"I'm not a teacher": A case of (dys)functional parent-teacher partnerships in a South African township

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Teachers collaborating with parents is an axiom of successful school programmes. The parents' role should be supportive and complementary to the teachers' pedagogical function. A functional or dysfunctional parent-teacher partnership is a predictor of children's success or failure in school. The functionality of parent-teacher partnerships is often measured through student achievement. The aim of this article was to illuminate how a coordinated parent-teacher partnership can be supportive to children's schooling. Focus is on teachers' teaching role complimented with the supportive and monitoring role of parents. Data were collected through interviews with parents and teachers at a township primary school. I engage the concern that a lack of parental involvement affects parent-teacher partnerships in township schools. Findings of this study demonstrate teachers' lack of understanding of the sociocultural and economic circumstances constraining parental involvement, resulting in a chasm of understanding between teachers and parents on how to collaboratively support children's learning positions at school and at home.

Keywords: children's school success; parent-teacher partnership; primary school; township

Introduction and Background

Parents and teachers play different roles in the education of children. Traditionally parents were responsible for bringing up and raising children at home whereas teachers were responsible for educating children at school. Recent research shows a shift in the traditional roles of parents and teachers concerning children's education (Onderwijsraad, 2003; Patall, Cooper & Robinson, 2008; Smit, Sluiter & Driessen, 2006). Parents are now assuming more of a teaching role in the education of their children (Cox, 2019; Menheere & Hooge, 2010). Teachers and parents are becoming jointly responsible for the education of children, both at home and in the school situation. Research reports a shift towards a form of a parent-teacher partnership combining the separate responsibilities of parents and teachers (Epstein, 2001).

A parent-teacher partnership can thrive on clearly defined shared goals and responsibilities to drive "collaborative innovation" within a school situation. A collaborative and strategic parent-teacher partnership is fundamental to improving school achievement (Parisi, 2017). It matters for children's achievement, motivation and well-being in school. An increasing body of research suggests that learners learn more successfully when their parents are actively engaged in supporting their learning (Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010). Parental involvement in children's education is a strong predictor of learner success (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016) and one of the factors affecting learner achievement (Wilder, 2014). Additionally, better self-confidence among learners has been linked to more parental participation (Moon & Hofferth, 2016). Research on literacy learning too has suggested strongly that parental involvement offers critical support for the development of skills and motivation central to literacy development (Edwards, 2010; Heath, 2010; Morrow, Mendelsohn & Kuhn, 2010).

Parental involvement in children's education has become a key component in school and government policy concerning family education programmes both in the United States of America (USA) and in Western Europe (Menheere & Hooge, 2010). South Africa is not an exception to this policy direction. Parental involvement in South African schools has been primarily limited to paying school fees and attending school meetings (Lemmer, 2007). However, this focus has shifted and parental involvement reflects the democratisation of education whereby parents are given the power to be part of the decision-making process in schools. Government recognises and encourages parent-teacher partnerships as part of an integral pillar in the school tripartite structure consisting of the learners, parents (community) and teachers. The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996), which stipulates that parents should be involved in the education of their children by being part of the school governing body, guides this collaborative relationship. This creates a framework for formal parental involvement, but home-school partnerships are not limited to this involvement, as many studies such as that of Harris and Robinson (2016) and Robinson and Harris (2014) have established. Several studies focusing on parental involvement in the education of children have been conducted in South Africa (Lemmer, 2007; Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004a, 2004b; Luxomo & Motala, 2012; Mncube, 2010). For example, Munje and Mncube's (2018) study of parental involvement in selected public primary schools in South Africa established that a gap existed between policy and practice in terms of school-parent relationships. The study also found a need in disadvantaged communities for schools to initiate and implement intervention strategies that are context friendly, taking the challenges experienced by parents into consideration.

Frequently, schools do not view parents as part of the community but as *the* community. This view leads education policy makers to hold individual parents, rather than the community responsible for the success or

failure in educational delivery (Rugh & Bossert, 1998). Parental involvement as a research concept should take into account the differences between parents. Parents and groups of parents (community) differ in many aspects such as behaviour, beliefs, conviction, aspiration, and also in background and situational characteristics like socio-economic and ethno-cultural background, language skills, level of education and home situation (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). As children's primary educators, parents lay the foundation on which the school can build (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). Parents are "the children's first teachers who must make sure that classroom education extends to home" (Heath, 2010:17). As Van Wyk and Lemmer (2009:7) point out, parents have to be "made aware of the vital link between education at home and education in the school." When examining the relation between parental involvement and school achievement, some research shows evidence of the latter influencing the former. As Morrison Gutman and McLoyd (2000) suggest, parents of successful achieving learners are likely to be more interested in their children's schoolwork, seek more contact with teachers and the school than parents of low achievers. The purpose of this article is to highlight the role of parents in supporting their children to learn.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework
Conceptualising parental involvement

Several researchers have used different definitions for parental involvement (Georgiou, 1996:190). Hill and Tyson (2009:761) define parental involvement as parents' interaction with the school and with their children to promote academic success. Joyce Epstein (2001) developed a widely recognised theoretical framework, which offers a comprehensive typology for different levels of parental involvement. This typology is generally based upon separate roles for parents and teachers in children's education, both at home and at school (Fan & Chen, 2001). Epstein (2001) identified six types of parental involvement in children's education: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, advocacy, and collaborating with the community. Apparently, these forms of parental involvement fall under four broad areas focusing on parental academic aspirations and expectations for children (Bloom, 1980; Keith, 1991; Walberg, 1986); participation in school activities and programmes (Epstein, 1984; Walberg, 1984); home structure that supports learning (Uguroglu & Walberg, 1986), and communication with children about school (Keith, 1991; Walberg, 1986 in Singh, Bickley, Keith, Keith, Trivette & Anderson, 1995).

The conception of parental involvement used in research is often ambiguous, which leads to the inference that when studying the phenomenon of parental involvement many other factors and the relation between these factors should be taken into account (Patall et al., 2008). For example, in Zambia the parent-teacher association (PTA) is a formal body composed of parents, teachers and staff, intended to facilitate parental participation in a school. Its role is to encourage closer links between home and school (Woodford School Lusaka, 2019). In general, a clear distinction is made between parental involvement and parental participation (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). Smit, Driessen, Sluiter and Brus (2007) define parental involvement as the involvement of parents in the upbringing and education of their children both at home and at school, whereas parental participation is the active contribution of parents in school activities. Parental participation can be divided into institutionalised forms (e.g. participating in a parent council or in school governance) and non-institutionalised forms by which parents assist teachers in day-to-day activities like accompanying children on school trips, cleaning toys or helping in the school library (Karsten, Jong, Ledoux & Sligte, 2006). Although parental involvement seems to have a more positive effect on children's development than parental participation (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), both forms seem to be closely related. In this study we utilise the overarching concept of parental involvement as ideal, considering the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors discussed in the subsequent sections.

Understanding township culture and parental involvement

An understanding of the sociocultural and economic situation is essential when examining parental involvement in the South African townships. According to the 2018 World Bank report on poverty and inequality in South Africa, South Africa has one of the most unequal societies in the world (Scott, 2019). According to World Bank estimates, South Africa's richest households are almost 10 times wealthier than poor households (Scott, 2019). The small proportion of extremely rich and middle class reside in suburbs and upper-class areas whereas the majority of the disadvantaged mostly reside in townships and rural areas. Most township dwellers are low-income earners, relying predominately on state social grants. In South Africa, about 16.5 million people from a population of 51.8 million are recipients of social assistance grants (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Evidence from this study shows that the harsh economic conditions in the townships force many parents or guardians to leave for work very early in the morning and return home late in the evening. This finding is concurred by Luxomo and Motala (2012) who observe that in poverty-stricken areas, an over-reliance on social grants contributes

to parental apathy because the income they receive can barely cater for basic needs. Therefore, they have to prioritise engaging in income-generating activities over involvement in school activities. Abrahams (2013) argues that under these circumstances parents cannot be held particularly responsible for their failure to participate fully in their children's education because they have little or no time to assist their children with homework or read stories as middle-class parents do (Noxy, 2013). This leads to flawed parent-teacher partnerships. Functional parent-teacher partnerships is applicable for "middle-class parents who often see teachers as partners in education" (Denessen, Driessen, Smit & Sleegers, 2001:63). In townships, most parents' own literacy levels are poor and a culture of reading is absent. Generally, there is a lack of basic literacy practice in township homes because texts are often unavailable. School is often the only environment in which the children are exposed to education-related activities (Noxy, 2013). Parents with less formal education and low-income tend to be preoccupied with survival strategies and time does not permit them to be involved in school-related activities that may improve their children's schooling (Kimaro & Machumu, 2015).

As in most developing countries, the breakdown in the family structure is a major social problem in South Africa. With democratisation, townships have a few educated parents whereas the majority are single, teenage mothers who dropped out of school either late in primary school or early in high school (Sibanda, 2018). In addition, the scourge of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) has affected the township family dynamics as many parents die, leaving children as orphans. Most of the affected children stay with their grandparents, relatives or foster parents (Sibanda, 2018). Some studies conducted in South Africa have found that many young children reside with extended family members or grandparents who, for varied reasons, do not invest in their education, with negative repercussions (Luxomo & Motala, 2012). There are even cases where some young children stay on their own or with older siblings who may also be children. South African schools have to acknowledge diverse family types: married or single parents, a relative (an older sibling, cousin, aunt or uncle for example), a custodial grandparent or any other person who takes care of the child (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009:8). In this regard, schools should provide parents with support because not all parents or guardians have the same interests, available time, resources and skills to help their children succeed in school in some way (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009:8).

Methodology
Research Questions and Method
My study formed part of broader research that explored early childhood literacy practices in a Johannesburg township. One of the fundamental findings of the broad research was the role of parents and teachers working in partnership in promoting literacy development in township communities. I aimed to provide insights into the role of parents and teachers as a partnership in the education of children, and to highlight the special position of parents in the partnership. For this study, the following research questions were formulated: How is the functionality or dysfunctionality of a parent-teacher partnership determined? How do parents contribute to the partnership in promoting learning? How does the teachers' understanding of the parents' sociocultural conditions influence learning and teaching?

The Sample and Selection of Case Study
The sample in this study was selected using purposive sampling. We used a sample of five teachers and seven parents (two couples and three single parents) who participated in the broader study. The sampling of the parents was based on their availability and willingness to give consent that their children participate in the broader study. Two parents were professionals and the rest were either general workers or unemployed. The five educators were selected because they were teaching in the Foundation Phase on which the broader study was based (Sibanda, 2018). All the teachers had more than 10 years of teaching experience in the Foundation Phase.

Procedure
The study was divided into two parts. The first part of the study was conducted at Kutlwano Primary School[i] where the broader study was conducted and the second part was conducted at the learners' homes. Kutlwano Primary is classified as a poorly performing school (PPS) in a township west of Johannesburg. All the teachers and learners in the school are black. A few of the teachers reside in the same township. The school charges no fees because learners' families cannot afford to pay, thus they qualify for government exemption on payment of school fees.

Data were collected mainly through interviews. The first set of interviews was conducted with each of the five teachers who were teaching Foundation Phase classes at the primary school. The interviews, lasting between 20 and 30 minutes, were conducted with each of the five teachers during school breaks or after school to ensure minimal disruption of the normal school

routine. The questions relevant to the study were: 1) What are the challenges facing children in literacy learning, both outside and inside the classroom? 2) What would you recommend should be done to improve the literacy levels in our schools? (Either by teachers, schools, school governing bodies [SGBs], parents, Department of Education). The second part of the interviews were conducted with parents during home visits on weekends because parents had certain engagements, such as work, during the week. The following questions were posed to the parents: 1) Do you ever assist your child with school/homework? 2) What challenges do you face when assisting your child? I audio recorded all the data collected with the permission of the respondents.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were initially done simultaneously as advocated by Marshall and Rossman (1989, cited in Creswell, 2009). After reading through all the data to get a general sense of the information and reflecting on its overall meaning, categorisation of data was done. Categorisation involved grouping the transcribed data according to similar or divergent views raised by participants. Three themes emerged from this process: parental role, teacher role and the home-school connection. These themes guide the presentation of results in the following section.

Results and Discussion

Parental Role: Parents Treat School like a Dumping Ground

Findings from my study show minimal parental involvement in terms of school-related activities. The educators claimed that parents treated the school like a "drop zone" or a "dumping ground." They argued that parents "dumped" their children at school and did not participate in any school-related activities such as school meetings or children's homework. One parent, who was the SGB chairperson, presented a counter claim. He believed that when asked to explain why the school was performing poorly, the teachers alleged that parents did not help the children with schoolwork. On the contrary, the SGB chairperson blamed the low achievement on the teachers as he raised questions about parent-teacher roles: "*How can the poor performance of students be blamed on parents? Parents don't teach for the whole school day. Teachers are the ones that teach*" (Parent A).

Teachers pushing the blame on parents is consistent with Heath's (2010:21) observation that when learner "failures became part of school's identities, schools often shifted blame to the shortcomings and failures of parents", as school staff consider parents from marginalised backgrounds difficult to work with (Lalvani & Hale, 2015). The lack of interest in school activities

by the parents can be attributed to the stigma attached to the labelling of the school as poorly performing. As research suggests, parents of successful achieving learners are likely to be more interested in their children's schoolwork (Morrison Gutman & McLoyd, 2000).

Another educator attributed the low school achievement to the broken family structure in the townships. She revealed that most children were from broken homes where they lived with young single mothers or grandparents. There were cases where some homes were child-headed. When describing such family situations, Heath (2010:15) says these children have "little in their lives that might be called 'family.'" Lasch (1977:3) highlights the importance of a stable family structure as the agency of socialisation, stating:

> [...] the family reproduces cultural patterns in the individual. It not only imparts ethical norms, providing the child with his [*sic*] first instruction in the prevailing social rules, it profoundly shapes his character, in ways of which he is not even aware. The family instils modes of thought and action that become habitual.

Lasch's observation gives insight into the importance of a family structure in moulding a child. He outlines the social problems confronting children from broken families as he warns of the invasion of the family by the sociocultural problems, leading to loss of their traditional forms and purpose (Heath, 2010). These children lack cultural capital (Freire, 1978), and face "cultural deprivation" (Heath, 2010:16). Sampson (2002:vii) concurs with Clark (1983) that differences in family dynamics and/or home environment account for the differences in school performance.

Related to a lack of "cultural capital" is the low level of learner discipline of which teachers in this study complained. Teachers attributed the low school achievement to the low levels of learner discipline, as one teacher noted, "*Parents can't discipline children (Batsadi aba kgone go disciplina bana). A child who lacks (Ngwana o senang) discipline cannot learn*" (Teacher 1).

Teachers described ill-disciplined learners as uncontrollable and difficult to teach. This finding resonates with experiences of many teachers in South Africa and throughout the world. There are several reported cases of learners, especially in township schools, who are ill disciplined and disrespectful to the teachers. In an average South African township school, learner ill-discipline is the major contributor to low learner achievement (Ramadwa, 2018). Children's lack of discipline at school is mostly ascribed to bad parenting practices and a lack of parental involvement in providing good parenthood in the home situation (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry & Childs, 2004; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen & Sekino, 2004). The parents' ability to provide guidance and discipline for their children is

a linchpin to school-based success (Moll & Cammarota, 2010).

Apart from disciplining their children, teachers expect parents to participate in school activities such as meetings. Teachers complained that parents did not attend school meetings or did not collect their children's progress reports. They viewed parents who do not attend meetings as being unsupportive and uninvolved because "coming to school is a critical symbol of parent involvement" (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008:76). The lack of interest in school meetings suggests an inherent generational problem in this community as one parent concurs as follows:

> *When we grew up our parents never liked to attend school meetings. They'd just take you to school. Whether there are meetings or not, they didn't care. And we grew up with that mentality that attending school meetings is a waste of time because our parents used to say* [teachers are crazy so what do they want] (*othitsha bayahlanya so bafunani). That mentality* [that teachers are crazy] (*yokuthi matichere atlhanya) is there in today's parents.* (Parent A)

The parents' attitudes seemed ingrained in the township culture as they emulated their own parents' attitudes. When describing the inherited attitude of parents, one teacher said, "*We are dealing with an illiterate community if not an 'I don't care' community.*" However, Kim and Bryan (2017) suggest that teachers who believe that parents do not care are misguided because some parents do desire to assist their children if they can; however, they do not know how. The teachers seem to blame the parents for being complacent. However, the assumed parental complacence may not be the fault of parents themselves but an inability to understand their role in the success of their children (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014). In this study I also established that in most cases some learners did not do homework because their parents were not available to help them. In some instances, the parents did the homework for the learners as they found it too difficult for their children. "*The homework they give our kids is too difficult even for me as an adult. What more a small kid?*" (Parent B).

With resignation, Parent C, who only held a primary school level education retorted, "*I am illiterate. In fact, I am not a teacher.*" Similarly, Munje and Mncube (2018:85) report that in their study most grandparents were not much involved in the learners' education because of their own low levels of education or lack of formal education. This points to a need for home teaching strategies to enable parents to mediate learning. The parents' lack of knowledge to mediate learning posits teachers' expectations of parents as impractical, as one parent rhetorically asked: "*How can I help in the teaching of the children? I'm not a teacher and don't know any methods of teaching.*" This

question accentuates the disjuncture between home and school literacies. The teachers' expectations of parents clearly indicate that teachers are not specifically prepared to deal with issues related to family-school-community partnerships (Epstein, 2018; Jacobs, 2008; Lemmer, 2007). This observation is not an indictment of teachers but of teacher training (Sibanda, 2019:3). The teachers seem to ignore the potential of parents to supervise learners and participate in school activities (Edwards, 2004). For example, in their study of Latino communities, Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba (1991) found that parents believed that the role of the school was to teach such things as reading, writing, and mathematics. In another study, Carrasquillo and London (1993) found that Latino parents believed that the school was responsible for the children's academic development whereas parents were responsible for their discipline. Like a grandparent in my study, the Latino parents in these studies argued that "they do not have the education to teach their children school-based subjects" (Rodriguez-Brown, 2010:206).

I also established that teachers expected parents to play a more benign role in promoting literacy development. For one teacher, parental involvement should not only be confined to assisting children with homework, but she urged that parents should "*make sure that the child reads every day. Ask him, 'What did you learn? How far are you now?'*" (Teacher 2). When I enquired about the role that the uneducated parents could play, one parent explained: "*Just asking the child what they have learnt at school or ask him to read his books. Our parents were uneducated but they used to force us to study*" (Parent A). Work on parental involvement in general and in literacy in particular has underscored the value of parental encouragement in supporting important learning processes (Clingenpeel & Pianta, 2007; Taylor, Anthony, Aghara, Smith & Landry, 2008). According to teachers, a parent should be able to say "*My child, what have you learnt. You have been looking at the TV* [television]" (Teacher 2). "*Parents must be able to take their children to places such as libraries where they can be able to learn*" (Teacher 2). This form of parental involvement at home is supported by Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong and Jones (2001) who observe that such support includes parents talking about school, expressing interest in the learners' learning, monitoring and reviewing learner work, encouraging learner effort, and offering help with assignments.

Teacher's Role: It's Your Job. You're Paid to Make My Child Know How to Read

Teachers in this study alleged that parents did not prepare children for school. One educator described learners entering school as "empty vessels." The

teacher's comment suggests ignorance of the knowledge the children possess from their lived experiences, what Freire (1974) called "knowledge banking." The school, according to Comer (1993), is an instrument of the mainstream culture. Public schools do not only inculcate the middle-class culture but they also shape and mould learners to fit that culture (Edwards, 2010:185). Edwards (2010:185) points out that many low-income parents are not part of that culture; as a result, they send children to school ill prepared to learn within the middle class cultural model. However, in this study some township parents were found to inculcate middle class values in their children, as one parent, who was a teacher, revealed, "*I don't recall reading to my child* (Nna waka ngwana akegopole ke mo-ridela). *She reads English on her own. Isn't it I'm a teacher so I bring books from school for her to read? I taught her to read at a very young age.*" This parent also expected the parents of her learners to teach their children how to read. Her perceptions about parent participation showed the teachers' lack of understanding "that school-based literacy practices are cultural homes to some individuals and often not to others" (Dunsmore & Fisher, 2010:2). Frey (2010:44) advises that if school is to become home-like, teachers should not superimpose their "own family experiences onto the members of a community and use those experiences as a yardstick for determining whether they measure." It is in this regard that Frey (2010) argues for the need to create a transactional relationship between home and school. In such a relationship, learners can find extensions of the values and goals of their homes, in their classroom learning. As Edwards (2010:186) concurs, "[c]hildren in academic families are familiar with cultural capital and the culture of literacy, making it easier for them to adapt to the school." In addition, Purcell-Gates (1996) notes that children from middleclass backgrounds already know, or acquire implicitly as they develop the varying registers of school. This makes learning the "new" so much easier. Another parent participant in this study, a general factory worker, revealed that he encouraged his child to read because everyone in his home reads: "*Seeing us as parents reading motivates her. We want to instil in our child that reading is fun. Through reading, her level of communication and understanding improves.*" By modelling learning-related values of reading, this parent provided a stimulus for learning as Bandura's (1997) modelling theory suggests that children learn by observing their parents. Sampson (2004:12) points out that some Black parents "appear to be middle class and do many things that seem to be important for good academic performance for their children, while others are not and do not." Sampson's racialised observation cannot be applied to the South African situation

literally, because parental involvement has more to do with individual parents' attitudes than with race. In township homes, literacy practices seem to transcend socioeconomic background.

There seems to be a chasm of understanding between teachers and parents in terms of how best to collaboratively support children's learning. Teachers expect parents to serve as an extension of the school in support of the children's learning, whereas parents believe that formal teaching is the responsibility of the school (Carrasquillo & London, 1993). As part of the parent-teacher partnership, teachers in this study expected of parents to "extend what has been done at school and assist their children with homework." The teachers argued that the school day was not long enough for them to offer learners comprehensive assistance. They expected children to be assisted at home by their parents despite the fact that some children came from broken homes or complex family settings with no parents or where the parents were unable to assist the children because of various reasons. Frey (2010:45) provides a valuable observation; society itself has changed in many ways from the family structure of the 70s and 80s when many of the teachers in this study were children themselves. Therefore, Valdes (1996) reasons that schools do not understand the possibility of differences across diverse families. In this regard, Parent A pointed out, "*Parents are just parents. They don't know what happens in the classroom. They can motivate and say 'my child, do homework, study', but when teachers teach in the classroom the parents are not there.*" A similar observation is made about Latino parents in the USA who are said to expect teachers to have more knowledge than parents or other people in the community (Saracho & Hancock, 1986; Valdes, 1996).

In this study, teachers expected parents to expose children to reading at home by reading with their children. Teachers said that parents did not even take their children to the library. The perceived lack of parental involvement was said to result in learners not reading on their own at home and being exposed to reading only at school. The teachers' expectations reflect ignorance of the fact that most parent may not be able to read and may not be able to teach their children to read. In her study, Edwards (1995:54) describes the dejection felt by an "illiterate" parent who was required to help his [sic] children read,

> [I] feel completely helpless because I can't read […] I don't know how to help them especially when the teacher wants me to read to them. These teachers think that reading to children is so easy and simple, but it's hard if you don't know how to read yourself.

Edward's finding resonates with the experiences of most parents in townships who do not possess reading or teaching skills required to assist their

children. In addition, the teachers' pedagogical skills are also questioned as studies have shown that many Foundation Phase teachers in South Africa do not have the content-knowledge and pedagogical skills to teach children to read (Cilliers & Bloch, 2018; George, 2016). Conclusions can be drawn that the educators' expectations of parents to teach their children to read may be meant to make up for their shortcoming or inability to teach reading in the classroom. Teachers view the parents' inability to help children read as a lack of cooperation, as one teacher alleges:

> The parents *di ya tena* [are annoying] at times. When you tell a parent (*gore ngwana wa gage*) [that her (*sic*) child] cannot read so she must try to practice reading with her (*sic*) at home, the parent will say 'What is your job? You are paid to make my child know how to read.' (Teacher 3)

What is found to be problematic in this study was the form of parental involvement that was expected by the teachers. According to Epstein's (1995) categories, parental involvement can be viewed in many ways. However, De la Vega (2007) finds Epstein's categories of parental involvement problematic because they seem to be based on what middle class parents usually do. She believes that it is more important for schools or teachers to examine why parents get involved and how culturally and linguistically different parents use personal resources and knowledge to support their children's learning. To create a meaningful partnership, she suggests that teachers should learn the parents' role as teachers through developing an awareness of cultural learning models used at home to support children's learning (Rodriguez-Brown, 2004, 2009). In my study there is evidence of untapped home literacy practices that can promote learning. For example, one parent described how children in her community were taught colours and how to count in African languages. In addition, in play-like activities, older children read stories and poems to younger children, which younger children were taught to recite. Therefore, the teachers' perceptions about parents' lack of involvement did not seem to affirm the value of parents' cultural engagement in supporting their children's learning. This did not encourage the parents' "sense of partnership with teachers and the school in supporting the students' learning success" (Hoover-Dempsey & Whitaker, 2010:58).

The Home-School Connection

Findings from my study show a dysfunctional parent-teacher partnership. Parent A succinctly described the extent of the home-school disconnection:

> *The challenge we're facing* [in fact is that] (*kahle kahle yikuthi*) *the SGB and the teacher component are not working together for the betterment of our children. It creates animosity to some degree. There is lack of communication and we're not working together as we are supposed to be because the SGB is only needed when the school needs money.*

This lack of communication does not encourage the parents' sense of partnership with the teachers and the school in supporting the learners' learning success. Such a "disconnection between home and school and the community" (Pew Hispanic Center & Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004) frequently contributes to low learner achievement in school. In my study teachers reflected little knowledge or understanding of the realities in the lives of their learners and families (Heath, 2010) as they seemed unaware of cultural and linguistic aspects of the township culture that "influence values and beliefs, especially about schooling" (Rodriguez-Brown, 2010:205). Establishing a functional parent-teacher collaboration needs teachers to know the geographical conditions of the area where the school is located and the problems stemming from this location and the economic status of the local community (Yiğit, 2013:213). Findings from my study show that most children in townships come from broken homes (Mofokeng, 2016). Most of them live with grandparents or with single mothers who dropped out of school early as teenage mothers (Kyei, 2012; Sayegh, Castrucci, Lewis & Hobbs-Lopez, 2010). One parent angrily remarked: "*Most teachers are from this township and they know the difficulties we face. Now that they are in heaven they forget how it is on earth.*" This analogy suggests the teachers' lack of empathy and loss of touch with the stark realities of township conditions.

The teachers' ignorance of the conditions in the township can be further deduced from their complaints that parents were unable to assist their children with homework because they did not understand English. Besides English not being their mother tongue, most parents were early school dropouts with a limited proficiency in English. As a result, these parents may not actively participate in their children's education because of either their limited educational level or the lack of parental responsibility. What also emerged from the study was that some older parents or guardians did not even have a Grade 5 primary school education, which hindered them from assisting their children with homework. In most cases, their children's homework was beyond their own level of understanding. One parent admitted that in most cases children brought homework with unclear instructions. In addition to the claims of unclear instructions, there was a strong possibility that homework was not based on work taught in class as no evidence of similar work was found in the learners' exercise books. In cases where similar exercises were done in class, learners claimed that teachers mostly taught using examples provided in the textbooks and avoided the difficult ones, which

they then assigned as homework. Because of the level of difficulty of homework, there is reported evidence of some South African parents paying other people to do their children's homework (Govender, 2019).

Besides the level of difficulty of the homework, one parent in the study complained of the amount of homework, "*How can teachers give children so much homework that takes them more than 2 hours to complete? What is it that children do at school?*" Another parent alleged that teachers did not teach but just idled the whole day, "*If we spend more than 2 hours helping our children with homework, what is it that the teachers do with our children at school? They spend the whole day gossiping over a cup of tea and painting their nails.*" The parents' comments suggested two things. Firstly, the parents thought that the teachers just "pushed" their teaching responsibilities to the parents. Secondly, the supportive role of the parents was not well defined. However, the teachers refuted the parents' allegations that teachers were idling, claiming that the low learner performance was a result of the difficult conditions under which they taught, such as large classes. However, one parent dismissed this claim as baseless: "*No man, listen (Hai maan, mamela) I don't buy this claim. Even long back, we Black people used to attend school in overcrowded classrooms. We were 100 to 150 in a class, but teachers could produce good results.*"

In their defence, teachers claimed that the main reason for low learner achievement was the highly demanding school curriculum with which teachers could not cope. On this complaint, one parent sarcastically remarked, "*Then it means whoever is dealing with the curriculum must be mad. They know it's not working. Why do they insist on continuing with it?*"

What also emerged from the study was that work commitments also prevented parents from helping their children with homework. This was evident from parents' comments: "*I don't have time for homework. I get home at 6 at night. I only have 2 hours before the kids go to bed*" or "*I leave for work at 5 am when they are still asleep and get back at 6 pm when they already asleep*" and, "*Honestly speaking, time is something that we don't have. We spend 8 hours at work and teachers spend most of the time with our kids.*" A third parent added: "*Honestly, I don't have time for homework. I come home tired and don't have time to assist my child with homework.*" Evidently, many parents in townships are not at home when their children return from school (Abrahams, 2013; Manilal, 2014). Jensen (2009) also attests that parents in disadvantaged communities have jobs that obstruct their involvement in learner education.

In summary, the parents' comments highlight the difficult life of working-class parents in townships, who cannot spend much time with their children nor attend school meetings. Another dimension to the reasons for not attending meetings is brought forth by another parent in this study: "*Othitsha abasicabangeli* [Teachers are inconsiderate towards us]. *They schedule meetings in the evenings when we are tired from work or on weekends when we are busy.*" She proceeded to give insight into the township culture: "*We can't attend meetings on weekends. People in our townships are dying like flies. We must attend funerals because tomorrow it will be me.*" This comment shows that the school's scheduled meetings conflict with the parental commitments. On the issue of attending meetings, the SGB chairperson revealed as follows:

> I have advised school management to give parents food. As you know, this is a very poor community. Many people are hungry. They can only attend meetings if there is food. You should come and see how funerals in our townships are packed because of food.

The SGB chairperson's observation provides insight of township culture and attitudes of residents, where people expect food or incentives for doing anything – even if it is for their own benefit.

Therefore, the teachers' complaint about a lack of parental involvement raises questions about their understanding of the circumstances of parents in their community and the fact that parents were not trained to mediate school-based learning. Giving children a lot of homework suggests teachers' misunderstanding of the purpose of homework. The parents complained that teachers "dumped" most of the teaching on them. Teachers seem not to understand the family literacy practices in the townships, which are different from the middle-class school practices. This finding is in line with Dunsmore and Fisher (2010:1) who point out that in middle class settings, "family literacy is often construed with parent-child book reading routines", which is not a common practice among low income Black people in the townships. All this misunderstanding suggests a form of incongruence between home and school, resulting in dysfunctional parent-teacher partnerships. One teacher in the study laconically described a typical functional partnership:

> I used to enjoy teaching. Parents were very much involved in students' work and that made my job as a teacher much easier because when you communicated with the parents, they would give you feedback and you would give them feedback. When you communicated with parents, they listened. We used to assist each other because it was like the teachers and parents are holding the rope this side and we are pulling the students together on the other side.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The classification of Kutlwano Primary School as poorly performing by the Gauteng Department of Education shows a general underachievement of learners. This general underperformance in the school could be the reason for parental apathy concerning attending meetings because of the negative stigma attached to the school.

Educators attribute low achievement to parental despondence, whereas parents attribute it to teacher incapability. The parents' and teachers' "blame game" suggests a dysfunctional teacher-parent partnership. These two entities' roles are uncoordinated, resulting in low learner achievement. The roles and responsibilities of both the teachers and parents need to be properly outlined so that interdependency between them can improve learner performance.

Results from this study show that parent-teacher collaboration is not smooth. Although some parents claimed that they participated in their children's homework to a certain extent, teachers thought that parents did not do enough. It can be deduced that teachers over-expected of parents because they did not consider the fact that not all parents or guardians could read and write. Even those who could read and write did not necessarily possess the necessary skills to facilitate learning.

I found that some parents did not spend much time with their children because they worked long hours. For this reason, they were also unable to attend school meetings or assist their children with homework on a regular basis. However, I found that most parents tried to use the little time at their disposal to assist their children with homework. This challenges the notion of "deficit families" as it clearly shows that even with limited resources, including time, the township families are committed to their children's literacy learning and to their schooling. Therefore, the allegations that parents are not supportive of their children's learning suggest the teachers' lack of understanding of parents' socioeconomic situations and the complexities of township family dynamics. To provide a better link between home and school, schools should exploit family routines and practices that support literacy development of children.

The general finding of the study shows that two forms of parental involvement are lacking: attending school meetings and supporting children with school-based learning at home. I suggest that township parental involvement needs to be promoted by the school. As suggested by the SGB chairperson, the school has to incentivise attendance of school meetings. The parents also need to be empowered with skills to assist children with homework if they are to make a meaningful contribution to their children's education. It is recommended that schools should expose parents to the knowledge about how schools work. As suggested by one teacher in the study, the SGB should encourage parents to participate actively in school-related matters. This can be achieved if schools educate parents on how to assist their children to learn. Parents need to be equipped with skills to facilitate better collaboration with teachers. To strengthen parent-teacher partnerships, extensive research should be conducted into how a comprehensive interface between parents and teachers could be improved. Researchers should investigate how the sociocultural hegemony of township parents can inculcate a culture of active participation in children's education.

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