

Home-school communication in South African primary schools

E. Lemmer* and N. van Wyk

School of Education, University of South Africa, PO Box 392, Unisa, 0003 South Africa
lemmeem@unisa.ac.za; vwyk@unisa.ac.za

* To whom correspondence should be addressed

Home-school communication is one of the most traditional and vital forms of parent involvement but it is often poorly implemented. According to Epstein's model of parent involvement, home-school communication should be two-way communication and reflect a co-equal partnership between families and schools. In this article we examine school practices of home-school communication in South African primary schools using quantitative data derived from a survey of primary schools and qualitative data derived from interviews held with a small sample of primary school principals who also participated in the survey. The aims in this research endeavour were twofold: to explore the nature, frequency and effectiveness of home-school communication practices, and to make recommendations how home-school communication can be improved to facilitate better home-school partnerships.

Introduction

A broad and growing body of literature documents the importance of a school and family partnership for increasing learner success in school and for strengthening school programmes. Epstein's (1987:214) theory of overlapping spheres of influence of families and schools proposes that the work of the family and the school overlap and they share goals and missions. Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence includes both external and internal structures. The external model recognises that the three major contexts in which children learn and grow — the family, school and the community — can be drawn together or pushed apart. Some practices are conducted separately by schools, families and communities and some are conducted jointly in order to strengthen children's learning (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon, 1997:3). The internal model of interaction of schools, families and communities shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school and in the community. These social relationships can take place at an institutional level or at an individual level (Epstein, 1995:703). The model of overlapping spheres assumes that the mutual interests of families and schools can be successfully promoted by the policies and programmes of schools and the actions of teachers (Epstein, 1987:130). Where teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children in the primary grades and rate the teachers as better teachers while learners improve their attitudes and achievement (Epstein, 2001:134; Chrispeels, 1992). Most parents, however, still need help to know how to be productively involved in their children's education at each grade level. School programmes and teacher practices to organise family and school relations are needed to encourage already active parents and to assist those families who would not become involved on their own. To realise this partnership, two-way communication between the school and home and the home and school is essential.

This article examines school practices of home-school communication in South African primary schools using quantitative data derived from a survey of primary schools and qualitative data derived from interviews held with a small sample of primary school principals who also participated in the survey. The aims of the research endeavour were twofold: to determine the nature, frequency and effectiveness of home-school communication practices; and to make recommendations how home-school communication can be improved to facilitate better home-school partnerships. Therefore, the article includes the results of empirical research that was divided into two phases: the survey and the interviews.

Home-school communication as a type of parent involvement

Various studies have suggested different types of parent involvement, which should form part of a comprehensive school programme in

which responsibilities are shared with families for the education of learners (Coleman, 1987; Gordon, 1977; Comer, 1984; Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1995). Epstein's (1995) six major types of involvement that fall within the areas of overlapping spheres evolved from many other investigations as well as the actual experience of educators in schools and pose a multidimensional model (Fantuzzo, Tighe & Childs, 2000: 368). The six types identified are as follows: parenting; communication; volunteering; learning at home; decision making; and collaborating with the community (Epstein *et al.*, 1997). Each type of involvement poses specific challenges for its successful design and implementation and each type leads to different outcomes for learners, parents, and teachers (Epstein *et al.*, 1997:80-85). Furthermore, Epstein *et al.* (1997:12) argue that good programmes to implement parent involvement will look different in each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the specific needs of learners and their families. There are, however, some commonalities across successful programmes at all grade levels. These include a recognition of the overlapping spheres of influence on learner development; attention to various types of involvement that promote a variety of opportunities for schools, families and communities to work together; and an organisational structure (the action team) for school, family and community partnerships to coordinate each school's work and progress (Epstein *et al.*, 1997:18). They (Epstein *et al.*, 1997:13) maintain that a single individual cannot create a lasting comprehensive programme that involves all families through all grades. Therefore, along with clear policies and strong support from education departments, an action team comprising parents and teachers is necessary. This could form part of the activities of a school governing body. The action team should assess present practices of parent involvement, organise activities, coordinate practices and evaluate activities on an ongoing basis.

Home-school communication

Home-school communication as one of the above types of parent involvement is critical to home-school relations. The extent to which the school communicates with parents determines their involvement in the activities of the school (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999:40). To promote effective communication with families, schools should design a variety of school-to-home as well as home-to-school communication strategies with all families, each year, about school programmes and about the learners' progress (Hanhan, 1998:107). Furthermore, this communication should be part of a co-equal relationship. Teachers often regard themselves as somewhat superior to parents due to their professional expertise; parents often feel less adequate than teachers as parenting is seen as something that everyone can do (Hanhan, 1998:108). The nature of home-school communication tends to reflect this situation. Therefore home-school communication should strive to give parents a voice and avoid patronising parents.

Although virtually all schools usually invest considerable time and energy in communicating with parents, most communication between home and school tends to be one-way: from the school to the

home. One-way communication predominates in the use of written circulars and general parent meetings. Individual parent-teacher interviews do allow for greater two-way communication, but they often end as brief exchanges in order to accommodate large numbers of parents at a time. If parents and teachers are not adequately prepared for these exchanges, with relevant information about the child, strategies for improvement, and opportunity for further feedback meetings, these interviews are less than satisfactory (Berger, 2000:219). In most schools little effort is made or channels created by school staff to listen to important information parents have about their children, their ideals for their children, their home culture, and their views on education (Hanhan, 1998:107). If schools truly want parents to be partners in education, they must allow parents ample opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns and views in a co-equal relationship with teachers. Furthermore, schools seldom pause to assess the effectiveness of the nature and frequency of their regular modes of home-school communications (Hanhan, 1998:108). Many schools do a poor job of communicating with families. Examples are schools with multilingual families that make information available in English only; schools that dismiss or fail to follow upon parents' suggestions or schools that predominantly deliver bad news about children instead of good news (Dietz, 1997:39). Alexander, Bastiani and Beresford (1995:57) confirm that continuous two-way communication is the basis of all sound home-school relationships.

Home-school communication in South African schooling

Within the context of South African schooling, legislation since 1994 has introduced important educational reforms which impact on parent involvement. The South African Schools Act (SASA) No. 84 of 1996 (RSA 1996) defines the concept of parent; describes basic parental duties; sets requirements for schools related to parents' right to information; and provides for parent and community representation in mandatory School Governing Bodies (SGBs). These reforms have created an environment more conducive to parent involvement in schools, however, actual parent involvement remains weak (Heystek & Louw, 1999; Kgaffe, 2001; Bridgemohan, 2001; Risimati, 2002). Authentic change must take place at local level where school managers, teachers and school governors play a crucial role in translating national initiatives into meaningful local policy and practice.

In terms of specific implications for home-school communication as a type of parent involvement, the broad definition of parent used by the Act (RSA, 1996) implies that schools should acknowledge a variety of family types and develop a range of home-school communication strategies accordingly. Thus, teachers should communicate regularly with non-traditional caregivers, for example, the non-custodial parent in a broken home, parents who live away from the family due to migrant labour, grandparents and other relatives or older siblings who are fulfilling the care-giving function. Although many children in disadvantaged communities are cared for by grandparents or other relatives, it is exceptional for schools to engage a learner's relatives actively and purposefully in parent involvement practices (Van Wyk, 1996). Moreover, the parent's rights of access to information concerning a child held by both the Department of Education and a public or private school as stipulated in the Act (RSA, 1996:13) also has implications for home-school communication. This implies the school's responsibility to communicate regularly and coherently with parents about the school programme, curriculum and the learner's total development. This has particular implications for the school's communication with poorly educated parents who may not easily grasp assessment strategies, medical or psychological jargon, or who may have a limited proficiency in the language of teaching and learning.

Research design

In the light of the above discussion an empirical investigation consisting of two separate phases was undertaken to determine the nature, use and effectiveness of home-school communication practices in South African primary schools. The research consisted of two phases:

a survey and semi-structured interviews. The research design and sampling, as well as the significant findings, are reported in the ensuing sections, respectively.

Research design and sampling in Phase one

Descriptive statistical data were extracted from a 30-item survey mailed to a list of 500 primary schools (public and independent) which subscribed to a quarterly newsletter, *The parent-teacher newsletter*, distributed free of charge countrywide. (This newsletter, compiled by the researcher and a colleague at the University of South Africa, has been distributed free of charge three times a year to approximately 6 000 primary schools since 1998. Distribution takes place regularly in Gauteng province, with the other eight provinces included on an alternating basis. Interested schools may request to be placed on a permanent mailing list. The current list comprises 500 schools.) The questionnaire required about 30 minutes to complete and asked school principals to respond to items dealing with the key characteristics of the school and learner population, views of parent involvement, and the school's practice of parent involvement, including home-school communication. Five of the 30 items were open-ended and produced soft data. These items concerned perceptions of the most effective practices of, and barriers to, home-school communication in the schools. Fifteen items focused specifically on practices of home-school communication. The remaining items related to other types of parent involvement in schools and are not relevant to this article. Space was also provided, below most closed questions, to allow for additional comment. After a pilot study of the questionnaire modifications were made. Peer assessment ensured that the items were relevant (face validity) and there was a representative sample of content (content validity) (Schumacher & Macmillan, 1997:236). The open items and the space provided for comments produced qualitative data which ensured data triangulation. The qualitative data were processed manually by two experienced researchers who agreed on the findings. 242 questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 48.4% and representing a cross-section of schools with different geographic locations, socio-economic status, and ethnic characteristics. Most of the respondents (86%) were principals of public schools; the remaining respondents were from independent schools. Exploratory analysis, using the SAS Systems statistical package, was utilised to analyse the data.

Research design and sampling in Phase two

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by two researchers with seven principals who had participated in the above survey. As an outcome of the survey these principals contacted the researchers personally to express interest in the research and were subsequently invited to participate in Phase two of the research. Thus, there was an element of volunteering in participant selection. De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delpoit (2002) indicate that volunteer participants facilitate the task of the researcher since they are normally more motivated, better trained and skilled than others. In this case each participating principal was strongly committed to improving home-school communication in his/her school and readily agreed to sharing the school's experience in more detail. All principals represented public schools. Two schools were located in an area adjoining the central business district and had a geographically mixed catchment area. Half the learners came from the surrounding neighbourhood of apartment buildings and houses and the rest were bussed by the school from a local township. Although these two schools used English as language of learning, all learners were English Second Language speakers (ESL). Two schools were located in middle-income suburbs and learners came from the neighbourhood. Both schools used Afrikaans as language of learning and learners were predominantly Afrikaans-speaking. In one of these schools, a very small minority (about 2%) of learners had English or Xhosa as home language. Two schools were located in mixed income suburbs and the catchment areas were comprised by the surrounding neighbourhoods. Both schools used English as language of learning;

Table 1 Characteristics of participating schools

School	Principal's tenure	Learners	Location	Economic status	Feeder area	School fees per annum	Home language of learners
A	14 years	653	Suburb	Middle income	Immediate neighbourhood	R4 000	English, Afrikaans, Xhosa
B	4 years	1 500	Inner city	Mixed income	Neighbourhood; bussed from township; boarding facilities	R3 400	Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu
C	2 years	1 500	Inner city	Mixed income	Neighbourhood; township; boarding facilities	R1 150	Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans
D	11 years	800	Suburb	Middle income	Neighbourhood	R1 900	Afrikaans
E	9 years	635	Suburb	Mixed income	Neighbourhood	R4 160	English, Afrikaans, Xhosa
F	12 years	724	Suburb	Middle income	Neighbourhood	R5 350	English, Xhosa, Afrikaans
G	5 years	930	Suburb	Lower income	Neighbourhood	R2 300	English, Afrikaans, Xhosa

the learner enrolment in both schools was English speaking with 15% ESL learners. Finally, the seventh school was situated in a lower income suburb and the learners came from the immediate neighbourhood. It is a dual medium school (Afrikaans and English) and about half the learners opting for instruction in English were ESL speakers. The characteristics of participating schools are reflected in Table 1.

All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and became the primary data source for analysis. Data analysis was conducted collaboratively by two researchers. The data were analysed manually by repeated examination of the interview transcripts, identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data. Extracts from the raw data were selected and paraphrased or quoted to illustrate patterns. Investigator triangulation (Johnson & Christensen, 2001) was employed by using both researchers to collect and interpret the data. Participant feedback was sought by contacting participants telephonically to obtain additional information or clarification. Finally, the interviews aimed at a more in-depth understanding of home-school communication as experienced by school principals from their own frame of reference and no attempt was made to quantify behaviour or generalise findings.

Significant findings and discussion of Phase one

This section describes the school's attitude to parent involvement and reported practices of home-school communication based on the findings of the survey. The overwhelming majority of respondents (92.6%) reported that the school deemed parent involvement to be very important. However, school practices of home-school communication as emerging from the subsequent items in the survey (*cf.* ensuing discussion) showed some discrepancy between the viewpoint expressed and actual school practice. This gap between rhetoric and practice with regard to parent involvement is common to most similar studies conducted in a range of countries and communities (Epstein, 2001:3).

Written communication

Regular written communication with parents is virtually a universal practice in schools, although the format, quality and frequency of such communication varies. Written communication conveys a sense of permanence and authority when issued by the school (Hanhan, 1998: 45). Virtually all the respondents (94.6%) reported that their schools regularly communicated with the home in writing about school matters. Comments generated by the open responses indicated that standard information about the school and the school year was communicated by means of newsletters, year or term planners and homework diaries containing dates of school events, including test and examination dates and procedures for contacting the school and large noticeboards on the school grounds. In addition, respondents noted that e-mail is being used increasingly and effectively to send messages to the home. One respondent added the comment that the school regularly

used Short Messaging Systems (SMS) to communicate reminders about important dates to parents.

These standard channels of written communication are accepted ways of bridging the information gap and the sense of distance felt by teachers and parents, who may be strangers to one another, but who share common interests in the same children. However, parents often experience official written communication from the school as relatively boring (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller & Moore, 2002:23) and the effectiveness of its distribution depends on the learner as a reliable 'messenger' (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999:41). This was corroborated by respondents' comments complaining that parents did not always heed written communications nor did learners deliver them in many cases. Very few respondents (26.9%) indicated that the school had a written policy on parent involvement which was disseminated to parents. Only 58% of schools had a written homework policy which was distributed to parents. This suggests that schools rely on the common wisdom concerning the role of parent involvement and this is seldom formalised in policy document which are widely distributed. Alexander *et al.* (1995:40) emphasise that, to implement effective parent involvement, schools and families should jointly produce written policies and these should be regularly revised and distributed to all families.

The majority of schools (92.6%) employed a system of quarterly written report cards to inform parents of the learner's progress. This relates to the legal requirement of parental right of access to information (RSA, 1996) designed, among others, to make schools more accountable to parents. Less than half of respondents (45%) used a report card pick up system, whereby parents were required to come to the school in person to receive the learner's report card. Explanatory comments indicated that this event was usually linked to a parent meeting where parents were given information about the school or were addressed on topics of interest, such as curriculum and assessment issues. Respondents commented that this was a very effective system of enforcing contact with parents who were otherwise reluctant or unable to visit the school.

Verbal communication

Verbal communication with parents builds relationships and can be more effective than written communication. It also allows, in theory at least, a greater opportunity for teachers to listen to parents' views. A standard practice of verbal communication in schools worldwide is the individual parent-teacher conference. Hanhan (1998:116) states that this form of verbal communication is the most frequently used method and has become institutionalised, usually lasting about fifteen minutes and occurring twice a year. However, these meetings are often experienced negatively by parents and teachers. They are often too short, too infrequent and occur after a problem has arisen or too late in the school year (Hendersen & Berla, 1994:44). Notwithstanding, authors advocate ways of maximising them by using learning contracts, pre-

paration sheets, extending the time allowed and including a positive focus instead of an exclusive problem orientation (Jonson, 1999; Hanhan, 1998). However, this survey showed that only two-thirds of the schools (66.1%) held regular parent-teacher conferences where parents could meet class or subject teachers and view learners' work. Respondents indicated that special meetings called between the principal and parents to deal with a problem frequently occurred in about half the schools (53.9%). In most of these cases (70.5%), the learner was also present in the discussion.

Parent nights, parent education classes, annual general meetings or school orientation programmes for new parents or parents of specific grades are events at which teachers address parents *en masse*. These occasions may also be structured to allow parents to raise issues or even share the podium. However, the survey findings suggest that the effectiveness of large parent meetings as a means of communicating with parents is dubious. While most schools (95%) held regular general meetings, attendance was poor. Only a third of the schools (35.9%) estimated attendance of half or more of the parent body at general meetings. The remainder estimated attendance that fell under 20% of the parent body. In response to the item dealing with estimated parent attendance of elections of members of the SGB, only 43% of respondents reported that the school had been able to gather more than 20% of the parent body. This is disturbing in the light of the requirement that SGB members should be elected by a mandatory quota of a quorum of at least 15% of the parent body (Gauteng Provincial Government, undated). Barriers to attendance of meetings were dealt with by means of an open item. The most frequently mentioned responses were parents' work schedules and distance from the school which created transport problems. Comments made about best practice included the use of incentives to encourage attendance of school meetings, such as allowing certain privileges to learners whose parents attended meetings or giving attendees complimentary concert/movie tickets. Some schools mentioned that they provided transport for parents who were farm labourers or bussed parents travelling to suburban schools from the townships.

Only a minority of schools initiate verbal interactions with parents that go beyond what is traditionally expected of them. Very few schools (28%) reported that teachers made home visits. Only 23% initiate workshops for parents apart from school-sponsored general meetings. However, more than half of the respondents (64.4%) indicated that they made regular use of phone calls to contact parents. Additional commentary indicated that this means of communication was becoming more frequent due to the availability of mobile phones. Other methods of verbal communication additionally noted by respondents included casual contact with parents before and after school, at sports or cultural events or when parents volunteer to assist on the school premises.

Nature of communication

The majority of respondents (70.5%) reported that communication with the home was usually motivated by the learner's academic, behavioural or emotional problems. A common tendency among schools is to communicate with the home only when a behavioural or learning problem arises and to neglect to communicate good news about learners' achievements (Dietz, 1997). Less than half the respondents (44.6%) reported the practice of communicating good news about learners and their achievements to parents. Yet, research (Shumow, 1997; Ames, 1995) illustrates that parents value positive information about their children and that this motivates parents to become more involved in the school. With regard to giving parents the opportunity to voice their views, two thirds of respondents (67%) reported that parents were consulted about decisions regarding school activities which affect them. Just over half (56%) reported that this was done by means of surveys held each year at the school.

Significant findings and discussion of Phase two

This section describes the practices of home-school communication based on the findings of the interviews.

Communicating through the whole environment

The participants agreed that sound home-school communication cannot be separated from the general school environment. Parents feel more comfortable entering a school and meeting teachers if the environment is clean, attractive and welcoming. One principal explained:

Disempowered parents aren't going to come knocking at the door and say, 'Here I am.' They have to be invited and the school is in the position to invite someone into its domain.

The endeavour to create an invitational environment was an ongoing concern of all principals who recognised that this responsibility lay with the school. Another principal observed,

My response to parent apathy is 'How good is the school environment for parents?' Are they seen as the source of challenge or the source of complaint? I believe we've got to make parents welcome.

In this regard frontline personnel, such as the school secretary, are vital in welcoming and assisting parents. A successful innovation in one participating school was the appointment of a retired school inspector as liaison officer between the public and the school. Neatly attired, wearing a name badge for easy recognition, the liaison officer is salaried from additional school funds and is tasked with

... a frontline function, handling all parent queries in person or telephonically, in order to alleviate the principal's burden.

Written communication

The participants used the standard methods of written communication, however, the variety and quality of products were exceptional. During the interviews, principals produced a variety of attractive year planners, term planners, homework diaries containing important dates and procedures for contacting the school and illustrated weekly or bi-monthly newsletters. Four schools used a homework book as a channel of personalised communication between the teacher and parent,

The homework book is signed by Mom, the teacher writes two sentences ... Dad writes back.

Another two employed large noticeboards sponsored by a commercial company outside the school to advertise forthcoming events:

All the school principals in this area tell me that they know what is happening at my school because of the noticeboard on the tennis courts. The board was sponsored by Minolta and we advertise for them on it.

However, although six of the seven schools served multilingual parent bodies, only one school made a concerted effort to provide multilingual communication. Here written communication was provided in two languages, English and Sotho, and the SGB chairperson interpreted when necessary from English to Sotho during parent meetings.

Group communication

The difficulty of attracting parents to large general parent meetings including SGB elections reflected in the survey findings was also mentioned by the participants. They expressed concern that attendance of group meetings, including the crucial SGB elections, was extremely poor:

We really have to work hard to get parents to come to meetings.

Four of these schools had struggled to obtain the mandatory quota in this regard (Gauteng Provincial Government, undated). However, these schools made concrete efforts to meet face to face with working parents on their terms. Parent meetings were held on Sundays, Saturday mornings or even public holidays, so that parents could attend. Teachers were expected to work these unconventional hours without special compensation. The two schools which serve largely disadvantaged communities held an annual Open Day on a regular school day, which provided useful opportunities for personal contact between parents and teachers. Parents were given a tour of the school, visited classrooms, sat with their children at their desks and observed school activities. Another school mentioned that it made special efforts to promote involvement among fathers and to acknowledge grandparents by arranging specific events for the latter.

Individual parent-teacher meetings

All the schools made use of individual parent-teacher meetings once a term. In contrast to the general meetings, individual parent-teacher meetings, where parents obtained feedback about their own child, were always well attended. Prior appointments had to be made for parent-teacher meetings, which generally lasted about 10 minutes. One school distributed the quarterly school reports on this occasion and thus obtained 100% attendance. Moreover, this school included the learner in the parent-teacher interview,

The kids are invited to join. The child has always seen his report before his parents see it ... we make the kids understand that this is a positive report and these are the things I am going to tell your mommy, what you are doing well and what we want you to work on next time.

Nature of communication

The tendency for schools to engage in problem-focused communication, mentioned above and borne out by the survey, was corroborated by the interview findings. Most principals sheepishly acknowledged that problem-oriented communication was the norm.

I am guilty!, one remarked when asked about the frequency of positive communication. Where achievements were acknowledged this was done by sending a child's work home for a parent's signature but without further commentary by the teacher. Only one school made use of personalised "Glad notes" which are sent home on an *ad hoc* basis to commend children to parents for minor achievements such as showing kindness to classmates, courtesy or small academic gains. One principal emphasised that home-relations had significantly improved since the school had made a conscious effort to communicate good news, constructive criticism and to avoid

personal attacks or blaming parents during parent meetings.

Communication and teachers' time

Effective communication with families makes considerable inroads on teachers' time. Epstein (2001:120) states that this is not a trivial issue, for example, telephone calls alone make heavy demands on a teacher who must contact 30 families. All principals claimed an open door policy. One described this saying:

I always say to parents if they phone I will deal with their problems within 24 hours.

This meant that they were inundated by parental demands on their time:

Unfortunately having an open door policy can backfire on you because your door is always closed because you always have people with you.

Although all the schools stipulated that appointments should be made, one principal complained that

We are confronted daily with problems and often parents would arrive uninvited and request help. We try to accommodate them as much as possible.

Unconventional methods of home-school communication such as home visits were only referred to by one participant, who carried out two or three home visits a year, in cases of repeated absenteeism or suspected child neglect.

Listening to parents

To realise a co-equal partnership in which authentic two-way communication takes place, parents' voices must be heard (Ng, 1999:552). In these schools certain channels to assess general parent opinion regularly and gather informal suggestions had been created. Topics on which parents were polled included issues such as transport, school fees, uniforms or curriculum choices. One school carried out an annual opinion poll by means of a comprehensive questionnaire to determine the general effectiveness of the school, described as follows:

We put out what we call our 'report card' that the parents write on and the parents actually rate all the areas of activity in the

school ... but they have to be a fee paying parents to participate ... if you are going to complain you must be delivering as the first thing.

Another school found that a suggestion box placed in the entrance foyer functioned well. Parents could pop in parents' suggestions, comments or complaints and these were referred daily to a senior teacher for immediate follow-up. But these strategies tended to provide parents with an anonymous and limited 'voice' in the school. A more participatory practice used in three schools is to create opportunities for smaller groups of parents with a common interest, such as parents of a particular class or grade, to gather with a teacher to discuss issues. Thus, parent opinion is gauged and

shy parents are more likely to speak out.

Guidelines for improving home-school communication

Arising from the empirical investigation, as well as relevant literature, recommendations for improving home-school communication are presented. A review of the literature shows many useful sources dealing with home-school communication, the nature of which falls within the 'how-to-do' genre of hints and tips to make written communication and personal contact more attractive and welcoming (*cf.* Gruber, 1989; Jonson, 1999). Whilst the usefulness of this is not disputed, long-term improvements in school practice are best served by a strategic approach. Therefore this section outlines steps, which could be coordinated by the SGB or a sub-committee with delegated powers, similar to Epstein's action team, to maximise improved home-school communication. These steps are briefly explained as follows:

Assess current school practice:

Each school should assess the effectiveness of its current communication strategies: written and verbal. This can be done by focus groups, questionnaires or phone surveys of both teacher and parent experiences of current practices. Indicators to measure effectiveness, such as attendance of general and individual meetings, the reliability of delivering written communication using learners, the effectiveness of frontline staff such as the school secretary, telephone answering, etc., should be identified and used (Epstein, 2001:44).

Identify goals for improvement:

Both partners in education, teachers and parents, should assist in formulating goals for improved home-school communication over a short term (e.g. six months to a year) and a long-term period (e.g. three years) (Epstein, 1997:122).

Identify a team to drive improvements:

An organisational structure, comprised of parents, teachers, support staff and learners, must be charged with the responsibility of driving the process. This team should be delegated responsibility by the SGB and it is useful for a SGB member to act as chairperson, thereby ensuring various kinds of essential support from the governing body, such as funding. Proponents of site school management stress the role of formal committee structures (Comer, 1988) to drive processes and Epstein (1995: 2001) applies this to the improvement of parent involvement. Representation of all stakeholders on such a structure ensures that the needs of both family and school are met in an effort to establish a co-equal partnership and two-way communication.

Evaluate implementation and results:

The improvement in a school's programmes and teacher practices of home-school communication should be continuously evaluated and revised so that the school can move toward even more effective practices.

Sustain practice:

Improved home-school communication must be sustained over time through continuous attention and support (Epstein, 2001:151). This is best done through the functioning of a team rather than an individual.

Conclusion

Home-school communication is one of the most traditional and vital forms of parent involvement, but it is often poorly implemented. Both the empirical investigation and the literature indicate that typical home-school communication relies on the school 'telling' parents about activities, school policies and procedures, learners' progress and the curriculum. Even parent-teacher conferences or principal-parent interviews are usually 'telling' opportunities in which the teacher plays the role of initiator and controller of communication. In other words, teachers tend to talk rather than listen to parents. To optimise parent involvement and to realise a true partnership, parents must also speak and be heard. Communication must thus flow in two directions and schools must encourage and create channels whereby parents can easily and with comfort speak to teachers and the school community. No partnership with parents can succeed without this kind of effective communication. To summarise in the words of a participant in this study,

Involved parents are informed parents and informed parents are satisfied parents.

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