Perceptions of professional educators on parental involvement in the education of lower primary learners in rural Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Many research articles reported about the consistent findings that the involvement of parents in education of learners is more likely to take root in urban than in rural schools. Moreover, most schools where parental involvement is functional, parents are more involved in non-academic than academic activities. In this article a survey of whether and how professional educators (N=146) of rural lower primary schools in northern Namibia (purposive sampling) perceive and practice parental involvement in the academic education of learners (Grade 1-3) was done. The current trend exposed by this study demonstrates the potential of rural lower primary schools in practising parental involvement. Therefore, strengthening rural schools’ initiatives to network with parents and other potential stakeholders for learners’ education seems to be a sensible recommendation.

Introduction and context

Since Namibia’s independence in 1990, the country’s education system has been in transformation inspiring politicians and educators to recognise the importance of parental involvement in education. The starting point for the education transformation process in Namibia is Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution (1991), which states that:

“All persons shall have the right to education. Primary education shall be compulsory and the State shall provide reasonable facilities to render effective this right for every resident within Namibia, by establishing and maintaining State schools at which primary education will be provided free of charge” (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) 1991: 12).

The right to education which includes the right to be involved in, contributes to and supports education processes. Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1991) gives parents the right and legal responsibility for supporting schools in providing education to Namibian children. As representatives of their children, families have a right to participate in and support school activities that affect their lives and the lives of their children (Olsen, Chang, Salazar, Leong, Perez, McClain & Raffel, 1994). Until 1990 these fundamental rights of access and the right to education were for so long denied to most parents and their children in many African countries and in Namibia in particular. This was particularly true for blacks and marginalised people because of the colonial and apartheid education systems. In the context of this study the term ‘black’ is utilised as the racial classification of disadvantaged people in Namibia. Dahlstrom (2002: 8) argues that, “it is almost impossible to understand anything in post-colonial African society if we pretend that this classification does not persist as a social signifier in the post-colonial society”.
Moreover, Namibia, as a signatory to the "World Declaration on Education for All" (5-9 March, 1990, Jomtien), interpreted its constitutional intentions into a policy for educational reform and development by publishing the educational policy, "Towards Education for All: A Development Brief for Education, Culture and training" (Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), 1993). Education for all means access to education and amending education for quality and better education, and is necessarily a partnership between the schools and parents (Cherrylholmes, 1998; MEC, 1993). The act of educating is indivisible and cannot be split into isolated spheres of home and school as this would be detrimental to the social, emotional and cognitive development of the learners. Provision of effective education includes recognition of the educational benefits of parental involvement in children's education. These goals should motivate schools to work toward greater involvement with parents.

Parental involvement is an integrative kind of thinking and approach to school improvement now emerging from education systems especially with respect to learners' learning. Its rationale is rooted in the belief that in order for schools to educate all youth effectively, parents and families should become fully involved in the process of educating learners (Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Fullan, 1998; MEC, 1993). Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004) and MEC (1993) view parental involvement as an important way to improve the quality of education, and the way to facilitate access to progression within education.

Education of children is a joint endeavour between home and school. Parents' involvement strengthens this bond of partnership (Faughnan, 2005; Kaplinski, 1992). Parental involvement is seen as a productive relationship between home and the educational setting in which the practitioners are responsible for involving parents in the work that they do for educational reasons (Faughnan, 2005). It should rather be regarded as a meaningful, respectful and authentic relationship schools and families co-constructed with genuine enthusiasm, and implies responsibility, sharing and balance of power over educational activities between parents and school to prevent practitioners from considering their own value positions and those embodied by the curriculum they are operating (Kaplinski, 1992). Edwards and Knight (1994: 111) accede and thus reason that the importance of this relationship should not be simplified and "seen as a bridge for the child between home and school in order to ease the transition into schools". Therefore, parental involvement should not be used as a system to release teachers from mundane work, or as a grudging obedience to policies (Stern, 2003). It rather should serve as the best means schools can use to convey a sense of parental rights and responsibilities within the school to parents and establish a set of expectations of parents as partners.

Advocates of parental involvement suggest that schools should get parents' perspectives and influence in school life, policies and decisions (Haggis, 1991; Dekker & Lemmer, 1993; Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994; Sanders, 1996; Fullan, 1998; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). Therefore, it is the school's role and responsibility to invite and encourage parents to visit the school, and offer them entry into some of the learning activities; make parents aware of their rights and responsibilities with regard to the support of the child's whole development; and provide education opportunities for parents in the development of their understanding of social and economic issues, curriculum, learning methods and the school organisational changes, which make parents to respond and contribute to the learning process.
The purpose of this article is to report on the investigation conducted on the practice of parental involvement in academic education of learners as it is happening in northern Namibia’s rural lower primary schools. Specifically, the study investigated how principals and teachers (professional educators) from northern Namibia’s rural area perceive and practise parental involvement for the promotion of learners’ academic learning.

Theoretical framework

The framework of this research is positioned within Namibia’s policy for Educational Reform and Development that advances a generative critique of educational process and a growing appreciation of contextualisation and ecological settings (MEC, 1993).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1986) the eco-systemic theory emphasises the meaning of each factor contributing to human learning and development. The child’s world is viewed as a series of nested structures. The eco-systemic theory indicates that individuals and groups at different levels of the social context are linked in dynamic, interdependent and interacting relationships (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002). Factors such as process, person, context, and time are the main concern of the eco-systemic theory. Process refers to mechanisms of human development, which in this study’s context include parent support for learners’ learning. The need to consider mechanisms for the learning process and the learning environment was based on Halverson’s (2001) argument that not inquiring into the process may result in loss of valuable information. A person is someone who develops. Through the eco-systemic theory, a person is inseparable from his/her environment and the environment can explain his/her behaviour. Time refers to the historical period of learning and development. Context means the environment that influences learners’ learning and development (Halverson, 2001). According to the eco-systemic theory, context has the most important meaning for development and it includes four levels of structural environment: micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The micro-system is a face-to-face/ classroom and/or family setting in which the learner experience a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations. The meso-system is a relationship between the parents and teachers. The exo-system is a linkage between parents and/or their working place and the community. The macro-system is the linkage between the community (in which parents, teachers and learners are consisted) and its value systems. The context factor of the ecosystem was dealt with most in this study. Therefore, the eco-systemic perspective influenced this research. Moreover, examining environmentally related issues with Bronfenbrenner’s level systems facilitated the development of systemic ideas about processes of parental involvement, which encourage learners’ learning.

The ecological belief that children’s learning does not exclude the influence of social interaction is tantamount to accepting that development of children’s learning of the formal curriculum becomes absurd if it disregards the home-school interconnected and supportive role (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Therefore, the role of parents in the education of learners as well as the relationships between and amongst professional educators (principals and teachers) and parents has long
been of interest to researchers and practitioners at all levels of public and private education.

In many ecological studies (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hornby, 2000; Smith, Connell, Wright, Norman, Hurley & Walker, 1997; Heneveld & Craig, 1996), explanations about home and school approaches to parental involvement include: schools link families to community resources; parents are encouraged to provide financial and/or material support; open and frequent communication between school personnel and parents; parents are encouraged to assist with classroom activities/participate in academic learning related activities; parents are involved in school policy formulation and school governance; parents are provided with educational and knowledge development opportunities; good relationship between schools and parents; positive school climate and leadership; professional educators’ positive perceptions and attitudes towards parental involvement; consultation, communication and memorandum of understanding between schools and teacher training programmes; staff members organise and coordinate assistance of voluntary help from parents; and conflict between parents and school staff, that means, parents critically but constructively question and influence school’s practices and policies.

Problem statement and aims of study
The literature indicates that the conclusion drawn by most of the abovementioned ecological studies is that if schools encourage parental involvement skilfully and with welfare of learners as the focus, it guarantees a remarkable educational growth and significant academic improvement of learners; an increment in teachers’ morale and effort, and a tremendous growth in parental support for schools and learners’ learning (Epstein et al., 2002; Hammond, 2001; Lindsay, 2001; Wisconsin Centre for Educational Research (WCER), 1995).

However, other findings reveal that despite successful and appropriate planning and implementation of parental involvement in low socio-economic status areas, in practice this meets with a lack of parental support and resistance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Lapp, Fisher, Flood & Moore, 2002; Sanders, 2001). Moreover, other researchers share the same findings that strongly indicate that the involvement of parents from distressed backgrounds is the most problematic and difficult aspect of changing and improving learners’ education in schools (Epstein et al., 2002; Fink & Stoll, 1998; Dekker & Lemmer, 1993).

Some of the findings from studies of parental involvement seem to contradict each other. Some findings (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Stern, 2003) say that all parents of all socio-economic classes are interested and want the best for their children. Therefore, it would seem that well-planned parental involvement would guarantee parents’ support for children’s education that would culminate in effective learning.

Other findings say parental involvement, regardless of being well planned, is difficult to implement among poor and less-educated parents (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Lapp et al., 2002; Sanders, 2001). Furthermore, still other findings conclude that teachers and administrators do not know the best way to involve parents (Finders and Lewis, 1994). These contradictions triggered our concern. If all parents of all ethnicities and socio-economic classes are similar in the respect that they all value and desire education and thus consider
education of their children important, then why is parental involvement difficult to implement in schools, specifically those situated in economically distressed areas? Why are poor, low-income and less-educated families reluctant to support schools for children's education? Were the strategies tried to involve parents compatible with such conditions? Is it parents who lack support or that schools do not know appropriate ways of involving parents? A few researchers' findings report that parental activities identified are not fitting and are not important for high-need and resource-poor schools in 'at-risk' communities (Sanders, 2001). However, the research findings did not elaborate on activities and strategies which are compatible with resource-poor schools in at-risk communities. Their findings do not indicate how parental involvement can be improved and practised differently in a contextually appropriate way in rural schools. Furthermore, Fink and Stoll (1998) argue that international attempts to replicate one country's findings elsewhere or examine the same factors are faced with difficulties. Therefore, they recommend studies to understand the precise context in terms of learners' social class background and school locations.

Moreover, the literature indicates that most schools where parental involvement is functional, parents are more involved in non-academic school-based spaces (activities) than in school-based academic spaces (Civil, Andrade & Anhalt, 2000; Heneveld & Craig, 1996). In addition, Edwards and Knight (1994: 118) found that "most parental involvement initiatives have not been premised on any analysis of the cycle of children's learning".

Against this background, we are of the opinion that there is insufficient empirical research-based information on whether and how parental involvement can be practised differently and compatibly in economically distressed contexts, especially in Africa. There is insufficient information about parental involvement focusing on supporting learners in academic related activities. For these reasons, we found it worthwhile to conduct an investigation into schools in the rural areas. Consequently, this study investigates typical rural lower primary schools' ways of getting parents involved in and sustaining their involvement in their children's academic education. The following research questions guided the study: How is parental involvement perceived and practised by professional educators (principals and teachers) for supporting learners' academic education in rural lower primary schools in Namibia and what barriers to parental involvement do rural lower primary schools in Namibia experience?

The aims of this study are to determine the perceptions of parental involvement among lower primary schools and the extent to which those schools in northern Namibia involve parents in their children's academic education and to identify and describe lower primary schools' ways of dealing with barriers that affect teachers' efforts to involve parents in learners' academic education.

**Research design and methodology**

The research was of a quantitative nature and followed a descriptive design, using a survey to collect the data. The survey instrument was in the form of a questionnaire on perceptions and attitudes regarding the practices of parental involvement in the education of learners (Grades 1 to 3). The questionnaire was divided into four sections: Section A: Demographic Information; Section B: Schools' Practice of Parental Involvement; Section C: Schools' Attitude towards Parental Involvement and Section D: Barriers to Parental Involvement. A four-point Likert scale was used
to measure the responses to the items on the questionnaire in Sections B, C and D. The responses varied from *Never* – (1) to *Always* – (4); *Strongly disagree* – (1) to *Strongly agree* – (4).

**The population and sampling**

The population of 764 lower primary schools in rural northern Namibia is distributed over four regions (Ovangwena, Omusati, Oshana and Oshikoto). All four regions are similar in regards to economic and educational levels of the inhabitants of rural areas across northern Namibia. Ovangwena has 205, Omusati has 258 lower primary schools, Oshana has 134 and Oshikoto has 167. Ovangwena Region was found dialectically most amenable, sufficient and feasible for this study to allow the drawing of conclusions. Hence, purposive sampling (sometimes called judgmental sampling) of all lower primary schools in Ovangwena region was done for this study. Moreover, “*no study can include everything: you cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything*” (Punch, 2005: 187). Four-hundred and ten questionnaires were sent out to 205 schools (i.e., two questionnaires per school). Schools were requested to send two responses, one from the principal and one from any lower primary (Grades 1-3) teacher selected by the principal. Responses were received from 87 schools (a return rate of 42.43% of the schools), which included the completed questionnaires of 66 principals and 80 teachers (Sample = 146). The study was conducted on a relatively small group (n=168) over a limited time and in a limited context and consequently the generalisation value of the study is limited.

**Results**

The information derived from Sections A, B, C and D of the questionnaire: Demographic Information; Schools’ Practice of Parental Involvement; Schools’ Attitude towards Parental Involvement and Barriers to Parental Involvement was coded and recorded on the SAS® (SAS Institute Inc., 2004) database. All statistical calculations were done with the aid of SAS® (SAS Institute Inc., 2004). A frequency analysis was done using the data obtained from Sections A, B, C and D of the principles and teachers (professional educators) sample. Professional educators’ responses were combined regarding the responses to the different categories: Schools’ Practice of Parental Involvement; Schools’ Attitude towards Parental Involvement and Barriers to Parental Involvement are reported by frequencies and percentages.

**Section A: Demographic profile of the professional educators and rural lower primary schools who participated in the investigation**

The ages of respondents varied between 24 and 59 years, with the majority of participants being between 40 and 49 years old, and the next largest group between 30 and 39 years old. Twenty seven (18.49%) of the remaining participants’ were 50 years old or above. Eight (5.47%) participants’ ages varied between 24 and 29 years. Two participants did not indicate their ages. Of 146 respondents, 86 were females and 59 were males. The dominant language in the region in which the research was conducted is Oshiwambo. All but five of the respondents reported Oshiwambo as their mother tongue. The remaining five reported Silozi (3), Otjiherero (1) and Other (1) specified as Subiya.

Qualifications include certificates (two-year or three-year), bachelor or honours degrees (three-year or four-year) and postgraduate degrees (five-year minimum). The highest frequently reported qualification was the three-year certificate
The postgraduate degree had the lowest response (2.92%). Nine (9) respondents provided no answer to this item. Respondents' years in the teaching profession ranged from 1 to 35, with a wide range of years among the respondents. Ten participants did not respond to this question.

The data indicate 43 as the lowest and 960 as the highest number of learners per school. Electricity and telephones were the least available facilities at many schools. Moreover, the data indicate a lack of clean water in many schools. According to the data 127 (88.82%) of professional educators indicate that most of Ohangwena region communities' living standard ranges from a poor to acceptable living standard.

**Section B: Rural lower primary schools’ practices of parental involvement: Perceptions of professional educators**

The schools’ practices of parental involvement were sought through requesting respondents to indicate the extent to which the statements describe the climate of their schools; the extent to which statements represent what their schools do regarding the participation of parents in educational opportunities; the extent to which their schools make use of community resources (social capital in the community); how often the statements indicate what happens at their schools; the extent to which their schools make use of the indicated communication options; and the extent to which their schools involve parents in school policy formulations.

**Professional educators’ perceptions of schools’ climate to parental involvement**

Figure 1 in general shows that professional educators see their school climate as inviting. Safety (Item 3.2 indicated by 40% as always) and cleanliness and maintenance (Item 3.1 indicated by 54% as most of the time) are in evidence as strengths in most of the schools. As well, parents’ freedom to visit at any time of the day (Item 3.5 indicated by 44% as always) is thought to be in keeping with most of the schools. Schools are only slightly more likely than not to show appreciation to parents (Item 3.4 indicated by 38% as sometimes) and 88% of the professional educators indicate that their schools never provide snacks and drinks during parent-teacher meetings.

![Figure 1: Professional educators' perceptions of schools' climate to parental involvement.](image-url)
Professional educators’ perceptions of school’s provision for parents with educational opportunities for knowledge development about parental involvement

Table 1 shows that, in practice, schools (47% - always and 38% most of the time) seem to give the most of their efforts toward organising meetings in which the importance of involvement is discussed with parents (Item 4.1). The next most effort seems to be toward providing counselling opportunities for parents of children with behavioural problems (Item 4.7: 23.97% - always and 33.56% - most of the time). Responses are more ambivalent on discussing the contents and philosophy of the curriculum (Item 4.3: 37.67% - sometimes and 25.34% - most of the time), providing workshops for making parents understand their roles, rights and responsibilities (Item 4.4: 30.82% - sometimes and 28.77% - most of the time) and organising counselling opportunities for parents of children with specific learning needs (Item 4.6: 37.67% - sometimes and 21.92% most of the time). Although 3.42%, 17.81% and 21.92% of the schools indicate that they always, most of the time and sometimes respectively (Item 4.5), offer parent literacy lessons, eighty-one professional educators (55.48%) indicate that their schools never do that.

Professional educators’ perceptions of how schools make use of community resources

Professional educators gave the use of community resources a very low score overall. Aspects such as the use of elderly community members (indicated by 54.79%) and utility of professional health workers (indicated by 45.89%) were never done by many schools. However, to the use of community members as interpreters, responses split equally: Forty nine professional educators (33.56%) say they never use community members as interpreters, 49 (33.56%) professional educators always do it, 20 (13.69%) do it most of the time and 26 (17.80%) do it sometimes. In the area of inviting the community for fund raising, responses are more equally split across all categories: Thirty five professional educators (23.97%) do it always, 36 (24.65%) do it most of the time, 45 (30.82%) do it sometimes and 30 (20.54%) never.

Professional educators’ perceptions of how schools provide parents with opportunities for technical support for classroom activities

There were mixed responses on inviting parents to observe teaching in progress (Item 6.5). From the schools, mixed responses were also reported on including parent volunteers in preparation of fundraising (Item 6.6). However, 43% of the schools always ask parents to support and monitor learners’ home work activities (Item 6.4).

Professional educators’ perceptions of how schools make use of communication options

The results show that letter writing (50.68% of the respondents indicated always, 29.45% indicated most of the time, 11.64% indicated sometimes); meetings (36.98% indicated always, 41.09% indicated most of the time, 17.12% indicated sometimes, 3.42% indicated never); and parents’ days (24.65% indicated always, 26.71% indicated most of the time, 23.28% indicated sometimes) are the communication options schools favour using to contact parents. Conversely, the use of telephone (72.60% indicated never, 4.79% indicated always), home-school diaries (56.16% indicated never, 2.73% indicated always), and home visits (46.57% indicated never, 2.05% indicated always) were the communication options many schools never use.
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<td>4.1. Our school organises meetings in which teachers discuss the</td>
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<td>importance of involvement with parents.</td>
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<td>4.2. Our school experiences at least 50% parent attendance at</td>
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<td>parent teacher meetings.</td>
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<td>4.3. The contents and philosophy of the curriculum of specific</td>
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<td>subjects are discussed at the parents' meetings.</td>
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<td>4.4. Our school organises workshops in which parents are made to</td>
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<td>understand their roles, rights and responsibilities in terms of</td>
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<td>their children's academic education.</td>
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<td>4.5. Our school offers parents literacy lessons in which parents</td>
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<td>are guided on what they should do when assisting their children in</td>
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<td>reading, writing and computation at home.</td>
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<td>4.6. Our school organises counselling opportunities for parents of</td>
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<td>children with specific learning needs.</td>
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<td>4.7. Our school organises counselling opportunities for parents of</td>
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<td>children with behaviour problems.</td>
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Figure 2: Professional educators' perceptions of how schools provide parents with opportunities for technical support for classroom activities.
Professional educators’ perceptions of how schools involve parents in decision-making and power-sharing activities

The professional educators’ responses on the extent to which schools share power and decision making in activities that promote education of learners show that schools (76.71%) always make parents members of school boards and schools (41.78%) are likely to involve parents on school improvement committees. Most of the time schools seek for parents’ critical comments on school policies (indicated by 26.02%) and include them in the development of homework policies (indicated by 32.19%).

Section C: Rural lower primary schools’ attitudes towards parental involvement

The professional educators’ attitudes towards parental involvement were sought through requesting them to indicate the extent to which they agree with statements which represent their sentiments and describe their thoughts.

Professional educators’ sentiments towards parental involvement

Professional educators seem to see parental involvement with learners as contributing to the quality of education in schools. They either strongly agree or agree with the statements that say: an important way to improve the quality of education in schools is to involve parents in school activities (85.62% - strongly agree and 12.33% agree); involvement of parents in learners’ learning activities reduces the feeling of alienation between schools and parents (41.1% - strongly agree and 32.88% agree); and parents’ support and monitoring of homework activities cultivate and promote the daily habit of completing homework (56.85% strongly agree and 36.99% agree). There are no disagreements indicated about the first statement (that parental involvement improves the quality of education in schools). However, responses indicated disagreements on the last two statements (involvement reduces the feeling of alienation (10.96% disagree and 10.27% strongly disagree).

Professional educators indicated that parents have a right to contribute to the decisions that affect their children’s education (70.55% - strongly agree, 24.66% - agree, 2.05% - disagree and no strongly disagreements were indicated); the distribution of school policies and rules enables parents to learn their rights and responsibilities in supporting their children's education (62.33% - strongly agree, 32.88% - agree, 1.37% - disagree and 0.68% strongly disagree); schools should allow parents to carefully examine and constructively question the practices of schools (38.36% - strongly agree, 44.52% - agree, 8.22% - disagree and 4.79% strongly disagree); and schools should allow parents to monitor teachers’ attendance (57.53% - strongly agree, 30.14% - agree, 6.85% - disagree and 1.37% - strongly disagree). Professional educators also indicated that no matter how qualified teachers are, they need parents’ support (77.4% - strongly agree and 17.81% agree). Participants’ responses to the statement that says “parents’ feedback helps teachers learn their strengths and weaknesses” (64.38% - strongly agree, 29.45% - agree, 0.68% - disagree and 0.68 – strongly disagree) is an evidence of perceptions that show role of parents in actively contributing to the classroom level.

Professional educators’ opinions regarding parental involvement

Most of the schools (64.38%) disagree with a question that says teachers are skilled enough to take care of all learners’ needs, therefore, they do not need parental support. Professional educators’ perceptions on how much parents assist with
homework, as well as whether parents have unique skills to assist the learners, are almost equally split between agreement and disagreement. Thirty four point ninety three percentages (34.93%) and 30.13% of the professional educators agree and disagree respectively to the statement that says "parents do not assist their children with homework activities". Thirty seven point sixty seven (37.67%) and 30.82% of the professional educators agree and disagree respectively to the statement that says that "parents in rural areas have unique skills and knowledge to assist in their children's academic learning".

Section D: Professional educators' indications of barriers to parental involvement that are experienced at their schools
Professional educators' responses to the barriers that were mostly experienced at their schools indicate unawareness and lack of understanding of parents about the fact that they (parents) also have a share in formal education of their children (20.55% – often, 44.52% - sometimes, 14.38% - seldom, 15.75%), parents' fear for responsibilities (8.9% - often, 42.47% - sometimes, 17.81% - seldom, 26.03 - never), parents' lack of confidence (28.08% - often, 41.78% - sometimes, 16.44% - seldom, 8.22% - never), illiteracy (21.92% - often, 36.3% - sometimes, 32.19% - seldom, 3.42% - never) and lack of time (14.38% - often, 33.56% - sometimes, 32.19% - seldom, 15.75% - never) on the side of parents were indicated as barriers they experience either seldom or sometimes. Barriers, which were least experienced were teachers' inability to involve parents due to lack of initial training (56.85% - never, 13.7% - seldom, 21.92% - sometimes, 2.74% - often); teachers not being sure of what to involve parents in (51.37% - never, 18.49% - seldom, 22.6% - sometimes, 2.74% often); teachers' lack of understanding about the value of family support (47.26% - never, 17.81% - seldom, 21.23% - sometimes, 8.9% - often) and teachers' attempts to avoid scrutiny from parents (54.79% - never, 12.33% - seldom, 18.49% - sometimes, 5.48% - often).

Discussion
Although half of the professional educators (50%) indicated that they encourage parents to support school activities, the majority did not have any suggestions of the exact academic education activities on which they would like parents to focus.

The fact that professional educators singled out relationships as the important aspect of involvement they would like to focus on suggests the possibility of their intention for working together with parents to implement necessary changes in schools. Strong relationships serve as evidence that schools see parents as partners in the provision of services, and not just as their recipients.

The results indicate that professional educators create an open, warm, inviting and productive climate and ensure security on the playgrounds. Warren (2005) and Beck and Murphy (1999) contend that schools which create an open, accepting, respectful culture and environment, and safe grounds for children when they are not in classrooms make their school climate inviting for parental involvement.

Schools experience acceptable and fair attendance of meetings and workshops for parents' educational purposes where the discussions focus on importance of parental involvement, philosophy of the curriculum of specific subjects, parents' roles, rights and responsibilities in terms of their children's academic education and counselling for parents of children with specific learning and behavioural
problems. Activities such as subject-specific information and training for families, as well as workshops, have a positive influence on families’ interests in their children’s education which helps parents who would not otherwise have done so to become involved. These services instil confidence and pride in parents and increase their sense of efficacy for supporting their children’s education. Nevertheless, the fact that many schools never offer literacy classes to parents is a challenge facing rural schools. Rural schools are in a unique position to address the concerns of uninvolved parents by establishing literacy programs and practices that target to prepare, empower and encourage all parents to participate in their children’s education.

Although communities contain rich cultural traditions and social resources that have much to offer the work of schools, and may serve as an important supporter of home and school by making beneficial services available to children and families, and by providing a context supportive of educational endeavours, most professional educators indicate that schools either do not really or sufficiently engage community resources in their school lives. Nevertheless, a number of schools who recognise the resources available within the community ask community members to interpret for parents when they do not understand the language of the meeting.

The results reveal that there is insufficiency of involving parents in lesson demonstrations, material donations for teaching, and preparation of fund-raising activities. However, the data indicate less opposition to involving parents in supporting and monitoring learners’ homework activities and observing teaching in progress. Supporting and monitoring their children’s homework could also have a direct impact on learners’ learning. Nevertheless, Carreon, Drake and Barton (2005) and Sanders and Epstein (1998) argue that the parents who volunteer in classrooms learn more about the teacher’s job and problems, and about the classroom life of a child. As a result, they find it easier to talk to teachers and ask questions. Therefore, schools’ increased efforts to make parents demonstrate lessons, design and/or donate materials for teaching and include parents in preparation of fund-raising need to be taken seriously and advance the level of involvement of families.

The results present evidence that to a certain extent, schools communicate with parents. As shown by the data, many schools always use a traditional, yet effective, communication method (letter writing) to invite parents to meetings and for informing parents about their children’s performances. Most of the time schools organise meetings (individual or group) for discussions about school policies, regulations, goals and learners’ conditions and backgrounds. The teacher-parent meeting is one of the strategies schools use most of the time to directly meet with parents and make them raise concerns and offer ideas about school improvements and making schools better places for children’s learning. It is hoped that schools use this method to create a platform for professional educators and parents to better understand each other, and work collaboratively for learners’ holistic development. This interpretation is based on Sanders and Epstein’s (1998) findings that learners benefit holistically when they see that their parents and teachers know and respect one another and communicate regularly. It is obvious schools in rural areas use communication methods that are not too burdensome on teachers and parents. The schools’ use of these communication options (meetings, letters and parent days) indicates their recognition of parents’ rights to be involved in the education of their children. Moreover, the schools show their determination to advance their goals regarding the education of learners.
The results indicate that lower primary schools in Ohangwena region make it possible for parents to have a hand in broad-based participation and a meaningful role in school decision-making. This interpretation is based on the evidence consistently revealed by the data that parents participate in school boards and other school development committees. Through participating in decision making and other school development committees, parents speak up, are listened to and help make decisions that in ways positively influence and shape learning and teaching (Warren, 2005; Beck and Murphy, 1999).

The responses of professional educators indicate openness in their views and attitudes towards involving and interacting with parents in school activities for the enhancement of learners' learning. Their attitudes reflect a belief that parents should be involved in the decision-making processes. The fact that professional educators have a strong belief against ‘teacher - as - expert’ (Epstein et al., 2002) and therefore, do not need parental support, create an equality rather than a hierarchy of knowledge, value and status that influences their collaboration with parents as equals in the process of educating children. Their attitudes reflect that they operate from within a culture of democracy, which fosters a curriculum and pedagogy that promote harmony and cooperation between schools and parents. Many of the attitudes and opinions of the professional educators show respect and value of the contributions of the parents as they see them (parents) as people with the power to monitor their (educators) attendance and people whose contributions can improve professional educators' weaknesses and can develop an awareness and understanding of the backgrounds and life styles of learners.

The results prominently show that although schools attempt to collaborate with families, there are deeply ingrained stumbling blocks that need to be addressed for good collaboration to advance. These include parents' lack of understanding and confidence, fear of responsibilities, insufficient responses to parents' meetings and other educational training opportunities, insufficient involvement of parents in classroom activities and unavailability of literacy lessons for parents at schools. These barriers should not be accepted without any attempt to overcome them. The argument is that the measure of a school's commitment to equalising power relationships is not the absence of struggles in this effort, but rather the way in which professional educators and parents address problems and persist in spite of them.

Conclusion
Although the results of this study revealed the practices of schools towards parental involvement in terms of providing parents with avenues to develop as leaders, engaging parents in authentic conversations such as counselling, and facilitating the support parents give their children at home, an in-depth understanding of parental involvement requires the study of involvement from the perspective of parents and would be enhanced by finding the rationales that motivate, sustain and/or inhibit these practices from both parents and professional educators. The study was limited to the professional educators who were either principals of schools with lower primary phases and/or teachers for lower primary grades (Grade 1-3). The study did not include learners' views due to their level of development. The study focused on the input (practice of parental involvement by schools and support of parents for academic activities) required to produce desired output (increased academic learning and achievement). However, this study did not look at the output or learners' academic achievement.
The results of this study denote professional educators’ positive perceptions of and experiences with parental involvement. Positive perception reveals a belief that the chances of success of learners in life is initiated by the home, and maximised when the home and the school are collaboratively involved in the child’s education (Charles-Welsh, Green and Howard, 2004; Epstein et al. 2002). Moreover, the results reflect challenges schools experience in the process of implementing parental involvement. The overall underlying problem rests within the realm of the use of community resources. Apart from inviting community members to fund-raising events, many schools do not make use of community members and other resources to support learners’ learning.

Schools should develop forms of recruiting and training parental leaders, and appoint parental involvement lead teachers for school and family connections. In addition, schools need to create and establish ways and strategies within which professional educators and parents can work effectively in partnership with each other. In these ways schools will quickly learn how best to utilise the skills and knowledge of parents and make the fullest use of the full range of resources available in the community.

This study focused on how rural lower primary schools involve parents in academic education of learners. Further studies which focus on how interactive networks, collaborations and links between and among stakeholders serve as resources for effective operations by schools will add more knowledge to the existing knowledge base. Networks of different stakeholders have the potential of fostering a sense of responsibility, trust and involvement in all partners.

There is a need for research which provides information about which strategies are likely to improve parents’ commitment to and participation in parental involvement. Further studies are needed which identify those strategies which produce positive changes in the academic performance of learners at all levels of the educational system.

References


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