschool children facilitated by nursing students.

## 2. Methods

A qualitative, descriptive and explorative research design that was contextual in origin was used. The intention of this qualitative study was to see through the eyes of the participants, whilst

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