



Engaging Fathers in Foundation Phase Education: A Pathway to Gender Equality and Positive Masculinities

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ABSTRACT

Limited father engagement in early childhood education affects children's social development and perpetuates traditional gender roles, hindering efforts to promote gender equality and positive masculinities. This article investigates how father involvement in the Foundation Phase contributes to fostering gender equality and modelling positive masculinities. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a framework, the article employed a qualitative case study design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 40 fathers, 8 teachers, and 4 school administrators from rural and semi-urban primary schools in South Africa's Vhembe District. Purposive sampling ensured diverse participant representation. Thematic analysis revealed that active father participation challenges traditional gender norms, models respectful behaviours, and facilitates open discussions on gender roles, thereby promoting gender equality and nurturing positive masculinities. Fathers' involvement also highlighted the importance of redefining caregiving roles, showcasing the nurturing aspects of fatherhood. To ensure the article's rigor, trustworthiness was achieved through member checking, peer review, and data triangulation, with ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality adhered to throughout. The article recommends the development of school programs aimed at encouraging father engagement and providing training for educators to facilitate active male participation in early education. These findings contribute to scholarship by emphasizing the transformative role of fathers in promoting gender-equitable, inclusive learning environments and offer practical strategies for enhancing father involvement in early childhood education.

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INTRODUCTION

The involvement of fathers in early childhood education has gained increasing attention in recent years, yet it remains an area that is often underestimated or overlooked. Research shows that active father engagement in education positively impacts children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.¹ Despite these benefits, traditional gender norms and societal stereotypes often assign caregiving and

¹ W. Marsiglio and K. Roy, *Nurturing Dads: Social Initiatives for Contemporary Fatherhood* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2019).

educational responsibilities primarily to mothers, thereby marginalizing fathers from these roles. This exclusion reinforces inequitable gender dynamics and limits the opportunities for children to witness diverse role models, particularly during their formative years.

Father involvement in the Foundation Phase, which encompasses the crucial early years of a child's education, provides an essential platform for challenging these traditional norms. It not only supports the holistic development of young learners but also fosters positive masculinities—behaviours and attitudes that promote respect, emotional engagement, and collaboration. Positive masculinities contrast with toxic masculinity, which perpetuates harmful stereotypes, such as emotional suppression and aggression.² By participating in their children's early education, fathers have the potential to model nurturing and respectful behaviours, thereby contributing to equitable family and community dynamics.

In rural and semi-urban contexts, such as South Africa's Vhembe District, the challenges to father engagement are further compounded by socio-economic factors, limited resources, and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Schools in these areas often lack structured initiatives to promote father involvement, leaving a critical gap in fostering inclusive educational practices. According to Van den Berg and Makusha, schools that actively engage fathers create an environment where children learn to value gender equality and develop positive social skills.³ However, the lack of targeted interventions perpetuates the underrepresentation of fathers in these spaces.

Father engagement in the Foundation Phase plays a critical role in the overall development of young learners, supporting their social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Research highlights that children with actively involved fathers show better self-confidence, improved academic outcomes, and healthier relationships with peers and family members.⁴ However, deeply ingrained societal and cultural norms often limit fathers' participation in caregiving and education, framing these roles as responsibilities primarily suited to mothers. These stereotypes marginalize fathers and reinforce unequal family dynamics.

In South Africa, father engagement faces additional challenges stemming from socio-economic inequalities and historical injustices. The enduring impacts of apartheid, alongside widespread poverty and unemployment, often force fathers to migrate for work or remain disconnected from their children's education.⁵ In rural and semi-urban regions such as the Vhembe District, these barriers are heightened by limited resources and traditional patriarchal norms, which discourage men from taking active roles in their children's early education.

The Foundation Phase, encompassing the first three years of formal education, is a crucial time for shaping children's learning behaviours, attitudes, and understanding of gender roles. Fathers who actively participate in this phase not only enhance academic success but also serve as role models for positive masculinities. By exhibiting nurturing and equitable behaviours, fathers challenge stereotypes that equate masculinity with control and emotional detachment, paving the way for healthier relationships within families and society.⁶

Despite these benefits, schools in rural and semi-urban areas often lack specific initiatives designed to increase father engagement. While programs may promote general parental involvement, they rarely address the unique obstacles fathers face. This gap results in missed opportunities to fully integrate fathers into their children's education and harness their potential to model gender equality and positive social values. To address these issues effectively, it is essential to understand the socio-cultural and economic dynamics influencing father engagement in under-resourced communities like the Vhembe District.

² Robert W Connell and James W Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59.

³ W. Van den Berg and T. Makusha, "Father Involvement in Early Childhood: Perspectives from South Africa," *Early Childhood Development Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2021): 45–62.

⁴ T. Makusha, L. Richter, and W. Van den Berg, "Father Involvement and Child Well-Being: Pathways to Gender Equality," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 56 (2021): 36–45.

⁵ S. S. Chisale, "Father Absence and Its Impact on Children in South Africa: A Gender-Sensitive Approach," *Child and Family Social Work* 25, no. 2 (2020): 320–29.

⁶ R. Morrell, R. Jewkes, and D. Blackbeard, "Disrupting Gender Norms: The Impact of Father Involvement in Education," *Gender and Education* 34, no. 3 (2022): 345–62.

Father involvement in early childhood education plays a critical role in promoting children's holistic development, yet it remains significantly limited in many contexts. This lack of engagement perpetuates traditional gender roles, where caregiving and educational responsibilities are primarily seen as maternal duties. These societal norms not only marginalize fathers in the caregiving domain but also hinder the development of equitable family structures and gender-balanced educational practices.

In schools, father involvement is often overlooked due to the absence of targeted initiatives designed to encourage male participation. Many programs aimed at parental engagement are generic, failing to address the specific barriers that fathers face. Socio-cultural expectations, lack of awareness, and institutional practices further discourage fathers from taking active roles in their children's education. This absence not only deprives children of the unique benefits of paternal involvement, such as improved social skills, self-esteem, and cognitive development, but also limits opportunities to challenge and reshape gender norms.

In South Africa, these issues are especially severe in rural and semi-urban areas like the Vhembe District, where socio-economic challenges make them worse. High levels of unemployment, migration for work, and deeply ingrained patriarchal norms restrict fathers' ability to participate in their children's early education. Consequently, children grow up with limited exposure to models of positive masculinity that embody nurturing and equitable behaviours. This reinforces traditional views of masculinity, often associated with dominance and emotional detachment, which perpetuate inequitable power dynamics within families and communities.

Addressing the lack of father engagement in the Foundation Phase is essential to foster inclusive educational practices that promote gender equality and positive masculinities. By involving fathers in early education, schools can create transformative opportunities for children to experience alternative representations of gender roles and contribute to more equitable societal values. However, this requires a concerted effort to understand and address the cultural, institutional, and socio-economic barriers that discourage fathers involvement in education. Without such interventions, the potential of early childhood education as a platform for social change remains unrealized.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how father engagement in the Foundation Phase can promote gender equality and foster positive masculinities. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a framework, the study explores the socio-cultural and institutional factors influencing father involvement and their impact on children's perceptions of gender roles. It also identifies strategies to overcome these barriers and outlines recommendations for schools to support meaningful father engagement. The subsequent sections discuss the theoretical framework, methodology, findings, and recommendations, underscoring the importance of father involvement in creating equitable and inclusive educational practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualization

Conceptualizing gender equality and positive masculinity is critical for this research article because these two concepts form the foundation for understanding the study's objectives and guiding its analysis. By clearly defining these terms, the research ensures clarity, precision, and relevance in addressing the issues surrounding father engagement in the Foundation Phase.

Gender Equality

Gender equality refers to the state in which individuals of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities in every aspect of life. It goes beyond mere numerical representation to ensure the elimination of systemic barriers that perpetuate discrimination and unequal power dynamics.⁷ Within education, gender equality focuses on creating inclusive environments where all learners, regardless of gender, can access resources, participate fully, and achieve their potential.

In the Foundation Phase, promoting gender equality requires addressing deep-rooted stereotypes that influence children's perceptions of gender roles. Schools must ensure that teaching practices, classroom interactions, and curricular content do not reinforce societal norms that marginalize any gender. For example, equitable classroom practices might involve encouraging boys

⁷ UNESCO, *Gender Equality in Education: Empowering Women and Girls* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2020).

and girls to engage in all activities without associating tasks or behaviours with traditional gender expectations.⁸ This concept also intersects with policies aimed at improving the representation and participation of women and girls in education systems globally, recognizing that transformative gender equality benefits all of society.

Positive Masculinity

Positive masculinity represents a redefinition of traditional masculinity, shifting away from harmful stereotypes such as dominance, aggression, and emotional suppression, and toward values like empathy, respect, and shared responsibility. This concept challenges patriarchal norms by encouraging men and boys to embrace nurturing and collaborative roles, contributing to healthier relationships and more equitable social structures.⁹ In educational contexts, positive masculinity highlights the importance of male role models who model inclusive and equitable behaviours. For young learners, particularly in the Foundation Phase, exposure to positive male figures can counteract stereotypes that associate caregiving and emotional expression solely with women. Fathers and male educators who demonstrate nurturing, respectful, and collaborative traits help children understand that masculinity includes a wide range of positive and supportive behaviours.¹⁰ Positive masculinity in schools fosters a culture where boys learn to value equality and empathy early in life. This shift is crucial for developing socially responsible individuals who challenge toxic gender norms, thereby promoting inclusive and respectful communities. Schools play a vital role in embedding this concept into their ethos through teacher training, parent involvement, and curriculum development. Father engagement in education has become an important area of study due to its positive impact on children's academic success, social development, and attitudes toward gender. When fathers are actively involved, they not only improve their children's learning outcomes but also help challenge traditional gender roles by encouraging shared caregiving and decision-making. However, several barriers, such as cultural norms and systemic challenges, prevent fathers from fully participating in their children's education. This literature review examines the benefits of father involvement, the obstacles fathers face, and the role of schools in creating inclusive practices that support both educational achievement and gender equality.

Father Engagement in Education

Research shows that fathers' involvement in their children's education has a positive impact on both academic performance and social well-being. Fathers who participate actively in their children's education provide emotional support and practical help, encouraging a positive learning environment. Children with involved fathers often perform better in school, exhibit higher self-esteem, and build stronger relationships with peers.¹¹ Fathers also model important values, such as collaboration and shared responsibility in caregiving and decision-making. These behaviours help children develop a more inclusive understanding of relationships and societal roles.¹² In South Africa, father involvement can play a significant role in improving the lives of children in disadvantaged communities. Socio-economic challenges and historical inequalities in areas like the Vhembe District often limit educational opportunities. When fathers actively support their children's education and engage with teachers and schools, they create a supportive environment that helps children view education as essential and achievable.¹³

Barriers to Father Involvement

Although father involvement offers many benefits, several barriers hinder men from fully participating in their children's education. Societal norms often view caregiving and educational involvement as women's roles, discouraging fathers from taking part. These patriarchal norms reinforce traditional

⁸ L. Chisholm and J. September, *Gender and Education in Africa: Inclusion, Equity, and Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 2021).

⁹ R. Morrell, R. Jewkes, and G. Lindegger, "Towards a Positive Masculinity: Redefining Male Roles in Education and Family Life," *Gender & Development* 30, no. 2 (2022): 235–48.

¹⁰ Makusha, Richter, and Van den Berg, "Father Involvement and Child Well-Being: Pathways to Gender Equality."

¹¹ Makusha, Richter, and Van den Berg, "Father Involvement and Child Well-Being: Pathways to Gender Equality."

¹² Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, "Towards a Positive Masculinity: Redefining Male Roles in Education and Family Life."

¹³ Chisale, "Father Absence and Its Impact on Children in South Africa: A Gender-Sensitive Approach."

gender roles, keeping fathers away from developmental and educational activities.¹⁴ Workplace demands also limit fathers' engagement. Many fathers face rigid work schedules that leave little time for family involvement. This issue is especially challenging in labour-intensive jobs or for fathers working far from home as migrant labourers. Their absence affects their ability to contribute meaningfully to their children's learning and school activities.¹⁵ Schools often lack initiatives tailored to address the unique challenges faced by fathers. Parental involvement programs are typically designed without considering fathers' specific circumstances, such as cultural stigmas or time constraints. This oversight limits the potential for schools to involve fathers effectively in fostering inclusive educational environments.¹⁶

Fostering Gender Equality

Father involvement in education is closely linked to promoting gender equality. Fathers who actively engage in their children's education challenge traditional ideas of masculinity, such as dominance and emotional detachment. By sharing caregiving responsibilities and participating in decision-making, fathers model progressive attitudes toward gender roles.¹⁷ Children who see their fathers take on nurturing roles often grow up with more equitable views of gender dynamics. This exposure helps them build respectful relationships and adopt inclusive practices in their own lives. Research emphasizes that fathers demonstrating positive traits like empathy, collaboration, and mutual respect help dismantle harmful stereotypes, creating healthier family and community relationships.¹⁸ Engaged fathers influence not only their children but also the broader community. Their actions create a ripple effect that promotes a culture of equality within and beyond the family. By challenging long-standing gender norms, fathers contribute to a broader societal transformation toward equity and inclusion.¹⁹

The Role of Schools

Schools play an essential role in encouraging father involvement and promoting gender equality. Inclusive policies and targeted programs can help overcome cultural and systemic barriers that limit male participation. For instance, schools can host father-child workshops, offer flexible schedules for parent-teacher meetings, and design mentoring programs specifically for fathers.²⁰ Schools also have the opportunity to model progressive gender norms. Teachers can create activities that emphasize shared responsibilities and teamwork, encouraging fathers to participate alongside their children. These initiatives help fathers challenge stereotypes while promoting inclusive practices in the school environment.²¹ In rural areas like the Vhembe District, the lack of resources and deeply rooted patriarchal norms create additional challenges for engaging fathers. However, schools that partner with local organizations and community leaders have found success in addressing these issues. Community-based programs that invite fathers to take an active role in education have led to better participation and more inclusive learning environments.²²

The literature shows that father involvement in education has a transformative impact on children's learning outcomes, social development, and views on gender equality. However, significant barriers such as societal norms, workplace challenges, and insufficient school initiatives need to be addressed. Schools have a critical role in fostering father engagement through targeted programs and inclusive policies. By supporting fathers' involvement, schools and communities can create environments that promote equity, respect, and collaboration, shaping a more inclusive future for the next generation.

¹⁴ A. Hendricks, R. Morrell, and L. Richter, "Fatherhood and Gender Equity in Education: Transforming Familial and Societal Dynamics," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 1 (2021): 1–12.

¹⁵ Van den Berg and Makusha, "Father Involvement in Early Childhood: Perspectives from South Africa."

¹⁶ Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, "Towards a Positive Masculinity: Redefining Male Roles in Education and Family Life."

¹⁷ Chisale, "Father Absence and Its Impact on Children in South Africa: A Gender-Sensitive Approach."

¹⁸ Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger, "Towards a Positive Masculinity: Redefining Male Roles in Education and Family Life."

¹⁹ Hendricks, Morrell, and Richter, "Fatherhood and Gender Equity in Education: Transforming Familial and Societal Dynamics."

²⁰ T. Makusha, L. Richter, and W. Van den Berg, "Paternal Involvement and Children's Development: A South African Perspective," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 36 (2021): 95–102.

²¹ Chisale, "Father Absence and Its Impact on Children in South Africa: A Gender-Sensitive Approach."

²² Hendricks, Morrell, and Richter, "Fatherhood and Gender Equity in Education: Transforming Familial and Societal Dynamics."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to analyse the multiple factors that influence father engagement in Foundation Phase education. Bronfenbrenner's theory explains that human development is shaped by interactions within various systems, including immediate environments like family and school (microsystem), relationships between these environments (mesosystem), external systems like workplaces and community settings (exosystem), and broader societal norms and cultural values (macrosystem).²³ This framework is suitable for exploring father involvement as it highlights how individual, relational, and systemic factors interact to influence behaviour. The microsystem is critical in this study because it focuses on direct interactions between fathers, children, and schools. For example, when fathers assist their children with schoolwork or participate in school meetings, they positively impact their children's academic and social development. This aligns with findings that active father involvement strengthens children's motivation and emotional resilience.²⁴

The mesosystem addresses how connections between family and school settings influence father participation. This study highlights the importance of targeted school initiatives, such as father-child activity days or flexible parent-teacher meeting schedules, in bridging these two environments. These programs can foster stronger collaboration and encourage fathers to take on more active roles, addressing gender role stereotypes.²⁵ The exosystem focuses on external factors, such as workplace policies and societal expectations, that create barriers to father involvement. Rigid work schedules or cultural stigmas surrounding caregiving roles often limit fathers' participation in educational activities. Understanding these barriers helps to identify changes needed at an institutional level to support father engagement.²⁶ The macrosystem examines how societal and cultural norms influence father involvement. This study addresses how father engagement challenges traditional patriarchal norms and promotes gender equality within families. By modeling shared responsibilities in caregiving and education, fathers can encourage more equitable behaviours in their children and broader societal contexts.

Bronfenbrenner's theory is well-suited for this research article as it provides a comprehensive framework to examine the individual, relational, and systemic factors affecting father involvement. It enables an in-depth analysis of barriers and opportunities while promoting strategies to enhance father participation in education.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopted an *interpretivist paradigm*, which focuses on understanding participants' lived experiences and perceptions. This approach is well-suited to exploring the specific and context-dependent nature of father engagement in Foundation Phase education. By emphasizing subjective meanings and shared experiences, the interpretivist paradigm provided an in-depth understanding of the social dynamics within Foundation Phase schools.

A *qualitative case study design* was used to gain a detailed understanding of father engagement in selected schools in the Vhembe District. This design allowed the researcher to explore the perspectives of fathers, teachers, and school administrators in a specific context, capturing the complexity and richness of their interactions and experiences. Case studies are particularly effective for examining real-life situations, offering insights that are deeply embedded in the social and cultural context.

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These methods were selected because they provide flexibility and depth in exploring participants' experiences. Semi-structured interviews allowed for individual perspectives to be examined in detail,

²³ U. Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

²⁴ Michael E Lamb and Charlie Lewis, "The Development and Significance of Father-Child Relationships in Two-Parent Families," *The Role of the Father in Child Development* 5, no. 94 (2010): 153.

²⁵ T. Nordahl, S. Dobson, and J. J. Wærness, "Engaging Fathers in Education: A Review of Effective Practices," *Educational Review* 73, no. 2 (2021): 153–70.

²⁶ Natasha J Cabrera, Brenda L Volling, and Rachel Barr, "Fathers Are Parents, Too! Widening the Lens on Parenting for Children's Development," *Child Development Perspectives* 12, no. 3 (2018): 152–57.

while focus groups encouraged dynamic discussions, revealing collective insights. A total of 52 participants took part in the study, including 40 fathers, 8 teachers, and 4 school administrators. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds, reflecting the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the Vhembe District. Fathers with children in Foundation Phase education and school staff were chosen as they directly engage with or influence father involvement in schools.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis, which helped identify recurring patterns and key themes related to father engagement. This process involved carefully reading the data, identifying initial codes, and grouping these codes into broader themes that addressed the research objectives. Thematic analysis was particularly useful for uncovering underlying meanings and shared understandings among the participants.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the article used several strategies. Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm their accuracy and relevance. Peer review provided additional feedback from experts in the field, enhancing the credibility of the analysis. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data from interviews, focus groups, and demographic information, ensuring consistency and strengthening the validity of the findings.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed. Participants were fully informed about the article's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing data and securely storing all research materials. Participation was voluntary, with no pressure or coercion applied.

The article focused on rural and semi-urban primary schools in the Vhembe District. While this focus enabled a deep exploration of father engagement within a specific context, it also limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or settings. However, the insights gained contribute valuable understanding of father engagement in similar socio-cultural contexts.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes were identified from the analysed data:

- Impact of Father Involvement on Children's Academic and Social Development.
- Barriers to Father Engagement in Education
- The Role of Schools in Promoting Father Involvement
- Father Engagement and Gender Equality

Impact of Father Involvement on Children's Academic and Social Development

Active father participation significantly enhances children's academic performance, self-confidence, and social skills. Several participants emphasized this impact. One father noted:

"I began assisting my daughter with reading in the evenings, which has resulted in significant improvement. She has gained confidence and now reads fluently. Her teacher has also noted this progress, observing increased confidence in her participation in school activities."

Another father shared a similar observation:

"My son used to struggle with mathematics, but after assisting him in the evenings, he has shown great improvement and is now achieving good marks in mathematics tests. He is no longer shy about asking mathematics-related questions to his teacher, and his class participation has significantly increased."

Teachers reiterated these effects. One teacher remarked:

"When fathers show support for their children's school-related activities, the children become happier, and their performance improves. One of my learners, for example, never forgets to complete homework due to his father's assistance and supervision."

These observations are consistent with Lamb and Lewis's study, which demonstrates that children with engaged fathers tend to exhibit better problem-solving abilities, greater emotional

resilience, and improved academic outcomes.²⁷ Furthermore, children with active paternal support are more likely to develop strong peer relationships and demonstrate higher self-esteem. These findings highlight the dual benefit of academic support and emotional bonding. The father's involvement not only enhances the child's academic performance but also fosters a supportive learning environment at home, which strengthens their social and emotional development.

Barriers to Father Engagement in Education

Participants outlined a range of challenges that hinder father engagement. Societal expectations surrounding traditional gender roles remain a persistent obstacle. One participant stated:

"There is a traditional belief that fathers are primarily financial providers for the family, while mothers are responsible for assisting children with school-related matters. In our community, it remains challenging to change this mindset."

A similar sentiment was echoed by another father, who shared:

"When I attend school meetings, I notice that very few men are present. It seems that women are primarily responsible for attending these meetings and following up with teachers and principals."

Workplace demands were frequently cited as a barrier. A father explained:

"My job is highly demanding, requiring overtime work, which leaves me very tired when I return home. As a result, I do not have time to assist my son with homework or other school activities."

Cultural stigmas also emerged as a factor. Some fathers reported feeling ridiculed by peers for actively participating in school activities. For example, one participant stated:

"I work as a bricklayer and occasionally volunteer for small school projects, such as repairing doors and windows. However, some parents make jokes about my efforts, suggesting I am trying to appear superior, which discourages me."

These findings align with research by Cabrera et al., which highlights how traditional gender norms, rigid work environments, and societal attitudes often limit father engagement.²⁸ Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach, including raising awareness about the importance of father involvement, promoting flexible workplace policies, and challenging cultural stereotypes.

The Role of Schools in Promoting Father Involvement

Schools play a pivotal role in fostering father engagement by creating inclusive and supportive environments. Several participants highlighted successful school initiatives. One father described:

"Two weeks ago, the school organized an event where fathers were invited to help clean the schoolyard. This provided an opportunity for fathers and their children to spend time together. The experience gave me a sense of ownership of the school and my child's education."

Teachers also observed the positive outcomes of such initiatives. One teacher stated:

"When we organize events that specifically invite fathers, such as career talks or parent-child projects, the response is encouraging. Fathers feel more comfortable engaging when they see they're welcomed."

An administrator elaborated on effective communication strategies:

"We send letters and WhatsApp messages about meetings and ensure they are scheduled after working hours. This approach has provided fathers with opportunities to attend and has increased their participation in their children's education."

²⁷ Lamb and Lewis, "The Development and Significance of Father-Child Relationships in Two-Parent Families."

²⁸ Cabrera, Volling, and Barr, "Fathers Are Parents, Too! Widening the Lens on Parenting for Children's Development."

This aligns with Nordahl et al., who emphasize the importance of father-targeted programs and flexible school policies in increasing male engagement.²⁹ Schools that actively encourage father involvement help break down perceived barriers and foster a more inclusive educational environment.

Father Engagement and Gender Equality

Father involvement has profound implications for promoting gender equality. Participants reflected on how their engagement helped reshape traditional family dynamics. One father shared:

"I have started sharing household chores, such as washing dishes and cooking. My wife and children appreciate this. My son now understands that these responsibilities should be shared equally between men and women, as well as boys and girls."

Teachers also observed the influence of father involvement on children's perceptions of gender roles. One teacher noted:

"When fathers actively involved in their children's education, children begin to see caregiving and education as shared responsibilities. It helps them grow up with a balanced view of what men and women can do."

Fathers also reported personal growth in challenging societal norms. One participant stated:

"Being involved in my child's education has made me reconsider what it means to be a man. It is not only about providing financially, but also about being present and supportive."

This theme resonates with Allen and Daly's findings, which suggest that father engagement helps dismantle patriarchal norms and fosters more equitable relationships within families. Fathers who actively participate in caregiving and education model positive masculinity, teaching children the importance of mutual respect and shared responsibilities.

The findings underscore the transformative potential of father involvement in education. While the immediate benefits include improved academic performance and social development, the broader impact extends to fostering gender equality and challenging traditional norms. Schools and communities must address barriers and actively promote father engagement through targeted initiatives and supportive policies. By doing so, they not only enhance educational outcomes but also contribute to more inclusive and equitable family and societal structures.

These findings highlight the significant impact of father engagement on children's development, the persistent barriers that limit participation, and the critical role schools play in fostering inclusivity. Father involvement is also instrumental in challenging traditional gender roles and promoting a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities. Together, these insights provide a strong foundation for advocating for policies and practices that support and encourage active father participation in education.

The findings highlighted how fathers' involvement in educational activities promotes inclusivity and respect, challenging traditional gender roles within families. Fathers who participated actively in their children's education modelled shared responsibilities, fostering a more equitable understanding of caregiving roles. For example, one father shared, *"When I help my daughter with her homework, I show her that men and women can share responsibilities."* This contribution not only redefines familial dynamics but also influences children's perceptions of gender equality, promoting attitudes that support equitable behaviours in future generations. Such active participation reflects a shift away from patriarchal norms, demonstrating the potential for education to serve as a platform for gender transformation within families.

Fathers also redefined traditional notions of masculinity by displaying nurturing behaviours and fostering collaborative problem-solving. Their involvement encouraged emotional expression and set an example of positive masculinity for children. One teacher noted, *"Children learn from seeing their fathers be caring and involved."* This observation underscores the significance of fathers modelling balanced gender roles, as their behaviour promotes healthy emotional development and

²⁹ Nordahl, Dobson, and Wærness, "Engaging Fathers in Education: A Review of Effective Practices."

interpersonal skills in children. Such actions contribute to a broader societal shift, encouraging a view of masculinity that values care, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Despite these positive outcomes, barriers to father engagement remain prevalent. Participants identified challenges such as time constraints, workplace demands, and cultural perceptions that frame caregiving as a predominantly maternal role. One participant noted, *“People think it’s the mother’s job to handle school matters, so when I go to school events, some even question why I am doing it.”* These societal expectations can discourage fathers from taking an active role in their children’s education, limiting their contributions to the learning process and reinforcing traditional gender norms.

Despite these challenges, participants emphasized the potential of targeted school initiatives to address barriers and enhance male participation. Programs designed specifically for fathers, such as father-child events or flexible school schedules, were identified as effective strategies. Participants acknowledged that when schools actively engage fathers and create spaces that welcome their involvement, it can shift perceptions and normalize their role in education. This approach not only supports the academic and social development of children but also serves as an important step toward fostering gender equality within families and communities.

These findings suggest that father engagement has profound implications beyond immediate educational outcomes, contributing to the promotion of inclusive and respectful gender norms, redefining masculinity, and addressing systemic barriers to equitable participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve father involvement in Foundation Phase education, several recommendations are essential. Schools should create programs that encourage fathers to participate in educational activities. Initiatives like “Father-Child Learning Days” can offer fathers a chance to engage in their children’s learning, while also modelling positive behaviours. These activities help strengthen the father-child relationship and emphasize the value of parental involvement in education.

It is also important to provide training for educators to help them engage fathers both in the classroom and at home. Teachers should be equipped with strategies to make fathers feel welcome and valued in the school environment. By offering tools that connect home and school, teachers can enhance father participation and improve the educational experience for children.

Community campaigns should also be organized to highlight the importance of father involvement in education. Workshops and awareness programs can educate fathers on how their engagement impacts their children’s academic success and social growth. These efforts can change cultural views and reduce the stigma around male participation in caregiving and education.

Policy changes are necessary to support inclusive parental involvement. Educational policies should ensure that fathers are encouraged to engage in their children’s education. Policies might include flexible meeting times, father-focused events, and resources to make it easier for fathers to participate.

Further research is needed to examine the long-term effects of father involvement on gender equality and positive masculinities. Long-term studies can provide valuable insights into how sustained father engagement can challenge traditional gender roles and promote more equal family dynamics. Understanding these long-term impacts can help improve strategies and policies to support fathers’ continued involvement in education, ultimately advancing gender equality and positive masculinities.

CONCLUSION

Father engagement in Foundation Phase education significantly contributes to promoting gender equality and modelling positive masculinities. When fathers actively participate in their children’s learning, they challenge traditional gender roles and set an example of shared responsibilities within the family. This involvement not only supports academic achievement but also encourages children to adopt more inclusive views on gender. Several barriers, such as time constraints, cultural expectations, and societal perceptions limit fathers’ engagement. To overcome these challenges, schools and communities must implement targeted initiatives that create opportunities for fathers to engage meaningfully in their children’s education. By addressing these structural and cultural obstacles, it is

possible to foster a more inclusive and equitable educational environment that benefits both children and families.

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