

The Empowerment Approach to Parental Involvement in Education

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KEYWORDS Parent Empowerment. Parental Involvement Ecologies. Parental Obligations. Community

ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to explore how parents perceive the essence of parental involvement in education. A qualitative phenomenological design using eight group interviews of ten parent participants was used for data collection. The main findings of this qualitative study indicate that the meaning attached to parental involvement falls short of its real essence, and focuses on parental responses to activities determined by schools as against meaningful partnerships. The main recommendation, therefore, is advocacy that begins with empowering all stakeholders, especially parents with regard to the essence of parental involvement. In this regard, the approach recommended in this study proposes an approach that empowers parents, schools and communities through school-based and cluster-based forums using actions that recognize the power of *zenzele* (do it yourself) for schools and parents, and *masakhane* (doing it for ourselves together) for school clusters and the community.

INTRODUCTION

Section 20(a)(1) of the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa 1996) prescribes that the governing body of a public school “must promote the best interests of the school and strive to ensure its development through the provision of quality education for all learners at the school”. The emphasis of this mandate is by extension on the best interest of the learner. The parents’ role in promoting the best interests of the child is of primary importance because their role is that of the child’s primary environment and determines the success of the child’s schooling trajectory. That role includes caring for children and making sure that they are integrated fully in society in terms of the culture and values of their community. An important aspect is that of preparing the children for life in the community physically, emotionally and mentally and being part of their development. This is what makes parental involvement in education an important element for children’s growth which, in historically disadvantaged schools in South Africa, presents numerous challenges. This is

especially in terms of, *inter alia*, what parental involvement means, activities indicating parental involvement, strategies employed to encourage parental involvement and barriers to parental involvement.

Epstein’s typology of parental involvement presents the most widely used and well-known framework for parental involvement in terms of home-school relationships. Epstein (1995) indicates that the overlapping spheres of influence among the school, home and community on interactional bases, underpin parental involvement. Parental involvement is viewed in terms of parents, family and community partnerships with the school and this entails, as articulated by Epstein and Salinas (2004: 14) and Sapungan and Sapungan (2014: 44), obligations pertaining to parents and the school namely, parenting, which relates to parenting skills, which it can be asserted, are essential for parents and all families to establish home environments that support children as learners; communicating, which relates to regular and meaningful two-way communication between home and school which, it can be said, implies effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children’s progress; volunteering, which entails recruiting and organizing parent help, support and assistance; learning at home, which relates to helping parents understand educational processes and their role in supporting learner achievement; school decision-making and advocacy, which implies includ-

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ing parents in school decisions that affect children and families, thereby giving them a voice in decisions that affect their children's education; and collaborating with the community, which relates to identifying and integrating community resources and services to strengthen school programs, family practices, and children's learning and development.

The present study locates the meaning of parental involvement within the obligations pertaining to parents (family), the school and the community as systems influencing a child's development and learning as espoused by Epstein. However, the researcher puts forth that with the current challenges facing families, the emphasis on parental involvement should reflect the African precept of communality, which is rooted in *ubuntu*, the philosophy key to all African values and involves humanness, a good disposition towards others, a moral nature and is based on trust and morality, sharing (interdependence), cooperation and participation (Chaplin n.d : 2; Broodryk 2005: 12; Msila 2009: 54). Mthembu (1996: 216) adds that in terms of *ubuntu*, two important practices emerge namely:

- ♦ *zenzele* (do it yourself), which relates to individual entrepreneurship and implies individuality in doing things. This can be related to parents or the family's attempts to do well for themselves in terms of encouraging and supporting children's education. This ties in with Epstein's parental obligations of parenting and learning at home; and
- ♦ *masakhane* (doing it for ourselves together), which relates to group-based practices, whose importance is collective ability and sharing and makes it possible for an individual to be formed by the community. In terms of Epstein's typology, this relates to practices involving communicating, volunteering, decision making and collaboration with the community.

Parental involvement thus involves the parent and family, as the child's immediate environment, engaging in *zenzele* to ensure that the child is raised and cared for; and the involvement of the community and school engaging in *masakhane* to care for all children in order for them to achieve academically. This means involving parents as individuals who have obligations of care and support for their children, as well as involving the community and the school who also have

obligations to care for children in ways that ensure that these systems support each other and children. This, as asserted by Mahlangu (2014: 177) is realized through "what parents do naturally in the home to socialize their children" and through linkages between the community and the schools in assisting "learners through the exchange of information and the provision of support services not available within the school". It is this interconnectedness of the child's family, community and school that defines the importance of parental involvement in the child's educational development (Sapungan and Sapungan 2014: 45).

However, in so far as the role of the family is concerned, many challenges face the parent in African schools. Although they do everything in their power to care for and nurture their children, African parents are constrained by numerous challenges like poor socio-economic factors that include among others, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, time constraints, which at the end, inhibit their ability to care for and support their children, especially educationally (Duma et al. 2011: 51; Xaba 2011: 207; Stephinah 2014: 465,646; Bojuwoye et al. 2014: 1; Matshe, 2014: 100). Furthermore, the effects of HIV and AIDS have factored in the prevalence, on a large scale, of orphans (over two and a half million) and child-headed families (Atilola 2014: 2; Garrity 2014: 2). This presents a situation where parents largely are unable to be involved in their children's education and a situation where children who 'head' families have to act as parents and be involved in their siblings' education as attested to in Pillay's (2012: 9) study of child-headed families. These challenges adversely impact on the abilities of families to engage in the practice of *zenzele*. This doubles the school's role into that of a provider of some parental obligations, which then means the school's role becomes that of *zenzele* with children's families regardless of their statuses, as well as *masakhane* with communities.

These challenges project the importance and significance of *masakhane*, which in the sense of *ubuntu*, advocates communality as a strong and binding network of relationships that embody the adages: "All children are my children" and that "It takes the village to raise a child", which according to Mthembu (1996), imply that children not only belong to their biological parents, but are also under the authority and con-

trol of any adult in the community. This means that any child belongs to the community and thus the community is also responsible for raising, supporting and encouraging children educationally and academically (*masakhane*). This notion actually reduces the burden on and demotes the individualistic nature of the modern family and by implication, the *zenzele* practice in its absolute sense, and promotes communality and *masakhane*. In this regard, the researcher concurs with the view that the child's ecological environment comprises a combination of the school and the community, which in essence, includes the collective notion of the family as the basic component of the community. This resonates with the African context of the child's ecological environment and in essence includes the importance of the community as a child's nurturing environment. To this end, the traditional African community does not have orphans, nor does it have child-headed families as stated by Foster (cited by Ardington and Leibbrandt 2010: 2) that "The extended family has been the predominant social safety net mechanism ... with children who lose their parents being absorbed into their relatives' families leading to the traditional assertion that 'there is no such thing as an orphan in Africa'".

Taking the two aforementioned practices and the philosophy on which they are grounded, this study advocates the communal spirit, which propounds such practices as mutual obligations, mutual assistance, trust, recognition, unselfishness, self-reliance, caring and respect, which practices find expression in value-sharing, interconnectedness, communal relationships, continuous integrated development and collectivism as the fundamental basis for meaningful parental involvement (Mthembu 1996; Mbaya 2011: 2; Mandova and Chingombe 2013: 100; Du Toit-Brits et al. 2012: 6). The researcher argues that *masakhane* is a generally familiar and well-known practice to African parents in the South African context. Consequently, invoking strategies and activities that foster both the *zenzele* and *masakhane* principles at schools is sure to enhance parental involvement. A school network that promotes the values of care, support, empathy and views children as belonging, not to individual schools, but to all schools in the communities, can be a first step towards realizing effective parental involvement in children's education.

Objectives of the Study

With this study, the researcher sought to justify the appropriateness of the African context of parental involvement so as to propose what can be done to enhance their involvement using what is familiar to African parents and communities as is advocated by the spirit of *masakhane*. Therefore the objectives were:

- ♦ to gain insight into how parents perceive the essence of parental involvement; and
- ♦ to propose an empowerment approach to parental involvement in education of their children.

METHODOLOGY

The present study draws on findings from a study that explored parental involvement from the viewpoints of parents in the Lejweleputswa District of the Free State Department of Education. A qualitative phenomenological design was used for data collection to explore the essence of parental involvement from participants' own perspectives and natural settings and to find out how it was enacted at schools (Bogdan and Biklen 2003: 23). For this reason, based on a social constructivist orientation, an understanding of participants' lived experiences was gained as pointed out by Creswell (2009: 13), "the researcher sets aside his or her own experiences in order to understand those of the participants in the study" because a social constructivist orientation holds the belief that people seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and they develop subjective meanings of their experiences toward certain objects or things (McMillan and Schumacher 2001: 396).

Group interviews, using semi-structured open-ended questions were held with parents as participants, specifically to engender a relaxed atmosphere where as participants, they would be comfortable to express their views without, as it were, fear of intimidation and victimization, as would be the case in individual one-to-one interviews. To this end, Greef (2002: 307) argues that group interviews allow sharing and comparing among participants and also allow people to self-disclose or share personal experiences. Interviews were held with eight groups of parents comprising an average of 10 parents per group, thus comprising 80 parent participants. The group nature of the interviews was

most advantageous because it afforded parents, who mostly are generally not very educated, the opportunity to express themselves freely in the mist of their 'peers' and indeed, they easily related to each other and gained confidence as interviews continued.

Content analysis was used for analyzing data. This process included verbatim transcriptions, organizing and reading through, coding, generating categories and themes and interpretation (De Vos 2002: 340; Leedy and Ormrod 2005: 150; Nieuwenhuis 2007: 101). This process culminated into four distinct themes namely, the meaning of parental involvement, parental activities at schools, strategies used to encourage parental involvement in their children's education and barriers to parental involvement. For trustworthiness, participants' verbal accounts were extensively quoted, which assisted in working with data as collected from participants' accounts and using participants' own words (Bogdan and Biklen 2003: 190).

Permission to conduct the research at schools was obtained from the Free State Department of Education, through following the prescribed official protocol. Furthermore, school principals and governing bodies were also requested to permit the conduct of interviews with parents. Participants were apprised of their rights to voluntary participation and to withdraw at any time if they so decided, were informed of their right not to respond to questions if they did not want to and were also guaranteed absolute confidentiality regarding participation and that the final report would ensure that there would be complete anonymity. Thus, this report uses fictitious names.

RESULTS

The profiles of the parents in the interview groups were on average, a mix of parents who were employed and unemployed, married, widowed and single, employed as professional and non-professional workers, guardians and foster parents. The majority of the parent participants were female (46) and there were a number of grandparents, who were also 'parents' of learners at schools. The majority of participant parents (49) had educational levels above the equivalent of the current grade 7. It was also noted that most schools (5) from where the participants were drawn, had high enrolment figures, which

was perceived as a challenge for effective parental involvement.

The Meaning of Parental Involvement

Findings on the meaning of parental involvement, though varied in expression, indicate that parents mostly held similar views. Participants largely expressed opinions that indicate parental involvement as entailing responding to schools' directives and requests. This was expressed in comments such as "*I must attend school activities when I am requested by the school*"; "... *assisting the school each time I am requested, paying school fees, attending school activities and meetings*" and "... *responding when I am called at school*".

Participants also seemed to suggest that mostly they did not really know or were not sure of what their roles and responsibilities were. One parent boldly indicated that she was not aware of any other roles and responsibilities and stated "*Whatever the school requests, I do wholeheartedly*" while another explained "*I expect the school to tell me what to do*". A parent who happened to be a school governing body member declared her willingness to be fully involved and made a statement that "*But for us to succeed, we need guidelines on how to do what*".

The view that they did not really know what their roles were, was reinforced by their responses indicating not really understanding departmental and school policies. Some of the reasons they raised included poor planning from both the schools and the Department, language used, poor management and lack of training for both the schools and parents. Many participants cited the language problem, because at schools where their children attend, mostly English was used during meetings and in correspondences. A mother of two children made the point that as parents, they did not understand policies "*as the language used there is difficult to understand as words used do not mean exactly what is implied. Roles and responsibilities of parents are not clearly outlined in these policies*".

Despite these views, it was however also evident that parents wanted much more than just responding to school's requests. In this regard, a mother of three children emphatically made the point that every parent would like to see his/her children prosper, but complained "*how do you help them if you do not know (pol-*

icies), because at the end you will find that you are stepping on the principal's toes". Other parents' remarks indicated a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities as evident in this comment:

Parental involvement means involving parents in all spheres of education, academically, spiritually and emotionally. We should become partners as a whole in the development of the children.

Parental Involvement Activities at Schools

Parental involvement activities largely pointed to attending meetings, sports activities, signing children's books, helping them with homework and projects and responding to their children's behavioural problems. A mother of three children confirmed that they attended meetings because other activities were to be done by educators as that was their job. A mother of one boy also remarked: "*We sign books, assist with homework and school projects although this is difficult*".

There was also general agreement that parents only became involved when told to do so, and only in activities determined by the school, which may be the reason for the low variety of activities they engaged in at schools. One parent succinctly expressed this view: "*We are involved only when we are told or requested to do so. We wait for the school to give us activities to perform*". A number of reasons were given for this state of parental involvement at schools, including the lack of knowledge and illiteracy while some parents felt that the school was burdening them with too much work.

However, some parents indicated an understanding of the essence of parental involvement and that they wanted to be involved in more than the current activities. One parent surmised this view:

In my children's school, we just attend meetings and go for class consultations. Honestly, that's not involvement. I need to be more involved from the planning stages of activities. We want to be involved in activities such as to maintain the school surroundings and buildings, work as committee members in different school committees like disciplinary committees, SGB, safety and security and be involved in decision-making. For instance, we are excluded from matters concerning monies and how

they are used. For example, at my child's school, monies are spent for teachers' year-end closing parties and yet, this is not budgeted for. In fact our school's budget is so skimpy, we do not know how items listed add value to our children's education.

She further made the point that they needed training because, as she said: "*For real stuff like being a member of a committee, for helping children with homework and projects, you need to be trained, otherwise you will end up doing the whole homework or project for the child*". Another parent emphasized that despite being uneducated, "*but for our children, we are really prepared to go an extra mile*".

From these responses, it was clear that parents generally wanted to be more involved and be engaged in more activities, only if they were to be capacitated in doing so. This is also indicative of how much of a priority parental involvement is regarded by parents. These responses from parents indicate generally that they do have a sense of the importance of their involvement at schools.

Strategies Used to Encourage Parental Involvement in Their Children's Education

Strategies used to encourage parental involvement, seemed generally aimed at encouraging attendance of meetings and responding to calls to schools. A mother of two children indicated in this regard, "*Our school calls us again and again for meetings, misbehaving children, pregnant girls, crime and vandalization of schools*". Another mother of two children, indicated that their principal wrote letters to invite them to quarterly school meetings, as well as when their children misbehaved. Similarly, Nobuhle indicated that although at their school they were called to meetings and other school activities, "*but I feel that this is not enough, more can still be done*". According to the participants, strategies mostly involved the invitation of service organizations like NGOs and state departments to inform parents on issues of a general social nature, including dealing with issues of social grants, advice on obtaining IDs and birth certificates.

Some parents indicated being involved in much more education-related issues. A father of a grade 5 girl commented that their school sought to use their skills and said that they were given

different responsibilities “according to what we know, and request us to account for what we did. This makes us feel responsible and wish to do more. Given a task of what you know or of your expertise, is the best motivation, I think”. Another parent mentioned activities that included actual children’s learning. She commented:

In my children’s school, we are always invited to classes to see our children’s progress, to clean their classrooms. Even when your child has performed well, you are called to school. Our achievements as parents and children are published in school magazines and local newspapers.

Some strategies used to encourage parental involvement seemed to reveal lack of focused strategic approaches. Consequently, some parents viewed such strategies as being ineffective in encouraging meaningful involvement. Rather, they made suggestions for improvement. For instance, a parent who was also a governing body member offered suggestions touching on community involvement. She emphasized “*If there were programs understood by all stakeholders and ... if only all community organizations were involved, our goal would be one.*” Another parent, a mother of a grade 7 girl also suggested: “*The problem is: it (strategy) is not owned by all stakeholders. That is why even good strategies fail. Planning together, can eliminate all problems and doubts*” while another parent, indicated that “*school visits and grouping of parents into ‘houses’ would produce positive results, because no parent will hide behind other parents, so that everyone has his/her turn in a group*”.

Some parents felt that no one encouraged them or took note when they had done something good for the school. Ntombizodwa, a mother of one child, remarked:

Everything that a parent does, should be written on the notice board or be included in the school records, because that will make us feel noticed and important. The other day I came early to a meeting and found educators struggling to decorate the hall. I rushed home, brought my table-cloths and flowers, since that is my expertise. I decorated it quickly and so beautifully that everybody was admiring it. But what happened thereafter? It was mentioned in passing, not recorded anywhere. No matter how small a deed, we all need recognition. ... Even passive parents should be recognized by

thanking them, even if it can be for attending school activities.

Some parents indicated that there was no monitoring and recognition of parental involvement. This was primarily based on lack of feedback. An interesting view was expressed by Matlakala, a mother of three children who argued, “... *as parents, we want our children and the school to be proud that we are doing something. We expect even a small token of appreciation, even if it is a card saying ‘thank you’*”.

Strategies used at schools to encourage parental involvement also have a bearing on the extent or level of involvement and some can be barriers to parental involvement.

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Participants identified a variety of barriers to their involvement. One barrier concerned methods of communication and identified language as a barrier. Pearl, a professional, maintained that language was still a problem because it was difficult for learners to carry out instructions and take messages to their parents and in turn, parents had difficulty assisting children with homework and projects, “*which also highlights the language and communication problem. They (parents) are passive in meetings because they do not understand what is being said and they cannot respond*”. Nthabiseng, an unemployed parent of three children argued, “*as parents we are afraid to air our views to the educators due to illiteracy. We always think they will judge us on the basis of our education level*”. Dikeledi and Mamokete, mothers of two and three children respectively, opined that regular changes in the school curriculum were a problem because towards the end of each year, they were called to school and new terms were used in progress reports. This also happened when the new curriculum was explained – they could not understand the language that changed all the time. In addition, Mafusi, a mother of two children remarked that one way communication was a big problem as they could not communicate effectively and efficiently with teachers. She stressed that communication was the basis that could empower and inform parents and suggested, “... *schools must come down to our level so that we can understand one another and communicate freely*”. Bongani, a hawker and father of two children, indicated that parents were not

prepared to bring suggestions because they “*feel inferior; they think the language problem and illiteracy is the yard-stick that principals use to under-estimate them*”.

Thoto, a college graduate, explained the use of modern technology as a barrier and explained that using the internet, computers, and cell-phones was another way of communication with parents, but most parents were so poor that they could not afford computers and cell-phones and had difficulties in accessing the internet. Letebele, a father of four children suggested “*...simple ways of communication, like giving letters or messages to children to and from schools. This method is easy and inexpensive. As parents and schools, we should train our children to deliver messages on time and precisely as it is expected of them*”.

Other problems highlighted as common barriers were the lack of guidelines and know-how, lack of and poor planning of activities to involve parents in schools. Tseliso, one of the few male parents from one group pleaded that “*If only parents can be given guidelines and the know-how of helping children. I feel that knowledge can make a huge difference, since parents will not fear to help or always make excuses when they are supposed to be involved in any way, even in assisting learners with projects or homework*”.

Lack of time was also cited as a barrier to parental involvement. One parent, a professional, remarked off-the-record, after the interviews that he found meetings at school a waste of time. He remarked:

I have a busy schedule. Most times we are called to meetings and the only things mentioned are ‘school fees’, ‘the school has no money’, ‘parents are not paying’. Imagine, I have paid my dues and I have to listen to that at every meeting. Secondly, in discussing children’s academic progress, we hear the same story every time - he must work harder; he is doing well; he is well behaved; I’m not interested in that. I want to know areas where my child struggles and how I must support him. What is the meaning of ‘he must work harder’?”

Another parent commented that meetings were not beneficial to them because mostly, decisions had already been taken and the meetings were a mere formality to legitimize such decisions. She stated that if they raised objections, the staff became negative and other parents

joined in “*because they are intimidated, fear educators, or think you want to ‘shine’. But the reality is, your word as a parent does not count. Otherwise you are labelled as being influenced by politics. So you see, such meetings are a waste of time really*”.

Violence and the abolishment of corporal punishment seemed to be other barriers. Participants expressed frustration on learners being bullied, unruly and ill-disciplined, which was perceived as causing schools to blame parents for poor parenting skills, orphans not having adult supervision, and child-headed families with no role models. Qondi, a mother of two children, expressing the feeling of helplessness and consequent reluctance to be involved at school, pointed out: “*Shifting of responsibility and lack of commitment shows that people have lost ‘ubuntu’ because before ‘apartheid’, adults punished every child who misbehaved without asking who is the parent*”. Mpho added, “*corporal punishment used to solve our problems. Ill-discipline, unruliness and learners not taking responsibility for their actions, ... were dealt with accordingly*”. In this regard, Limakatso, a mother of three children, actually reasoned that parents were reluctant to support schools to maintain discipline “*because although there are alternatives to corporal punishment, they feel alternatives are not as effective. No wonder parents and principals are demotivated. Principals and parents are also threatened by their children*”.

DISCUSSION

The main finding from this study is on how parental involvement was viewed by parents and how it could be enhanced. While parents seemed to engage in some meaningful activities, this seemed mainly to emanate from the dictates of schools rather than an outcome of partnership with schools. This appeared to reduce parental involvement to attending meetings, sport activities and mainly doing what schools tell them to do. Indeed some writers espouse parental involvement as being to attend their children’s school meetings, sport activities, leisure activities and social activities (Mmotlane et al. 2009: 529). This view of parental involvement inadvertently limits and sets boundaries on what parents can do as partners at schools. In this regard, Calabrese-Barton et al. (2004: 4) argue

that parents' roles and involvement at schools have been understood largely in terms of "what they do" and how that fits with the needs of the child or the goals of the school, which project parents as subjects to be manipulated or without power to position themselves in ways they see fit by espousing views like "*here are the things that successful parents do*".

This study has revealed views that seem to confirm this notion. Remarks like "*Whatever the school requests, I do wholeheartedly*" attest to this. It was also found that, although parents generally seemed to respond to schools' dictates, some parents wanted to be more involved and actually participate as partners in determining the direction of their children's education. In fact, some parents leveled criticism at how schools encouraged parental involvement and activities they were required to be involved in. These parents, though in the minority, seemed to understand the value of promoting the best interests of the child as pronounced in the Schools Act, which in essence means, providing the school with a strategic direction, acting as schools' critical friends and holding the schools to account (Barton et al. 2006: 5; James et al. 2011: 418; Ranson 2011: 402). In this regard, an approach to parental involvement that empowers them to be active partners who are considered to have something to contribute to their children's education is essential. According to Calabrese-Barton et al. (2004: 4), this means providing parents spaces linked with particular activities along school-based academic spaces that reflect curriculum and instruction. To this end, Bagarette (2014: 405) points out that parents "bring a wealth of knowledge from their own experiences to the school", which they can "use to the advantage and advancement of the school". For this reason, parent empowerment is critical as it involves the capacity for active involvement that extends to other arenas such as schools and community agencies; recognition of and ability to mobilize relevant resources, which can include the capacity to access services and the capacity to join with others to set common goals or the capacity and ability to be linked in as part of a mutually supportive community (Freiberg et al. 2014: 408 - 409).

School-based spaces also include non-academic spaces that reflect the social organizational qualities of schooling not directly implicated in academic learning, such as managing

learner behaviour in the school campus; and home/community spaces, which include such spaces as those where parents interact with others about their concerns of schooling, such as church-based groups, parent networks and community organizations. Parents' interaction with these spaces allows them to provide their own capital, which Calabrese-Barton et al. (2004: 4) relate to as what parents bring with their involvement such as human, social and material resources they possess and can activate. In this regard, Makoelle's (2014: 127) study found that "parental involvement in both curricular and extra-curricular activities is very instrumental and that a balance between extra-curricular activities with teaching and learning was significant in creating a conducive atmosphere for school improvement", which implies that parents invest their economic, cultural and academic capital at schools.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the empirical research, it is necessary to engender an understanding of what parental involvement entails. This requires a process involving a series of activities aimed at advocating the typologies of parental involvement. This is especially because there seems to be an acknowledgement from parents that suggests the main challenges as being two-fold. Firstly, there are those parental involvement challenges that are school-based and can be addressed at school level. These include ensuring that the basic obligations of parents and schools are promoted. This is in terms of the parenting responsibilities of parents, school communication with the parents, parental volunteering, learning at home responsibilities and participation of parents in decision-making. Focusing on these aspects addresses the main findings of this research namely, a comprehensive understanding of what parental involvement entails and language and literacy challenges. Secondly, there are those parental involvement challenges over which both, schools and parents have little control. These relate to such issues as school safety, orphaned learners, single parenthood, teenage-motherhood, child-headed families including issues around HIV and AIDS. These are challenges that require a focus on collaboration and involvement with the community. For such reasons, empowering parents for active involvement is crucial.

Empowering parents’ means allowing them to gain the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to cope with their roles as children’s primary socializing environments. It is widely held that an empowerment process enables people to gain power, authority and influence by possessing decision-making abilities and powers and utilizing them to the benefit of children through empowered involvement and participation in the crucial process of children’s education. In this regard, parents are enabled to acquire apposite confidence and knowledge and are enabled to apply it through active vocal and physical participation in school processes. Based on these capabilities, the empowerment approach seeks to empower schools, parents and communities with regard to an understanding of what parental involvement entails and how it can be made a reality at schools. Thus, parents, the school and

communities represent a child’s ecological environment in that the child belongs and grows in a family, which is in the community and is influenced by the community environment and enters the school with its influencing relationships as a new environment. These three environments locate the child in a central position.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study’s main recommendation is an empowerment approach to parental involvement in education. The tasks regarding parental involvement in so far as the child’s three environments alluded to earlier are concerned, relate to advocacy and implementation of the parental involvement roles that focus on parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaboration with the com-

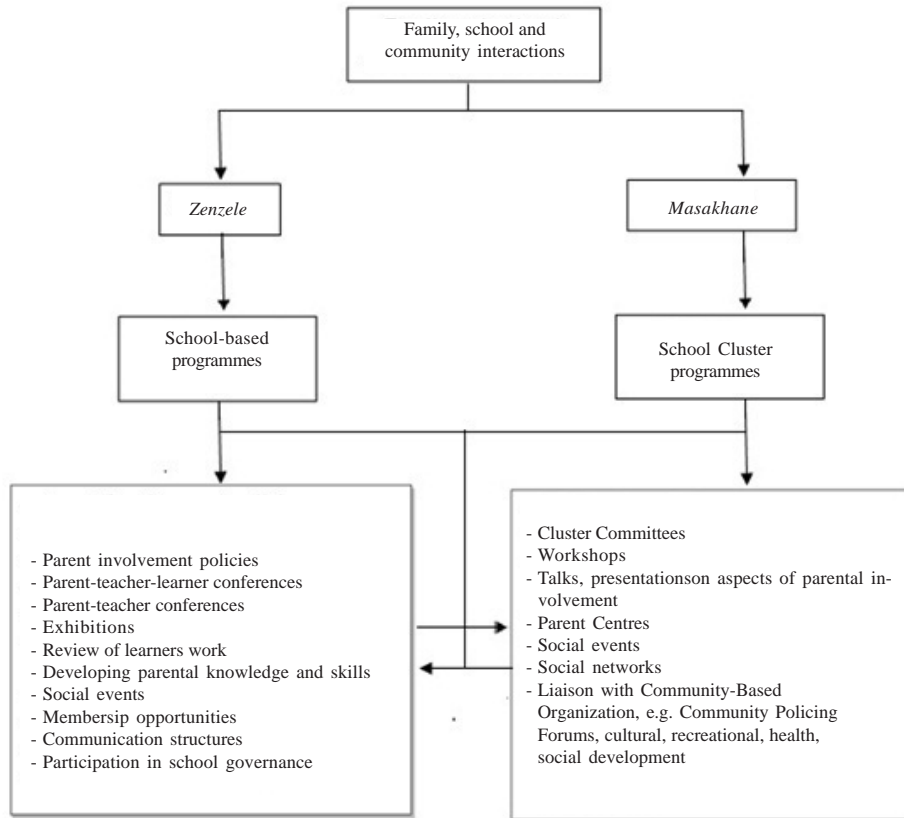


Fig. 1. The empowerment approach to parental involvement

munity. Thus, taking the three dimensions as a starting point, parental involvement is viewed as a function of the interaction of and among the three environments as illustrated in Figure 1.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the empowerment approach addresses this by initiating the necessary structures or framework consisting of two main levels namely, school-based and cluster-based parental involvement programs.

The School-based Parental Involvement Programs

The school initiates programs aimed at enhancing parental involvement for challenges at school level. These include such aspects as advocating an understanding of parental involvement, language and literacy and staff attitude challenges. These programs are premised on the principle of *zenzele*, which means schools do it themselves in terms of empowerment. Individual schools initiate school-based programs through activities listed under *zenzele* in Figure 1. To initiate such programs, schools have to conduct systematic strategic review processes, which must involve all stakeholders in line with the school and home engaging in *zenzele*. This is a process that focuses on identifying the school's needs for development in parental involvement. This includes, identifying the school's stakeholders, analyzing current activities and programs of parental involvement with the view of identifying the strengths and challenges, prioritizing the most critical aspects of need in terms of development. This in essence, requires the school to focus on the question of where the school is and where the school would want to be in terms of parental involvement.

This process culminates into the development of written parental involvement policies and the production of an action plan addressing areas identified and prioritized as critical for enhancing parental involvement. Besides, in the case of parents from schools in the research area, the action plan of the school would focus on who the stakeholders are in terms of families. This will identify the persons responsible for learners at home as well as identify those families where parents are 'absent' or families that are headed by children, grandparents or guardians. The intention is to be able to determine parental involvement programs that are specific to the needs of such families. This identification will serve as a feedback loop to the greater clus-

ter-based program, which seeks to include stakeholders external to the school, such as state departments that can be of assistance in line with *masakhane*. For instances where there are parents who already are involved, the action plan would focus on ensuring that they are attuned to being fully engaged and are high contributors to learner success. This will also allow the school to create spaces for parents to engage in programs leading to action.

Cluster-based Parental Involvement Programs

This phase entails organizing schools into local clusters, which essentially implies that schools in a locality, determined by political ward boundaries or by some determined radius, are clustered and form a cluster-based parental involvement forum. This forum can consist of representatives that will comprise parents and school staff from each school. The forum elects a liaison person who will act as chair. The logistics of how the forum will function will be determined by the forum, including resource acquisition. It must be stated that this is a process requiring dedication and commitment. The forum will, as it develops, strive to form partnerships with Community-Based Organizations and structures.

The aim of the forum would be to advocate parental involvement across the school clusters, which in essence implies applying *masakhane* principles. This is premised on the principles that view parents as parents of all children and children as children of all parents.

The cluster-based forum's main focus will be to address those aspects of involvement over which both the schools and parents have little control through activities listed under *masakhane* in Figure 1. These include issues relating to school safety, orphaned learners, single parenthood, teenage-motherhood including issues around HIV and AIDS. Therefore parental involvement programs will focus on areas such as safety, health and community welfare, in line with the obligations relating to parental involvement. For instance, in a cluster of five schools, funds can be raised on a rotational cycle spanning a number of months or years for assisting child-headed families thus taking ownership of such children as 'children of the village' or community. This is a familiar group-based support concept to African parents as is the practice of a *stokvel* system¹.

The advantage of the cluster-based parental involvement is that the community's economic, cultural, academic and social capitals are pooled together for the good of the schools and community. Another advantage of this level is that it can eliminate barriers to parental involvement, especially those relating to language and illiteracy, cultural, socio-economic and school characteristics factors. Finally, activities at this level will benefit schools in the area and reduce the performance disparity often found among schools. In this sense, the children become the community's children.

The empowerment approach to parental involvement espoused above proposes a systematic approach to initiating parental involvement programs. The most important aspect of the approach is its adjustability to local circumstances of schools and their communities. However, its implementation requires conscientious leadership. It is therefore recommended that the school and parents, in the spirit of *zenzele* and *masakhane* should join hands committedly to initiate processes aimed at enhancing parental involvement through considering the three environments of child development as one community or village that take cares of its children.

LIMITATIONS

It is to be stated that while the study gained valuable insights into parental involvement from the view of the parents, it was limited by findings which are by no means exhaustive. For instance, the views of other stakeholders would form a complete picture of the study phenomenon and thus shed more light from other stakeholders. The study was also limited by focusing on historically disadvantaged schools in one district of the Free State Department of Education. This, however, opens a scope for further investigation of schools including the so-called ex-Model C² schools, which are at this stage multiracial and in most cases comprise black learners as their enrollment majority.

NOTES

1. *Stokvels* are forms of savings clubs, burial societies and various economic activities by groups of people. It is worth pointing

out that *stokvels* project the ability of groups of people in the community to work cooperatively in ventures for a common purpose regardless of their educational statuses. For example, Broodryk (2005: 57) cites Lukhele who points out that during one month, 24 000 *stokvels* exchanged R84 million.

2. Ex-Model C were formerly Whites only schools located in White suburbs and catering for White learners only.

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