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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGIES IN FIJI SCHOOLS - A REVIEW.

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#### Abstract

Parental engagement in children's education has been an effective resource for enlightening student achievement and has been very instrumental in the lives of students, teachers and the school (Banda, Coleman and Matuszny, 2007). Many benefits of parental engagement in schools have been acknowledged in educational literature and quite a number of researchers have highlighted that parental involvement in education gives rise to greater student achievement. In this paper, Ministry of Education, Fiji's reform on Parental Engagement Framework and Strategies has been reviewed. Firstly, the paper explains what parental engagement is and highlights the parental engagement framework and strategies, Next, it discusses the purpose of the reform and highlights its strengths and weaknesses. In addition, it discusses how the reform has affected me as a teacher. Furthermore, the impact of this reform on the teaching and learning process and student learning outcomes is discussed. Finally, some recommendations have been made to improve the reform on parental engagement framework and strategies. The essay concludes that parents are the most important partner in children's' education and schools can reap large benefits by taking advantage of their support.

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#### Introduction:-

LaBahn (1995) identifies parental involvement not only as commitment of parents to the school and to the students but, also as their active participation in their children's education. Children who have been guided by their parents at an early age tend to have better learning outcomes and good cognitive development. According to Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2004), for children's' early development, parents identity is less important than what they are actually doing to enhance children's cognition. That is, parents' occupation, education or income is less important than the activities parents are engaged in to improve children's intellectual and social development.

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2005), defines successful parental involvement as the active, ongoing participation of a parent or primary caregiver in the education of his or her child. Parental involvement at home can be demonstrated by actively reading with the children, helping them with their homework, and discussing school events whereas at school it can be demonstrated by attending to school functions or helping in classrooms as volunteers. Schools which involve parental engagement, communicate with parents regularly, and incorporate them into the learning process. (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2005).

In this essay, Ministry of Education, Fiji's reform on Parental engagement framework and strategies has been highlighted. Secondly, the purpose of this reform will be discussed. Moreover, the strengths and weaknesses of this reform will be highlighted. In addition, it will discuss how the reform has affected me as a teacher. Furthermore, the impact of this reform on the teaching and learning process and student learning outcomes is discussed. Finally, some recommendations will be made to improve the reform on parental engagement framework and strategies. The essay will conclude that parents are the most important partner in children's education and schools can reap large benefits by taking advantage of their support.

### **Background:-**

Parental engagement framework and strategies is basically about actively engaging parents in their Children's education. (Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts. 2016). The framework highlights the importance of parental support in molding children to achieve success in life. It emphasizes that school needs to understand and recognize the roles of parents in their child's education. The importance is given to home influence in terms of parental support and intervention out of all the factors that affect a child's education. The reform highlights that effective parental engagement in children's education is more than just participation in school meetings and fundraising event, but is engaging effectively with children's learning both at home and school:

The reform highlights some of the aspects of good and responsible parenting. Firstly, it talks about how the parents can provide a caring and motivating home environment for learning by emphasizing the importance of education. Parents need to spend quality time with their children every day and must ensure that the child has had enough rest, has done morning chores, has had enough breakfast and taken lunch parcel, has enough bus fare and spending money, is dressed neatly and the personal hygiene has been considered before the child goes to school. After school, parents also need to ensure that children have reached home safely and on time, provide refreshment, ask about what they have done at school and whether it was interesting, check their lunch box to see that they had eaten lunch, help children in their homework and also in completing any school work and encourage children in reading a story book and ask questions on the reading to enhance comprehending skills. (Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts. 2016.: 4-5).

Secondly, the reform states that parents and guardians need to have regular communications with the school to strengthen the relationship between the parents, teachers and school. These communications can be interpreted in school and class newsletters whereby term planners are given highlighting the important events and activities that would unfold in various weeks and in general academic performance of the students. In addition, school needs to organize Community and Parental Support (CAPS) meetings to discuss about the school activities and highlight problems which are faced at the school in fostering children's education in terms of not doing homework, incomplete work, discipline, truancy to name a few and how they can be minimized.

Moreover, the need to have outreach programme and pocket meetings is also encouraged to allow the school to go out to the community and discuss about the school issues and bring awareness about school activities. The reform also encourages parents to take active participation in school meetings and Annual General Meetings (AGM) to discuss issues pertaining to children's education and attend to parent teacher interviews to learn about their children's performance at school.

Furthermore, some of the parental engagement strategies highlighted in the reform includes; firstly, parents to be invited to school events such as in sports activities, prefects induction, prize giving day, cultural events, national and international day's programmes, careers expo and have standard operating procedures for all these events. Secondly, involving parents to assist in establishing Parent Teacher Association (PTA) with a constitution that clearly states its motives as to assist the school and the school board in the activities of the school and strengthening understanding between teachers and parents. Thirdly, parents to attend orientation programme of the school to discuss about various subjects combination at school, career choices and opportunities and discuss about school development and improvement programmes. Furthermore, parents to take suggestions on home conditions that support learning. These home conditions include; limiting visitors, provision for study place, home study timetable, spending quality time with children, instilling good values in children, providing safe and secure environment, providing children with school requisitions etcetera. Moreover, parents to assist in excursions and preparing children for sporting events in terms of finance, travelling with children and providing supervisions, assisting in training and help in preparing and distributing meals. In addition, parents to be invited to talk to the students on the specialized areas of knowledge and skills to inspire students to reach greater academic heights. Moreover, parents to help in setting up

commercial schemes to generate revenue for the school. Parents to help students and teachers to plan and set up projects to provide hands on real life experiences and challenges. Finally, the parental engagement framework encourages parents to work together with the school to protect the children from all forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation. (Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts. 2016.: 11-15).

**Purpose:-**

Some of the most important influences on children's education are parents, families and caregivers. When parents are positively engaged in children's education, children are more likely to perform better at school. The reform aims at engaging parents in children's education and making them realize the importance of their input and participation in their child's learning. Studies have shown that parental engagement has had a greater positive effect on children's learning process and it also been accepted and acknowledged by the policy makers in the past that parental engagement is vital for children's learning but very little had been done to identify strategies which would help to cater for the needs. (Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts. 2016.: 3). As such the Ministry of Education in Fiji came up with strategies to involve parents in their child's education for better student performance.

In order for the parents to feel better about the school, they need to become more involved with the teacher, school curriculum and the administration of the school. This would enable the parents to have sense of pride for their children's education, for the school and the community at large. Through involvement in the school, the parents will come to learn about how the school functions and thus would increase their understanding on educational process and decisions.

In addition, according to Gelfer (1991), "parent involvement in schools increases their understanding of child development in areas of physical, social, emotional and cognitive development"(p.164). This helps the parents to provide more bonding between the home experiences of the child and the educational program. Moreover, the parents and school will work in partnership and would benefit from each other when it comes to dealing with difficult situations and students (Stouffe, 1992).

Furthermore, the reform aims at increasing parental interaction and discussion with the children's learning. Parents need to gain adequate knowledge of child development so that they use less punishment on their children and show more affection and use positive reinforcement on them to make them success in school work. In addition, parents will have sound idea and understanding of the roles of a teacher and the requirements of the curriculum. Through parental engagement in schools, parents will become aware of what their children are learning and would be a great help in terms of helping their children in their studies. Moreover, parents' perception of the school will improve and they will create stronger ties and show more commitment to the school. They would become more aware and active in terms of decision making for the school regarding policies that affect their children's education (Henderson and Berla, 1994).

**Strengths:-**

There are many advantages of parental engagement in schools. Firstly, through parental involvement in schools, parents are able to know about the policies of Ministry of Education. Parents learn about the new requirements and expectation of the education ministry. They become aware of the guiding principles of schools and try to mold their child in a way that would be appropriate and suit the needs.

Secondly, the reform through the parental engagement in schools tends to motivate parents to assist their children in homework. Henderson and Berla (1994), acknowledges that parental engagement in education helps children to consistently complete homework. It also tries to enable parents to learn some of the skills of teaching through frequent visits to the school. For example, parents can learn strategies in teaching phonics by seeing and observing how teachers teach or carry out reading exercise and use the same techniques at home to assist their children in reading.

Moreover, Community and parental Support (CAPS) programmes will strengthen. Parents will be engaged in school and would take ownership of their children's learning. They would also learn about some of the difficulties that teachers face in imparting quality education to their children and would become a great asset in overcoming these difficulties. Parents would be able to reinforce behaviours and skills learnt at school in order to see that there is a continuity of good behavior, knowledge and skills even though children are at home.

In addition, the barrier between parents, community and school will be reduced. Parents will feel free to come up and discuss their children's performance with the teachers. They would feel comfortable in working together with the teachers and other stakeholders in order to achieve desired outcomes for their child. Parents through involvement in schools will be able to identify and learn about their responsibilities in education and will be aware of the changes that are happening in schools.

Furthermore, it strengthens parental support in extracurricular activities in school. Parents would be able to assist in organizing and supervising children during various events in and out of school. They could also help in taking up projects that would help the school in generating income. These projects could include constructing a proper school garden and planting and selling of vegetables, making and selling of school calendars and promoting the school at the same time, running canteens of the school on lease and giving a fixed rental amount every month, etcetera.

Finally, parents involvement in children's education improves their children's emotional well-being (Epstein, 2005). Children would feel that how special they are by seeing the support their parents are providing for them in their education. This would also enable children to show interest in their school work and give full commitment to their education in order to achieve high standards.

**Weaknesses:-**

Apart from the strengths, the reform also has some weakness. Firstly, there has been a lack of consultation in the change process as all the stakeholders were not involved in forming the parental engagement framework and strategy document. The stakeholders have very little idea about the reform as they did not contribute towards it. Unless and until there is a lot of awareness done to the general public about it, the reform could become a failure.

Secondly, most of the parents are working and they may not be able to come to school quite often to discuss and help in their Childs' education. Parents may not be able to get leave from their employers on regular basis to attend to school and monitor their children's education. This would also raise curiosity in students as to why his/her parents are not showing interest in their learning and thus could demoralize students.

Furthermore, parents are scattered due to the location and may not be able to make up to the school as the ones who are just nearby. Although the Ministry of Education, Fiji has introduced the zoning policy whereby children need to attend school in their two kilometer boundary, there are still bulk of students who are travelling from outside the zones to schools due to religious teaching and parents' workplace area. In addition, some of the parents are illiterate and may not be able to help their children at home as a literate parent would do. Some parents may not be economically stable and therefore will find it difficult to participate in all school activities. This would give rise to disparity amongst students as some will be on the gaining side and some vice versa.

Moreover, too much of parental involvement in schools is also dangerous as some confidential issues can be leaked. Parents can make up stories about issues related to school and teachers which could later cause problems. Some parents would also try to overrule the administration and put their words ahead of them.

Finally, parents fully understanding their 'limits', considering the time line between confidentiality, legal implications, rights of children and protection policies, there must be a cordial relationship established between all parties at all times. Failure to have a healthy relationship can result in conflicts amongst the school stakeholders and can ruin the name of the school and the teachers in eyes of the general public.

**How the Reform Has Affected Me as a Teacher:-**

The introduction of parental engagement framework and strategies has affected teachers both positively and negatively. The positive impacts include; firstly, parents are becoming more concern about their child's schooling and visit school to discuss about their child's performance. This has shown improvement in how children do their work that is assigned to them. Improvement in terms of test scores and overall percentage has also been noted. This has allowed me as a teacher to share weakness of children to parents so that they can work on it to make their child more productive.

Secondly, as the examination culture has been introduced again in the school system, we teachers were pressurized as how to change the mindset of children who have been enjoying with classroom based assessments for couple of years. In addition, the disciplinary issues such as bullying, fighting, swearing and stealing were also hindering child

performance in the classroom. With the introduction of parental involvement in schools, we have seen that these issues are dying out slowly as the children are aware that they are under a strict surveillance of their parents. We have also noted that children are becoming more responsible for their learning and improving slowly as far as their education is concerned.

Thirdly, parental engagement in school has also relieved some of the burdens from us teachers in terms of organizing sports related activities at school. Just recently, we had the inter house athletics meet at our school. It was encouraging to see the level of participation from the parents. They helped us teachers to mark the grounds, set up tents, field athletes for various events, act as officials and organize a colourful athletics meet.

Moreover, it has made me realize how important parents can become in organizing school functions. Recently, our school celebrated National Library Week and marked National Suicide Awareness Week. Parents were very instrumental in these two events in terms of organizing the programmes and the way they disseminated the messages of the programmes through letting their children participate in character parades, drama, and composing song for them and providing appropriate costumes to them.

Furthermore, through parent involvement in school, I have also learnt a lot about my students regarding the activities that they like doing, how they spent their leisure time, the role they play at home, their behavior and attitude at home, their strengths and weaknesses and about their home culture. All these things have helped me to design appropriate strategies and deploy suitable teaching methods in my classroom to suit my students so that they enjoy the teaching and learning process.

On the other hand, parental engagements in schools have also posed negative impacts on us teachers. Firstly, the frequent visits by parents to school distract children's learning as children tend to drive their attention from the classroom to their parents. Secondly, some parents try to be very bossy and make things go their way. In this type of situations it becomes very difficult to persuade them and tell them that, "that is how things must go". In addition, teachers feel very uncomfortable to teach children in the presence of the parents. It becomes very uneasy to teach when somebody is staring at you who is not part of your normal classroom. Finally, entertaining parents in the classroom quite often is very time consuming and also causes a lot of disturbances to the teaching and learning process.

#### **Impact on Teaching and Learning Processes:-**

According to Smith (2006), active parental engagement in schools provided a number of improvements including, firstly, their academic performances will improve. The children will score high test results and score higher grades thus increasing their percentages. The children will thrive for excellence knowing that their parents are very much particular about their education.

Secondly, the children would be motivated to learn seeing the active participation of their parents at school. They would always try to complete their homework as they know that their parents are frequently in touch with the teachers. Through lot of dialogues with parents, teachers come to know about their childrens' culture, ethos and values at home which become a key aspect in designing appropriate teaching and learning strategies for the children. This is also very much supported by Vygotsky's Cultural Historic theory which highlights that knowledge from children's culture and cultural background should form basis of teaching and learning process (Vygotsky, 1978).

Moreover, parent's involvement at school would enable them to know about the weaknesses of their child and would enable them to take remedial lessons at home. For parents who are not so educated would be able to arrange and provide for extra tuitions after school for their child.

In addition, parents would be able to know about the activities that would be unfolding in the school. This would help parents to prepare their children well for these upcoming events. Parents will have sound idea of the things happening in the school and can become part of the programmes in terms of organizing and helping in the events.

Furthermore, seeing how some parents are involved in their child's education would build interest in other parents who are least bothered about the education of their children. They would feel sense of belonging to teaching and learning process (Smith, 2006). This would help to make our schools grow in terms of academic outputs and help underperforming children to succeed seeing how their friends with parental support excel in their work.



Finally, parental engagement in school allows parents to monitor school and classroom activities and work in partnership with the teachers to encourage good classroom behavior and ensure that children complete all assigned classroom work successfully (Hill and Taylor, 2004). Even students with greater parental involvement in schooling are given greater attention by teachers as they see the commitment the parents have for their child. These students' problems are also identified at earlier stage and recommendations are made for better student learning (Zill and Nord, 1994).

#### **Impact on Student Learning Outcomes:-**

The key benefit of parental engagement in schools is the improvement in student achievement. According to Loucks (1992), "Research shows that parent involvement in the school results in improved student achievement" (p. 19). When children see that their parents are very much concerned about their learning, they tend to become more serious about their learning. They tend to do all their school work on time, complete their homework and notes and spend quality time in studying. Improvement in the achievement of the student is the key benefit of parental engagement in school. If parents show greater concern in the education of their children, it will produce greater achievement on the part of the students.

It has also been highlighted by Henderson and Berla (1994) that through parental engagement, children tend to achieve more regardless of their race or ethnic background and socioeconomic status. Children tend to achieve better grades, test results and also show improvement in their attendance. Children with positive attitude towards education would show improvement in behavior and suspension for disciplinary reasons would improve.

According to Epstein, et.al (2002), there is very little understanding between teachers, parents and students regarding each other's interest in schooling. Through parental engagement in schools, teachers would be able to know the goals that parents have for their children and also the parents would be able to know about the educational programmes at school and what is required of them at their children's school. A true partnership needs to exist between the school and families in order to obtain student achievement. When the gap between the culture at school and culture at home is bridged, children from diverse cultural background will perform better (Henderson and Berla, 1994).

Furthermore, fewer children would be placed in remedial classes as their parents would also be monitoring their performances at home. Children would be getting extra support at home which would boost their understanding of ideas learnt at school.

#### **Recommendations to Improve Parental Engagement Framework:-**

Some of the recommendations to improve the parental engagement framework and strategy are; firstly, the reform has not gone through the consultative process with all the stakeholders who are affected by it therefore it becomes very important to review the reform so that all the stakeholders are aware and have some input in the reform. We must remember that change is a process and includes acceptance, adaptation and institutionalization of change by individuals, the school organization and the local school community (Speck, 1996).

Secondly, Ministry of Education, Fiji needs to organize outreach programmes to enlighten parents, create awareness of its importance amongst parents especially in remote areas. They need to educate parents on the importance of their engagement in their children's learning. In addition, more workshops for parents and caregivers need to be organized and greater awareness needs to be done through the use of readily available media such as television, radio and newspapers whereby the parental engagement framework can be explained to the parents and caregivers in a more reliable and encouraging manner.

In addition, Ministry of Education, Fiji needs to provide the parental engagement framework and strategy document not only in English but also in the major spoken languages that are used in Fiji (I-Taukei, Hindi, Urdu and Rotuman) so that it becomes easy for the parents to read and understand the new reform properly.

Moreover, the reform on parental engagement in schools should have been pilot first for some schools before the whole of Fiji and Rotuma takes it on board. Sarason (1990), highlights that the failure of any school reforms is not because the idea is not good, but it is due to how those ideas were implemented. Piloting the reform would have enabled the education ministry to see and easily monitor the effect of it on students, parents, teachers and the school before imposing it on the whole of Fiji and Rotuma schools.

### Conclusion:-

To conclude, parents are seen as the most important partner in children's education and schools can benefit a lot by taking advantage of the parents support. Parental engagement in schools not only improves children's morale, attitude and academic achievements but also strengthens good behavior and social adjustments. In addition, parents also learn about how schools operate and they develop positive attitude towards the school, become more responsible in their children's education and become active in the community. The parental engagement framework and strategy can become a very instrumental tool in improving the standard of our students if it is positively implemented and taken by all the stakeholders. If all the stakeholders work in partnership following the parental engagement framework in a professional manner, it will have great positive effect on students learning outcomes. However, while there are a lot of positives brought about by Parental Engagement Framework and Strategies policy of Ministry of Education, Fiji, there are a few weaknesses that have been identified in this essay for which some fresh recommendations have been suggested.

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