Stepping into the shoes of absent parents to provide educational support: voices of house parents at a Children's Home, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement is recognised as a significant factor in education globally. However, evidence suggests a scarcity of research focusing on parental involvement in education of vulnerable children in South Africa. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the perspectives of house parents at Sunshine Haven Children’s Home regarding parental involvement in the education of vulnerable children. Informed by Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence, the qualitative study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a case study design. Data were obtained through focus group interviews with a group of five purposefully selected house parents at Sunshine Haven Children’s Home. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study reveal that, according to house parents’ perspectives, parental involvement in education for vulnerable children is not satisfactory. House parents experienced challenges in offering educational support, including lack of resources, lack of confidence in assisting with children homework and lack of effective communication between school and home. Therefore, the study recommends the forging of a viable partnership between teachers and house parents, the development of targeted interventions and training programmes and the allocation of resources to enhance parental involvement and ultimately improve the academic performance and wellbeing of vulnerable children.

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Introduction

The significance of parental involvement in children’s education is widely recognised as a critical factor in a child’s educational journey and in shaping the child’s academic success (Mehta & Kaur, 2022). Every child requires parental support, guidance and a nurturing environment to grow well and to strive in various aspects of life, including in education. Without children receiving help and guidance of responsible parents, they stand little chance in our society (Ngcobo, 1992). According to Omukunyi (2015) and Magagula (2015), parents’ participation in learners’ education can bring many social and emotional benefits. In the view of El Nokali, Bachman and Votruba-Drzal (2010), parental involvement refers to various activities that parents exercise either at home or in school to offer educational support. This simply means parental involvement entails the forging of home-school relations where parents and teachers partner in offering support in the educational journey of the child. Similarly, Sahin (2019) defines parental involvement in education as involving monitoring lessons and assignments, getting involved in educational games, attending parent-teacher meetings, opening communication channels with teachers, observing school performance and participating in school decision making. Such parental support is particularly crucial for children who are vulnerable (Harris & Goodall, 2007). However, countless children are not enjoying that privilege (Naidu, 1997) especially those living children at home where parents may be physically absent due to work obligations, illness, drug and alcohol abuse and other personal reasons. For instance, evidence from statistics of UNICEF 2017 reveals that globally roughly 2.7 million children were living in institutionalised care (Dozier, Zeanah, Wallin & Shaufer, 2012; De Haas, 2019). A study by Ntshongwana and Tanga (2018) a dearth of recent data on house/foster parents in South Africa. The only data available indicate that in 2011, more than 5.2 million children were reported to be both in institutional and foster care in South Africa, and this number was increasing by 6.2% every year due to the prevalence of HIV and the high poverty...
rate faced by the community (Dawes, 2011). The study by Dozier et al. (2012) notes that young children in institutional care have often been abandoned at birth or after birth for various reasons, including poverty or parental instability. On a similar note, Meintjies, Moses, Berry and Mampane (2007) report that the primary reasons children are placed under care in South Africa are abandonment, abuse, neglect and being orphaned. Mosia (2014) regards the prevalence of HIV/AIDS as one of the contributing factors to the increasing number of children without parents residing in the home. Wolff and Fesseha (1998) argue that due to social problems, extended family members of the children are not able to adopt or take care of these children. In certain situations, the government has to take action to remove these children from the care of their parents and place them in children’s homes by court order, which is authorised by the Children’s Act 38 of 2005. These institutions provide a temporary shelter for these children by giving them guidance and services in education, emotional, social, psychological, educational and spiritual development, ethics and moral support (Nurul Hazimah, Yanti Idaya Aspura & Noorhidawati, 2019). Because of the consistent absence of parental figures, children are faced with numerous significant and unique challenges, including educational challenges (Moyer, 2018). In such a situation, this necessitates substitute caregivers or house parents to step in and provide the necessary support to children to solve these problems. Importantly, according to Naidu (1997), house parents play a pivotal role in the education of children living in residential care. They are entrusted with the responsibility for the day-to-day needs and wellbeing of children under their supervision, which includes meeting their educational needs. However, scholars such as De Schipper, Marianne Riksen-Waltraven and Geurts (2006) and Omidire, AnnaMosia and Mampane (2015) argue that the quality of interaction between caregivers and children who are placed under their care depends on the level of education, training and skills of the caregivers or house parents, which have an influence on the psychological, academic and emotional development of the vulnerable children.

Sunshine Haven Children’s Home (pseudonym) is one notable example of a residential care or institution housing children who are not able to reside with their biological parents for various reasons such as neglect, abuse, exploitation, traumatisation, being orphaned and parents’ incapacity. The home was founded in 1960 and is located in Pretoria in South Africa. It is one of the projects under the Child Welfare Tshwane Projects, which is a non-profit child protection service organisation whose mission is to safeguard, protect and empower children (Van Rooyen, 2016). Sunshine Haven Children’s Home is occupied by children predominantly between the ages of 5 and 19 years from various backgrounds. The home is registered to accommodate 54 children, and each household has at least 12 children. Special school transport is available to take these children to about 17 local schools around Pretoria. Children are also allowed to participate in after-school activities. House parents at Sunshine Haven are tasked with a huge responsibility to provide not only care, but also educational support to the children under their care, thus stepping into a very challenging role that should solely be played by their biological parents. A study by Brueckmann (2023) contends that children residing in children’s homes or foster care face a myriad of challenges in educational development.

However, as far as the study has determined, no previous research has investigated or captured the voices of house parents in residential settings or children’s homes regarding the offering of educational support in children’s homes in South Africa. According to Omidire et al. (2015), the majority of research studies conducted in the past in South Africa have focused on caregivers who care for the elderly or those who are terminally ill. Moreover, despite the importance of the topic, the voices of house parents, their experiences, challenges, strategies and practices to support children’s educational journey have rarely been taken into consideration, which emphasises the need to close this gap (Omidire et al., 2015). Johnson (2020) recommends deep research on how to better prepare foster or house parents for improving the educational outcome of children under their care. Their perception and experiences provide valuable insight into how to support the education of children in their care. Therefore, this paper contributes to the current body of knowledge by providing a more comprehensive understanding of educational support in children’s homes. It does so by exploring the perspectives of house parents at Sunshine Haven Children’s Home in their attempts to step into the shoes of absent parents and by highlighting their challenges in providing educational support of the vulnerable children in their care. The study was guided by the following research questions:

i. What is the understanding and experiences of Sunshine Haven house parents of their role in supporting the education of children in their care?

ii. What are challenges faced by Sunshine Haven house parents when stepping into the role of absent parents in providing educational support within the children’s home?

Literature Review

The qualitative study was anchored on Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence; this is discussed in the section that follows. Thereafter, parental involvement in their children’s education, the study methodology, findings and conclusion are discussed.

Theory of overlapping spheres of influence

This study was conducted through the lens of the theory of overlapping spheres, which was postulated by Joyce Epstein (1987; 2010) of Johns Hopkins, a prominent scholar in the field of parental involvement. The theory emphasises the need to establish multiple spheres of influence in three interconnected settings such as family, school and community, which interact and overlap with each other in shaping the educational performance of children. According to Epstein (2018), this partnership is known as overlapping of spheres of influence in that three contexts (family, school, community) influence the learner’s development, meaning that effective
schools and families need to share an overlapping goal when it comes to caring for and developing children. The next figure illustrates the overlapping sphere of influence on the educational development of vulnerable children.

**Figure 1: overlapping sphere of influence: Adapted form Epstein (2005)**

Epstein (1995) identifies six types of parental involvement, known as Epstein’s typology of family–school community relations: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, and collaborations with communities. These areas of overlap can contribute to a child’s educational development. (i) Parenting involves parents cooperating with the school and providing children with a nurturing and supportive environment conducive for children to learn. In the context of this study, the house parents at Sunshine Haven Children’s Home have taken on the role of parenting or stepping into the shoes of absent parents, and parenting in this case entails creating a caring and stable atmosphere in the home to promote learning. (ii) Communication involves any kind of effective communication between the school and house parents or caregivers regarding the progress of the learners at school and other school-related matters. In terms of the house parents at Sunshine Haven, they open communication channels with the school and are kept informed of the educational needs and progress of the children under their care. (iii) Volunteering involves dedication and willingness to assist in school activities for the betterment of children. In the context of this study, house parents can reach out to the community and recruit volunteers who can support the educational endeavours of the children. These could be motivational speakers, mentors, tutors and other professionals from various fields who are willing to volunteer their time to offer guidance and support. (iv) With regard to learning at home, parents involve themselves by encouraging learning activities at home, which is a significant factor for a child’s educational development. In the case of the study, Sunshine Haven Children’s Home can provide house parents with all the necessary resources and guidance to create a learning-friendly environment and to be engaged in other educational activities which are outside the school timetable. (v) Decision making entails involving parents or caregivers as important decision makers regarding the education of the children under their care. The Sunshine Haven staff can collaborate with house parents when making decisions about issues affecting the education of the children under their care, such as choosing suitable schools and extramural activities that children could participate in. (vi) Finally, collaborating with the community involves working together with the community to improve the educational experiences of children. Sunshine Haven Children’s Home can invite and establish collaborations with local organisations, educational institutions and businesses to provide educational opportunities by identifying and integrating resources and enlisting the services of the community to strengthen school programmes and support for the vulnerable children. The next section deals with the role of house parents in offering educational support.

**Role of house parents in providing educational support**

House parents are regarded as being key in the education of children in the home, as they provide a nurturing and supportive environment for children who may be without a stable family (Naidu, 1997). Parents in children’s homes are responsible for the day-to-day supervision and wellbeing of the children under their care and for ensuring that their educational needs are met. As a result, the educational support provided by house parents has a significant role in the academic performance and overall growth and development of children who are not able to live with their biological parents (Naidu, 1997).

One of the ways house parents can provide educational support at children’s homes is by assisting children with homework (Mora & Escardibul, 2018). House parents can help their children with homework by ensuring that they have a quiet and conducive environment for studying (Oribiana, 2022). According to Corno (1996), homework is given to learners as a revision tool of what has been learned at school and to give children an extra opportunity to practise. Katz, Kaplan and Buzukashvily (2011) view homework as a popular and frequent instructional tool used in home-based involvement, in which parents must be involved for their child’s learning. Moreover, Tina and McComb (2008) emphasise that homework provides children with significant educational benefits, such as good study habits, teaches them to be responsible and promotes independent lifelong learning. Therefore, house parents in children’s homes could provide guidance, allow children to ask questions, provide explanations when they do not understand and assist them with completing assignments. Oribiana (2022) agrees that the parent’s role should be to offer support to the learning structure and reinforce the goals that can fulfilled through education in and out of school. Similarly, Luaña (2021) contends that parents can provide educational support by guiding children through giving examples, offering guidance by correcting their incorrect answers and by guiding them on how find answers.

Tutoring is one aspect of education where house parents could play a role. Parent tutoring involves well-organised interaction between a parent and a child on a one-to-one basis, conducted regularly, with the goal of improving the child’s learning or school achievement. Much of this tutoring takes place outside the school in the home (Hendrikse, 2000). House parents in this case could provide tutoring...
in specific subjects, especially if they have the necessary knowledge and skills to do so. Gabela (1983) agrees that parents can enhance the quality of educational services, depending on their areas of expertise.

Another role of house parents in offering educational support to vulnerable children residing in children’s homes is to assist children in developing study routines and time management. A study by Jezierski and Wall (2017) examined parental involvement in education modelling and teaching of organisational and time management skills, especially with regard to homework completion. House parents could oversee homework sessions and ensure that the children use the time effectively to complete their homework. This requires house parents to develop some routine and schedule to ensure that the children are able to fulfill their homework obligations. House parents need to monitor the use of gadgets and limit loud background sounds in the home, such as television, stereotypes and video games, which are distracting and stressful to young children, and they should either be turned off or the volume kept low when the children are studying.

Barriers that hinder house parents from offering educational support

Despite the widespread recognition of the potential benefit of house parents in supporting the education of children under their care, research indicates that there are noticeable challenges that hinder their effective participation (Humphrey-Taylor, 2015). The issue of limited time and competing responsibilities challenges house parents’ abilities to offer educational support. House parents have to balance the role of being professional and the care role (Smith, 2009), since a large portion of the time is consumed by caregiving, which basically entails them trying to build a relationship with the children in their care. House parents have a number of responsibilities to fulfil, which include managing the household, attending to children’s physical needs and creating a safe living environment for all children (Mosia, 2014). As a result, these responsibilities leave house parents with limited time and energy to support the education of the children under their care. William and Sanchez (2011) confirm that inhibiting factors to parental involvement include lack of time, resources and awareness. In the same vein, LaRocque, Kleiman and Darling (2011) affirm that it is common for parents to experience reduced opportunities to be involved in the education of their children.

Lack of training and resources can be another barrier hindering house parents from offering educational support. Based on their studies conducted in South Africa, Levin and Haines (2007) and Mosia (2014) found that a number of children’s homes are faced with the challenge of untrained caregivers and a high caregiver children ratio. Further, the ability of caregivers or house parents to engage with learners is limited by the level of education and training in childcare as well as the workload of each parent. Similarly, findings from a study by Anastasiou and Papagianni (2020) were that house parents who are not adequately trained or who lack enough resources at the children’s home may struggle to support the children’s education needs effectively. Moreover, sometimes the lack of understanding of appropriate teaching techniques or methods for fostering a supportive learning environment can be a challenge. In this regard, Patton (2019) suggests that schools and children’s homes provide more training opportunities and training to empower house parents to become more productive in supporting their children’s education. Taylor-Richardson, Heflinger and Brown (2006) underscore the need for caregivers or home parents to be equipped with skills to care for vulnerable children who may struggle with emotional and behavioural challenges due to the traumatic experiences suffered in their home of origin. Furthermore, De Schipper et al. (2006) note that the quality of interaction between house parents as caregivers and the children under their care, as well as level of education, training and skills, have an influence on the psychological, academic and emotional development of vulnerable children.

The lack of communication and coordination is recognised as a barrier to the involvement of house parents in the education of the children under their care. Communication and collaboration between parents and the school are key for effective involvement in children’s education. Communication in this study entails house parents opening communication channels with the school and being kept informed of the educational needs and progress of the children under their care (Gokalp, Akbasli & Dis, 2021).

House parents with limited education or some kind of specialised background tend to experience more hindrances when it comes to providing educational support to the vulnerable children under their care. This view supports that of Kimaro and Machumu (2015), who stress that those parents who possess a lower level of education often struggle to provide the needed education support to their children and to assist with homework, provide academic support or to address specific educational needs of each child. This is true for subjects such as Mathematics and Science. Since each child under the house parents has diverse and unique educational needs and academic level of education, house parents with limited resources, time constraints and no specialised knowledge may encounter challenges in developing and implementing individualised educational strategies.

The following section presents the research methodology adopted in this study.

Research and Methodology

This research was qualitative (Lichtman, 2023) and adopted a case study research design and an interpretative paradigm, which is subjective. The study provided a detailed narrative description to investigate the experiences and perspectives of house parents regarding their role in providing educational support to children residing at Sunshine Haven. The qualitative research approach was deemed suitable to achieve the goals of this study since it afforded the researcher an opportunity to interact with house parents in their social setting about their experiences (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013). The researcher selected an interpretative paradigm
Data collection methods and sampling procedure

In order to generate data for the research, a single focus group discussion was held with a purposefully selected sample of five house parents (N = 5). Lichtman (2023) describes a focus group as a gathering of a limited number of individuals who, through conversion with each other, provide information about a specific topic, issue or subject. The criteria used to select participants were that they had to be house parents, employed by the children’s home at that time and have direct experience in providing educational support to children in the absence of their biological parents. They were also selected to participate in the study based on their availability and willingness. This rendered them information-rich participants to provide the necessary information on how best to improve and guide future interventions to enhance educational support for children living in similar contexts. The use of a focus group interview was advantageous, as it permitted the researcher to obtain a wide range of perspectives from multiple participants at once (Hall, 2020). The researcher had access to the participants as part of the community engagement projects between the university and Sunshine Haven Children’s Home. The study sample size was determined by two factors: the complexity of the research problem pertaining to educational support provided by house parents and the availability of the house parents. During data collection, an interview guide steered the discussion and focused on two main questions: What is the understanding of Sunshine Haven house parents of their role in supporting the education of children in their care? What challenges are faced by Sunshine Haven house parents when stepping into the role of absent parents in providing educational support within the children’s home? Both parties signed the consent form, which guaranteed the interview participants that their information would be kept confidential. Interviews were conducted in a boardroom at the children’s home and the audio-recorded focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Data analysis

In order to make meaning of the data collection, qualitative data analysis was conducted using a thematical approach with the goal of answering the research questions. Six steps as proposed by Braun and Clark (2006) were followed to guide the analysis process. The data collected through the focus interview were digitally recorded and transcribed. Thereafter, the researcher carefully studied the interview transcripts multiple times to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ responses. The researcher then coded the data, which involved re-reading through each transcript line-by-line while marking certain words and phrases which were found to be relevant in providing answers to the research questions. The coded data were then classified into distinct themes and the final process involved the writing of the final report.

Ethical considerations

The research complied with various ethical considerations. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), ethics refers to principles or beliefs about what is viewed as right or wrong from moral perspectives. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of South Africa. Permission to conduct research in the children’s home was granted by the management of the home. All the participants were formally invited and consent forms were signed by five house parents who agreed to participate voluntarily in the study. All the participants were provided with all relevant information regarding the purpose of the study, and their anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by using codes HP 1 to HP 5 to represent each participant.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the themes that emerged from the data analysis, which are as follows: the understanding of house parents of Sunshine Haven Children’s Home of their role in supporting the education of children in their care; challenges faced by Sunshine Haven house parents when stepping into the role of absent parents in providing educational support within the children’s home.

Experiences of house parents in providing educational support

Evidence derived from interviews indicates that house parents’ understanding of their role in providing educational support was not satisfactory. Most house parents indicated that their role entailed fostering and nurturing a supportive environment conducive to learning. Their additional, but fundamental, role included providing a sense of stability, security and encouragement to the vulnerable children under their care, which has a positive impact on the education experience of these children. For example, one house parent remarked that their role involved developing the holistic care of the child. The above findings are noted in the following statements made by the participants:

“My role, according to the rules [of Sunshine Haven] they say we are here to develop the holistic care of the child, but hey it goes further, but we are trying to develop their physical wellbeing, their emotional and socially, and mentally, the cognitive part of them. I also ensure that children have a space for their education. So ja, according to me I think I guess that is what I do. That is what I try to do every day.” (HP 2)

“For me as a house parent, I don’t think it is according to the books, because when you enter here as a house parent, you have to be like their real parents, we have children without biological parent. I must talk with them about their needs, it is more, so that I create a sense of belonging for them... we as a house parent there is some job description but our job is more than that, we just to be there for every child; we must show them love, support, and all the aspects including educational” (HP 1)
This perception is in line with Razavi and Staab’s assertion (2010) that house parents view themselves as service workers responsible for providing interpersonal relations and nurturance to children, which is essential for their educational performance. Furthermore, the interview also revealed that house parents viewed themselves as a source of nurture and support for the vulnerable children under their care, which also involves providing stability and security and assisting them, including encouraging them to remain positive in life despite their life challenges. One house parent said:

“We must be there to guard them and help them. Ja, just give love and really look after them. My role is to encourage them to be more positive. To see the brighter side of life because they are already down to the ground sometimes and I am not saying I am successful all the time but I am trying my best” (HP 3)

Another house parent expressed how she attempted to assist children with homework and encouraged them to study. However, she indicated that a lack of Mathematics skills hindered her ability to assist further with Mathematics. The house parent remarked as follows:

“I would say that I am in position to help a child with their homework or their studies, I would be there but unfortunately … unclear … my mathematic skills are limited but I try to encourage them to study. You know if it is just like two hours a day, I really push for that and if they do need help, they can come to me. That is my role” (HP 4)

The above findings are in line with Mora and Escardibul (2018) who state that house parents can provide educational support at children’s homes by assisting children with homework. Likewise, Oribiana (2022) affirms that house parents can help their children with homework by ensuring that they have a quiet and conducive environment for studying.

Challenges hindering house parents in offering educational support.

The findings of the analysed data are that there are a number of challenges that can hinder the ability of house parents to step in effectively in providing the necessary educational support to help children under their care to strive academically. Some of the challenges were (a) time constraints, (b) lack of training, (c) varied educational needs, (d) behavioural issues, (e) limited support networks. These sub-themes are discussed below:

Time constraints

Findings indicate that house parents perceived time constraints as a challenge hindering their ability to provide effective educational support to children under their care. Evidence from a few participants suggests that house parents found it challenging to dedicate time for educational support amidst the demands of managing a household. As a result, they struggled to balance their responsibility of caregiving with that of providing educational support, especially with the higher caregiver: children ratio. One participant (HP 3) had the following to say:

“On my side I will definitely love to help but we don’t have that time, enough time because you imagine us working with 17 kids, at the end of the day you have to drive or fetch others at school, when you come here you have to give them food, make sure there school uniform is clean. You know sometimes I feel that we are neglecting that part, the educational support.”

During the interview, a few participants revealed that the issue of time, conflicting work schedules and content-related challenges hindered house parents from providing educational support to children. One participant stated the following.

“For me, I think the issue of time is a challenge. sometimes we are on driving schedules and that we cannot sit there also and help them with their homework, we are time limited and like I said the schoolwork that they do now, I don’t even understand half of the content of school work. So I think in terms of that we can help them Google or try to find answers, but it is difficult for us as house parents to help with school work per say because school work today and when it was back it is not the same” (HP 2)

A similar view was expressed by one participant (HP 4):

“My challenge is that I don’t have time, but I am trying my best, like she said our children are slow learners, you cannot sit there for an hour with them alone because you’ve got 14 other kids or 13 other kids who also need your help and attention. At least, the bigger boys can help themselves, fortunately the majority of kids in my house are normal children.”

The participants (HP 1) also revealed that it was challenging to assist children in subjects such as Mathematics due to a lack of time on their side.

“Like I said also I mean these high school kids, it is mathematics, and all that, I honestly said I will not be able to help them with that, because like I said we are not teachers. So, I think maybe they should rather get a tutor again or somebody that can help them with homework because we can only help not so far and there even is no time.”

The above findings are in line with those of Smith (2009) who argues that the issue of limited time and competing responsibilities is one of the challenges affecting house parents’ abilities to offer educational support. During the interview house parents complained that they struggled to balance the role of being professional and their care role, since a large portion of the time was taken up by caregiving, which basically entailed them trying to build a relationship with the children in their care to offer educational support.
There is consistency between what the participants mentioned and the literature study conducted by William and Sanchez (2011), who affirm that inhibiting factors for parental involvement include lack of time, resources and awareness. Furthermore, the findings are keeping with LaRocque et al. (2011) who found that it is common for parents to experience reduced opportunities to be involved in the education of their children.

**Diverse educational needs**

The study found that due to diverse educational needs and learning styles of children in Sunshine Haven Children’s Home, house parents faced a challenge in offering individualised educational support to each child and to children in higher grades. One participant (HP 2) had the following view:

“Some of our kids are slow learners, and this involvement could consume our time out as house parents. I think we have outgrown this thing now. Because of different age among the children, and different learning styles everything, it sometimes become difficult. I said to the child as long as you can read, so make sure that you can read you will understand, I am not able to help you then, or you just have to ask the teacher again. That is why I think they have also that extra classes to help them, but I am not a qualified teacher, I am only a qualified child and youth care worker. So, I can help, where I can help but sometimes it is really difficult also when it comes to their education especially the higher grades children.”

Another house parent (HP 3) explained that it was challenging to provide educational support since some children were at special school and others were on medication.

“Some of our children are on special schools like I said, there are slow learners, some are on medication, so we don’t even know that time when the child had their medication, what effect does it help on the child, trying to educate the child to better them. So, it is totally confusing, I have act as a doctor, a teacher, a mother, it is all of that in one.”

**Heavy workload**

House parents highlighted that the heavy workload was one of the significant challenges in providing educational support to the children. Since the responsibility of house parents often extends beyond educational support to include caregiving, household supervision of day-to-day activities and addressing the emotional and behavioural development of the children, this workload impacted on their ability to dedicate sufficient time and attention to educational activities. The following comments were made by one participant (H5) regarding the issue of heavy workload:

“I think it feels that sometimes there is too many roles put upon us. Because we are not teachers, we don’t have sometimes understand the work that the kids are doing, I really feel sorry for them. But we can’t do everything, it is really.”

“I said we are just one person and then you have to cook, you have to drive, you have to be here, you have to be here and then you still have to come and help them with their homework. And as I said I always try if I can but time is really an issue. You can’t do everything. It is difficult”

A similar point was raised by a house parent:

“And we are trying to monitor but imagine you have 17 kids in a house with different characters. So the minute I am busy with the writing, or maybe I am busy doing something, I am trying to help Amanda (Pseudonym) , here also, you understand, so it is more challenging especially for us house parents because we are trying our best but it looks like they are not doing it and then the schools will complain, yet they don’t understand what we are going through as house parents. So, I feel like everything is just a challenge, we are carrying huge loads, this was worse during covid period” (HP 2)

The findings are in line with Dhludhlu and Lombard (2017), who maintain that the South African foster care system is not coping, due to increased workload and lack of resources. A study by Whitt-Woosley et al. (2021) that house or foster parents experienced increased parental stress and additional burdens in taking care of the children all day due to school closure during COVID-19. Furthermore, Levin and Haines (2007) agree that the ability of house parents or caregivers to engage with children’s education can be compromised by various factors such as the level of education of caregivers, lack of training in childcare and the level of workload.

**Language barrier**

This current study also found that issues of language pose a significant barrier for house parents in providing educational support. House parents revealed that the majority of children at Sunshine Haven used Afrikaans as their language of communication. This made it challenging for the house parents to assist with schoolwork and also impeded the transfer of educational instruction, explanations and support. One house parent lamented as follows:

“On my side I would say the issue of the language barrier that comes into educational support. Because our kids here they do Afrikaans and then you know when it comes to me, my Afrikaans, so it is more difficult for me like to google, translate Afrikaans to English, sometimes I get it wrong but ja. We keep trying.” (HP 1)
A similar view was expressed by another participant:

“I also think a language barrier because I am studying teaching, it is my final year but our children study in Afrikaans and then you want to help the child. Here comes this language barrier, we don’t understand each other. I remember last year that I wanted to help another child who is doing business at school, but now she is doing it in Afrikaans so I have to explain to her in English and then she had to translate it in Afrikaans.” (HP 3)

This statement is supported by Plüddemann (2018), who underscores the issue of language barriers as a reality in various contexts in South Africa, both in and outside the classroom. Moreover, the study indicates that parents sometimes find it difficult to communicate with their children due to language barriers and this serves to decrease their involvement in education matters.

**Inadequate training**

Participants were of the view that they were not adequately trained or prepared to provide effective educational support to the children in their care. A few participants indicated that they enrolled on a short course to become an auxiliary child and youth care (CYC) worker, but they complained that the course was not effective in empowering them to understand their roles better.

“I never received any training, I don’t even have my own children, but I am doing a course now to become an auxiliary CYC”- (HP2)

“No, I have done a few short courses, a worked in a previous children’s home, then like is first aid, I did a CYC course which were supposed to be qualified but I think it is more of a money-making thing.”-HP 3

“Ja, the training, I got some short courses, and I also did a childcare certificate but eish, it is difficult. What they teach us, and what we do here, it is totally different”-HP 4

This view supports that of Kimaro and Machumu (2015), who found that parents who possess a lower level of education often struggle to provide the needed education support of their children and to assist with homework, provide academic support or address specific educational needs of each child. This was found more relevant with subjects such as Mathematics and Science. In this regard, Ranahan, Pascczzo and Moretti (2023) are of the opinion that training is mandatory for all prospective foster parents, especially in offering educational support.

**Conclusion**

This current study aimed at exploring the perspectives and experiences of house parents at Sunshine Haven Children’s Home regarding their role in offering educational support to vulnerable children. It was argued that house parents have a significant role to play in the education of children under their care in children’s homes, as they provide a nurturing and supportive environment for children who may be without a stable family. However, in spite of the positive effects their involvement has on these vulnerable children, evidence from the study reveals that house parents face unique challenges in their effort to step into or fill the void created by absent parents, and as a result the current status of house parents’ capacity to provide effective educational support is not satisfactory. The challenges hindering their effective educational support include time constraints, heavy workload, language barriers and inadequate training. There is a dearth of studies that explore the role of house parents in meeting the educational needs of children and the challenges hindering their effort to step into the shoes of absent parents in offering educational support. This study has brought attention to the often-overlooked role of house parents in offering educational support. It makes a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence from the first-hand perspectives of house parents, shedding light on the experiences and challenges faced by house parents in providing educational support to children under their care.

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the education support provided by house parents at Sunshine Haven Children’s Home:

i. House parents need to prioritise and set aside time for providing educational support to children under their care. Effective time management practices could be facilitated among house parents, which would include collaborative scheduling and sharing best practices of prioritising tasks.

ii. To alleviate the burden of non-core responsibilities and free up time for impactful interaction with the children, the study recommends that house parents consider delegating certain non-essential tasks to support staff and volunteers so that they can prioritise direct educational support.

iii. The use of technology, such as translation apps and software, should be promoted to facilitate communication between house parents and children who speak a different language. House parents and children need to attend language classes to facilitate better educational support.

iv. Specialised training and professional development of programmes needs to be prioritised and should be tailored to address the needs and challenges faced by house parents in providing educational support. Again, house parents need to be provided with ongoing professional opportunities regarding issues of child development, educational psychology and effective tutoring techniques to ensure that they are empowered to offer effective educational support for the wellbeing of children under their care.
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References


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