

## **Effective home-school partnership: Some strategies to help strengthen parental involvement**

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The primary aim of the study from which this paper derives was to investigate the level of parental involvement in the schooling of their children. The study employed a descriptive case study research design. All data were based on unstructured interviews with the 30 parents whose children attended one of the primary schools located in the London area of England, United Kingdom. The results of the study showed that parents care about their children's education, and want to get involved. However, results also showed that most parents do not always know how to get involved, and some are even intimidated by the operational structures within the school. The study concludes that to effectively involve parents in the affairs of the school, as well as in their children's education, certain strategies must be popularised within the school. It is recommended that parents be made aware of the strategies for their involvement in children's education if such strategies are to be effective.

**Keywords:** children; cultural capital; strategies; education; home-school partnership; home visits; involvement; parents; parents' evening; parent-teacher games; school childcare policy

### **Introduction**

There is substantial evidence to suggest that parents' involvement in the education of their children can make a significant difference in the educational attainment of those children (Epstein, 1995; Keane, 2007; Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004a; Lemmer, 2009; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Studsrød & Bru, 2009; Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013). However, popular opinion and the public outcry for more meaningful parental involvement in school matters (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Smit & Liebenberg, 2003; Mmotlane, Winnaar & Wa-Kivilu, 2009), parent participation in education still leaves much to be desired. The importance of the home environment in the education of the child made it imperative for legislation to ensure better participation, recognition and visibility of parents within the school system (Gershberg & Meade, 2005; Mestry & Grobler, 2007).

Although there is a growing body of literature on the importance of parental involvement in their children's education, studies have nevertheless shown that parents' involvement in the education of their children still appears to be limited (Keane, 2007; Mncube, 2009; 2010; Wherry, 2009; Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013). The primary aim of the study, which has influenced this paper, was to investigate the level of parents' involvement in the schooling of their children in one of the primary schools located in the London area of England, United Kingdom. Investigating the level of parental involvement enabled the researcher to explore various strategies used by the school to ensure effective parent participation. This is particularly important for South Africa because studies have shown that although "internationally, there is significant literature on parental participation in school activities, however, not much has yet been written about parental participation in such activities in South Africa" (Mncube, 2010: 233).

Equally important is the view of Makgopa & Mokhele (2013:219) who, in their study of two South African schools, noted that "to date, no systematic research has been carried out to determine what type of involvement has the strongest connection with achievement". Specifically, the study sought to investigate parents' views that schools should develop strategies to involve them; to find out from participants how their children's school has implemented such regulations; and finally, to explore the strategies participants thought would ensure effective home-school partnerships. The present paper therefore seeks to contribute to existing literature on viable strategies that enable effective parental involvement in their children's schooling.

### **How literature defines parental involvement in education**

Although there is a "lack of a uniform and accepted definition" (Dor, 2012:921) of what parental involvement actually means, there appears to be some consensus in the literature on the conflation of activities that together represent effective parental involvement in their children's schooling. The context of parental involvement has been used in this paper to describe a situation in which parents are perceived as active partners in the process of educating their children. Makgopa & Mokhele (2013:220) perceive parental involvement as "a combination of supporting student academic achievement and participating in school-initiated functions". Mncube (2010:234) notes that the "concept entails awareness of, and achievement in, schoolwork, an understanding of the interaction between parenting skills and learner success in schooling, and a commitment to consistent communication with educators about learner progress".

Earlier, Cotton and Wikelund (1989) conceived parental involvement activities to include telephone communication between parents and their child's school officials, written home-school communication, home assistance or tutoring, home educational enrichment that supports the child's educational activities, and attending school functions. Epstein (1995) also identifies six areas of parental involvement, namely: parenting, which helps them create an enabling, academically-friendly home environment for their child; communicating, which assists in designing effective forms of school-to-home communications about the school programmes and child's progress; recruiting and organising parents' help and support; assisting with child home learning; developing parent leaders and representatives at school; and collaborating with the community.

Similarly, Moore and Lasky (1999) explain parents' participation as entailing helping their children with homework, holding parent-teacher interviews, conducting parent nights, having special consultations on the child's problems, holding parent councils, and helping in the school and in the classroom. Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong and Jones (2001) note that parent participation in the school includes establishing structures for homework performance, teaching for understanding, and developing child learning strategies. It equally involves attending parent-teacher association meetings, attending one-on-one meetings with the child's school official, volunteering in classroom and outside activities, helping with homework, and also attending parent-teacher conferences (Domina, 2005). Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates and Pettit (2004:1491) observe that parental involvement connotes a cluster of school and academically-related activities such as "parent's work with schools and with their children to benefit their children's educational outcomes and future success". In England and Wales, parental involvement is conceived by Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2006) as a response to school obligations by parents of children in the school. These include getting the child to school on time, involvement in curriculum implementation, volunteering, self-education, and taking a leadership role at the child's school (Damle, 2006).

For Georgiou (2007:60), parental involvement has five dimensions, which include "parenting, helping with homework, communicating with the school, volunteering at school, and participating in school decision-making". Parental involvement ranges from "involvement at school as a governor, helping in the classroom or during lunch breaks, reading to the child at home, teaching songs or nursery rhymes, and assisting with homework" (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008:3). Adams, Forsyth and Mitchell (2009:17) define involved parents as those "who actively share in the responsibility for student and school performance by working in synchrony with teachers, administrators, and other parents to shape and reinforce an educational vision that fosters student learning and growth".

Within the South African context, parental involvement is uniquely packaged following the historical antecedents that produced the South African Schools Acts (SASA) of 1996 (Smit & Liebenberg, 2003; Lemmer, 2007; Mmotlane et al., 2009; Mncube, 2009; Mbokodi & Singh, 2011). Although such legislation appears to play both an empowering and a motivational role in parents' involvement in their children's schooling (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004a; Brown & Duku, 2008; Felix, Dornbrack & Scheckle, 2008; Heystek, 1999), there still seems to be a lack of actual involvement of parents in many of the

school activities of their children. Studies (Mestry & Grobler, 2007:177; Felix et al., 2008; Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013) have noted that this lack of involvement "is not a lack of interest that prevents parents from becoming involved in their child's education, but rather problems of poverty, single-parenthood, non-English literacy, the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and cultural and socio-economic isolation". It is also important to note that although many South African parents may be involved in their children's schooling, in many instances, much existing literature on the subject shows a predominance of issues of school governance, where parents are legally constituted as part of the school governing bodies (SGBs) (see Mestry & Grobler, 2007; Brown & Duku, 2008; Mncube, 2009, 2010; Nojaja, 2009; Mbokodi & Singh, 2011; Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013). This was an earlier observation alluded to by Lemmer and Van Wyk (2004b:261) who argue that "investigations into parent involvement in diverse South African communities from the perspectives of teachers, parents and learners confirm the need for a broader conceptualisation of parent involvement, which includes, but transcends, parent participation in school governance".

Although the participation of parents in governance and leadership in schools is vital, it is the academic involvement of parents in the schooling of their children which appears to be more productive. While it is acknowledged that this was not within the scope of the study on which the present paper is based, it is arguable whether a well-functioning SGB, where parents are actively involved, would guarantee a successful schooling experience for children. After all, as Lemmer (2007: 218) notes "changes in governance arrangements[...]do not improve student achievement". It is possible for learners to experience poor learning outcomes and low achievement even in schools where the SGBs are very efficient. It is apparent that clear differences exist between parent involvement in the governing of a school, and their individual and/or collective involvement in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor development of their children.

Correlates of parental involvement and the education of the child Empirical evidence reveals an important link between parental involvement and educational achievement of children, as well as parental involvement and effective home-school relationships (Damle, 2006; Ranson, Martin & Vincent, 2004; Symeou, 2007). It has been noted that parents' involvement in the early phase of their child's educational development will have a significant impact on the child's cognitive and literacy abilities (see Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Taggart, Melhuish, Sammons & Elliot, 2004; Dor, 2012; Sheng, 2012). Studies that have measured the effect of close parental relationships and support on children's educational attainment (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Studsrød & Bru, 2009) have noted that statistically, such children usually obtain very high scores in the area of psycho-social and behavioural competence.

Literature also suggests that most parents believe they should be involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001); that they are in a better position, early on, to put their children on the right path (Olatoye & Ogunkola, 2008); that they are the major players in the lives of their children (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009); and that they understand their children's needs best (Sylva, Scott, Totsika, Ereky-Stevens & Crook, 2008). Colpin, Vandemeulebroecke and Ghesquière (2004) note that most mothers and fathers who took part in their study, expressed significant interest in getting involved in their children's

schooling. Interestingly, the fathers in their study “felt they were perceived as incompetent parents in general” (Colpin et al., 2004:285) by the school, and were thereby discouraged from getting involved. This implies that the way teachers perceive their pupils’ parents has a significant impact on the level of involvement by the parents in the long run. This explains the fact that “the idea that parents can change their children’s educational trajectories by engaging with their children’s schooling has inspired a generation of school reform policies” (Domina, 2005: 245). It therefore follows that schools in which parents are effectively involved, are better positioned to tackle problems associated with their children’s education.

Research has also shown that early parental involvement, as well as continuous involvement, has a significant positive effect on the child’s achievement, particularly for the entire duration of their early educational experience (Låftman, 2008; Putman & Feldstein, 2003). Flouri and Buchanan (2004:150) see parent involvement as “one of the major influences on attainment”. On another note, Olatoye and Ogunkola (2008:33) report that when parents are involved, “it can promote better cooperation between parents and the school”, thereby enhancing the child’s academic progress. This is because research suggests that home–school conviviality has an impact on the academic performance of the child (Putman & Feldstein, 2003; Studsrød & Bru, 2009).

Notwithstanding the numerous benefits associated with effective parental involvement in the schooling of their children, the literature appears to suggest that most parents complain of lack of time, or of having nothing to contribute (Mestry & Grobler, 2007; Carter, 2008; Felix et al., 2008; Nojaja, 2009; Mncube, 2010; Dor, 2012; Sheng, 2012), fear of academic victimisation, language barriers, and difficulties in attending academic meetings (Mncube, 2009; 2010). Moreover, while some think only professionals should run schools (Wherry, 2009), others suggest they are not being welcomed by the school (Låftman, 2008). Studies also show that most parents within multi-ethnic communities face even greater barriers, especially in relation to language and other cultural idiosyncrasies (Carter, 2008). Heystek’s (1999) study recorded feelings of inferiority to teachers; negative attitudes towards the school; inadequate knowledge and skills; demographic factors; as well as teachers’ negative actions and attitudes, as some of the reasons why black parents do not want to get involved in schooling matters. In addition, it has also been suggested that the school’s ideological positioning within the larger society may equally act as a serious impediment to parental involvement. For instance, only those parents whose personal ideologies and beliefs align with those of the school may be encouraged to get involved; and those parents whose beliefs as well as personal ideologies about schooling are in dissonance with those of the school, shun involvement (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Levine-Rasky, 2009).

#### Cultural capital and parent involvement in education

The epistemological starting point for parents’ involvement in the schooling of their child is cultural currency, that is, the mental as well as psychic disposition in terms of the knowledge base. According to Lee and Bowen (2006:196) parental involvement in education “promotes connections between adults in two of the child’s primary micro-systems, the home and the school, while parent educational involvement at home conveys congruence in the attitudes and behaviour governing these two micro-systems”. Central to the home–school bond, and the ability of parents to get involved, is the cultural capital available

to the individual parent. Cultural capital can be associated with the forms of knowledge, skills, education, or any advantage a person has, which gives him or her a higher status in society (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

A key aspect of any social structure is that the patterns of social relationships recreate the same or similar social structures and relationships over time and across space. Schools appear to provide parents with the cultural capital congruent with those of the school, as well as the attitudes and knowledge that make the educational system a comfortably familiar place in which they can successfully and easily participate. The concept of cultural capital offers a useful theoretical base for understanding “the influence of family background on school experience and educational achievement, and differences in school–family relationships between social classes” (Symeou, 2007:476). The concept has also been applied in the investigation by Lee and Bowen (2006) of the home–school mesosystem, as a way of understanding the persistent achievement gap among primary school pupils. The concept provides us with a particular frame for thinking about how certain amounts of culturally accumulated symbolic resources mediate the regenerative process of interactional transmission in the form of ideology, within a particular social setting.

Symeou (2007) describes three forms of cultural capital: First, embodied or incorporated cultural capital, also classified as habitus by Bourdieu (1986). Habitus denotes the dispositions that are inculcated in the family, which manifest themselves in different ways in each individual. More so, it is formed not only by the habitus of the family, but also by the objective chances of the class to which the individual belongs in their interactions, and it changes as the individual’s position within a field also changes. Next, there is objectified cultural capital, which consists of the cultural goods and artefacts (e.g. books, films, digital material, artworks and heritage) that can be transmitted for the purpose of their symbolic value and meaning (Coleman, 1990; Damle, 2006). Last, there is institutionalised cultural capital, an aggregate of the potential resources held by an individual, which are linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, most often in the form of academic credentials and social connections (Eyal, 2008; Georgiou, 1999).

The concept of cultural capital is fundamentally linked to the concept of fields. A field can be any structure of social relations (Bourdieu, 1986); and is always a site of struggle for position. It is a product of the conflict created when individuals or groups endeavour to establish what comprises valuable and legitimate capital within such space. It must be noted that one type of cultural capital can be both legitimate and illegitimate, depending on the field in which it manifests. This then implies that the legitimisation of a particular type of cultural capital is completely arbitrary. Thus, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), and Symeou (2007) argue that the allocation of cultural capital is achieved through a particular form of transmission. This situation is reflected, for instance, in the school system which offers not only the mechanisms but also the fields which the dominant group has consistently and closely employed to align education with middle- and upper-class values and aims, consequently alienating parents of the lower class. According to Symeou (2007:475), “although most families care about their children’s school success, only some find their habitus legitimated and valued at school, so that it becomes embodied cultural capital”. At the heart of Bourdieu’s (1986) illumination of cultural capital, are the unequal social relations, in terms of the possession

of such cultural dispositions, among various individuals within such a social system as the school. Such unequal relations are sustained by the extent of the fit between the individual's cultural idiosyncrasies and that of the school. Such unequal relations emanate from the fact that "some individuals have inherited cultural capital in the process of habitus formation in their families, which makes them more successful players than others in the field of the education system" (Lee & Bowen, 2006:197).

The level of parents' involvement in the schooling of their children therefore would be a function of the amount of cultural capital in their possession, and the extent to which such embodied cultural capital is consonant with that required by the school. Parents with the type of cultural capital aligned with that of the school would be at a greater advantage to participate in school activities. The interest in participating for such parents is the result of congruence between the parents' cumulative cultural capital and that of the school. Conversely, parents with minimal or no cultural capital in their possession would surely experience barriers to meaningful participation, where participatory apathy becomes a function of dissonance between such parents' cumulative cultural capital and those of the school. This observation appears to be consistent with that of Lee and Bowen (2006:199), who note that "different levels of parental involvement may reflect differences in parents' habitus for educational involvement, while different effects of parental involvement may reflect differences in levels of cultural capital". Singh et al.'s (2004:305) study reveals that "the socio-economic status of many parents in [their] study was at a low level and, although the parents attributed their non-involvement to various factors, their involvement in school issues was highly influenced by their economic status".

### Research methodology

A descriptive case study design was used to obtain data for the study. Using a case study design presented the researcher with opportunity for a micro-approach to the study. The design ensured that detailed viewpoints of the parent participants were brought to the fore, using unstructured in-depth interviews.

A sample size of 30 parents whose children attended Anelka participated in the study. Eight of these participants were men and the remaining 22 were women. Anelka (pseudonym) is a state school situated in northwest London in the UK, with a predominantly multicultural population. Demographically, 13 of the participants were of white ethnic background; 10 of the participants were of black origin; four participants were of Jewish origin; and three of Indian origin. Eleven of the parent participants were in full-time professional employment, including those in business. Seven of the women participants were full-time homemakers; four were shop owners; and eight were semi-skilled workers. The participants were in the age bracket 29 to 44 years, and between them had 38 children at the time of the study.

Although the interview instrument was unstructured, the researcher had some guidelines that were drawn from the research questions. The following were the research questions that guided the study: i) How can the school develop strategies for parental involvement? ii) How has the school implemented strategies to involve parents? iii) What strategies would you suggest to schools to ensure that parents are effectively involved in their children's schooling?

The data collected during the fieldwork process were analysed through the analytic induction approach. Analytic induc-

tion represents a process that enables the researcher to develop explanatory model that satisfactorily accounts for the parents' views on the nature of their involvement in their child's schooling. The researcher was interested in offering an explanatory approach to the level of parental involvement in the schooling of their children at Anelka. It was for this reason that the analytic induction approach was adopted. Within this framework, the researcher was able to organise the collected data from the 30 interviews in a way which allowed for the generation of categories, themes, and patterns. These were then examined for any emerging patterns, which in turn, influenced the alternative explanatory models that were used. Such an exercise was aimed "at identifying central themes in the data by searching for recurrent experiences, feelings and attitudes, so as to be able to code, reduce, and connect different categories into central themes" (Oplatka & Eizenberg, 2007:344). Coding of data was guided by grounded theory's emphasis on comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). The analysis of the findings was peer-reviewed by two experts in order to enhance trustworthiness.

### Ethical issues

The permission to carry out the study was obtained from the relevant authorities, including the Faculty of Humanities and Teacher Education at the host university, and the local education authority. Permission was also obtained from the Police Department after the usual background checks that are routinely conducted on all researchers entering the space of any designated vulnerable group. Permission was also sought from the head teacher of the primary school where the study took place, as well as from the participating parents. All the processes of the research were explained to the participants, and all the parent participants willingly signed the consent form.

### Summary of key findings

Although this study took place in a school located in the Greater London area in the United Kingdom, it contains important findings and suggestions for schools, which transcend the shores of the United Kingdom. One finding of this study, which is consistent with the findings of earlier research (see, for example, Eyal, 2008; Dor, 2012; Sheng, 2012), is that the majority of the participants (25 parents), felt very involved in the schooling of their children. The results of the study show that parents care about, and want to get involved in their children's education. The findings of the study further reveal that 22 of the parents expressed a desire to be more involved in their child's education at school. When asked about the nature of their responsibility towards the school, 18 of the parents noted that both the home and the teachers should have equal responsibility regarding the education of the child.

On the issue of government's demand that schools must develop strategies to involve parents in the schooling of their children, results showed that most parents do not always know how to get involved. Most of the participants indicated that the policy document was not explicit on how schools should encourage parents to participate in school matters. Regarding their opinion about the particular school where the study took place, some of the participants mentioned that there were occasions when they had to put up with feelings of intimidation, as well as a sense of not being valued by the school. A situation in which parents feel unwelcome, a feeling of not being valued, or intimidated by the school authorities, could constitute serious constraints to the manner in which parents may want to involve

themselves in their children's education. For instance, in their study of three Eastern Cape primary schools, the findings of Felix et al. (2008:108) corroborate the UK study, especially when they argue that the "this issue of undervaluing parents can be seen in the way that the teachers refer to the parents at these schools", resulting in most of the parents opting to stay away.

It has been argued that parents who lack the type of cultural capital predominantly associated with school practices and activities would surely experience barriers, where participatory apathy becomes a function of dissonance between such parents' cumulative cultural capital disadvantage and those of the school. Such barriers, according to Georgiou (2007:60), are therefore "related to the socio-economic status and the educational level of the particular parent". What is more, discussing the barriers to parents' involvement in the educational life of their children without suggesting the strategies that would ensure effective parental involvement may not be enough.

Regarding the question on what strategies would be suggested to ensure that parents are effectively involved in their children's schooling, participants made a number of suggestions. It would appear, as evidence from the interviews with participants seemed to suggest, that Anelka had no friendly school-parent welcoming policy in place. Empirical evidence from the study of Anelka, suggests a lack of a comprehensive policy model for parental involvement in the school. The remainder of this paper articulates various views of participants by looking at some of the ways that may encourage a level of effective and purposeful involvement of parents in the education of their children.

#### Some strategies to encourage greater parental involvement

The situation at Anelka may not be unique. For instance, various literature discussed in this paper suggests that, in terms of parental involvement or the existence of any model for such, many schools in England as well as in South Africa, are found wanting (CCSSO, 2006; Eyal, 2008; Feinstein & Symons, 1999; Felix et al., 2008; Mncube, 2010; Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013). Interview data suggest that participants thought that the following strategies would help strengthen and ensure the effective involvement in the schooling of their children:

#### *A national policy on parent involvement*

To state in some education laws (as is the case in England) that any parent whose child fails to attend school, will be prosecuted (Taylor & Saunders, 1976), without ensuring in what ways such schools must encourage parents to be involved, is not enough. This article notes with concern, that in spite of the drawbacks of this legislation in England, no such legislation holding parents accountable for their children's education currently exists within the South African context. Laura, one of the parents whose children attended Anelka, expressed her views on the deficiency of the national policy on parental involvement in England. She noted that "with the national policy, I believe there is little influence for parental involvement." Laura's concerns call for a more structured guideline on effective parental involvement in schools to direct parents who may wish to help in their children's learning activities. Such an approach would ensure that school heads are mandated, as suggested in the CCSSO (2006:11) document, to "committing explicitly to parent involvement with a written policy and leadership from the principal". Such commitment can only be strengthened if parents themselves feel their family's interests are clearly accentuated within such policy framework; and where the

National Education Policy is equally explicit on what school principals, teachers, as well as parents, should be doing both within and outside the schools about the children's learning. Most importantly, such policy must distinguish between school governance as a parameter for effective school functioning, and effective home-school partnerships as synergic to the overall success of the child's education.

It has been noted that one correlate of parental involvement is the amount of cultural capital available to the parent, and the degree of congruence between the parent's habitus and that of the school. In line with this argument, national policies on education, be it for England (where this study took place), South Africa, or elsewhere, must be explicit on how to even out such differential cultural capital in order to encourage every parent's involvement. Bourdieu (1986) noted the implications for parent involvement of such unequal possession of cultural dispositions by various parents within the school. Thus, as "different levels of parent involvement may reflect differences in parents' habitus for educational involvement" (Lee & Bowen, 2006: 199), it behoves schools to develop different strategies to ensure the involvement of different categories of parents. Suggestions that may assist the schools include: initiating training programmes for parents in need; official recognition of the different languages within the school where interpreters may be necessary in order to draw every parent in; sending newsletters (possibly in the languages of the school) to parents as often as the resources of each school would allow; and avoiding any form of discriminatory practices capable of discouraging disadvantaged parents.

#### *Parents' involvement in curriculum matters*

Involving parents in curriculum matters may be as effective as putting a comprehensive national policy on parental involvement in place. This sort of involvement is capable of strengthening the home-school relationship. Evidence from Anelka appeared to suggest that parents were not officially involved in any curriculum matters. It is either that most of the parents were not aware of what involvement in curriculum matters entailed, or the school staff did not think parents were in any position to get involved with the planning, implementation or evaluation of their children's learning programmes. To ensure that parents are encouraged to take part in curriculum matters, schools must invite parents at the beginning of each academic year or term to take an interest. This would allow school officials to get background information about the child, while giving parents the opportunity to become involved in the placement of their child in a particular class, form or grade. It is thought that when parents are aware, they could be influential during the placement of their child in school, and they would be motivated to monitor the very early stage of their child's preschool activities. This has the potential of arousing parents' interest since they are assured that the school would count on their experiences.

Although Anelka had a policy of sending the scheme of work for the term or syllabus to every parent at the beginning of each term, no empirical evidence emerged from the interview data to suggest that parents ever sent any feedback to the school; or, if they did, whether such feedback was utilised by the management of Anelka. Notwithstanding, such practice is commendable insofar as it was aimed at informing the parents about what their children would be learning during the following term, and also at soliciting their support in those areas where they might be able to contribute. One outcome of such a practice is that when parents feel they are being treated as partners by the school, they are drawn more closely to the school.

### Parents' evenings

Parents' evenings are occasions when both parents and teachers have the opportunity to learn about the school, as well as the home background. It is a time when schools reassure parents that they know their children best, and their knowledge is therefore very important to the school. Parents' evenings are usually the best moments for teachers to communicate with parents about their children, and solicit their support in motivating and educating those children. Although parents' evenings may offer valuable insights to both parties, the manner in which such evenings were organised at Anelka appeared to devalue its potency. Parents' evenings at Anelka were very formal affairs, and parents were expected to make appointments to see their children's teachers during the evening. These appointments usually lasted about 4 to 5 minutes, and during a particular evening, a parent was expected to see about nine teachers, including the principal.

Notwithstanding the above limitations, parents' evenings still offer great potential for healthy home-school relations, and for motivating effective parental involvement. One challenge to involvement in parents' evenings is a lack of time on the part of the parents (Levine-Rasky, 2009). For this reason, schools may be required to involve parents early when planning and scheduling such an evening. One way to do this is to send a questionnaire to parents seeking their opinion on the timing of the meetings, and then working out times suitable to the invited parents. It is inadvisable to organise parents' evenings as once-off events during an academic year because doing so may tend to complicate issues, which should have been dealt with at an earlier stage. When receiving parents during such evening events, it may help to make parents feel more comfortable if teachers can avoid being too formal. This often leads to a situation in which parents may begin to feel "...that the main effect, and possibly purpose, of this conjuncture is to recruit homes to do outreach work for schools, or even to smuggle school culture into the home" (Maclure & Walker, 2000:22). Teachers should try to be as informal as possible without losing focus during such evenings, in order to keep parents from feeling intimidated. At all costs, parents should not feel that they have come 'back to school', to be lectured and disciplined.

Bubb (2004) suggests that teachers must first 'know' the nature of the audience, which is their pupils' parents. Knowing, in this case, involves understanding the fact that every parent wants the best for his or her child, from the school. Teachers must endeavour to get parents on their side or else the work becomes much harder to accomplish. Teachers should anticipate conflict during such evenings and avoid pretending it does not exist, or does not matter. Planning parents' evenings ahead of time so that some flexibility has been built in, but maintaining discipline about the time schedule during the event, makes the work much easier.

### School childcare policy for nursing mothers

It will be recalled that, as noted in the methodology section, 22 of the participants were women in the age bracket between 29 and 44 years. Although data were not obtained about who was a recent or nursing mother, it is highly probable that some of the participants might have been so, since issues of childcare were raised by some of them. Lack of childcare has been reported by earlier studies as a serious impediment to parental involvement in school. Georgiou (2007), and Låftman (2008) report that women are more likely than men to mention lack of childcare as the cause of their non-involvement in their child's school.

Furthermore, Collins and Wickham (2001) and Dombrovsky (2004) implicate recent configurations of contemporary families, where single mothers are twice as likely as mothers from the more traditional nuclear arrangement of two-parent families, to mention lack of childcare as an impediment to involvement. Sheng (2012:135) also notes that "it is clear that mothers are nearly always the ones who are involved in their children's school learning activities". Given the fact that some of these mothers may well be involved in child-bearing and caring for children in the home, as well as having jobs outside the home, an institutionalised childcare policy is critical in order to encourage such categories of parents to get involved in the affairs of their children's schooling. Schools need to develop appropriate childcare policies that would ensure that the needs of all parents will be taken care of while they attend school activities and events.

### Home visits

Home visits are a very effective way of establishing good home-school relations as they offer valuable opportunities for both parents and teachers to get closer in dealing with the child's academic and other learning needs and/or difficulties. According to Helen, through a home visit, she was able to relate to the teacher problems which she would not have been comfortable with divulging to anyone else. Through home visits, teachers can establish a deeper understanding and healthy relationship not only with the parents of the child, but also with every member of a particular family. The benefits of home visiting could therefore be as rewarding to the teacher's experience as the formal training he or she has received. The author himself recalls his own primary school days when his teachers used to visit his parents. It was always a special evening for both, and possibly more especially for the teacher; there was always a dinner, and then a follow-up discussion session during which their son's academic performance and other school activities would form major topics. It was very informative and helpful to both parties. Researchers recognise the importance of home visits in the establishment of effective home-school relations. For instance, Wolfendale (1992:74) sees home visiting "as a viable means of promoting home-school links". As Proctor (1990) rightly observes, home visits should not only be meant for children with problems, but for every child in the school.

### Parent-teacher games

Games and sports are inherently uniting. Organised sporting activities between the staff and parents of a particular school can help improve relations amongst them. This could be in the form of novelty match or competition. Again, the author recalls his primary school days when he witnessed such competitions amongst the staff and parents at his school. Such events which usually took place once every term were those that parents always looked forward to. Some parents brought food sharing this among themselves and the staff, and at the end of various competitions, prizes were awarded to those who had excelled. It was a very happy occasion which both parents and teachers enjoyed. Updated and organised in a more up-to-date way, and held at times most convenient for parents, parent-teacher games could help promote unity and the cooperation necessary for effective and friendly home-school relations. However, in organising such games, both school officials and parents must jointly work out the appropriate time of the year in order for such events to be hitch-free.

### School debates and speech days

School debates and speech days can help establish effective home–school relations. Interesting and current topics for debate amongst pupils could attract their parents to school if they are informed in time, and when organised at times when parents may be less busy. Personal experience has shown that parents cherish moments when they see their children exhibit mastery of skills and knowledge in a particular area of learning. In fact, such moments give parents great joy when they see that their children can engage in school academic exercise. This can bolster the interest of parents towards the activities of the school and, in the process, they too can be drawn closer to the school. The same thing goes for speech days. If parents who have an interest in their children's studies are informed in advance of a speech day in which their child will be taking part, they would want to be there and to be part of it. By getting interested in activities organised by the school, parents could be fully involved in other school matters. There is also the aspect of a speech day where interesting or distinguished speakers may be invited to the school to address the school on some important topic that may also be relevant to effective home–school partnerships.

### Parent–teacher associations

Parent–teacher associations can help strengthen good home–school relations. Although at the time of the study the PTA was active at Anelka in matters of fundraising and renovation of the school buildings, some of the participants wanted improved PTA programmes, especially with regard to the timing of the PTA meetings. Deidre commented during the interview that the PTA was active in her child's school and she thought the association was useful because it helped both the parents and teachers know themselves and become closer. But she was not able to attend all PTA meetings because sometimes she was busy at work and sometimes meetings were fixed at times not suitable for her family. It is important to note that Deidre was not alone in the complaint about the dissonance between parents' tight domestic or work schedules, and the demands of PTA meetings. Most of the participants interviewed during the study also complained that sometimes the timing of meetings usually clashed with their own personal engagements.

The PTA by its composition is a forum for teachers and parents to meet and engage in social and perhaps also fundraising activities (Wolfendale, 1992). Whereas the PTA is necessarily non-political on one hand, SGBs and school management teams (SMTs) are school-based structures that have been created through legislation. The PTA is more a social conglomerate of parents of pupils attending a particular school than a political or legislative board. [0]It is argued that the PTA, being non-partisan with no managerial responsibilities, unlike the SGBs and SMTs, offers a conducive, environment within and outside the school for a home–school synergy.

One ideal way of engaging parents in the timing of PTA meetings is to send a provisional programme and availability questionnaire to them through their children. Such questionnaires would establish those times of the day and week most convenient for parents to attend meetings, so that the PTA organisers can schedule meetings at the best possible time for everyone. Another way to attract parents to attend PTA meetings is to engage them in writing the agenda for the meetings. The author's experience as a classroom teacher for over two decades has shown that individuals who participate in writing meeting agendas are usually certain to attend as they have a

vested interest in the deliberations during such meetings. This suggestion is made in the spirit that anything that positively attracts parents to their child's school is worth considering seriously.

### Conclusion

This paper argues that to effectively involve parents in the affairs of the school, as well as in their children's education, certain strategies must be promoted and popularised within the school community. Strategies for involvement are effective when parents themselves are aware of such strategies. Certain realities need to be faced and worked through, however, such as factors of time, confidence, interest and usefulness, in order to maximally involve parents. Parents need to understand all aspects of involvement which are available within their child's school in order to become fully engaged. Opportunities should be given to the parents for orientation or training sessions to acquaint them with the most effective strategies for ensuring home–school relations. Noting that teachers, usually by virtue of their own training, are better equipped to understand parent–school partnerships, it is suggested that those who lack this training should undertake appropriate in-service courses to update their knowledge on effective approaches to good home–school relations.

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