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The effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration in preventing learner pregnancy in secondary schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa: Implications for leadership

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This study focused on the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration in the prevention of learner pregnancy in secondary schools. Literature indicates that teamwork is a powerful tool for positive results and that stakeholder collaboration is key to preventing learner pregnancy. The author believes that formal and informal collaboration are important for collaboration to be effective. Teamwork as a societal aspect has been marginalised and is seemingly insignificant. A qualitative approach, grounded on the foundation of collaborative leadership, was adopted in the study. Four stakeholders were selected in each of the purposively selected secondary schools. Data was collected using semi-structured individual interviews. Thematic data analysis indicated that stakeholders' collaboration was effective in both schools; thus, learner pregnancies decreased. The importance of formal and informal collaboration was also emphasised. Trust among stakeholders was developed and general effective running of schools was observed. The study concludes that stakeholder collaboration is not only important for the prevention of learner pregnancies in these schools, but is also important for every organisation's effectiveness. Special training on collaboration for stakeholders at other secondary schools is recommended, and schools are encouraged to use collaborative leadership as model to build a constructive and fruitful atmosphere for all stakeholders.

Keywords: collaborative leadership; learner pregnancy; prevention of learner pregnancy; roles of stakeholders; sexuality education; stakeholder collaboration; strategies for the prevention of learner pregnancies

Introduction

When thinking about collaboration, two concepts from my formative years come to mind. These are the concepts "*ilima*" and "*imbizo*." *Ilima* refers to teamwork required whenever a task or project needs to be completed in a short space of time. *Imbizo* refers to when a chief or headman calls people from the community to gather in one place to share ideas and suggest strategies to achieve a community goal. Both *ilima* and *imbizo* represent informal collaboration and demonstrate the power of working together as a team, hence; their inclusion in this study. Generally, in the African set-up, the upbringing of a child is a collaborative enterprise entered into, not only by the parents, guardians and relatives, but by the wider community. The school adds a formal dimension of upbringing. One challenge that has beset the school system, affects the family system and negatively impacts global systems, is learner pregnancy.

Over time learner pregnancies have negatively affected economies globally. Wind (2015) notes that government expenditure on unpremeditated pregnancies in the United States (US) totalled \$21 billion in 2010, and in 2011 \$12 billion dollars was spent on medical care for women with unintended pregnancies and infants conceived unintentionally (Monea & Thomas, 2011). The above expenditure indicates that unplanned pregnancies in the U.S. are likely to consume a huge portion of the taxpayers' money.

Learner pregnancies have also had a negative effect on the South African economy. Reviewed literature reveals that learners who fall pregnant drop out of school, which affects their chances of being employed. This, in turn, leads to the family income being affected as the learner and her baby become dependent on the learner's parents (The Skills Portal, 2012). Solomon (2013) maintains that in South Africa a total of 11.2 million child support grants were paid out at a cost of ± R40 billion in 2012. A lot of taxpayers' money is thus utilised for the maintenance of unplanned children, which can negatively affect the economy. It is apparent that by preventing or decreasing learner pregnancies in South Africa can contribute greatly to improving the economy.

Literature Review

Decline in learner pregnancy

A considerable decline in the learner pregnancy rate was reported in the district where the two participating schools are situated. Previously, the district had high learner pregnancy rates of 847 in 2011 and 857 in 2012 (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2014). In 2013, there was a sharp decrease to 422 learner pregnancies (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2014). The statistics concur with Skade's (2012) observation that the fertility rate in South Africa has dropped during that time. Another study showed that there has been a decrease in learner pregnancies from 2015 to 2016. Fifteen thousand five hundred and four learner pregnancies were reported in South African schools in 2015, while only 8,732 were reported in 2016 (Andersen, 2017). The extent to which stakeholder collaboration can be credited for the decline is not clear, but a developing country like South Africa welcomes the decline in learner pregnancies because it could have a significant impact on the economy in the near future.

The birth rate in Africa declined from 122 births per 1,000 between 1990 and 1995, to 98 for the period between 2010 and 2015 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015). From international literature it seems as though the same trend applies internationally. Roser (2016) indicates that half of the world's population is already below the replacement ratio (which means fertility is lower than what it has been or expected to be). Howe (2017) reports a decline in the birth rate among younger people, with the steepest decline in the United States. Although the decline reported by Howe (2017) points to younger people without the age range being stipulated, one would assume that it includes learners because they are also younger people. It is unclear whether this is attributed to the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration in the prevention of learner pregnancy or if there is another reason. Some authors attribute the decline of learner pregnancy decline to prevention programmes and sexuality education directed at learners (As teenage pregnancies decline, so do preterm births, 2016; Patten & Livingston, 2016). Statistics from the reviewed literature on learner pregnancies clearly indicates that there has been a significant decline worldwide, but little has been said about the cause of the decline, hence, the exploration of the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration. Below I review studies on how this decline in learner pregnancy impacts the economy.

How the decline in learner pregnancy impacts the economy

The decline in learner pregnancy positively affects the economy. According to the National Conference of State Legislature (2018), \$4.4 billion of public funds was saved through the decline in births among teenagers in the U.S. Statistics reveal that one high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost earnings and taxes (Culp-Ressler, 2012). Should that one learner not drop out and manage to graduate, the nation is likely to benefit nearly \$154 billion in additional income over the course of that learner's lifetime. Studies have shown that pregnant learner dropouts in South Africa lowers these learners' chances of finding employment. This also lowers the family income and results in the young mothers depending on their parents and grandparents to provide for their newborn babies (The Skills Portal, 2012). Another study conducted in South Africa (Phoku, 2009) reports that few teenage mothers apply for Child Support Grants (CSG). Only 20% of teenage mothers access CSG, which is contrary to the sentiment that girls fall pregnant to access this grant (Gina, 2017). Although not much literature exists on the impact of the decline of learner pregnancy on a country's economy, the few available studies (Gina, 2017; National Conference

of State Legislature, 2018; The Skills Portal, 2012) indicate that the decline in learner pregnancy has a positive impact on the economy of any country.

Effectiveness of collaboration

The former U.S. first lady, Hillary Clinton, once quoted the African proverb "it takes a community to raise a child" or "to build the nation" (Clinton, 2006). This seems to continue to be relevant even in this era. Working together as a team can lead to better results than working as individuals. This is in line with John-Steiner's (2000) view that when stakeholders engage in collaborative work, they learn from each other by revealing what they know and sharing ideas.

Numerous authors have discussed collaboration and its effectiveness in different ways. Halonen, Atkins, Hakulinen, Pesonen and Uitti (2017) identify a clear definition of roles and flexibility as a prerequisite for effective collaboration, while other studies postulate that collaboration can result in better, more effective management of natural resources and environmental quality (Yaffee, 2002). Collaboration generates wiser and more durable decisions, fosters action, and promotes change (Yaffee, 2002). It involves complementary skills from team members, shared working approaches, and mutual accountability among all members (Katzenbech & Smith, 2003). Gardner (2005) frames the relationship between collaboration and teamwork as the most important aspect of teamwork, but certainly not the only dimension.

When stakeholders collaborate, the results tend to be positive. For example, Klein, Sabaratnam, Pazoz, Auerbach, Havens and Brach (2005) conducted a study on parents as primary sexual educators in the United States of America. They found that there was a decrease in pregnancy where there was greater parent-child communication about sexuality. Forming profound trust with parents and involving them in school activities as well as in the learners' studies can help to improve educational outcomes such as grade and test scores, as well as building self-esteem and decreasing the dropout rate (Wight, Williamson & Henderson, 2006).

The above perceptions about collaboration by different authors mean that teaching in a collaborative environment allows stakeholders to divide the tasks, making classroom activities more manageable.

This study sought to explore the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration in the prevention of learner pregnancy through an in-depth understanding of whether the decline in learner pregnancy rates in two schools in one educational district of the Eastern Cape was due to the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration. The findings of the study are envisaged to contribute to the economy of the country through informing the

schools about how stakeholder collaboration can be used effectively in the prevention of learner pregnancy. The main research question directing the study was: "Is stakeholders' collaboration in the prevention of learner pregnancy effective?" The objective was to determine the extent to which stakeholders' collaboration is effective in the prevention of learner pregnancies in secondary schools.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in the collaborative leadership framework (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). Collaborative leadership occurs when one brings appropriate people who possess good information together in constructive ways. They will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organisation or community (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). Hurley (2011) seems to agree with Chrislip and Larson (1994) in saying that collaborative leadership is grounded in the belief that all of us together can be smarter, more creative, and more competent than any of us alone. I explain the effectiveness of stakeholders' collaboration in the prevention of learner pregnancy in secondary schools based on this theory. I am of the view that stakeholders working together could be effective in the prevention of learner pregnancies and there is a relationship between learner pregnancy and collaboration among parents, teachers, and school managers in secondary schools. The collaboration of these stakeholders in secondary schools could decrease learner pregnancies. I concur with the above sentiments, because working together as a team can lead to better results than working as individuals. This includes formal and informal collaboration among stakeholders.

In this research study, parents, teachers, and school managers in the two secondary schools were the appropriate people brought together to solve the problem of learner pregnancy in their schools.

Methodology

This study was constructed from an interpretivist stance using a qualitative research approach. A case study design was employed to explore the complexity of the effectiveness of stakeholder collaboration in the prevention of learner pregnancy. This helped to gain an in-depth understanding of stakeholders' experiences as they collaborate in the prevention of learner pregnancies (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

The target population in this study was school managers (SMs), Life Orientation teachers (LOTS), parent-members of the school governing bodies (PSGBs), and parents who were not members of the school governing bodies (PNSGBs) in one educational district in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The two purposively selected secondary

schools were chosen on the basis that they had both experienced high learner pregnancies in recent years, which have since decreased.

One of the schools was in a community that initiated collaboration with the school and implemented a virginity testing programme in the community (School A). Parents from this community were staunch believers in abstinence only as a way of preventing pregnancy. The second school (School B) had a timetable that included parent sessions with learners, and they used comprehensive sexuality education as a collaborative strategy.

In each secondary school, four purposively selected participants were sampled (a Life Orientation teacher (LOT), a school manager (SM), a parent from the school governing body (PSGB) and a parent who was NOT a member of the school governing body (PNSGB). The above participants were selected based on being the most useful representatives (Babbie, 2014).

I did not focus on the size but rather on sample adequacy because I was not aiming at generalising the findings. According to Bowen (2008) adequacy of sampling is usually justified by reaching "saturation" and is used by researchers as an indication of quality (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). However, in this paper, saturation was not reached because of constraints in terms of time and financial resources and I am aware that the phenomenon could be further explored. O'Reilly and Parker (2013) support this when they explain that this does not invalidate the findings, but it means that the phenomenon has not yet been fully explored.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with one LOT, one SM, one PSGB, and one PNSGB from each of the two participating schools. The interviews focused on how stakeholders collaborated in order to prevent learner pregnancies in their schools. An interview schedule was drawn up to solicit responses that would indicate whether stakeholder collaboration in the prevention of learner pregnancy was effective. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each.

Participants' responses were recorded and transcribed. Field notes were shared with the participants, and this helped in triangulating data and provided me with another opportunity to talk to the participants. Interviews were conducted in places where the participants felt comfortable. Both school managers were interviewed in their school offices. The Life Orientation teachers were interviewed at a restaurant away from their schools and the parents were interviewed at their homes. Interview transcripts were coded, from which themes emerged. A thematic analysis was

employed (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants' verbatim quotes were used, where appropriate, to support themes.

To ensure trustworthiness of the research study, the following four criteria were considered: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Eastern Cape Provincial and District Departments of Basic Education, as well as the principals of the two secondary schools. Conditions of participation and the purpose of the study were explained to the participants and informed consent forms were signed. The two schools were named School A and School B to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were named using A and B to indicate the different schools: the Life Orientation teacher from school A was LOTA and from school B, LOTB, SMA and SMB, PSGBA and PSGBB, and PNSGBA and PNSGBB. I obtained ethical clearance to conduct the study from the Walter Sisulu University where I completed my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) study.

Results

The study focused on stakeholder practices in the two schools regarding the prevention of learner pregnancies. The results of this qualitative research are presented as themes. Precise quotes of the participants are used to demonstrate what emerged in the findings. Responses that were given in isiXhosa, the mother tongue of most of the participants, were translated into English.

Two themes were identified. The first theme reveals what participants identified as the qualities of their collaboration, which involve participants' experiences of when they collaborate with the aim of preventing learner pregnancy. The second theme indicates other gains from the collaboration of stakeholders, which includes participants' practical experiences regarding other gains of stakeholder collaboration.

Theme 1: Qualities of Effective Stakeholder Collaboration

A number of qualities regarding effective stakeholder collaboration were indicated. These included working together, dedication, trust, delegation, sharing ideas, transparency, regular meetings, implementation of decisions, and regular feedback. Findings from this study agree with findings from previous studies by Chrislip and Larson (1994), Hurley (2011), John-Steiner (2000) and Yaffee (2002).

All participants indicated that learner pregnancies decreased in their schools, a trend that is supported by literature (Andersen, 2017; As teenage pregnancies decline, so do preterm births, 2016; Howe, 2017; Klein et al., 2005; Patten &

Livingston, 2016; Pretorius, 2016; Roser, 2016; Skade, 2012). Participants indicated that having the same goals as the stakeholders helped them to work together with dedication. It further influenced them to strive to achieve their goal, which was the prevention of learner pregnancies. It was revealed that this could only be achieved when there was transparency among all stakeholders. Although participants were aware of the fact that they supported different approaches to the issue, with some believing in abstinence while others believed in comprehensive sexuality education, they also learnt to trust each other in the process.

The following were some of the sentiments shared by participants in both schools:

SMA: All stakeholders in our school were dedicated in working together. We all knew who does what because we delegated one another though we differed on the approaches used. And the important part of this is that we had good results – learner pregnancies decreased in our school.

SMB echoed these sentiments:

Working as a team with all stakeholders having the same approach and with the same goal helped us to decrease learner pregnancy in our school. This was achieved through trust, dedication, and transparency.

The sentiments raised by the SMA above were supported by the LOTA who said:

Collaboration among stakeholders was key for us to prevent learner pregnancies. Each stakeholder did what s/he was delegated to do. The only thing that could have been a problem – but was not – was working together though having conflicting approaches. As a result of that learner pregnancies decreased in our school.

LOTB agreed with these sentiments, except regarding the different approaches.

In School A and School B, PSGBs and PNSGBs concurred that working together towards the same goal calls for dedication, transparency, and trust. The slight difference was that parents from School A believed in abstinence while parents from School B believed in comprehensive sexuality education. The following is how parents from School A responded:

Collaborating, with trust and dedication, helped us to decrease learner pregnancy in our school although as parents we only believed in abstinence, which was contrary to teachers' beliefs.

PNSGBA supported what other participants said in her school:

As parents of School A, we do not compromise our belief that abstinence only can prevent learner pregnancy. Through teaching abstinence in our school, learner pregnancies decreased. This cannot be attributed to parents only but to stakeholders' dedication and trust when collaborating.

Parents from School B were adamant that learners should be taught comprehensive sexuality education so that they can make their own choices

between abstaining or indulging in sexual activities. This is how PNSGGBB responded:

For a school to succeed in preventing learner pregnancy, stakeholders need to collaboratively teach learners everything they need to understand about sexuality education. All stakeholders must be dedicated, trusting, and transparent in this.

Furthermore, all stakeholders from both schools reported that for stakeholder collaboration to be effective in a school, they needed to have regular meetings and feedback. Another aspect indicated as vital was the implementation of decisions by the school managers. The following were the sentiments raised by some of the participants in both schools.

A SMB said:

In my experiences I discovered that stakeholder collaboration can never be effective if we do not have regular meetings and feedback. During these meetings we make decisions that need to be implemented and the relevant person for this is the school manager.

LOTA supported this:

Effective stakeholder collaboration does not exist without regular meetings, feedback, and implementation of decisions made.

PSGBA also concurred with the sentiments:

Regular meetings, feedback, and implementation of decisions are key to effective stakeholders' collaboration.

Theme 2: Gains from Stakeholder Collaboration

The participants felt that as a result of stakeholder collaboration there was a decrease in learner pregnancies in the two schools where the research study was conducted. Participants further indicated gains from stakeholder collaboration such as acquiring knowledge through sharing ideas, gaining knowledge about sexuality education, gaining confidence to talk about sex education, the development of teamwork, and the smooth running of the schools.

All participants indicated that although stakeholder collaboration focused on the prevention of learner pregnancies, a number of other positive aspects were achieved. This is indicated by the following participant responses.

SMA said:

In our school we achieved far more than we had targeted through stakeholders' collaboration. Learner pregnancies decreased, which was our main goal, and on top of that, teamwork has been developed amongst all stakeholders in our school and that is helping with the smooth running of the school.

LOTB shared the same sentiments as the school manager of School A by indicating that, "stakeholders' collaboration has helped us to gain knowledge through sharing ideas and also build teamwork that helps in the smooth running of our school."

Other points that stemmed from the parents' responses (both PSGBs and PNSGBs) included that

parents had gained confidence in their ability to talk with their children about sex education, and stakeholder collaboration led to teamwork. This meant collaborative teamwork resulted in the general smooth running of the schools.

The PNSGGBB mentioned the following:

Through stakeholder collaboration we have gained knowledge on how to guide learners and on how to handle our own children at home. We gained further knowledge on guiding and supporting learners who are already pregnant but, most of all, we gain confidence of talking to learners about how to prevent learner pregnancies.

All of the above sentiments seem to reveal that through stakeholder collaboration learner pregnancies decreased in the two schools. Furthermore, a number of aspects such as teamwork, acquiring knowledge, and confidence to teach sexuality education, and the smooth running of the schools were also achieved.

Discussion

From the findings it is clear that the participants thought that certain qualities should be manifested in stakeholder collaboration. All participants indicated that having the same goals as the stakeholders helped them to work together with dedication. Stakeholder collaboration influenced them to strive to achieve their goal, which was the prevention of learner pregnancies. The participants seemed to qualify to be called collaborative leaders because they brought together people who possessed the relevant information of what they wanted and what they needed to do to prevent learner pregnancies in their schools. This is what Chrislip and Larson (1994) state in their theory, which forms the theoretical framework of this study.

Participants from the selected secondary schools in this study differed in the strategies they used to prevent learner pregnancies. One school's parents were staunch believers in abstinence only, and those parents were allowed to teach learners about abstinence. In the other school all the stakeholders believed in comprehensive sexuality education. However, both schools reported positive results as outcomes of their stakeholder collaboration. Participants indicated that collaboration among all stakeholders was key in the prevention of learner pregnancies. The significance of this study was to show how stakeholder collaboration can prevent learner pregnancies in secondary schools. In this study participants indicated that stakeholders working together can be smarter, more creative, and more competent than those working alone (Hurley, 2011). The participants also highlighted implementation of decisions by school managers as a vital aspect in achieving their goal. This is one of the several aspects that collaborative leadership requires (De Meyer, 2009).

Other authors reported a fertility rate drop among learners and a decline in learner pregnancies due to working together or the involvement of parents (Andersen, 2017; Howe, 2017; Klein et al., 2005; Pretorius, 2016; Roser, 2016; Skade, 2012). *JAMA* (As teenage pregnancies decline, so do preterm births, 2016) and Patten and Livingston (2016) suggest that a decline in learner pregnancies could be attributed to the collaborative efforts of different stakeholders. Findings of this study indicate that stakeholder collaboration was effective in decreasing the number of learner pregnancies and I argue that it can contribute to the South African economy. Literature indicates that learner pregnancy leads to high learner dropouts, which lowers their chances of finding employment, and lowers the family income. Although the findings of this study cannot be generalised, stakeholders at schools can practise what the stakeholders of the two schools did and experience learner pregnancy declines in their schools. Should any school practise what was done in these two schools, it can decrease learner pregnancy and contribute to the economy. Countries could gradually save money. This concurs with the findings in one study that indicated that through declines in teenage births, public funds were saved (National Conference of State Legislature, 2018).

Furthermore, the results indicate that learners and stakeholders acquired knowledge by way of stakeholder collaboration. All participants claimed to have gained knowledge on how to guide learners and on how to handle their own children at home. All stakeholders were of the view that the learners were more knowledgeable about sexual education than they would have been if only LOTs taught them during Life Orientation school lessons. John-Steiner (2000) argues that when stakeholders engage in collaborative work, they learn from each other by revealing what they know and by sharing ideas.

Parents indicated that they gained knowledge about sex education in dealing with their own children and other teenagers in the community. Another point that stemmed from the parents' responses (both PSGBs and PNSGBs) was that all parents gained confidence in their ability to talk with their children about sex education. Creating meaningful partnerships with parents and involving them in school activities as well as in their children's studies, can help to improve educational outcomes such as grade and test scores. It also has the added benefit of building self-esteem and decreasing the school dropout rate (Wight et al., 2006).

This study revealed that teamwork developed through collaboration. It was also established that collaboration contributes to the smooth running of the school and Yaffee (2002) states that collaboration can result in better, more effective

management of natural resources and environmental quality. It also generates wiser decisions, fosters action, and promotes change. Stakeholders in the two secondary schools collaborated in the face of one big problem, which resulted in the smooth running of the school.

It became clear that stakeholder collaboration was effective in the two schools where the study was conducted. Learner pregnancies decreased and stakeholder collaboration led to other achievements. It is important to note that collaboration in this study took place among stakeholders of different academic levels, which included illiterate parents whose capabilities are usually marginalised, yet it yielded effective outcomes. Formal and informal collaboration contributed towards achieving the stakeholders' goal.

Recommendations

This research paper confirms what a number of authors have alluded to, namely that collaboration is one of the best tools for effective organisations. The participants from the two schools were clear about how stakeholders worked together to achieve their goal in the different schools. It is therefore, recommended that special training for all secondary schools in stakeholder collaboration be conducted. It is further recommended that schools should use collaborative leadership as a model to build a constructive and fruitful atmosphere for all stakeholders.

Conclusion

While the findings of this study may not be generalisable, they succeeded to point that stakeholder collaboration was effective in the prevention of learner pregnancies. Using stakeholder collaboration resulted in a decline in learner pregnancies in the two schools. The stakeholders' collaborative efforts in preventing learner pregnancies were successful. Stakeholders did not only succeed in preventing learner pregnancies, but also obtained other benefits of collaboration. These include the smooth running of schools, gaining knowledge from sharing ideas and gaining trust in each other, to mention a few. In light of these findings, I conclude that collaboration is important – not only for the prevention of learner pregnancies in secondary schools, but also for every organisation's effectiveness. When stakeholders come together, think together about how to solve the problems they face, share their views and ideas, support each other, and plan the strategies of achieving their goals together, the result is effectiveness.

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Notes

- i. This article reports on one objective of a larger study (unpublished thesis) conducted in 2015.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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