

Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and it's Influence on the Academic Achievement of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

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Abstract: This study sought to investigate how Parent Teacher Association influences the academic achievement of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. The survey design was used for conducting this study. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire. From the data analyzed, it was realized that many parents of autistic children did not have interest in their children's education. They did not go the institutions where these children were kept to visit them and the children felt rejected, abandoned and not loved. They did not attend meetings when invited by the managers of these institutions. The parents complained that cost of educating their autistic children was too high. The parents admitted that medication helps their children and makes them stable to study. The parents also said that medication creates the feelings of love, affection, and a sense of belonging in their children especially when they are taken to the hospital for health care. They also affirmed that medication makes their children to face life's challenges which education itself is one of them. Also based on the findings some recommendations were made to centers offering education to Autistic children and the ministry of basic education prominent among which were the need for centers to form Parents Teachers Associations (P.T.A) and the need for the ministry of basic education to include courses in special education in Teacher Training Colleges. From the findings, recommendations were made.

Key points: Parental Involvement, Academic Achievements, Autism, Autistic Spectrum Disorders.

INTRODUCTION

Children need the full support of their parents in order to maximize their potentials. The commitment of parents in their children's education can directly influence their performance. This commitment can be in two folds as stated by Grolnick and Slowiazek (1994) that is home based and school based involvement. The study focuses on parental involvement such as parental association with teacher

Autistic children are often seen as worthless especially in a village situation and neighborhood. At home Autistic children were often kept out of every activity that took place. He or she was considered as an "outcast". The community also tended to reject the child and he or she started developing a world of his own and became very aggressive because the child lost the basic necessities of life such as security, friendship, love, attention and sense of worth and dignity. Parental involvement is very much needed for the child to achieve. According to Schwartz (1997), a family may face additional challenges or frustration when one of its family members stands out as being "different" (autistic).

Children with autistic Spectrum Disorders faced a lot of problems in their daily lives that in turn affect their academic achievement. Through communication with others, the "normal people" mediate articulate their over experiences, articulate their thoughts, describe their needs, express their desires, learn new skills, understand one another's perspectives and relate to one another. But

the reverse is true for persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders who are even unable to do any of the above. In addition, they are unable to produce words and do not know how to use other sorts of nonverbal communication strategies such as the use of gestures or eyes to express themselves.

BACKGROUND

According to “the American institute for Autism”, autism (Sometimes called Classical Autism) is the most common condition in a group of developmental disorders known as Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Autism is characterized by impaired social interaction, problems verbal and non-verbal communication, and unusual repetitive or severely limited activities and interests. It is a pervasive developmental disorder that appears in the first three years of life and affects the brain's control of the normal development of social and communication skills, motor and language skills. It is such a broad diagnosis that can include people with IQs and mental retardation. People with autism can be chatty or silent, affectionate or cold, methodical or disorganized.

Causes of Autism

Experts have been trying to identify the causes of autism, but to date, no definite answers are available. With no specific causes having been identified, it is impossible to develop preventive strategies. This situation is frustrating to some people who work with children with autism. This situation is even most frustrating to most families with autistic children because they want to know the chances of having another child with autism.

Koegelet. al., (1995) state that although precise causes have not been identified, a number of suggestions and reasonable conclusions have been made. First, several suggested causes of autism are a result of inadequate parenting. They further maintain that autism is a lifelong neurological disorder. Some researchers believe that at least some forms of autism are caused by the brain stem. Dawson et. al., (1998) maintain that autism is basically a failure of the frontal lobe while Piven (2002) maintains that autism probably has a genetic bias.

Cowley, Brownell, and Footes, (2000) maintain that the causes suggested in recent years, have included environmental toxins, gastrointestinal anomalies, and in gradients in the measles, mumps and rubella vaccines. That also state that such speculation about possible causes of autism creates dangerous situations. For example, some parents believe that measles/mumps rubella vaccine cause autism. In line with the above, Seroussi (2000) states that just as there are few known causes, no consistent effective treatments are available.

Whether et. al., (1989) maintain that some children with autism generate verbal language but make errors when using personal pronouns or have a difficult time understanding formatic semantic categories. Also Ramberget. al., (1996) provide an example that people with autism have difficulty understanding that the word “dog” refers to a general category of dogs as well as specific examples of “dogs” regardless of the actual verbal abilities of a particular child. All children with autism have trouble with the use or pragmatics of language. Whetherby and Prizant, (1993) maintain that typically autistic children do not understand that communication happens between people nor do they understand that nonverbal cues and personal perspectives are important to successful communication.

Children with autism also have problems with social interactions. Powers (2000) states that they often appear to live in their own world and may not seek out the company of peers and adults. Many people with autism seem to use people as tools. He continues that a child may lead an adult by the hand to a refrigerator and push the adult's hand toward the juice the child wants. In this way the child with autism is using the adult as a means to an end. Also children with autism do not generally initiate social situations and do not engage in social turn-taking just for the pleasure of being part of a social interaction.

Levis and Bodfish (1998) state that children with autism have repetitive or odd patterns of behaviors, unusual interest or strange responses to the environment. They may be attracted to specific aspects of a toy. For example, a child with autism may be interested only in wiggling the

string of a pull toy. Some children may have rigid or set patterns of behavior. For example, the child might line up his or her toys in a specific way, and might have to follow the same routine every day. If these patterns of behaviors are violated, a tantrum might result to protest and disruption. Other children may repeat the same movement over and over again. For example, a child may wave his hand in front of an eye frequently. Not a lot is understood about the function of this type of behavior. Interestingly, children diagnosed with autism at a young age (3years) do not exhibit much of this type of behavior. It is not known whether children with autism learn this type of behavior in response to their experiences in the world or whether this aspect of the disorder just does not develop until children are older.

Strumey and Sevin (1994) state that intelligence scores are not considered in the diagnosis of autism yet most children (approximately 75 percent) diagnosed with autism also mental retardation. This 25 percent of the autistic population has at least a normal level of intelligence. This wide range of cognitive ability has resulted in people using such terms as **low functioning autism** and **high functioning autism** whereas low functioning autism refers to children without mental retardation. The tern high functioning autism should not be thought as a synonym for another type of ASD.

The Critical and Social Constructionist Theory Of Disability By Oliver (1998)

Oliver in his study states that, in the construction of our social structures, persons with disabilities are not taken into consideration. He states that most institutions like hospitals, roads schools and more, elevate social frontiers that children with disability find it difficult to transcend. The stratification of society between the rich and the poor (haves and have not), the educated and the non-educated, and more helps spread discrimination and exclusion. According to the critical and social constructionist theory, the discrimination in most homes between parents and their children especially those with disabilities and those without disabilities is a reflection of what goes on in the society. He further states that the problems and difficulties faced by individuals with disabilities are as a result of an unequal society. It describes the notion of disability as social oppression and the societies are so stratified segregation. Oliver further states that the societies are so stratified in a manner that even the educational facilities are affected by this stratification. Most institutions are constructed with no consideration of the fact that there are persons with disabilities most especially those with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. He holds that this exclusion has extended to the different families that live in the society. According to this theory an individual's disability may not constitute a real handicap to him or her but social attitudes towards the disability creates barrier that hinder the individual's ability to adapt to his or her environment and function normally.

This theory is related to this study in that, most parents today are not unable to meet the needs of their children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, but the fact that the society in which they live attaches no value to these people makes it difficult for them to fully incorporate these children in their family circle. This explains why some of their parents upon registration abandon them in institutions and rehabilitation centers.

Reactions to Oliver's theory are found in the summary made by Thompson and Hickey (2000) that, the causes of inequality in education is due to poverty and social isolation. Isolation impacts the lives of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders negatively and leads them to believe they are worthless and feelings that life is a privilege that is meant for a few. Parental prejudice and discrimination restrict the child's life much than the disability itself

Statement of the Problem

It was discovered that having a child with autism was very difficult even for the most confident parent. Hecimovie and Christensen (1992) state that these children often lack independent play and leisure skills which means that parents were not to spend much time providing direct care to their children. Of note is the fact that these parents had less time to take care of other important activities of daily living such as self-care and household chores. As a result, parents who believed that they were in part responsible for their children's instruction often found it very frustrating when learning was not achieved or was achieved very slowly.

In Cameroon for example, little or no attention is paid to persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. As a result, most of these children were kept in institutions like Center For Empowerment of Females with Disability (CEFED) Matazem-Santa, Foundation Pour L'education de deficient Menttaux et Auditifs (FEDEME) Douala, and Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAH) Bafut, Associated Rehabilitation Center for the Handicapped (ARCH) Mutengene etc. which made the children in these institutions to loose contact with their parents, siblings and other relations. Worst of all, some parents consider these children useless and had even forgotten about them completely after enrolling them in the above mentioned centers and this attitude may affect the children's academic achievement negatively.

Research Objective

To find out the influence of Parent Teacher Association on the academic achievement of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Research Question

How does Parent Teacher Association influence the academic achievement of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders?

METHODOLOGY

The survey design was used for conducting this study. In this light, data was collected only from a few respondents who were considered to be a representative of the group. This was achieved through the use of simple sampling.

The study focused on parents of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in some centers in the North West and littoral Regions of Cameroon. Parents of autistic children in Saint Joseph Children and Adult Home (SAJOCAH) Bafut, Center for the empowerment of Females with Disabilites (CEFED) Santa, Foundation Pour L'education de Deficients Mentaux et Auditifs (FEDEME) Douala, and Associated Center for the Rehabilitation of the Handicapped (ARCH) Mutengene were contacted.

SAJOCAH had a total population of 5 children with Autism while CEFED had 12 and FEDEME had 22 making a total of 34 children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Therefore their parents became the population of the study.

The target population of this study consisted of the total population of persons with impairments in SAJOCAH, CEFED, FEDEME, and ARCH.

According to Bryman (2001), the accessible population is defined in terms of those elements in the group with the reach of the researcher. From this perspective, the accessible participants for this study were 34 parents of Autistic children who were resident in CEFED, FEDEME AND SAJOCAH as seen on the table below

Table 1: Showing Distribution of the Sample

School/ Institution	Autistic Persons sampled	Parents Sampled
SAJOCAH Bafut	05	05
FEDEME Douala	22	22
CEFED Santa	12	12
TOTAL	34	34

The sample size of this study consisted of 43 parents of autistic children in SAJOCAH, FEDEME, and CEFED. Following the research objectives, a purposive sampling was used in this study. A purposive sampling is based upon the assumption that the researcher's knowledge about the population can be used to handpick the cases to be included in the sample (Silverman, 2004:102).

Questionnaires was used as instruments for data collection because most of the information needed was not directly observable. A questionnaire was used because it usually involves or inquires about feelings, attitudes and experiences of the respondents

FINDINGS

Findings of this study are presented with regards to the research question under investigation

How does Parent Teachers Association (PTA) influence the Academic Achievement of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders?

To answer this question, the researcher sampled the opinions of the parents and those of the different heads of various institutions. As far as the heads of the different institutions were concerned, both (100%) considered parents teachers association to be of utmost importance in that: it creates in the children a sense of belonging, it encourages them to learn, builds their self-esteem and makes them to be psychologically stable and all these are qualities that foster academic achievement.

Despite this the both institutions still find it difficult to get parents regularly during meetings. Most of the parents hardly come to the institution even to visit. This is in itself a great hindrance to the success of these children.

Table 2: Computing means the percentages of respondent’s responses on question on assumption 1

Assumption 1 Teachers Association influence the academic achievement of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Total
Upon registration in school, I was told about the PTA	24 (48.0%)	13 (26.0%)	0 (0.00%)	13 (26.0%)	0 (0.00%)	50 (100%)
Ever since my child was admitted to this institution, I have never attended any meeting here.	100%	1 (2.0%)	14 (28.0%)	35 (70.0%)	0 (0.00%)	50 (100%)
Since I am too busy, I only visit my child when the school calls for a PTA meeting	1 (2.0%)	9 (18.0%)	14 (28.0%)	26 (52.0%)	0 (00.0%)	50 (100%)
Due to the nature of my schedule I only come to take my child at the end of the term	2 4.0%)	6 (12.0%)	9 (18.0%)	33 (66.0%)	0 (00.0%)	50 (100%)
I actually see no need visiting an Autistic child in school, since he or she is in the hands of professionals	0 (00.0%)	4 (8.0%)	15 (30.0%)	30 (60.0%)	1 (2.0%)	50 (100%)
My regular visit to my child’s institution has a positive effect on my child’s academic and social life	30 (60.0%)	17 (34.0)	0 (00.0%)	0 (00.0%)	3 (6.0%)	50 (100%)
Aggregate scores (MRS)	57 (19.0%)	50 (16.7%)	52 (17.3%)	137 (45.7%)	4 (1.3%)	300 (100%)

The above table focuses on the relationship between parents and the institutions of their Autistic children. 98% of parents hold that, they do not go to the institution except at the end of term because their children are in the hands of professionals. Thus we can conclude that parents in their greater majority are unconscious of the fact that they ought to meet with the teacher of their children. Urie (1979) supports this view because he states that social factors can influence the cognitive development of a child. The home is the first place where children begin to socialize and if this component is absent the child will definitely be affected even in his academic achievement.

Table 3: Contingency table showing the Relationship between Parent Teachers Association (PTA) and Academic Achievement of Persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Questions on PTA	Good		Average		Poor		Total		X ² – test (P Value)
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	
Upon registration in school, I was told about the PTA	2 (22.2%)	3 (21.4%)	11 (91.7%)	1 (8.3%)	7 (77.8%)	11 (91.7%)	6 (17.1%)	26 (82.9%)	P= 0.6 06
Ever since my child was admitted into this institution, I have never attended any meeting here.	0 (100%)	14 (00.0%)	0 (00.0%)	0 (00.0%)	0 (00.0%)	9 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	25 (100%)	
Since I am too busy, I only visit my child when the school calls for a PTA Meeting	1 (11.1%)	11 (78.6%)	1 (8.3%)	11 (91.7%)	13 (21.4%)	8 (88.9%)	5 (14.3%)	30 (85.7%)	P=06.05
Due to the nature of my schedule I only come to take my child at the end of the term	11 (78.6%)	3 (21.4%)	2 (16.7%)	10 (83.3%)	0 (00.0%)	9 (100%)	30 (85.7%)	5 (14.3%)	P=0.3 73
I actually see no need visiting an Autistic child in school, since he or she is in the hands of professionals	14 (100%)	0 (00.0%)	11 (91.7%)	1 (8.3%)	9 (100%)	0 (00.0%)	34 (91.7%)	0 (00.0%)	P=0.3 73
My regular visit to my child’s institution has a positive effect on my child’s academic and social life	13 (92.9%)	0 (00.0%)	12 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	9 (100%)	0 (00.0%)	34 (91.7%)	0 (00.0%)	P=0.4 62
Aggregate score (MRS)	30 (35.7%)	53 (63.1%)	26 (36.1%)	45 (36.1%)	17 (31.5%)	37 (68.5%)	73 (34.8%)	135 (64.3%)	P=0.8 48

Chi square value (χ^2) = 0.35

Degree of freedom (df) = 2

P value = 5.848

From the above, we can realize that the weight of parental awareness of PTA was higher for children who performed good or averagely with proportions of 53 (63.1%) and 45 (62.5%) respectively and was lower with children who performed poorly 37 (68.55%). Above all, the relationship between the teachers and parents affects academic performance of persons with Autism significantly (X² – test: P = 0.848). We can therefore conclude that the relationship between parents and teachers is a major determinant of the children’s academic performance. Bowly (1960) supports this view in that parents show love to their children by supporting their needs and if the Childs needs are given that child has a higher probability to achieve in education better.

In this study, the null hypothesis was rejected while the alternative was retained. This result shows that parent teacher Association significantly influences the academic achievement of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders as stated by Yuh (2008) that parents and teachers both help the child to achieve and the absence of this help can affect the child’s performance.

Implications of this finding: It is clear from this study that the parent teachers association impact children with a sense of belonging, encourage them to learn, builds their self-esteem and makes them psychologically stable. The quantitative data however showed that the PTA significantly influences the academic achievement of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. If a learner knows that the teacher cooperates with his or her parents, the learner will modify his or her behavior because he or she knows that the teacher can easily report what he or she does in school to his or her pFrom this study it is clear that the only independent variable parental involvement that is significantly related to the academic achievement of persons with Autism is parent teachers association. In the other sense, among all the indicators involved in this study only the relationship between teachers and parents significantly determines the academic performance of the persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Though the independent variables are important they however do not directly influence the academic achievement of these children with Autism.

Therefore, the relationship between parents and teachers should be strengthened. Teachers and other stake holders are called upon to educate parents by creating a home-school link so as to better improve or enhance parental involvement which will result to a better academic achievement of persons with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. This instills a sense of discipline in the leaner.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward for parents, teachers and other significant stakeholders to address the problems discovered in the course of this study.

Parents should be empowered and encouraged to become involved in their children's education and support workers be trained to facilitate this through community based networks.

Parents should endeavour to invest in the academic life of their children with Autism bearing in mind that disability is not inability and that these children can attain my height in the academic ladder and can work in my office if they are educated as others.

The school authorities should endeavor to build a strong family involvement foundation and develop a network of partnership. By developing strategies to enable parents of autistic children to become fully involved in the education of their children.

Teachers and other school authorities should strive to build a learning system with network members by creating community based counseling centre where parents would be given training on how to work with persons with autism and other disabilities.

An association of parents whose children are autistic should be formed. This will keep bring them together to share ideas and experiences and to be aware of those non-governmental organizations who are out to help persons with autism.

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