

Delegated Parenting in the City of Masvingo: Perceptions and Experiences of Parent Students at Zimbabwe Open University, Masvingo Regional Campus

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate perceptions and experiences of female parent students on delegated parenting using a sample of twenty parent students at Zimbabwe Open University, Masvingo regional campus. The study was qualitative. Data was generated using focus group discussion. The study revealed that, the young female parents did not trust their maids but still they had to rely on them since they were all employed and going to school. Respondents shared instances and reports of child abuse in their families and stories from the media about child abuse. The study recommended that government, employers and local authorities should come up with supportive policies to create a conducive environment for parenting responsibilities; efforts should be made to improve the quality and conditions for child care in both the informal and formal environment through caregiver training; and parents should always create quality time for their children.

Keywords: Parenting, city of Masvingo, perceptions, experiences, students, Zimbabwe Open University

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1. Orientation of the study

This study investigated perceptions and experiences of female parent students on delegated parenting in Masvingo. Delegated parenting has been going on among working class women for several decades in Zimbabwe. Delegated parenting can be defined as a situation where parents or households with children hire the services of caregivers, with a view to take care of children and households chores (O'Brien, 1989). Although parents choose to make use of caregivers, there are many concerns about use of caregivers since there are no clear mechanisms of monitoring the delegated responsibilities. In most cases, delegated parenting exposes children to emotional, psychological and physical abuse.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (2009), a child is any individual aged below 18 years. Martha (2009) notes that "a child is a precursor of the future adult, and its upbringing should ensure it develops physically, intellectually, socially and spiritually". Parents are supposed to ensure that their children get this holistic kind of development. Children are a gift from the Lord. The Bible commands parents to train their children in the way they should (Psalms 22: 6). Children are central to society as they represent its continuation over time. As put forward by Dominelli (2004), children are our collective future.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), children's development is influenced by the interactions that they have over time with people, objects and symbols in their immediate environment. For Hamilton & Luster (2003) children need their parents most to develop optimally. To the community, "children are the future and they convey the notion that children must be protected and nurtured, otherwise without them, society will die" (Kiame, 2009). Kiame further maintains that at least in an African perspective, children belong to the community and every member of the community has a role to play in the children upbringing including discipline, care and protection. To society at large children are the future adults, citizens and leaders who contribute to the social and economic development of a country (The United Republic of Tanzania, 2014).

Despite the fact that delegated parenting has been going on for ages in Zimbabwe, official data on the subject is admittedly very scanty, since there have hardly been any studies and researches on the subject. Most studies have been based on mistreatment of the maids rather than focus on child upbringing and development and how it is affected by presence of these hired caregivers within the households. Mlama (1979) touched on the subject ascertaining the effects of delegated parenting on child development concluding that they have negative effects.

In light of the dearth of studies on delegated parenting, we thought it prudent to explore the subject from the angle of employed Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) students.

Governments have been trying to educate people on the implementation of various policies, laws and programmes, which protect rights of children. Despite these efforts on emphasizing careful childcare, which in turn enhances child development for future development of the country, delegated child parenting seem to be on the rise due to increased pressure engaging both parents in economic activities.

2. Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to assess the effects of delegated parenting on child development. This overall objective of the study was anchored on the following specific research questions: What are the leading types of delegated parenting among the employed parents in Masvingo? What are the effects of delegated parenting on children of employed parents in Masvingo? What are the challenges facing implementation of quality delegated parenting in Masvingo?

3. Literature review

In this section, we briefly discuss related literature as presented by different authorities.

3.1 Parenting

Kalu (2014) defines parenting as the process of promoting and supporting the physical, emotional, social and intellectual developments of a child from infancy to adulthood. The process entails providing safety, shelter, clothes, nourishment, protection and physical development by introducing the child to exercise thereby inculcating good health habits in the child (ibid). To Brisbane (1988) parenting is the process of caring for children and helping them grow and learn. Thus, parental presence / absence is very important in this process. According to Linke (2004), parenting is a dynamic demanding and challenging process that involves relationships and interactions between parents, children and young people all of whom are continually developing.

Parenting is fundamental to the success of the human race (Linke, 2004). Children do not just grow on their own without parents or guardians in the event that a parent may not be available. Thus, Linke (2004) defines parenting in terms of “attention and action” of both mother and father at different degree towards their children. Parenting is the universal way a culture reproduces itself from one generation to the next. Parents are the principal interpreters of various cultural issues to their children. In parents’ absence, children become cultureless and thus take every trash from other cultures as part of their culture (Linke, 2004).

In this study, we thus see parenting as a central social process for child development. Parental presence is critical for the overall parenting process and wellness of children.

3.2 Delegated parenting

Huber (2012) notes that “since ancient times, parents purposely entrusted their children to members of other ethnic groups/nations who were believed to have specific skills in childcare, the foremost one being, their capacity to teach their children their mother tongue and culture”. In the modern world, this system has phased out. Parents now entrust their parental responsibilities with hired maids and other care givers.

Modern society is highly sophisticated. The way children are raised today is getting more and more complicated. Responsibilities of caring for children no longer simply rest on the parents’ shoulders as the primary caregivers (women) are now entering the world of formal work away from the home. Hence the need for non-parent caregivers. The responsibility of childcare when left in the hands of maids’ or other childcare givers is what we mean by the term “delegated parenting”. Delegated parenting is in most cases practiced by families with working parents. This system of parenting gives responsibilities of parenting/raising children to a person other than their biological parents. This may include the extended family members, close relatives or maids, especially in the situation where a single or both parents have to work to earn a living.

According to Demma (2005), 60% of children in most countries, between birth and 5 years today spend time in the care of someone other than their own parents. He notes that, in a study involving 1,186 working women in government departments in Dubai 62% of the children under the age of 4 were reared at home by a housemaid, while 32% of them were reared by extended family members and 5% were enrolled in private nurseries.

3.3 Social responsibility of parents in child upbringing

Regnerus (2003) argues that, child upbringing is the core responsibility of parents and particularly mothers. Mothers thus play a significant role in child upbringing. As the social learning theory suggests, children learn to adopt the behavioural patterns of their parents through imitation, modeling and reinforcement. When children are left under other peoples’ care in a situation where both parents are employed and they have less time with their children, they are denied their rights of being raised by their parents. According to Fostering Network (2009) parental responsibility (PR) is “all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority, which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property.” Thus, a person with parental responsibility is tasked with the care and wellbeing of the child.

According to Direnfeld (2010), the degree at which parents are available and active in the lives of their children is reflected in the way children develop an internal sense of self-worth. They also develop a sense of trust in a caring world. Time with parents allows for the transmission of values and morals as well as offering of guidance, direction and discipline as the children naturally pick up on their parents’ attitudes, beliefs, morals and values.

4. Research methodology

This study is qualitative based on focus group discussions of 20 students in a classroom setting at the Zimbabwe Open University, Masvingo Regional Campus. One of the researchers simply introduced the topic ‘delegated parenting’ in class and asked students to get into four groups of five students to discuss their experiences with delegated parenting as workers and adult learners. The class had fifteen female and five male students so that each group had three female students and one male student. All participants had children, some of which were still babies.

5. Findings

Participants observed that, the notion of delegated parenting is not new as already argued by Huber (2012) above. In the Shona setting, young parents could entrust their children with their parents, brothers, sisters or cousins from both the maternal and paternal side, especially with the advent of colonialism when young men were taken to work for the white masters in cities and towns and the wife would visit the husband occasionally. Participants agreed that these days there has been a transition from parents entrusting childcare from their relatives to maids and other institutions especially in urban settings like the city of Masvingo in Zimbabwe. Thus, like in the Demma (2005) study discussed above, participants agreed that most employed parents delegate their parenting responsibilities to others. There was consensus among the participants that due to societal developments involving increasing participation of mothers in employment outside the home, this was inevitable as parents are overwhelmed with competing responsibilities constraining their time for looking after their children.

5.1 Leading types of delegated parenting

Most discussants said their children spent most time of the day with housemaids. This was followed by cousins, grandparents, aunts and older siblings. This means that family members and different categories of maids were leading in the delegated parenting role while parents were away. It was thus, established that the maid represented the main form of delegated parenting in the city of Masvingo. Nonetheless, discussants agreed that they also sent their 3-5 years old children to nursery schools, 6-13 years old children to primary school and 14-19 years old children to secondary and high school. Only the 0-2 years old children were in the complete care of housemaids. For the older children, childcare was shared between the maid and formal school. This leads us to the conclusion that there are two leading types of delegated parenting in the city of Masvingo: the informal home based delegated parenting and the formal professional childcare services.

The informal home based delegated parenting is categorized into home-based delegated childcare discharged through hired services of mainly domestic workers / housemaids; and family-based delegated parenting where child care is carried out by family members and close relatives including grandparents, aunts, cousins, siblings and close friends / acquaintances normally implemented without payment or rather through in-direct payment. Relatives and friends took childcare responsibilities and other household chores in anticipation of support in education and other indirect benefits like supporting poor relatives in the rural areas. In most cases, these relatives tend to be mostly of young age who with time move on with their lives (perhaps by getting married or some other things). As already noted above, this is largely informal without any government authority monitoring the relationship.

The formal professional childcare services include private and government institutions. These include formally registered, licensed, and regulated privately owned nursery and government schools. The child care services offered range from infants of ages birth to 7 years; and pre-school care for children of ages 2 to enrollment into preschool and school age children. They have professional and trained staff in childcare and educational aspects. Compared with the informal delegated parenting, the formal delegated parenting involves payment of fees to those institutions and is usually costly.

The study, however, established that these two types of delegated parenting co-existed in most of the families represented in the study. This was more evident with families of parents with younger children of below 7 years old who in the early part of the day attend the nursery school, and in the later part of the day spend time at home under the care of the maid. The home based hired childcare services still remained the main type of delegated parenting since most employed parents would turn up home in the later part of the evening from work while the children had to be attended after school.

5.2 Effects of delegated parenting

Parenting is about being present to children and providing support and guidance that facilitate growth. To understand the physical and social distance or closeness between parents and their teenage children, the study examined how parents are interacting with their teenage children. Participants discussed how often and at what time of the day or week they were available to interact with their children and other family members. Some said they had time with their children every evening of the working day. The majority were available to interact with their children every weekend. Some simply said they were available for interaction with their children occasionally.

There were also those who rarely interacted with their children. Some participants felt that so long as they provide for the physical needs of the children, that was good enough. They also assumed that the educational system through preschool and childcare centres would cater for the growth and development of the child.

Apart from setting aside time for interacting with their children, participants further discussed the actual time they spent in that interaction. Very few parents were able to spend good quality time of more than two hours interacting with their children in the moments they got together. With such a quality time parents may be able to probe and explore deeper physical, emotional and social issues affecting or disturbing their children and thus have remedial measures where necessary. A comparative assessment of the time normally children came home from school with that parents returned home from work after a long day, shows that this lifestyle leaves very little time for quality interaction between the parents and the children.

Participants also discussed the effect of parental absence on the child. Most of the participants, especially female participants agreed that parental absence had negative effect on the children. There was agreement among the participants that the hiring of housemaids to take care of children in the absence of the parents though a preferred alternative, had serious physical and emotional effects on children. There were incidents where maids either through neglect or lack of understanding did not attend children properly leading to serious consequences. Cases were cited where parents discovered that there had been inappropriate handling of children by maids and in the extreme cases child abuses of varying proportions. They also made reference to evidence from the media which are filled with stories on child neglect and abuse affecting children under delegated parenting environment.

Participants also discussed whether they have noticed inappropriate behaviour on their children. Some had noticed inappropriate behaviour though the majority had not. In this study, inappropriate behaviour refers to things like smoking, taking drugs, rowdiness, insulting others, fighting, gang membership, among other unwanted behaviours. The fact that parents spend long hours away from home may contribute to parents lacking adequate knowledge of their children's behaviour. The might not have been able to adequately identify inappropriate behaviour and handle misguided teenagers. It is therefore, very important for parents to make close follow up and monitor behavioural changes in their children and take corrective measures wherever necessary.

5.3 Challenges facing the implementation of quality delegated parenting.

Following were some of the identified challenges to the implementation of quality delegated parenting:

- Employment kept apart parents and children. The maid became the unintended beneficiary of this environment as she spent much time with the child and became bonded to the child through many activities and situations. When the maid decided to leave the job, it became difficult for the parent to deal with her absence.
- Several technologies (the computer, radio, television smart phones) are readily available (Zebron, Sigauke and Musingafi, 2013). These technologies make children adopt behaviours which parents are not aware of and would not have liked their children to adopt.
- Lack of skills of child upbringing by maids
- *Employment laws did not provide parents with time to attend to their children*

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The study established that delegated parenting has negative effects on children resulting in bad behaviour and the development of anti-social tendencies by children. The study established that lack of closeness to the child due to parental absence; access to technology; lack of skills on child upbringing on the part of the maid; and lack of supportive employment contracts are the major challenges in the delegated parenting process.

Findings of this study revealed that most parents were aware of their role as parents. Their major challenge was limited or unavailability of alternatives to the informal delegated parenting. This study therefore, provides a number of recommendations to ensure effectiveness of delegated parenting:

- government, employers and local authorities should come up with supportive policies to create a conducive environment for parenting responsibilities;
- efforts should be made to improve the quality and conditions for child care in both the informal and formal environment through caregiver training; and
- parents should always create quality time for their children.

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