THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN STRENTHENING PARENT-TEACHER
RELATIONSHIPS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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DECLARATION

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I hereby declare the dissertation titled **THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN STRENGTHENING PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL** as my own work. I also declare that all references used or quoted are acknowledged in full

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TO GOD THE GLORY

My thanks go to the following people:

ABSTRACT

Parent involvement is consistently ranked high among the key components of effective schools, and as a result is one of the brightest prospects for the future of public education. This study sought to develop a reliable measure to strengthen parent-teacher relationships that included previously unidentified aspects. Using a qualitative approach, 27 participants were purposely selected to be interviewed in order to determine the challenges stakeholders face in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships. In addition to parents-teacher relationships, the goal was to determine the role of school principals in managing effective communication to strengthen these relationships between parents and teachers.

Results identified numerous reliable parent involvement factors reflecting home monitoring, effective school involvement, and educational management. Attitude toward learning and competence motivation of learners learning behavior were positively identified when all stakeholders work together as a team.

Education management that translates high expectations strengthens parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development.

Key terms:

Parent involvement; Effective communication; School principal; Educational management; Relationships; Benefits; Qualities; Primary schools; Challenges; Expectations; Motivation; Attitude toward learning.

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1   INTRODUCTION

Human development on account of learning processes results from multiple inputs and comprises an interactive and renewing process that is influenced by all stakeholders of the community (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2003:13). The impact of parents' and families' nurturing of healthy and productive ways of living in their children is therefore realized by means of various stakeholder structures that is contingent on mutually strong and nurturing relationships (Barbour, Barbour & Scully, 2005:154).

Owing to constant changes in the external environment that initiate changes to occur in schools, educators and parents must create diverse and adaptive ways to support each other (Fields, 1987:75, McClure, 2009:7). Such an empowerment approach is based on the understanding that parents are responsible for the child's lifelong learning and well-being. It is further based on the advocation and structuring of schools to be places in which parents, children, and teachers renew and enrich their lives, thus empowering and capacitating each other to increased efficiency (Marsh, Mayfield, McFadden & Prince, 2001:15).

Parent involvement in education thrives at schools where an open door policy is practised that is based on effective communication. In both written and personal communication, parents should be convinced that they are welcome at the school and that their active involvement as primary partners in their children's education is important to the school and to the optimal development of their children's potential (Payne, 2006:23).

Saracho and Spodek (2001:23) pointed out that the ultimate goal of active parent involvement is enhancing the family's ability to respond to its children. This goal of capacitating parents to assist their children optimally is as vital today as it was then and

it is therefore important to establish effective communication in primary schools to strengthen parent–teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

1.2   BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.2.1   Communication and the management of parent–teacher relationships

People communicate both directly and indirectly. Direct communication is intentional and includes what is chosen to be said, written and done. In addition to direct communication, interaction also occurs by means of indirect and unintentional communication pertaining to body language in the form of facial expressions, body placement and speech patterns (Bender, 2005:3). Direct and indirect communication that is controlled can make a difference in managing interactions in that problems can be solved with a greater degree of control.

At schools, communication with learners is carried out in a diverse number of ways. While much of the communication with learners is about imparting essential knowledge, it is also important that all communication with learners should have an element of motivation in that it should serve to motivate learners to explore further (Chrisman & Couchenour, 2004:42).

The best way to avoid misunderstanding between parents and teachers is to have regular, clear, established lines of communication. The more informed and involved parents are with what is going on in the classroom, the more they feel a part of the classroom team (Bender, 2005:4). Informed parents who feel included on a regular basis are more likely to be supportive and understanding and less likely to jump to negative conclusions. Indirect communication is mostly the result of habit, personality traits, and social customs that are unintentional and require a concerted effort to control (Fuller, 1999:56; Chrisman & Couchenour, 2004:13). Therefore, by mastering and employing the fine art of communication, many benefits are provided and gained in that

anxiety and stress are reduced, confidence is increased and clear and constructive and proactive understanding is arranged (Mariconda, 2003:132).

The greatest beneficiary of the rewards of a positive parent-teacher partnership is the child. When parents and teachers work together in the best interests of the child, an environment is created with optimal potential for learner development (Fuller, 1999:67).

1.2.2   Factors influencing the management of parent-teacher relationships

There may be a tendency to treat learners according to presupposed categories at school, that is, according to ethnicity and the social status of the family. To counteract these tendencies and to manage these relationships humanely, teachers should approach parents and learners as individuals with different needs and expectations (Bender, 2005:143).

Often children with emotional, behavioural, and educational needs as well as poor children, have extreme problems at home such as alcoholism in the family, uncaring parents or families that do not properly function according to accepted social norms that interfere with schoolwork and achievement. Seeing that the school must insist on achievement and maximal effort, efforts should be made to assist such families and learners to overcome obstacles (Popkin, 2002:15). Many divorced parents and parents of lower socioeconomic status for example feel uncomfortable in social settings at school. Schools should encourage participation by tailoring programs to meet the needs of single parents and culturally diverse parents.

Schools are obligated to provide families with assistance and ideas about what to do at home to support their children and identify issues and challenges to strengthen effective parent involvement. Homework assignments can for instance be structured in such a way that they intentionally involve parents (Mariconda, 2003:6), all for the sake of promoting the importance of parents and motivating them as primary educators of their children to meet their obligations in assisting with the development of their children.

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While teachers may be well prepared to work with children and types of subject matter, they are not always prepared to work effectively with parents. It is imperative, however, that schools provide parents with information about parental rights and information to help parents make informed decisions about their children's learning (Cook, Tessier & Klein, 1996:34).

1.2.3 The role of the school principal as effective communicator in the management of parent-teacher relationships

With regard to effective leadership necessary for the 21st Century, which also applies to the school principal as leader, Evertson and Weinstein (2006:16) determined the qualities that the school principal must possess in order to be a successful manager. Apart from acquiring professional skills such as obtaining a high level of knowledge and expertise in management and maintaining the focus on the real purpose of the organization, school principals as leaders also need to have the qualities of caring for people and setting a personal example for subordinates. They need to have a belief in the competence and professionalism of their staff and a moral and ethical base for leadership judgement. Communication is an important management and leadership skill and is determined as a pertinent quality pertaining to organizational success (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006:46). There is thus an increasing emphasis in the leadership literature on the importance of interpersonal communication skills. Effective communication includes not only the delivery of messages but also the fostering of listening skills. The fact that most people can hear perfectly adequately but only a minority can actually listen in the sense of genuinely attending (Bender, 2005:46), points to the importance of acquiring active listening skills for effective communication. Active listening is about sensitivity to others' feelings and perceptions, and it is a total involvement in the communication process. Understanding can only be obtained when active listening is applied.

Popkin (2002:13) believes that the school principal's leadership skill of communication is a two-way process that involves the skill of conveying messages successfully and the skill of active listening. Within such conducive conditions for genuine communication, all stakeholders become aware of where they fit into the school as a team and how they contribute to that team.

The skill of 'facilitating' important messages via effective communication within the team enables all members to perform at their peak level in the pursuit of a common vision and mission of excellence in teaching and learning. This idea of Popkin (2002:39) resulted in a shift from a management style based on control and aggression to one centred upon caring and connection which is made possible through communication as a two-way process.

1.2.4 Benefits of constructive parent-teacher relationships and the effect thereof on learners

Mutual respect and professionalism are the keys to constructive parent-teacher relationships (Fields,1987:32 , McClure, 2009:7) and therefore learners achieve better grades and show higher aspirations and motivation towards school (Olsen & Fuller, 2008: 129). This positive attitude about school results in improved behaviour at home and in school. Educational success depends on learner's self-perception, their desire to learn and the ability of parents and teachers to engage them in a way that recognizes their needs, interests and motivates them to bridge the gap between the culture at home and the culture at school (Fields, 1987:32, McClure, 2009:8).

1.3 RATIONALE FOR STUDY

The need for parent involvement in the optimal development of the child is a topic in education on which there is overwhelming consensus (Epstein, 2009:1). Teachers and school principals want to know how to work with parents in positive ways and how to involve the parents to increase learner success.

Parents on the other hand want to know if schools are providing high-quality education, they want to be empowered on how to help their children do their best, and they want to be informed on how to connect and communicate with teachers and school principals. Learners want to succeed at school. They know they need guidance, support and encouragement from parents, teachers, and other members of the community (Epstein, 2009:67).

Teaching at primary schools in the United States of America, the researcher observed that effective communication is needed for the successful management of parent-teacher relationships. What struck her most was the negative attitude of unsecured learners stemming from the negative perceptions of uninformed parents. This was exacerbated by language barriers in that English was the only medium of communication at schools. For parents who were not mother tongue speakers, the only communication from the school was what they received via translations from the children. This resulted in much confusion with sometimes disastrous consequences.

It became clear to the researcher that it is important to investigate the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of effective communication for successful parent-teacher relationships in order to provide learners with sufficient opportunities for optimal development. The researcher will therefore focus on the management of two-way communication in the primary school to enhance parent–teacher relationships for successful learner development.

A first focus entails constructive communication methods that enhance parent–teacher relationships and that ensure an 'open door' environment for optimal learner development.

A second focus is on the role of the school principal communicating actions and plans as the school's senior manager and his/her ability to establish a positive and constructive environment for all. This entails a focus on the principal's management skills to communicate with teachers and parents, creating a mutual awareness of

expectations regarding learner development. A third focus comprises the quantifiable outcomes for learners on account of a constructive parent–teacher relationship.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

New strategies are needed to organize effective communication in school programs (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006:20). Bender (2005:13) emphasizes that to modify behaviour to fit a setting and situation, one also modifies the way one communicates in order to achieve the intended outcomes. This implies that positive and effective parent-teacher communication results in positive behaviour that has substantial benefits for learners, parents, teachers and the school.

Communicating the 'how' and 'what' of learning activities increase school-to home and home-to-school exchanges about learners' progress. Exchanges through notes, memos, conferences, report cards, newsletters, phone, e-mail, and other traditional and innovative communication increase positive communication between home and school (Epstein, 2009:75). The best way to avoid misunderstanding between parents and teachers is to have regular, clear and established lines of communication to ensure constructive parent- teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development.

A main research question flowing from this comprises the following:

- How can effective communication in primary schools strengthen parent–teacher relationships to ensure optimal learner development?

In order to solve this problem, the main research question is divided into four sub-questions that are investigated first so that the solution to these sub-questions can contribute to the solution of the main research question.

The following sub-questions are deducted from the main research question:

- How do learners benefit from constructive parent–teacher relationships?
- What are the main challenges facing teachers in arranging constructive parent–teacher relationships?
- What are the main challenges facing parents to become involved in the education of their children?
- How can school principals manage effective communication to strengthen parent–teacher relationships?

1.5   AIMS OF STUDY

To strengthen the communication between the home and school in pursuit of optimal learner development opportunities to participate should be provided to all stakeholders (Fields, 1987:12, McClure, 2009:7). For that reason, investigation into the effective communication in primary schools to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development, is a meaningful study. The aims of the study are thus as follows:

- To determine how learners benefit from constructive parent-teacher relationships.
- To determine the main challenges teachers face in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships.
- To determine the main challenges parents face to become involved in the education of their children.
- To elicit the role of school principals in managing effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships.
- To provide guidelines on effective communication to strengthen parent- teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To find answers on how to strengthen parent–teacher relationships for optimal learner development through effective communication, both a literature study and an empirical investigation were conducted.

1.6.1 Literature study

The literature study served as a basis for conducting a context specific empirical investigation. By determining the value of strengthening parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development, the literature study revealed what is already known on how principals, teachers, parents and learners manage to communicate with one another in order to establish strong partnership relationships that increase the potential for optimal learning.

1.6.2 Empirical investigation

In order to understand the challenges and impact of effective parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development and the means by which that can be arranged through effective communication, a qualitative approach was employed as the best option for the optimal collection of relevant data. A qualitative research approach was chosen because the researcher wanted to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon of effective parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development (McMillam & Schumacher, 1993:372, McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:214).

1.6.2.1 Selection of sites and participants

Four primary schools from the Ocean View School District in Huntington Beach California were selected as research sites. These schools were selected on the basis that they were accessible to the researcher, thus typifying the sampling procedure as convenient (Leedy, 1997:219). The participants were purposefully selected which

related to the selection of participants for a particular purpose, namely to gain a deep understanding on the 'how' and 'what' of the effect of effective parent-teacher relationships due to effective communication on optimal learner development.

For the purpose of this study, purposeful selection therefore concerned an involvement in active communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development. Participants meeting this criterion were the four principals of the selected Californian schools because of their involvement in the management of effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships. Eight teachers, two per school, were selected as participants. They were in charge of organizing and coordinating communication on a daily basis with parents regarding the learning and school work activities of their children. Eight parents, two from each school, who were active participants in school communication programs and who actively participated in strengthening parent-teacher relationships on a daily basis, were selected as participants. Seven learners, one from each grade, who daily participated in home-to-school and school-to-home communication and who represented good examples of how learning is enhanced by functional parent-teacher communication, were also selected as participants. A total of 27 participants took part in the empirical investigation.

1.6.2.2 Data Collection

The researcher used focus group interviewing and individual interviewing to collect data in order to find answers to the postulated research questions.

Focus group interviewing

Focus group interviews are essentially vocal questioners in that the major steps as in justification, defining objectives, writing questions, deciding general and item format, and presenting are the same as preparing a questionnaire (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:201). The obvious difference is that the focus group interviews are direct interactions and were therefore conducted as they provided the opportunity for the

researcher to obtain general background information about effective parent-teacher communication in primary schools to strengthen parent-teacher relationships. Data collected from the focus group interviews stimulated new ideas and provided creative concepts on the solving of problems with parent-teacher communications which the researcher would not have been able to have obtained with the same efficiency if another data collecting instrument were employed (Mcmillan & Schumacher, 2010:202).

Focus group interviewing was conducted with the selected teachers, parents and learner participants. In that regard three focus group interviews were conducted. A focus group interview was conducted with the eight teachers from the four selected primary schools to determine the main challenges and constructive techniques that teachers employ to arrange for effective parent-teacher relationships. A second focus group interview was conducted with the eight parents of the selected primary schools to determine their main challenges and successful arrangements of dynamic involvement in the education of their children on account of active parent-teacher relationships. The third focus group interview was conducted with the learner participants of the selected primary schools to determine to what extent they benefitted from active parent-teacher relationships.

Further advantages of focus group interviewing related to the fact that it was possible to conduct them within a relatively short period of time. Financial costs were limited, considerable probing was permitted and participants were exposed to each other's perceptions and opinions. Group interaction was facilitated that enhanced quality data. As a flexible technique unanticipated issues were explored which allowed for participants to build on the responses from others, with the effect of gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000:288).

Individual interviewing

The individual interview technique is used to gather qualitative and in-depth information of those individuals specifically affected by a particular programme or project, its

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context, implementation, results and impact (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008:23). The researcher used semi-structured individual interviews as a data collection instrument to interview the four school principals from the respective research sites. The participant principals were individually interviewed in order to determine how they manage effective communication and what their opinions are with regard to the challenges and benefits of communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships. With the permission of the Ocean View School District, the principals were interviewed at their schools according to their own time schedules. Four individual interviews were therefore conducted.

1.6.2.3 Data analysis

Data analysis involves an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns in order to interpret meaning and construct relevant answers to postulated research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:364).   Different approaches may be followed with regard to data analysis. In this study, Tesch's approach (in De Vos, 2005:361) and the Strauss and Corbin (1998:101) approach for data analysis and data interpretation was used. An analysis and interpretation of the findings took place during and after the process of data collection. A report on research findings was done via a predominant focus on applicably referring to verbatim expressions from the interviews to ensure an authentic reporting on all perspectives and issues that arose from the data collected via interviewing (Tesch,1990:2).

According to the data analysis and data interpretation approach of Strauss and Corbin, the first step required the open coding of transcribed data so that each interview was read and re-read to ensure an overview of as much contextual data as possible so as to determine an inductive selection of codes at sentence level. The second step represented an axial coding of the related codes into categories, and the inductive naming of these categories by using the data as a guideline for labelling purposes.

1.6.2.4 Trustworthiness and transferability

Transferability as the possibility of interpreting data into other contexts (Neuman, 2006:43) is considered against the fact that observations are defined by the specific contexts in which they occur, which with this study was the context of the selected four primary schools in the Ocean View School District, Huntington Beach, California. Relevant to a qualitatively research approach is the fact that research is conducted in a context where each situation is unique. Findings on a specific problem from a particular research phenomenon or experience can therefore be described in full detail for a deep understanding of the manifestation of the investigated phenomenon within context without the possibility of generalization to other situations (Krefting,1991:216).

The researcher selected trustworthy evidence for findings by qualitatively assessing solicited data versus unsolicited data, acknowledging subtle influences among the focus groups, confirming accuracy of the sources and distinguishing between the relevant and vague statements (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:348). This was enhanced by the researcher's general openness for data collection and for the openness to the possibility of different meanings attached to the same reality.

1.6.2.5 Ethical measures

Ethics provide guidelines for planning and conducting research in such a way as to protect the rights and welfare of the participants involved in the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006;133). In this regard, the researcher was at all times responsible for an adherence to ethical standards and participants were informed about all aspects of the research that might have influenced their willingness to participate.

The researcher achieved informed consent by providing participants with an explanation of the research, an opportunity to terminate their participation at any time with no penalty, and full disclosure of any risks associated with the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:134).

Written consent was obtained by asking participants to sign a form that indicated their understanding of the research and their consent to participate; however, with the understanding that they were at no stage being coerced into participating. Participants were ensured that information obtained about and from them was treated as confidential unless otherwise agreed upon, in advance, through informed consent (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:134).

The researcher was as open and honest with the participants as possible and the participants were clearly informed about the reasons for undertaking the research and the aims of the study (Strydom, 2005b:58). This ensured that full cooperation was obtained from all the participants.

1.7   CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

The most important concepts related to this research and which need to be defined and explained are as follows:

1.7.1   Parent involvement

Parent involvement is the willing participation of parents and family members in regular, two-way meaningful communication involving learners' learning and school activities (Crozier, 2000:29). These activities can take place in or outside the school, with the intention of improving children's learning. Parent involvement at home can include activities such as helping with homework or taking part in constructive discussions about school. Improvement at school may include parents volunteering to assist the teacher in the classroom, attending workshops on constructive support with their children's learning and assisting with and attending sporting events (Fine, 2005:683).

1.7.2   Communication

Communication can be viewed as a symbolic and transactional process through which we create and share meanings (Fields,1987:43, McClure, 2009:26). With this study, communication is understood as a process involving the exchange of information that can simultaneously influence and is influenced by the communication of others with the objective of strengthening parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

1.7.3   School Principal

The school principal is the senior manager of the school who has executive and accountable authority over the school (Benjamin,1996:9). The principal's duties with regard to this study, include the welfare of each individual learner, and the welfare of the school in creating an effective communication environment consisting of constructive parent-teacher relationships ensuring optimal learner development.

1.7.4   Management

Management is broadly defined as the attainment of organizational goals in an effective and efficient manner through planning, organizing, leading and controlling organizational resources (Smith, Cronje, Brevis & Vrba, 2007:9). The management of the communication programs in primary schools requires a dedicated application of all these managerial skills to ensure a productive process (Fuller,1999:11).

1.8   PROGRAMME OF STUDY

The study is divided into six chapters:

Chapter one

Chapter one comprises a general orientation of the research. This includes the introduction to the research and a reflection on the background to and the motivation for the study. The statement of the study, the aims and objectives with the research and an explanation of the research design are matters that are addressed in this chapter.

Chapter two

Chapter two is devoted to a literature review on the value placed on parent involvement in primary schools and the importance of strengthening parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development.

Chapter three

Chapter three is devoted to a literature review on the value of effective communication in the strengthening of parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development. The focus is on how this is achieved in the primary school environment and what the role of the principal is in managing such communication.

Chapter four

Chapter four is devoted to a discussion of the research design and research methodology employed to collect data in the empirical investigation. Matters that are discussed include: data collection techniques, the sample of the study and the procedure followed to analyse and interpret the collected data in order to find answers to the research question.

Chapter five

Data collected are reported on in this chapter. This includes the presentation of the empirical research findings that were made by means of scientific analysis of the collected data and an interpretation and evaluation of the analysed data.

Chapter six

Interpretations of the literature findings and the findings from the empirical investigation are dealt with in Chapter 6. These are reflected in conclusions that are drawn, guidelines that are developed and recommendations that are made with the aim of contributing to an improvement of the practice of strong parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

1.9   CONCLUSION

There are many reasons for developing constructive parent-teacher relationships. Effective parent-teacher relationships improve the efficiency of school programs and the health of school climate. It provides for family services and family support and it empowers parents by increasing parents' skills and leadership potential. Strong parent-teacher relationships connect families with others in the school and in the community and help teachers with the improvement of learners' achievement.

When parents, teachers, learners and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around learners with a rippling effect on the well-being of the broader community (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:9). Effective communication as a vital factor to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development results in a school climate that is conducive to all stakeholders: parents learn the strategies to help their children to be more successful; learners become more positive towards school work and teachers experience the satisfaction of improved learner achievement.

CHAPTER 2

THE VALUE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF STRENGTHENING PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS FOR OPTIMAL LEARNER DEVELOPMENT

2.1   INTRODUCTION

Although homes and schools ideally play complementary and mutually reinforcing roles in learners' education, major differences that exist between the two institutions in their goals and circumstances in which they pursue those goals, give rise to difficulties for some learners in that the characteristics developed at home do not support school learning (Deplanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007:17). The strengthening of parent-teacher relationships not only contributes to a closer aligning of home and school goals, but provides the social, cultural and emotional support for optimal learner development in primary schools. A positive home and school environment fosters healthy development in learners. Without healthy connections, learners face mental and behavioural problems in primary school which can continue for the remainder of their lives (Hill, 2001:25).

2.2   PARENT INVOLVEMENT

2.2.1   Definition

Parent involvement in primary school encompasses a wide variety of parent behaviour patterns and practices, and cannot be defined by one specific feature. Parent involvement is defined by the United States Department of Education as the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving their children's academic learning and other school activities including assisting in their children's learning and being actively involved in their children's education at school (West & Peterson, 2003:24). Parent involvement in primary school is multidimensional

and can include parent aspirations, expectations, interests, attitudes and beliefs regarding education, as well as parent participation in school activities at school and at home (Hong & Ho, 2005: 41).

2.2.2　Four types of parent involvement

In their study on parent involvement, Vandergrift and Greene (1992:58-59) identified four categories to explain parent involvement with regard to the support/participation they present in the learning of their children: parents who are committed to their children but do not participate, those who participate but are not necessarily supportive, parents that supports and participate, and parents who neither support nor participate in their child's education. In rethinking parent involvement, primary schools might better evaluate the degree of involvement by separating the notions of support and participation of the four basic types of parents in order to understand the level of commitment and active participation. Both support and participation fall along a continuum of involvement.

Table 2.1 Four types of parents (Vandergrift and Greene, 1992:58)

+ Supportive of child (for example, often encourages) + Active participation (for example, helps child with homework)	- Not supportive of child (for example, ignores child) + Active participant (for example, comes to school if food is provided, or to gain status)
+ Supportive of child (for example, cares for well-being) - Inactive participant (for example, rarely comes to school activities)	- Not supportive of child (for example, is abusive) - Inactive participant (for example, no communication with school)

Table 2.1 depicts four types of parents that are supportive (+) or active (+) in their child's education as well as the non-supportive (-) and inactive patent (-):

- *Parents who are supportive and willing to participate (+,+)* are likely to attend workshops and conferences, respond to notes and phone calls and get involved in decision-making roles through the governing body and planning teams.

- Even though some parents care deeply about their child's education, they *do not participate in school activities (+,-)*. For them, several kinds of approaches hold promise. Newsletters with suggestions for home activities have proven to be successful, as have school-based activities where they feel safe in numbers and meeting parents on their own turf.

- The most difficult parent to identify is the one who *attends school events, but is not supportive at home (-,+)*. This type of parent may attend a parent-teacher conference only to go home and ignore or mistreat the child.

- *Unsupportive and non-participative parents (-,-)* are the most difficult to reach, but perhaps the most important group on which to focus efforts to improve communication. It is essential to determine the basis for their lack of involvement. In many cases, the reasons stem from the fact that the parents' own problems take precedence over his or her children's education (Vandergrift & Greene, (1992:58).

In this study, the researcher used this model in the focus group interviews to determine the level of parents' support and willingness to participate in their children's education. The model was also used to match the parents' individual needs in order to get answers on how to improve parent support and participation.

2.2.3 Lack of parent involvement

The lack of parent involvement is a prevalent problem among primary schools today. More disturbing is the number of parents who are perceived as unsupportive with regard to their children's needs and wellbeing in primary school and the effect this has on their children's education. These parents may be at risk themselves in that they could be drug addicts, alcoholics, child abusers, or they may simply have bad memories of their own school experiences and denigrate the value of education (Attaway & Bry, 2004:24).

Major factors that influence parents' lack of support and participation in the learning of their children relate to poverty, parents' level of education, as well as cultural differences (Payne, 2006:2).

2.2.3.1 Poverty

According to Attaway and Bry, (2004:14), children raised in poverty are at risk in areas of cognitive development and academic achievement in that the loss of the stimulating and nurturing environment causes physical and emotional stresses. The environment of poverty aids in a child's inability to experience the necessary parent interaction as well as social interactions which promote cognitive development, language development, and social skills (Hill, 2001:54). Economic hardships have been found to cause a hostile living environment and increased negative parent behaviours that transferred to the child and revealed a poor cognition development due to the lack of positive parent instruction and involvement (Attaway & Bry, 2004:15). The majority of parents living in poverty are headed by a single working parent (Culp, Hubbs-Tait, Culp & Starost, 2000:66). In an effort to provide for and meet the basic needs of their families, many parents have two jobs and have little time to interact with their children and be involved in their schooling. The stress of having a low income and/or having multiple jobs can lead to problems in the parent-child relationship as well as parent-teacher relationships with the main reason being the lack of parents' support in home-to-school and school-to-home activities and communication (Attaway & Bry, 2004:15). Research indicates that lower income families are less able to support their children's schooling through supervision and monitoring of their homework, they are less likely to be involved in school activities, and have lower expectations regarding their children's school achievements (Ricciuti, 2004:26). The explanation for the lack of parent involvement in lower income families has been shown to be associated with: economic hardship, time constraints, and parent occupation (Ricciuti, 2004:17). The education level of parents may also be fundamental to understanding the lack of involvement in their children's education.

2.2.3.2 Level of education of parents

Parents are socializing agents (Spera, 2006:12-14) in that children are often influenced by the thoughts and beliefs of their parents. During their child's social and educational development, parents transmit their educational values, goals and aspirations to their child. These values are strong predictors of adolescent school achievement, motivation and interest in school (Hill, 2001:25). Parents who place a high value on education and exhibit high expectations towards their children's grades, ability, and long term educational aspirations, create a home environment conducive to learning and academic success (Seyfried & Chung, 2002:43).

Because children are influenced by the thoughts and beliefs of their parents, the value that parents place on education is transmitted to their children (Constantino, 2007:25). Parents with higher levels of education are more likely to have the same aspirations of continuing education for their children than parents with lower levels of education. Owing to this high importance which educated parents place on receiving a good education, parent educational level is positively correlated to parent involvement (Deplanty, et al., 2007:17). Parents with a higher degree of education are more likely to be active in school activities, school meetings and parent-teacher progress conferences of their children. In general, family income relates to parental education level, therefore lower income parents may have had negative experiences with schools and are unable to provide their children with the skills to negotiate the school system successfully, which has a negative effect on the child's school performance (Hill, 2001:25).

With regard to constructive parent-teacher relationships, it is essential for educators to have an understanding of learners' and parents' income level, education level, and support at home (Constantino, 2007:27). This information will assist teachers in adequately determining the best learning methods for learners and how to strengthen parent-teacher communication for the benefit of optimal learner development. Parent education programs such as workshops for parents on supporting their children at

home, were linked with higher maths and reading scores (Henderson & Mapp, 2002:23).

2.2.3.3 Cultural differences

Culture is the pattern of behaviour and thinking that people living in social groups learn, create, and share. It is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category, to people from another group or category (Hofstede, 1991:5). Hofstede's research on parent involvement suggests that parents from diverse social and cultural backgrounds approach schools with different educational expectations for their children as well as different views on parent involvement in school and at home. Lower social classes and ethnic minority parents seem less involved than middle class parents. Less involved parents are characterized by a more traditional culture in which role-divisions are explicitly defined: parents are responsible for children at home, and teachers are responsible for the children at school. A partnership-view of the parent school relationship is especially apt for middle-class parents, who indeed often see teachers as partners in education.

Sonnenschein, Brody and Munsterman (1996:18) state that teachers need to understand the cultural basis of different child-rearing practices mainly because it builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as academic abstractions and lived socio-cultural realities. Teachers also need to understand that parents' practices may well reflect their explicit or implicit belief about child development which is related to their cultural beliefs. Research to date indicates that parents from different socio-cultural groups have different notions about how their children learn and what they should learn. Researchers and teachers alike must strive to understand these beliefs and practices so that suggestions on parent–involvement can be strengthen to better reflect the diverse strengths and interests of primary school learners for a mutual and universal development to responsible adulthood (Sonnenschein *et. al.*, 1996:19). A mutual understanding of what is implied by responsible adulthood and an acceptance of

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the different cultural related interpretations of actions to reach this final goal with education is required (Multicultural Institute Utrecht, 2001:24).

Research found that educators must create methods by which they address equality and diversity in the classroom to help learners to better understand and respect one another. If at all possible, teachers should build community service into the curriculum (Overstreet, Devine, Bevans & Efreom, 2005:14).

2.4   BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR LEARNER SUCCESS

Research done by Vandergrift and Greene (1992:3) indicates that when a parent provides support, insistence, and expectations to the child, the presence or absence of a parent in the physical school building is immaterial in that the physical presence (involvement) should not be confused with parent engagement. Therefore, training for parents should concentrate on issues such as giving families tools to support their children in teaching them strategies for enhancing learning at home, explaining school policies and expectations, and building mutual, respectful relationships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002:2). One should think of parents not as a single group but as distinct sub-groups pertaining to different categories of distinction that relate to their support of their children, school-home involvement, and personal issues such as addiction or illnesses. According to Payne (2005:2), the following sub-groups can be identified:

- *Career-oriented parents too busy to attend school activities*

It is not always easy for parents to find time to become involved or to coordinate with schedules for school events. Schools need to provide parents with flexible programme scheduling for school events and parent-teacher conferences and help parents create a supportive environment for learners' learning at home.

- *Very involved in school activities*

These parents are at school, volunteering to help, but are over-involved wanting to take on teachers' and principals' roles. Schools need to revisit the boundaries involving learners' privacy. Parents believe that their children's success or failure confirms their own success or failure as a parent. They need to be less of a participant and more of a consultant to their children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002: 7).

- *Single parent having two jobs therefore too busy to attend*

Parents in this sub-group may feel guilty for not being involved even though they care about their children's learning. Schools could use colour-coded paper to send information home with red paper for immediate attention. Evening meetings with teachers provide the opportunity for parents to stay involved and organise their time effectively for quality involvement (Mayer, Kreider & Vaughan, 1999:3).

- *Parents with language issues*

Common barriers of parents with a low proficiency in the language of instruction to being actively involved in their children's education include a lack of formal education and lack of knowledge of the school system. Teachers and principals play important roles in engaging parents and creating a welcoming school environment for families of diverse backgrounds. Schools can make videos translated into the parents' own language explaining the school system, effective ways to talk to teachers, the importance of grades and how they affect learners as well as the importance of homework (Turney & Kao, 2009:259).

- *Parents with overwhelming personal issues such as addiction, illness, incarceration, or evading the law.*

Children of incarcerated parents are at risk of poor school performance, drug use and mental health problems, and are more likely to be exposed to parental substance abuse, extreme poverty, and domestic violence. It is difficult to quantify the number of children with incarcerated parents in that self-reporting by parents has limitations due to fear of involvement in the child welfare system, loss of parental rights, or impeding with the collection of child support (Christian, 2009:12). The best way for schools to make contact with this sub-group is through home visits, when and where possible (Payne, 2006:3).

- *Surrogate parents, foster parents and grandparents.*

This sub-group fulfils the parental role in the education planning and process for learners who are in state care, where parents are not known, or parents are unable to take care of their children because of personal issues. This sub-group often needs emotional support in order to meet the emotional needs of the children. Schools need to assign a mentor – e.g., a counsellor or involved parent – who touches base with these parents once a month (Payne, 2006:4).

- *Children who, in effect, are their own parents.*

They no longer have involved parents or guardians. The parents of these children are mentally or physically ill, have an addiction problem or are in jail. Schools should teach these learners how to be his/her own parent and provide linkages from the learner to other school social service agencies. Schools should also provide daily meals and health care for these learners where needed (Payne, 2006:5).

Schools need to plan and identify specific ways to target each group with a consideration of the different sentiments towards the support provided to the children

within each of these different sub-groups (Coleman, 2007:22). Many discipline problems come from learners whose parents are in the sub-groups with personal issues or from learners without any parents. Schools can provide adult mentor groups to assist these learners with discipline problems and personal needs (Payne, 2005:2-3).

Garland, *et al.*, (2009:4) suggest that effective communication and information sharing can help child welfare caseworkers and service providers identify the children of sub-group parents that need assistance. Keeping families consistently connected to familiar services and caseworkers reduces the confusion children may experience and enables caregivers to navigate service systems more effectively (Garland, *et al.,* 2009:6).

2.4.1   Building relationships with parents

Building mutual trust with learners' parents help schools build a strong foundation for learning in that parents feel included in the decision making surrounding their children's education and therefore can be part of a collaborative relationship with the school (Coleman, 2007:22). Research done by Coleman (2007:22) suggests that building trustworthy collaborative relationships and partnerships with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds and parent sub-group representation requires schools to meet two main goals: firstly to prevent and break down barriers with these parents from becoming involved in the learning process of their child's learning, and secondly, to encourage parent participation by meeting their needs for support and comfortable involvement in their child's education. It is possible for teachers to implement an ongoing plan that may progressively build, support, maintain, and improve collaborative relationships with parents whose backgrounds differ from their own.

Coleman, (2007:24-29) suggests a Four Phase Plan to develop such collaborative relationships:

- Phase 1: Initiation

The initiation phase of the plan, establishing the collaborative parent-teacher relationship, is best launched prior to or during the pre-planning phase of the school year in order to get to know each other as individuals and then as teachers and parents. The school could sponsor an informal celebratory event that allows teachers and parents to meet in a comfortable, informal, stress-free setting. The atmosphere should be festive and could include music, food, and collaborative games, while bearing in mind appropriateness of activities for different cultures (e.g., if dance goes against religious norms, it is best to select another type of activity or theme). Once the school year begins, individuals will come to know each other in their roles as parents or teachers. However, if teachers wait until the middle of a busy school year to initiate relationships with parents and/or families, it is possible that neither party will find time to talk informally or really get to know each other as individuals. If this part of the plan is bypassed, it is likely that the relationships between parents and teachers are to remain impersonal and uncomfortable for both stakeholders, making collaboration much more difficult (Coleman, 2007:25-26).

- Phase 2: Building the foundation

The next phase of a collaborative relationship building between parents, teachers, and principals begins preferably within the first few weeks of school. During this phase, teachers focus on building trust between themselves and family members. Some ways to build, establish, and strengthen trust are by providing information and sharing information with parents/families, providing choices to parents in how to get involved, and asking parents for input in decision making on issues that relate to their child (Sontag & Schacht,1994:36). Teachers establish trust by inviting learners' family members into the classroom. This allows the teacher to share basic information about the classroom as it relates to the child, such as general plans for the school year, classroom organization, classroom rules and behaviour problems, and teacher–parent communication methods.

When building the foundation for developing collaborative relationships with diverse families and parent sub-group representation, teachers should begin the process by asking them to provide input about the cultural congruence of the classroom and/or school rules, behaviour procedures, and the classroom set-up as they relate to the individual learner. This is important because some families' religious practices, for example, do not include the celebration of certain holidays or birthdays. Encouraging family input indicates that the teacher acknowledges and respects specific needs for and unique contributions to the child's education (Sontag & Schacht, 1994:36). The foundation of the collaborative relationship is complete once the learners' culturally diverse family and the parent sub-group representation have shared their backgrounds, beliefs, and input, and the families' information needs are met.

- Phase 3: Maintenance and Support

After establishing the foundation for the collaborative relationship, schools must maintain, support, and continue to strengthen the relationship. Maintaining and strengthening the relationship can be accomplished through trust-building and communication efforts. Continued communication with parents and families with agreed upon timelines helps to maintain effective communication (Ames, 1992:4). Communication must be positive and problems should be discussed as a natural part of learning. The school provides the information as the parent needs it, while maintaining informational equity with the family regarding the child's needs and progress. Maintaining information equity requires, for example, that the teacher share with the parents as soon as possible any new information about the child exhibits, areas of difficulty, new approaches used to remedy learning difficulties, and upcoming events. With reference to the demand to target distinct ways of making contact and develop parent-teacher relationships with each parent sub-group representation, Payne (2005:3) also suggested that the only way to make contact with parents with personal issues and surrogate or grandparents, is through home visits, when and where possible.

- Phase 4: Wrap-Up and reflection

The progressive plan for parent involvement does not end with the fourth phase, the plan recycles each year until the child graduates (Sontag & Schacht, 1994:36). At the end of each school year, parents and teachers reflect on the progress of their relationship over the past year. A collaborative review and reflection worksheet assists parents in identifying the success of their comfort level with the school and assists them in identifying what needs to be added to further strengthen the collaborative relationship. Information is passed on every year to the next teacher as the child moves into new classrooms and/or new school, allowing the individual families' needs to be updated and strengthened regularly without having to gather important information again.

The progressive plan is designed to help teachers build, support, and consistently improve collaborative relationships with families from year to year or school to school (Coleman, 2007:29). Through the implementation of the four-part plan, schools can help eliminate and prevent barriers to the involvement of diverse families and the plan may encourage parental involvement while assisting teachers in gaining parental guidance and support to meet the needs of all learners.

In this study, the researcher used this progressive plan in the focus group interviews to determine the level of collaborative relationships between parents and the school and the willingness of schools to implement an ongoing plan that may progressively build, support, maintain, and improve collaborative relationships with parents whose backgrounds and circumstances differ.

2.4.1.1 Poor parents

Developing positive relationships with parents and families of low socio-economic status and getting them involved with their children's education and school activities is a challenge. In order to address this challenge it is first necessary to understand the

dynamics of parenting in the context of poor parents. Parenting is a critical process affecting many developmental outcomes for children living with poor families. Parent ability is weakened by living in poor conditions and by the emotional and psychological stress associated with living in a poor environment (Kaiser & Delaney, 1996:43). Parenting is the means through which children experience the world. Because the parent-child relationship is the primary context for early behavioural, social and cognitive development, negative effects on parents due to low socio-economic factors in turn have a negative effect on the development of the child. Children rely on their parents to mediate their environment, respond to their needs and provide emotional stimulation and support. If, because of low socio-economic related stresses, the parent does not do this, the child's development could be delayed or be otherwise negatively affected (Kaiser & Delaney, 1996:12).

Home-school collaboration is particularly important for children of poor parents in helping to facilitate better educational outcomes (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999:23-26). Because relationships with these families are often the most difficult to cultivate, teachers and schools need to make extra effort to reach out to poor parents and families, helping them to help their children in their school environment. Sometimes reaching a parent can be difficult in that they have no method of contact, have language problems, or are illiterate. It is even more critical that schools find ways to reach these parents. Once schools do reach them, however, there is no guarantee that they will be positive, cooperative, or receptive. Schools must do their best to attempt to foster a positive relationship with them in the face of resistance, keeping them in their minds and trying to convince them that their involvement is for the benefit of the child. McGee (1996:3) mentions that a significant discovery was made by researchers studying poor and homeless families. They discovered that human relationships must take precedence over academic objectives. They found that only if parents trusted teachers and felt accepted by teachers could the teachers stand a chance of getting through to them.

Conditions required for families to be successful are often lacking in the environment of poor families. Conditions such as stability, security, emotionally positive time together, access to basic resources, and a strong shared belief system are a fallacy. Thus, family relationships suffer when individuals live in poor circumstances. Parents exhibit less capacity to be supportive and consistent in their parenting, provide less vocal and emotional stimulation, are less responsive to their children's needs and model less sophisticated language. Parenting style is more punitive and coercive and less consistent (Kaiser & Delaney,1996:15). Overall, parental support and involvement in school activities is lower among poor parents. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest. It reflects issues related to low socio-economic status such as time (especially if they work shifts or have more than one job), availability and affordability of child care and/or transportation, as well as possible negative personal experiences between the parent and his or her own school when growing up (Kaiser & Delaney, 1996:16).

For many poor parents, school is not given a high priority. It is often feared and resented. Their own experiences may not have been positive, and school is alternately viewed as a babysitter or a necessary evil. Payne (2005:10) suggested that when meeting with poor parents at school conferences, primary schools should use the museum format in terms of welcoming parents, and specify time schedules so that parents can come and go when it is convenient for their schedule and their inclination. The implementation is that arrangements should be made to allow the school to be open from six o'clock to nine o'clock and parents could come to one room to watch a video or learners' performance. These would be repeated every 20 to 30 minutes. Another room could have a formal meeting at any given time. Most important is the strategies of arranging a room for food were parents can feel secure and be involved with their children in activities such as reading with their children (McGee, 1996:14). What is also important is to arrange a room where learners can play games in order for parents to meet each other through their children.

Research shows that most parents, regardless of their socio-economic status, love their children and want them to succeed (McGee,1996:14). Many of these parents need to learn strategies that can help them cope and help their children get a chance at breaking the cycle of poverty. Schools need to develop classes that benefit parents in order to speak English, teach them how to fill in a job application, or assist them in child care choices. Schools can also make their computer laboratories available on Saturdays to teach computer skills and simple introductory courses that last four to five Saturdays for a couple of hours (Payne,2005:6). A class trip to the local public library where every learner signs up to receive a library card is a great opportunity for children and parents to get excited about literacy (McGee, 1996:14).

Because of negative past school experience, greeting poor parents for the first time should be a welcoming experience in that they need to be assured that the school has an open door policy where their needs will be met (Payne, 2005:7). Some sort of greeting procedure should be agreed upon by all schools. Parents should know that they are welcome to observe the class and spend time helping out in the classroom, lunchroom or during activities when meeting them for the first time (McGee,1996:16). Parents should be encouraged to view learners' work, accomplishments and portfolios when they come to school so they can become more aware of their child's abilities and talents and can discuss them with their children in a meaningful way. When meeting poor parents for the first time, school staff should address parents with regard to the importance of getting involved in their child's education and the benefits it brings to both parent and child. Parent involvement can also be contagious, especially when other children observe positive interaction among the teacher, learner and parent (McGee, 1996:17).

When communicating with poor parents, teachers and principals need to identify their intent verbally as well as non-verbally. Poor parents decide if they like you based largely on your non-verbals (McGee, 1996:17). When principals and teachers are disliked, parents hesitate to work and support the school. Living in low socio-economic circumstances should not be an excuse for schools to expect less from their parents

and learners. Schools need to focus on their learning, find ways to help parents overcome these challenges and gain the most they can from their children's education (Fogarty, 1997:53).

In this study, the researcher focused on the effects of the changing economic climate in American schools in order to more thoroughly understand and evaluate schools' efforts in involving and supporting poor parents.

2.4.1.2 Difficult parents

Working with difficult or demanding parents can be a huge challenge for teachers and schools. It can cause them to feel unappreciated and defensive, and can put up roadblocks in their efforts to help learners' optimal development (Tingley, 2006:13). When schools have to deal with difficult parents, it can quickly become heated, particularly if parents are looking for answers that the school is unable or unwilling to give. In these situations, it is crucial that teachers and principals remain calm, articulate, and under control. Admittedly, this can be difficult, particularly when parents get personal or make accusations that simply are not true (Roberts, 2007:96).

According to Tingley (2006:14), difficult parents can be grouped in the following categories:

2.4.1.3 Unrealistic parents

Many parents are unable to see problems or difficulties that their children have, especially when they are behavioural issues that make them hard do deal with (Tingley, 2006:16). Consequently, these parents can be in denial about the help that their child needs and the school's role in providing it. However, schools need to be able to communicate with these parents without raising their unrealistic expectations or underplaying their child's issues.

In order to work with unrealistic parents, it is important for schools not to use any potentially frustrating language or to put blame on the sometimes unruly child (Roberts, 2007: 98).

2.4.1.4 Aggressive parents

It is very hard to deal with aggressive parents, especially as it often serves to highlight how the child may have learnt their own behavioural issues (Hill, 2001:55, Tingley, 2006:18). The key to working with these parents is to be approachable and relaxed. When schools look at these parents dishonourably with a degree of contempt, it will often exacerbate the problem as they, understandably, feel patronised. Schools need to work hard to build a trustworthy relationship with aggressive parents who often care deeply for their children (Roberts, 2007:99).

2.4.1.5 Unsupportive parents

Unsupportive parents' values differ from the rest of the parents at school in that they make their own decisions such as whether the child needs to go to school at any given time (Tingley, 2006:19). These parents often hinder the child's development in their careless display of behaviour patterns towards school and school policies. In order to work with unsupportive parents, schools must not be judgmental of their decisions, but rather try to introduce them to new behaviour patterns which may benefit their child (Attaway & Bry, 2004:15, Roberts, 2007:101).

2.4.1.6 Disinterested parents

In many ways, this is the most frustrating and heart-breaking category of difficult parents schools have to work with (Ricciuti, 2004:27, Tingley, 2006:20). They allow their child to miss important events such as sport competitions or final examinations. Schools need to engage with these parents to gain their trust. If unsuccessful, schools need to help

the child even more than other children without drawing attention and spare the child from further embarrassment of their parents' disinterest (Roberts, 2007:103).

In this study, the researcher used these categories in order to find answers to the strategies principals and teachers use to communicate with difficult parents for the sake of effective parent-teacher relationships.

2.4.1.7 Overprotective parents

Overprotected parents' primary motivation is to protect their child from harm (Payne, 2005:7). They may also be motivated by other less admirable intentions such as a desire to look good in front of other parents by having their children reflect positively on them. The overprotective parent is the most difficult parent to identify and one who attends school events, but is not supportive at home (-, +). This type of parent may attend a parent-teacher conference only to go home and ignore or mistreat the child (Vandergrift, & Greene, 1992:58).

Often, overprotective parents live vicariously through their children, usually without being aware that they are doing it. They over-function, or are overprotective, and view their children as an extension of themselves (Krehbiel, 2010:2). Parents, who have the financial means, may take the extra step of hiring personalized athletic trainers, send their children to endless sports camps, and hire sports psychologists hoping to give their child the needed edge to gain sports notoriety. Invariably, the motivation for these added performance enhancers comes from the parents, not the child.

Overprotective parents are undermining children's confidence in their own abilities to take care of themselves and get things done on their own such as homework, choosing sport activities, or choosing friends (Krehbiel, 2010:3). They instill fear of the future in that their children are denied the chance to learn how to persevere while standing on their own two feet. Krehbiel (2010:3) found that overprotective parents stunt the growth and development of their children in that they lack some of the knowledge to negotiate

what they need, solve their own problems, stay safe, or interact in close quarters with others.

Whilst understanding overprotective parents, principals and teachers need to advise parents on how to support learners to blossom into healthy adults. Payne (2005:8) suggests that when engaging with overprotective parents, principals and teachers need to protect their time as overprotective parents will never be satisfied when given more response. Teachers need to keep all responses professional and brief. Parents need to understand that time is valuable, therefore principals and teachers must set their own schedules when engaging in conversations with overprotective parents.

Listening in a respectful and calm manner would help principals and teachers get overprotective parents on their side in order to listen to what they have to say. Principals and teachers need to be open-minded and decide what actions will benefit the child. They need to be flexible in decision-making and provide alternatives that will give learners more responsibility (Krehbiel, 2010:4).

2.4.2   Building relationships with the external community

External community influence on children's attitudes varies because of the different perspectives held by the organisations within the community as well as the interactions of individual citizens (Barbour, Barbour & Scully, 2005:8). Bronfenbrenner (1993:14) points out that a communities' influence on children's growth and development will be from both formal and informal community structures. Influence from formal structures comes from political and social systems, health and recreational services, business enterprises, entertainment, and educational services. The informal structures are the social networks that each family establishes with people outside the home. Members of many communities hold common attitudes toward their local schools, as evidenced by community organisations and in news coverage by local media (Bronfenbrenner, 1993:14).

It is difficult to measure the actual effect of community attitudes on learner achievement, but children quickly assimilate attitudes expressed by adults around them (Barbour et al, 2005:9). Research suggests that a community's social climate and the personal relationships that children form in the community influence their attitudes about learning, for example, when school sports activities are highlighted in the media coverage and the teams get money for trips but the school librarian cannot buy children's literature for the school, children soon get the message that being a good athlete is more important than being a good reader (Hoffer & Coleman, 1990:36). When a community paper publishes the poems, stories, and artwork of local primary school learners, children understand that the community values their academic achievement. Primary school learners are less likely to make such connections to community attitudes toward the school, but they get excited about winning a prize from the community for reading a certain number of books (Barbour et al, 2005:10). Eventually they get the message that reading is important. Businesspeople often provide support for various school programs such as sport events and school fairs (Warren, 2005:25). When children learn that the local grocer, politician, or businessman comment on the positive qualities of teachers, they learn that others value the learning experiences these teachers provide.

Effective and comprehensive partnership programs should be formed with the community to build relationships between business and education (Cate,1992:2). Programs could be implemented that would bring the community into the classroom such as: guest lecturers; mentoring; tutoring of learners; and/or sponsoring field trips. Successful school-community partnerships require planning and monitoring to meet the specific goals decided on for the partnership programme.

2.5   ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND THE PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Mendez-Morse (1991:2) notes that effective school principals have a vision for what they want their learners to achieve. They engage teachers, parents, learners and the community to share in their vision and encourage them to join in the efforts to make

their vision a reality. There is nothing that will improve a learner's self-esteem better than academic success. Engineering such success is a good parent-teacher obligation (Butler, 1997:30).

2.5.1   Academic Achievement

The first research in the area of parent involvement and academic achievement dates back to the 1900s. E.C. Brooks, in 1916, conducted the first known study of the effects of parent involvement on academic achievement (Cooper, Lindsay, & Nye, 2000:52). After interviewing 268 fourth, fifth and sixth grade learners, Brooks concluded that children are more likely to have higher academic achievement levels and improved behaviour when parents are involved in the child's education. Since 1916, schools and society have both changed dramatically with regard to parent involvement, but the underlying findings of this study are consistent with contemporary research in terms of the importance of parent involvement on learner's academic achievement.

Academic achievement and school success have been found to predict a positive outcome in learners' self-esteem (Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, & Dielman, 1997:117). Zimmerman et al. (1997:118) define self-esteem as a personal evaluation or appraisal of his or her own worth that encompasses beliefs and emotions such as triumph, despair, pride, or shame. Gonzalez-Pienda, Nunez, Gonzalez-Pumariega, Alvarez, Roces, & Garcia, (2002:14) found that academic self-concept in terms of self-esteem is positively affected by parent-teacher involvement which in turn has a positive effect on academic achievement.

Communication between parents, teachers and learners on homework assignments plays a valuable role in strengthening parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner achievement. Holler and Lovelace (2001:27) define homework as any task that is assigned by teachers and meant to be carried out during non-school hours. Originally, homework was assigned as a punishment to learners and was based on recitation. In the 1950s, educators incorporated homework into the curriculum as a way

of extending learning. In the 1960s, educators decreased the amount of homework given to learners in fear that too much homework would cause mental stress. The education reform movement of the 1970s caused educators to re-examine learner learning, and it was established that increased homework results in improved learner achievement. It also increased parent participation on a daily basis and therefore improved communication from home to school (Holler & Lovelace, 2001:27).

A literature review on homework however has confounding results. Kohn (2006:31), for example, believes that homework does more bad than good for learners during primary school and even high school. He argues that no evidence supports the assumption that homework increases academic achievement. He believes that homework has a negative affect that causes stress, frustration, parent-teacher conflict, loss of time for other activities and a decrease of interest in learning. Still, many educators believe that homework improves academic achievement and encourages learners to become independent and critical thinkers (Holler & Lovelace, 2001:45). Effective homework includes opportunities for learners to interact meaningfully with parents and teachers. In order for homework to be effective, teachers need to develop lessons that incorporate aspects of parental involvement that encourage parents to actively participate in their child's learning. If parents fail to emphasise the importance of homework, the child's ability to complete and learn from homework assignments is hampered (Holler & Lovelace, 2001:46)

Communication between parents, teachers and learners on homework assignments plays a valuable role in strengthening parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development. Despite research as evidence that parent involvement is directly connected to academic achievement, there are still parents who do not actively participate in their child's education. In this study, the researcher focused on effective communication between parents and teachers on homework assignments in order to establish the effect this has on learners' academic achievement.

2.5.2   Learner benefits

Many studies over the last thirty years have found that parent involvement in learners' learning in primary schools generally has positive benefits on the learner's academic outcomes. Whatever the family background and circumstances, parent relationships with schools and teachers or the resources available to schools and the general school environment, parent involvement seems to have a positive effect on academic achievement (Henderson & Berla, 1994:161). A review of 66 studies of parent participation in primary schools, including several literature reviews, Henderson and Berla (1994:161-162) and Olsen & Fuller (2008:129-130) concluded learner's outcomes as follow:

- Learners achieve higher grades and test scores in that they have better attendance at school and therefore get more homework done.
- Learners achieve better in language and mathematics and therefore enroll in more challenging academic programs in high school.
- Greater academic persistence betters learners' social skills in that they adapt better to their school environment.
- Learners have higher graduation rates due to their positive behaviour and attitudes towards school.
- Fewer learners are placed in special education and remedial classes and therefore enroll more in post-secondary education.
- Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when parents and professionals work together to bridge the gap between the culture at home and the culture in school.
- Learners feel that they have some control over their destinies and that they can earn an honourable place in society.

2.5.3   Parent benefits

When parents are constructively involved in the education of their children at primary school, they become more aware of issues that the school and their children face such as homework, academic achievement, and behavioural problems (Henderson & Berla (1994:162-163). Other benefits for parents include (Henderson & Berla, 1994:16-17; Olsen & Fuller, 2008:129):

- Parents increase their interactions and discussion with their children and are more responsive and sensitive to their children's social, emotional, and intellectual developmental needs.

- Parents are more confident in their parenting and decision-making skills in that they gain more knowledge of child development and therefore are more affectionate and positive towards their children.

- When parents are aware of what their children are learning, they are more likely to help when they are requested by teachers to become more involved in their children's learning activities at home.

- Parents develop more confidence in the school as their perceptions of the school improved and stronger ties are build that strengthens their commitment to the school.

- Interacting with other parents in supporting their children results in a better understanding of the teacher's job and school curriculum.

- Parents are more aware of school policies that affect their children's education when they are requested to be part of the decision-making team at their children's school.

- An improvement in regular family routine and priority given to schoolwork over other activities, results in a better understanding of their child's day-to-day routine.

- Providing opportunities to experience and explore ideas and activities with other parents result in opportunities for language development in that parents that are language incompetent, can interact with other parents.

When parents are treated as partners in the primary school and given the relevant information about getting involved by teachers and principals they trust, they put into practice the involvement activities they already know but which they were hesitant to contribute.

2.5.4   School Benefits

Schools and communities profit from parent involvement (Henderson and Bella,1994:162).

• Schools that work well with families can improve teacher morale due to higher ratings of teachers by parents and the community.

• Schools that actively involve parents and the community tend to establish better reputations in the community that escalates in high community support.

• School programs that encourage and involve parents usually have higher quality programs than programs that do not involve parents.

• Schools have higher academic achievement and therefore establish a sense of pride with all stakeholders.

The effects of constructive parent involvement on learners' achievement can influence adolescents' social, cognitive and emotional development. (Annunziata et al. 2006:34). Epstein (1995:701) reports that learners' chances for success in school is likely to improve when parents and the community are involved. Gaining skills, knowledge, and confidence helps parents and other family members in helping their children to improve their economic conditions as well as being good citizens. Informed families' expectations of their children result in an increase in their children's success, which support their children's efforts to learn. Teachers and schools benefit when parents experience frequent communication from school-to-home in that they receive higher ratings in their efforts to educate their children. With frequent communication parents

are more likely to understand the goals of the teacher and the school and therefore are more supportive of proposed changes (Epstein,1995:701).

2.6   PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE COMMUNITY FOR IMPROVED PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS AND OPTIMAL LEARNER DEVELOPMENT

Partnership within the school environment is a formal and contractual agreement to work towards shared goals and to share the profits of mutual investments in the teaching/learning of learners as future citizens (Epstein, 1992:1). Due to the fact that primary schools cannot educate children alone, school-initiated family and community partnerships in the sense of comprehensive programs are an essential factor of successful schools. Family centred partnerships and extra-curricular enrichment partnership programs are most beneficial in improving academic achievement (Bryan, 2005:4).   Examples of extra-curricular enrichment activities include group work on science projects, maths games, the study of plants and animals, opportunities to create a newspaper, write a play, or participate in special interest groups or clubs such as homework and computer clubs. High-quality extracurricular enrichment partnership programs also provide time and space for children to become involved in long-term projects and productions (Gardner, 1993:32). After-school programs provide opportunities for young adolescents to learn skills that are not usually acquired in school, such as athletic and artistic performance skills. Programs may also extend and enrich academic skills by enabling participation in a debate or a computer club. In some cases, these experiences lead to lifelong interests or careers. But perhaps more importantly, the sense of competence and affiliation that can flourish during after school programs provides the best reason for enrichment programs (Miller, 1998:2).

There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships in primary schools (Epstein, 2009:9). Of the most obvious reasons are the fact that community partnerships improve school programs such as reading clubs, computer clubs and community mentors in science and art. Partnerships with the community have an impact on school climate by means of celebrating academic, sport, and culture

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achievements. Community partnerships provide family services and support such as parenting classes which increase parents' skills and leadership opportunities which connect families with one another in school and in the community, and help strengthen communication between parents and teachers (Miller, 1998:2).

Extracurricular programs enriched by community partnerships are most beneficial in improving academic achievement and resiliency. Extracurricular enrichment programs include tutoring, mentoring, and after school programs such as visiting museums, field trips and participating in community marathons (Bryan, 2005:24).Partnerships with the community which focus on family-centred initiatives include family centres where activities such as family sport nights, art instruction and social events can take place as well as parent education programs such as parenting workshops, and fitness and health classes. Teacher outreach to parents has also shown increases in learner's performances. Effective outreach programs such as meeting with parents, sending materials home and keeping in touch with learners' progress strengthen parent-teacher communication for optimal learner development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002: 34). Parent education programs such as workshops for parents on helping their children at home were linked with higher maths and reading scores (Henderson & Mapp, 2002:34).

Learners, parents and teachers form ties with the community and feel more accepted when their achievements are celebrated within the community. Learners have increased opportunities for participation in their schools and communities as they learn of all the extracurricular enrichment programs available. Child-parent interaction increases as well as parent involvement as stimulated by the ongoing participation and sharing in community partnership programs (Bryan, 2005:25).

2.7   CONCLUSION

Parent involvement provides an important opportunity for schools to enrich current school programs by bringing parents into the educational process. Increased parent involvement has been shown to result in increased learner success, increased parent

and teacher relationships, and improved school climate (Smith, 1994:183). Schools can encourage involvement in a number of areas including parenting, learning at home, communication, volunteering, decision making, and community collaboration. Effective parent involvement programmes are built upon a careful consideration of the unique needs of the community. In order to build trust, effective approaches to parent involvement rely upon a strength-based approach, emphasising positive interactions. Though specifics may vary, all parent involvement programs share the goal of increasing parent-school collaboration in order to promote healthy child development and safe school communities.

CHAPTER 3

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TO STRENGTHEN PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS FOR OPTIMAL LEARNER DEVELOPMENT

3.1   INTRODUCTION

Being able to communicate is vital to being an effective educator (Kowalski, 2007:12). Communication not only conveys information, but it encourages effort, modifies attitudes, and stimulates thinking. Without it, stereotypes develop, messages become distorted, and learning is stifled (Bender, 2005:4).

Communication is the process of understanding and sharing information where listening plays an important role.   Intrapersonal or internal communication includes planning, problem solving, self-talk, and evaluation of self and others (Kowalski, 2007:12).   It is a continuous process that prepares the speaker to proceed in a clear and concise manner. Interpersonal communication is sharing meaning between oneself and at least one other person.   The goal of interpersonal communication is to send relevant and objective messages.

We communicate with others, not only verbally, but by how we act.   This is referred to as non-verbal communication.   Since we are constantly sending messages, we need to be aware of our appearance, gestures, posture, eye contact, use of space, body movement, what we carry with us, how close we stand or sit to others, and our facial expressions. When what we say contradicts our nonverbal behaviour, mistrust and confusion results because listeners believe what they see (Williams & Cartledge, 1997:29).

Effective communication is central to working with children and parents in primary school to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development (McEvan, 2003:4). Effective communication establishes and maintain relationships, and

is an active process that involves listening, questioning, understanding and responding. Communication should appropriately match the stage of development, personal circumstances, and needs of the person communicating with.

3.2   EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is the process of understanding and sharing information where listening plays an important role. Intrapersonal or internal communication includes planning, problem solving, self-talk, and evaluation of self and others. It is a continuous process that prepares the speaker to proceed in a clear and concise manner. Interpersonal communication is sharing meaning between oneself and at least one other person.   The goal of interpersonal communication is to send relevant and objective messages (Kowalski, 2007:12, Marzano, 2003:132).

3.2.1   Definition

Effective communication should always be a process of sending the right message that is also being correctly received and understood by the other person/s (Kowalski, 2007:12). Effective communication is defined, for this study, as that by which people in the primary school setting fulfil and cater for the needs of affirmation, encouragement, and social interaction and assistance of one another, with the final aim focused on optimal development of the learner (Albrecht, Burleson & Goldsmith, 1994:3).

There are several ways in which effective communication occurs in primary schools. Any show of concern or interest in others is perceived as supportive and effective communication (Bender, 2005:4-5). Appreciation, recognition, encouragement, constructive criticism, and demonstrating trust are examples of supportive communication that are essential for effective communication in primary schools for the sake of optimal learner development.

Communication is often complicated by an inability to accurately interpret communication. Misinterpretation results in inappropriate responses which may create serious and sometimes long-lasting difficulties flowing from communication distortion. The way to prevent such misunderstandings is to understand and implement effective communication strategies (Bender, 2005:4).

3.2.2 Strategies in building effective communication

Teachers strive to establish partnerships with parents to support learners' learning. Effective communication is fundamental to this partnership and building of a sense of sharing between home and school (Williams & Cartledge, 1997:30). In these changing times, effective partnerships between teachers and parents become even more essential to meet the needs of the children they share. Epstein (1995:703) describes communicating with parents as one of the six major types of parent involvement practices critical to establishing strong working relationships between teachers and parents. Cultivating the parent-teacher relationship is also considered vital to the development of schools as learning communities (Schussler, 2003:7). Many teachers are however not specifically trained in the skills they need to communicate effectively with parents (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004:25). Because school communication practises are so fundamental to involving families in the education process, Caspe (2003:116) suggests that teachers' preparation and professional development programs should actively promote the development of communication skills for teachers.

Effective communication in school begins with the welcome sign when parents enter the school building (Chambers, 1998:34). Welcome signs reflecting the range of ethnic languages spoken in the school community create an even more inviting atmosphere (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004:111). The next impression may be the welcoming smile from the first person with which the visitor interact on the school premise or, conversely, lack of acknowledgement by office staff. Parents may also be positively influenced by the cleanness of the school grounds and/or learners artwork on the walls. A "customer-

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friendly" school environment reflects how highly communication with parents is valued by school staff (Chambers, 1998:35).

Expressed communication involves one-way or two-way exchanges (Bender, 2005:4). One-way communication occurs when teachers seek to inform parents about events, activities, or learner progress through a variety of sources, such as an introductory letter at the beginning of the school year, classroom or school newsletters, report cards, communication books, and school web sites. Two-way communication involves interactive dialogue between teachers and parents. Conversations may occur during telephone calls, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and various school-based community activities. Teachers should actively incorporate both strategies to maximize sharing information with parents.

3.2.2.1 One-way communication

Written communication with regard to the formal school environment comprises a one-way communication and is probably the most efficient and effective way schools can provide valuable ongoing correspondence between school and home (Williams & Cartledge, 1997:30). Written communication is a permanent product that requires careful consideration regarding format and content. The goal is to organize concise, clear and accurate information so that parents will read and understand it.

Newsletters are commonly used as mechanism to share written information with the parent community. Consistent application of several specific strategies can make classroom and school newsletters even more effective communication tools. Stakeholders should incorporate the same colour, quality, and paper size for all newsletters to create a communication set of importance in everyday language and ensure grammar, spell checks and proofreading of the information (Aronson, 1995:3). Chambers (1998:35) further proposes that schools develop a descriptive brochure to provide helpful information for new families moving into the school community.

School-to-home notebooks are another commonly used written communication technique. Many teachers use daily communication books to share information with parents, particularly for children who have special learning needs (Davern, 2004:25). Initially, it is important to clearly establish what information will be communicated, by whom, and how often. Teachers should be sensitive to a balance of good and bad news contained in the message. The use of titles (such as Mr, Mrs, and Ms) establishes respect in the relationship. To maximize efficiency, alternate day or twice weekly notes may be adequate, as long as the communication is frequent enough to engage parents and to monitor learner success.

Davern (2004:27) notes that it is important to consider when a face-to-face meeting is more appropriate than a written exchange, depending on the issue. A parent's non-verbal reaction to a message (such as, agreement, surprise, boredom, and hostility) can tell teachers how to respond and it allows immediate indications of how a message is being received. Participants involved can discuss the message, ask questions for clarification and resolve any misunderstandings (McNeese, 1991:43).

Report cards are the traditional mode of conveying permanent, written evaluative information regarding learner progress. Report cards should be clear and easy for parents to understand. These records should provide an analysis of academic development across content areas, information about learners' strengths and learning styles, an assessment of the child's social development, specific goals for the learner to work on, and associated suggestions for the parent (Aronson, 1995:5). Report cards also generally provide an invitation for the parent to respond, usually in written format. Teachers should review parents' responses in timely matter to determine any required follow-up. Carefully prepared report cards, coupled with parent conferences as needed, provide effective communication with parents by ensuring that the report card is not the first communication when concerns exist. Rather, frequent progress reports, phone calls, and/or e-mail messages should support and improve learner performance prior to the traditional report card (Giannetti & Sagarese, 1998:41).

Teachers have used a range of other creative approaches to communicate with parents. Grande (2004:121), for example, created "literacy bags" which were sent home with first-grade students. These were developed to help parents to understand grade-level expectations and to provide them with materials and specific activities to support literacy development in their child. Learners took the bags home on a rotating basis, and parents were asked to contribute through a feedback journal. An independent survey of parents' understanding of grade-level expectations supported the effectiveness of this approach.

3.2.2.2 Two-way communication

Two-way communication occurs when teachers and parents dialogue together. Effective dialogue develops out of a growing trust, a mutuality of concern, and an appreciation of contrasting perspectives (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004:24). A teacher may contact parents to celebrate a child's successful school experience. However, more frequently, the contact is to share a concern about a child, which can be a source of significant tension for both teachers and parents alike. Teachers should strive to make these interactions as productive as possible.

One popular communication strategy is a phone call home. Love (1996:443) advocates the use of "good news calls" to recognize the child for progress or a job well done as a way of promoting positive relations with parents. Ramirez (2002:32) developed an effective way, during school hours, to contact all parents on a regular basis. He notes that these initial positive phone calls set the stage for more collaborative interactions later if needed, because parents were already an "ally."

Another traditional occasion for dialogue is the parent-teacher conference. Effective parent-teacher conferences are an opportunity to create a successful partnership, but they may be anxiety provoking for both teachers and parents alike (Minke & Anderson, 2003:52). In this regard, Metcalf (2002:19) suggests that instead of viewing the conference as a reporting session for what is not working in school, teachers could

construct an opportunity to discuss what is working with the learners. Metcalf (2002:19) advocates a solution-focused approach based on past learner successes in order to alleviate blame and move forward with an individualized intervention plan. Putting the child at the centre of the parent-teacher conferences require thoughtful and well-developed planning.   In planning for the conference, Prince and March (1985:25) encourage teachers to select an appropriate meeting time and location, advise participants in advance, review the learners' file in advance, develop a clear purpose for the meeting, and identify information to be discussed including positive aspects of the child's performance. Teachers are advised to begin the conference with a friendly comment and brief, informal conversation and then to explain the learner's progress in a straightforward way, carefully listening to parent input and ensuring time to summarize the discussion and plan recommendations for future planning. Establishing a specific time frame at the outset of the conference, followed by close adherence to the agenda, allows for more comfortable termination of the meeting. Teachers are encouraged to follow up the meeting by preparing a written conference summary in line with school board policies. Additional follow-up activities might involve making appropriate referrals, discussions with relevant teachers, or planning specific instructions or strategies. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004:25).

3.2.2.3 Communication through technology

In recent years, teachers have experimented with various technologies to communicate with parents in innovative and time-efficient ways. Integrating technology can help schools communicate quickly to a broad parent community (Ramirez, 2001:30). Classroom phones and voice mail, video technology, and school web sites are all examples of integrating technology. Phones in each classroom permit teachers a flexible opportunity to contact parents from their classrooms when learners are not present. Use of voice mail to augment phone communication has been specifically explored to enhance communication opportunities with parents. One creative teacher, for example, maintained a daily one-minute voice mail message for parents and learners to call at the end of each day (Clemens-Brower, 1997:59). The recorded

message provided updates on homework assignments, and also invited parents and learners to respond with a message of their own. Cameron and Lee (1997:185) conducted two studies to explore satisfaction by teachers and parents regarding the use of voice-mail technology. Findings demonstrated enhanced communication in both quality and quantity for upper primary-aged learners.

Aronson (1995:9) suggests that schools create a brief ten-minute video to welcome new families to the school including an introduction, tour of the school, portions of a lesson in action, and an invitation to become involved. One school expanded this idea and developed fifty short videos to be circulated to families on a variety of topics (Clevenson, 1999:67). For example, one video outlined how parents could help their Grade 6 child with a science research project. Clevenson (1999:67) noted that this particular video significantly impacted learners' success by dramatically increasing the number of projects completed.

Internet technology is the most recent tool used by schools to communicate to a parent community. Increasingly, school websites are used to convey a broad message of school information. Learners often become involved with both the technology and the content of the website and may work together with teachers to create and maintain the site. Teachers trained to use the school website can provide updates easily accessed by parents regarding homework assignments, test schedules, and resource links. Use of the internet can serve as an interactive tool for individualizing homework and supporting the involvement of families in the homework process (Salend, Duhaney, Anderson & Gottschalk, 2004:65). Salend et al. (2004:65) notes that a homework web site can start with a simple format providing basic information to parents and learners, and gradually increase in sophistication to create electronic assignment logs and individualized homework modifications for learners, incorporating appropriate password protection.

Technology also holds promise to allow teachers communication opportunities not limited by school hours or location (Brewer & Kallick, 1996:181). Learners'

performances can be videotaped and presented to a larger audience at convenient times. Learners may create digital portfolios that can be shared with parents on an ongoing basis. Ultimately, learners' learning plans may be accessed online, enabling goals and progress to be shared with parents. The capacity to link homes and schools with new technologies provides many novel opportunities to enhance communication with parents beyond the traditional formats.

3.2.2.4 Communication between all stakeholders

The essential element in communication and school-community relations is sound relationship arrangements. The principal must establish a positive relationship among all key stakeholders. These key stakeholders consist of parents, learners, teachers/staff, and community/business people. The principal may be an expert in curriculum development and finances; however, the major factor in job security is the principals' ability to develop a positive relationship with both internal and external stakeholders (Gallagher, Bagin, & Moore, 2005:11).

Communication is the lifeblood of a school organization. The school principal cannot accomplish any tasks in the school without adequate communication. School principals do not intentionally plan to fail, they fail to plan. Bender (2005:5) notes that, whether a school system is excellent or mediocre depends on how stakeholders work together, how they communicate, how they relate, to what extent they are involved, participate and share with regard to the school organization and planning. Community relations are aimed at focusing on the relationships of all stakeholders with an overall goal of improving learner achievement (Gallagher, Bagin, & Moore, 2005:12).

Bender (2005:6) notes the following strategies for building an effective communication plan between all stakeholders in the primary school setting:

- Adjust communication to fit the situation – behaviour and communication styles are different in every situation. Observing behaviour sharpens your awareness

of the dynamics of communication, this awareness gives you information that can help you modify the way you communicate so you are more readily accepted and easily understood by your intended audience (Grande, 2004:123).

- Know and follow your school's communication chain of command – learn the school's established way of communicating down the ranks in order to establish a long and administratively hassle-free communication (Bender, 2005:7).

- Open lines of communication before problems start and work to keep them open – this could be done through e-mails, notes, phone calls, formal conferences, and informal meetings (Ramirez, 2001:30).

- Begin positively – people are more receptive and cooperative when they are approached in a courteous manner (Bender, 2005:7).

- Practise active listening – this requires paying close attention, making supportive comments, and asking pertinent questions (Richardson, 1997:25).

- Emphasise areas of agreement – since discussions are more enjoyable and make better progress when participants are not at odds over every point, always try to emphasise areas of agreement (Richardson, 1997:25).

- Be willing to compromise – when the purpose of your communication is to resolve a problem, your willingness to compromise, aids the dialogue and helps all stakeholders to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution for solving problems. (Bender, 2005:7)

- Respect confidentiality – people are reluctant to discuss personal problems, express unpopular opinions, or disclose personal information if they feel their comments might be indiscriminately shared with others, your respect for confidentiality is essential to open and productive communication (Bender, 2005:7).

- Avoid gossip – gossip will destroy trust and can tarnish your reputation as a responsible person or professional and therefore must be reacted to with incredulity.

- End on a positive note – do not end your communications in an exchange with hard feelings, it is difficult to establish positive and productive exchanges in the

future. Work hard to end all communications on a positive note (Richardson, 1997:25).

These strategies provide effective, easy implemented solutions to vexing communication problems between all stakeholders and help to communicate in a proactive, positive, and respectfully assertive fashion with those whose support is essential in the parent-teacher relationships for the benefit of optimal learner development (Bender, 2005:6).

3.3   BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Barriers that hinder effective communication between teachers and parents exist at several levels. At a social level, Brandt (1998:26) notes that the public in general is becoming increasingly estranged from public institutions and schools are more frequently the target of negative reports. Additionally, Taffel (2001:114) notes that many parents today feel unsupportive, misunderstood, and overwhelmed by the demands placed on them. To address these barriers, teachers should appreciate that every positive interchange will serve to increase trust and build stronger relationships, not only with individual parents, but ultimately with the broader community as well. The local school needs to become a vibrant part of the community, and schools have the advantage of being a natural point of interaction with parents. As such, schools are in a position to host or facilitate workshops for parents on a variety of topics ranging from child development to stress management. Schools can help create support groups for parents to address a range of needs (Molland, 2004:26). Schools can provide a mechanism for the involvement of community stakeholders to lead workshops, provide resource links for families, fund and participate in school projects, and support mentorship programs.

Cultural differences can also create significant communication challenges if teachers use "their own cultural lenses" to interact with culturally and linguistically diverse parents (Colombo, 2004:49). To address this potentially disconnecting situation, teachers need

to seek out information to understand the cultural and linguistic diversity reflected in the families of their learners. This knowledge and appreciation can be demonstrated by celebrating the various cultural traditions of their learners, by incorporating speakers from the community, by appreciating the difficulties faced by parents with language barriers, and by seeking out interpreter services as needed (Lai & Ishiyame, 2004:103). Similarly, teachers can incorporate the faces of diversity into children's literature in the classroom (Molland, 2004:27). Bilingual hotlines, as well as a bilingual phone tree, have been suggested as creative ways to enhance communication with culturally diverse families regarding upcoming events (Ramirez, 2001:31). Similarly, it may be appropriate to provide written communication in several lineages to ensure the greatest access to the parent community.

On a parent level, a parent's own negative school experience may hinder positive relationships with all stakeholders, or parents may simply not understand how to effectively interact with the educational system. These barriers can become particularly problematic when parents are faced with concerns regarding their children's behaviour or academic progress. Schools can provide guidelines in a checklist format to assist parents in managing their concerns in a constructive manner (Hartman & Chesley, 1998:26). These guidelines would encourage parents to approach their concern from an information-gathering perspective, to start at the classroom level, to hear the teacher's perspective fully, and identify how and when to engage the principal. Providing such information to parents at parent evenings and in the school newsletter creates a proactive plan for parents to follow should concerns arise.

Economic and time constraints may also be primary obstacles to effective communication (Finders & Lewis, 1994:52). To address this, teachers can survey parents at the beginning of the school year to determine parent schedules and availability, and also to provide parents with information regarding how and when to contact the teacher. Meeting times need to be somewhat flexible to accommodate working parents, including those working shifts and those who commute. Reaching out in the form of home visits may also be needed to connect with some families (Molland,

2004:23). Logistical constraints such as childcare and transportation create challenges for many parents (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2003:47). Providing childcare options in the school building while parents attend meetings can make all the difference for some families.

Lack of technology also limits communication opportunities for many families. Teachers should never assume that learners have access to technology at home (Ramirez, 2001: 30). They should survey parents regarding access to voice mail, computers, and the internet. In addition, many teachers and parents are still uncomfortable with the use of technology. Thus, Ramirez (2001:31) notes that paper-based communication should still have a fundamental place in the overall communication strategy of the school, despite extensive technology use. Importantly, the rules to written communication also apply to e-mail and web-based content, and confidentiality of personal information must always be ensured.

On a school level, the use of educational jargon with parents is a common communication roadblock. Teachers should monitor their conversation and written communications to ensure jargon is avoided. If technical terms or acronyms must be used, these should be carefully explained. Audio messages may be appropriate with parents who have reduced literacy levels (Williams & Cartledge, 1997:33).

3.4   THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AS EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Highly effective principals have the courage it takes to step out and meet the needs of parents, teachers, and learners and never lose sight of a vision to create a more humane and caring school environment (McEvan, 2003:5).

A key element of an effective school is an effective principal with effective communication skills (Whitaker, 1997:3). Although school success is influenced by all stakeholders, school principals remain one of the most important factors in this success.

Research on effective schools and instructional leadership, point to the impact of school principals' leadership on learners' learning and improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996: 7). The effect of the school principal on learners learning cannot be overemphasized. Establishing a safe and secure learning environment and positive, nurturing school climate are merely the first steps in a long series of critically high expectations effective school principals set for themselves, as well as the educational communities they lead. Most importantly, however, is the love for learning and learners, which is at the heart of every successful school principal (Cotton, 2004:93). School principals play an important role in establishing school discipline, both by effective administration and by personal example. Effective school principals are liked and respected, rather than feared, and communicate caring of learners as well as willingness to impose punishment if necessary.

Teachers' satisfaction with school discipline policy is related to their relationship with the school principal (McEvan, 2003:5). Good communication and shared values are important elements in this relationship. Learner achievement is likely to be greatest where teachers and school principals work together (Korir & Karr-Kidwell, 2000:23) Ideally, a school principal should be able to create consensus among staff on rules and their enforcement. The school principal must have knowledge and understanding of effective communication strategies. Creating a collaborative environment and open communication has been described as the single most important factor for successful school improvement initiatives. (Aronson, 1995:23; Chrisman & Couchenour, 2004:56). Good communicators are good listeners.

School climate affects school principals' effectiveness. It also interferes with outcomes for teachers and learners. Improvement in school climate enhances the school principal's effectiveness, teachers' performance, and learner achievement and behaviour. This improvement, however, only occurs if the school principal, teachers, and learners are empowered. School principals must model behaviours consistent with the school's vision and develop a clear purpose in the school, so that learner achievement can improve. They must identify and implement instructional strategies

that will result in achieving the school's vision and mission (Korir & Karr-Kidwell, 2000:23).

Schools are multi-faceted organisations. Achieving and sustaining a high quality institution within a complex environment demands that the school principal, as school leader, possesses a wide range of leadership capabilities (McEvan, 2003:4). Many efforts are attempted to improve the fragmented approach to school principal preparation. Increasingly, people are recognising that if school principals are to better serve schools and learners in our rapidly changing society, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they possess must be different than those reflected in traditional educational administration curricula. Successful school reform cannot take place apart from a better understanding of school leadership (Daresh & Barnett, 1993:133).

According to Beck and Murphy (1993:32), school principals were assumed to be more like business executives, using good management and social science research to run schools effectively and efficiently. Visible school principals have the opportunity to model their beliefs and to promote a positive instructional climate. School principals who create an exciting and reinforcing learning environment will find that learners and teachers will want to do what needs to be done (Krug, 1992:431). Effective school principals engage in efforts to manage the curriculum and instruction with a pertinent focus on their instructional task alongside their managerial task. This is done by providing the knowledge and information, materials and supplies that support the work of teachers and staff members as they go about accomplishing the mission of the school. Villa (1992:23) points out that effective principals also promote an instructional climate that strongly values and reinforces learning and achievement. The school climate is established as interest, concern, and support for all learners. It is most important that school principals articulate goals, timelines, and procedures to promote change and foster a climate of unity with a mutual focus on optimal learner development.

With regard to effective principalship, Sergiovanni (2001:42) provides a comprehensive description of effective school principals. Actions related to effective principalship pertain to achieving higher levels of pedagogical thoughtfulness, developing relationships characterised by caring and civility, and achieving increases in the quality of learners' performance on both conventional and alternative assessments. On the same lines McEvan (2003:21-162) identified ten traits of highly effective school principals that are essential in the communication and management of primary schools to establish a climate of learning that fosters academic achievement. These ten traits pertain to the following:

- Communicator

Communication via the sending and receiving of messages both verbal and nonverbal does not necessarily guarantee that the communication has been successful (Diekman, 1979:16 McEvan, 2003:2). Effective school principals should be aware of that and should focus on being genuine and open with the capacity to listen, empathise, and connect with individual learners, parents, and teachers in productive, helping, and healing ways. Effective school principals should also be aware of the ability to teach effectively, present, and motivate people in large group settings (McEvan, 2003:5).

- Educator

Teachers are constantly thinking about how to organise a school and instruction so that all learners can learn (Joyce, 1983:114). Effective school principals assist teachers to become self-directed instructional leaders with a strong intellect and personal depth of knowledge regarding research-based curriculum. Principals should also assist in instruction and learning that motivates and facilitates the intellectual growth and development of learners, teachers and parents in primary schools (McEvan, 2003 29).

- The Envisioner

The practice of leadership requires a sense of purpose and the capacity to find the values that make risk-taking meaningful (Heifetz, 1994: 274). Effective school principals have a sense of purpose, focus on a vision of what schools can be, and are guided by a mission that has the best interests of learners at its core (McEvan, 2003:43).

- The Facilitator

To lead a primary school means having the humanity to grasp the fact that you do not yet understand enough to have the answers and then to ask the questions that will lead to the best possible insights (Collins, 2001:75). The effective school principal has leadership with outstanding human relations skills that include the abilities to build individual relationships with parents, teachers and learners in the primary school and bond people together into a community of leaders (McEvan, 2003:59).

- The Change Master

School principals must acquire an appreciation for what constitutes genuine change, compared to what was traditionally considered to constitute change (Lemming, 1994:52). Effectiveness in change requires a flexible, futuristic, and realistic principal who both motivate and manage change in an organised, positive and enduring fashion (McEvan, 2003:84).

- The Culture Builder

Manna (1999:14) refers to school culture as a feeling shared by the management staff, teachers, learners and parents that their particular school is special and belongs to them. It represents the accumulated learning of a group, the ways of thinking, feeling and perceiving the world that have made the group successful (Schein, 1999:21). The highly effective school principal communicates and models a strong and viable vision

based on achievement, expectations, character, personal responsibility, and accountability (McEvan, 2003:89).

- The Activator

With regard to the school principal as the pivotal role player in sound school relationships, noteworthy achievements are contingent on passionate enthusiasm (Cohen & Cohen, 1961:156). To activate effective communication through drive, motivation, enthusiasm, energy, courage, and humour gives primary school parents, teachers, and learner's motivation for participating in school functioning for optimal learner success. (McEvan, 2003:117).

- The Producer

Effective school principals recognise academic achievement as options and opportunities for the future (Drucker, 2001:40). The effective school principal is a result-orientated individual with a strong sense of accountability to parents, learners and teachers who translates high expectations into intellectual development and academic achievement for all learners in primary schools (McEvan, 2003:125).

- The Character Builder

Edward Murrow (in Kouzes & Posner, 1999:15) believes that, to be persuasive, an effective school principal must be believable, credible, and truthful. He/she is a role model whose values, words, and deeds are marked by trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity, respect, generosity, and humility (McEvan, 2003:139).

- The Contributor

Sergiovanni (1992:46) states the importance of the school principal's personality, and equally important the leader's ability to establish a climate of trust and a sense of

integrity in his/her ideas. Without ideas, values, and commitments, there can be no followership. Without followership, there can be no leadership (Sergiovanni, 1996:85). The effective school principal is a servant-leader, encourager, and enabler whose utmost priority is making contributions to the success of others (McEvan, 2003:115). School principals are key elements in creating an effective school climate where learners learn, improve, grow, and achieve their goals efficiently. Creating a collaborative environment and open communication is a critical factor for successful school improvement. Many schools are not blessed with principals that are contributors, activators, envisioners and producers. Some school principals are stuck with excuses, hostility, abuse, and low achievement (Blase & Blase, 2002:56). There are a lot of school principals who do not listen to their followers and do not seem to believe that they need a "servant's heart" in order to effectively manage the school. They seem to care more about their careers than their learners, teachers and parents.

In reflecting on these ten traits of an effective school principal, it is important to note that every school principal has the potential to learn, to grow, and to change. These traits for effective principalship can be learned and practised to the point of instinctive response by school principals at any point along the continuum of their career, whether aspiring, novice, or even experienced school principals who are weary and want to make a difference in the primary school setting.

Research from the 1970s and early 1980s, shows that the key to high learner achievement in schools is strong administrative leadership and instructional leadership (Sammons, Thomas, Mortimore, Cairns & Bausor, 1998:287). Effective communication is positively related to learners' achievement, attitudes, and social behaviour. In relation to the ten traits of school principal effectiveness as determined by McEvan (2003) school principals of high-achieving schools are effective in the following areas (Cotton, 2000:67):

- Safe and orderly school environment

Effective school principals involve others, including learners, in setting standards for learner behaviour (Cotton, 2000:68).   Effective school principals communicate high expectations for behaviour; they apply rules consistently from day to day and from learner to learner.   They expect teachers to handle most disciplinary matters, and they provide in-school suspension with support for seriously disruptive learners. They foster a sense of responsibility in learners for appropriate behaviour and work to create an environment that encourages such behaviours (Sammons et al., 1998:286).

- Vision and goals focused on high levels of learners' learning

Effective school principals work with parents, teachers and learners to establish a vision of the ideal school and clear goals related to the vision (Mendez-Morse, 1991:3).   They continually emphasize the academic goals of the school and the importance of learning.

- High expectations for learner achievement

Successful and effective school principals expect and encourage their teachers to expect all learners to reach their learning potential (Butler, 1997:30).   Nothing improves a learner's self-esteem better than academic success. Effective school principals ensure that learners understand that teachers believe in their abilities (Cotton, 2000:68).

- Visibility and accessibility

Black (1997:34), reports that school principals maintain an accessible and inviting office and that they use humour to help teachers, parents, and learners feel comfortable in their presence.   Most important, effective school principals in primary schools are a frequent presence in classrooms, observing and interacting with learners and teachers (Black, 1997:34).

- Communication and interaction

Effective school principals not only share information, but also listen and take the suggestions from teachers, parents and learners (Gaziel, 1995:186). Wendel, Hoke & Joekel, (1996:155) found that successful school principals use communication skills to build close relationships and use relationships to extend communication patterns. When hiring new staff, effective school principals seek people with communication skills.

- Parent-community outreach and involvement

Effective school principals interact with parents and the community to communicate their vision for their school, get constituent input, and make certain that the resulting goals are broadly understood (Cotton, 2004:94). They engage parents and the community members as classroom helpers, have schools serve as community centres, and encourage parents to work with their children on instructional activities at home. Johnson and Asera (1999:43) describe that school principals made efforts to win the confidence and respect of primary school parents, primarily by improving the achievement of learners in that they build strong partnerships with parents in support of learner development.

- High levels of learners' learning

Effective school principals are at the centre of curricular and instructional improvements within their schools (Cotton, 2004:74). School principals who are knowledgeable about and actively involved with their school's instructional programme have higher-achieving learners than school principals who manage only the non-instructional aspects of their school (Johnson & Asera, 1999:22). Successful school principals recognise the need for innovation, change, and continuous improvement through collaborative efforts to enhance teaching and learning (Wendel et.al.1996:128).

- Monitoring learners' progress and shared feelings

The frequent and careful monitoring of learners' academic progress as one of the major attributes of effective school principals in the primary school (Cotton, 2000:68). Monitoring includes both those efforts personally conducted by the administration staff and those the school principal undertake to ensure that teachers are tracking their learners' learning.

Effective school principals ensure that there are systematic procedures for monitoring learner progress at both school wide and classroom levels (Cotton, 2004:95). School principals ensure that data are disaggregated to monitor the progress of specific cultural groups. They also communicate findings to everyone in the school community.

- Use of student data for program improvement

Effective school principals not only monitor and report learners' progress data, but they also ensure that findings are used to improve the instructional program (Bartell, 1990:125). Bartell also found that effective school principals know how to interpret learners' performance data, and they review and use it as a basis for plans for improvement. Mendez-Morse (1991:3) found that school principals use data to focus attention on improving the curriculum or instructional approach to maximize learner achievement and determine teachers' development activities that strengthen teachers' instructional skills. To monitor progress and utilise data is not about addressing needs only. Johnson and Asera (1999:22) report that school principals use data to identify, acknowledge, and celebrate strengths.

The importance of the school principal's role in fostering communication could not be overstated. Evidence clearly shows that through working with parents, teachers, learners and the community, primary school principals have a profound and positive influence on day-to-day communication with parents, teachers, and learners for the sake of optimal learner development (Cotton, 2004:74).

3.5   CONCLUSION

Effective communication is essential to creating strong home-school partnerships and to increase parent involvement. Just as teachers are skilled in the art of teaching, they should also require knowledge and skills to effectively communicate with their parent community. Importantly, teachers should note that communication is rarely a discrete, individual act but rather occurs within the context of ongoing exchanges (Adler & Rodman, 1994:5). Thus, teachers should strive to use a variety of effective strategies to make communication with parents as informative as possible, incorporating new communication methods and yet retaining the human touch. Every communication exchange, regardless of format, should reflect a thoughtful, planned approach and should be viewed as an opportunity for teachers to promote parent partnerships and, to support learners' learning.

Although school success is influenced by many people, school principals remain one of the most important factors in this success. The effect of the school principal on learners' learning cannot be overemphasized. Establishing a safe and secure learning environment and positive, nurturing school climate are merely the first steps in a long series of critically high expectations that effective school principals set for themselves, as well as the educational communities they lead. Most importantly, however, is the love for learning and learners, which is at the heart of every successful principal (Cotton, 2004:14). School principals play an important role in establishing school discipline, both by effective administration and by personal example. Effective school principals are indeed liked and respected, rather than feared.

CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1   INTRODUCTION

According to Wiersma and Jurs (2008:82), the goal of research is to collect information that will answer a postulated research problem or question. This goal is attained only if the research is conceived and executed in such a manner that the information collected is accurate and relevant directly to the question posed.

The main purpose of this study was to analyse how effective communication in primary schools can strengthen parent–teacher relationships to ensure optimal learner development. As was already stated in par 1.4, four sub-questions were formulated that were investigated first so that the solution to these sub-questions could contribute to the solution of the main research question.

The four sub-questions related to the following:

- How do learners benefit from constructive parent–teacher relationships?
- What are the main challenges facing teachers in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships?
- What are the main challenges facing parents to become involved in the education of their children?
- How can school principals manage effective communication to strengthen parent–teacher relationships?

The methods that were used to collect data, together with the methods used to analyse and interpret the collected data, are discussed in this chapter. The research sample with sampling procedures are elicited and the way in which trustworthiness and transferability were accounted for are treated. Finally, the adherence to ethical measures is explained.

4.2   RESEARCH DESIGN

According to McMillan (2007:14), research design represents the major methodological thrust of the study.   Being the distinctive and specific approach with this study, the research design describes the plan of action best suited to answer the research questions. In this regard, the research design encapsulates the way in which the study is conducted and the procedures and techniques employed to shed light on the research problem by answering the research question. Cohen and Manion (1997:14) and Bogdan (2007:15) analyse the research design as the consideration of methods to be used to collect data and the creation of procedures and techniques in obtaining and interpreting reliable, objective, generalised and valid data by means of which formal announcements about the phenomenon may be confirmed or rejected.

To satisfy the information needs of any study, an appropriate methodology has to be selected as well as suitable tools for data collection (Wiersma & Jurs, 2008:10; Mouton, 1996:17). Primarily, there are two distinct approaches that inform the gathering of data in any research project, namely the qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Qualitative and quantitative research approaches are governed by specific paradigms and employ specific methodologies.

4.3   QUANTITATIVE VERSUS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Researchers have long debated the relative value of quantitative and qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002:104).   Each of these inquiries represents a fundamentally different research paradigm with researcher actions that are based on the underlying assumptions of and intentions with the research. Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings. Logical positivism, or quantitative research, on the other hand, uses experimental methods and quantitative measures to test hypothetical generalizations. In this regard, Strauss and Corbin (1998:17) defines qualitative research as any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of

quantification. Where quantitative researchers seek causal determination, prediction, and generalisation of findings, qualitative researchers instead seek illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situations (Merriam, 2009:15). The outcome is that qualitative analysis results in a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of study than does quantitative inquiry.

A qualitative research paradigm was employed for this study owing to the fact that the researcher used a naturalistic approach for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of study, namely the role communication plays in strengthening parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

4.4   QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Of the many considerations to adopt a qualitative research methodology, the consideration of Strauss and Corbin (1998:19) is an important one, namely that qualitative methods are the best to use for a deep understanding of a phenomenon about which little is yet known. Qualitative research methodology can, however, also be used to gain new perspectives on things about which much is already known, or to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to achieve with quantitative measures. Qualitative methods are also appropriate in situations where one needs to first identify the variables that might later be tested quantitatively, or where the researcher has determined that quantitative measures cannot adequately describe or interpret a situation (McMillan, 2007:17). Research problems treated from a qualitative perspective tend to be framed as open-ended questions that will support discovery of new and in-depth information.

With the consideration of the value of a deep understanding of phenomena, the researcher focused on real-world situations as they unfolded naturally with this study and therefore chose to use a qualitative research paradigm. In this regard, Patton (2002:104) emphasises that an important characteristic of qualitative research is the study of real-world situations as they unfold naturally. A study of the natural unfolding of

such real-world situations implies a non-manipulative and non-controlling scenario with openness to whatever emerges. As qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with process, rather than outcomes and with an openness to adapt inquiry as the understanding of the studied phenomena deepened, or as situations that are studied changed, qualitative research methodology proved to be the most suitable for this study. Apart from the flexibility of adapting to situations that change, Patton (2002:104) notes a flexibility of design. This occurs through an openness of adapting and remoulding the inquiry due to a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon with new insights gained as data is collected. In this way, it remains possible to examine new areas of learning as they present themselves during the investigation (Patton, 2002:104).

With this study, the researcher studied real world situations as they unfolded naturally in the primary school setting without controlling or manipulating situations or participants and by accepting and accommodating any change that emerged during the time of investigation. The researcher was receptive when she conducted the interviews. This resulted in unplanned questions, additional to the questions captured in an interview schedule. The unplanned questions served as prompts to collect data which provided broader and deeper information on the studied phenomenon. Not only did the researcher's understanding of the studied phenomenon increase as new insights were gained, but a new perspective on the role of the participants in the conducted study emerged.

Another important feature of qualitative research is the fact that the researcher has direct contact with the participants and research sites and in that regard got close to the people and situations involved in the phenomenon under study. Patton (2002:105) notes that the researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry to understanding the phenomenon under study. The researcher was interested in understanding how participants interpret their experiences, how they construct their words, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009:5). Owing to the fact that the researcher was familiar with most of the schools' principals, teachers, and parents, qualitative research allowed the researcher to explore

and probe participants' responses to gather more in-depth data about their experiences and insights. The participants willingly shared their attitudes, interests, feelings, concerns and values about the phenomenon under study (Gay & Airasian, 2008:209). The researcher was self-analytical, politically aware and was reflective about her own voice and perspective in order to convey authenticity and trustworthiness.

Qualitative research pertains to a unique case orientation in that each individual case in terms of participants and research sites is valued and therefore closely examined, with the aim of thoroughly capturing the details of each specific case (Merriam, 2009:7). Such a capturing of single case detail is followed by cross case analysis through a process of comparison to determine similarities and differences in order to gain relevant insights on the studied phenomenon. Apart from the unique case orientation, qualitative research also entails a holistic perspective in that the whole phenomenon is studied as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts. In this regard the focus with qualitative research is then on the complex interdependencies of matter and situations and on the influence which system dynamics have on these matter and situations and which cannot meaningfully be reduced to a few discrete variables and linear, case-effective relationships (Gay & Airasian, 2008:201).

With a consideration of all the features of a qualitative research paradigm discussed, it was apparent to the researcher that it was the best option for the study on the role communication plays in strengthening parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development in primary schools.

4.5   RESEARCH SAMPLING

The research sample consists of individuals that are selected from a larger group of persons, known as the research population (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2009:272).

Participant selection depends on the purpose of the study. Ary *et al* (2009:273) suggest however that the compilation of the research sample should always adhere to the criterion of being representative of the research population. Apart from a consideration of purpose of study with participant selection, the number of the participants selected will depend on the objectives of the research (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2011:197).

The research population for this study comprised a Southern California School District. Based on convenience and familiarity, four primary schools within the Ocean View School District were selected as research site. Southern California School Districts are of several varieties, usually a Unified District, which includes all of the primary and high schools in the same geographic area. Primary School Districts include schools with kindergarten to grade six or kindergarten to grade eight only. Ocean View School District consists of twelve primary schools and three high schools within the same geographic area. There are two County Offices of Education in the Ocean View School District that is led by a superintendent and a board of trustees selected by parents within the district. The Ocean View Board of Trustees together with the Superintendent focus on policy making, planning, and evaluation, for learner success. The County Offices operate transparently and ensure accurate communication to all stakeholders.

According to the Superintendent, the Ocean View School District is an educational community with a long history of excellence in education. It is committed to providing learners with academic programmes and classroom instruction of the highest quality (Rasmussen, 2010:1). Ocean View Primary Schools provide a strong emphasis on achieving proficiency and excellence in the areas of literacy, mathematics and all core areas of the curriculum such as their reading program that ensures learners read more than ten books every year. They are also committed to providing opportunities which expand and broaden the scope of learning for all learners. The district's high expectations for learners and positive opinion of the staff are reflected in high Academic Performance Index (API) scores and learner performance levels. The API is a measurement of academic performance and progress of individual schools in California. Ocean View Schools are frequent recipients of many local, state, and federal awards

and honours, including recognition as California Distinguished Schools and National Blue Ribbon Schools.

It is clear that the research population for this study comprised a school district that is located in a community that understands and values the importance of education. The school district has parents who make education a priority in their homes. The external community also values and recognises the importance of preparing their learners to be contributing members of society. As mentioned earlier on in this paragraph, these schools were selected on the basis that they were accessible to the researcher, thus typifying the sampling procedure as convenient (Wiersma & Stephen, 2008:219). Apart from accessibility, the research sites were also selected in anticipation of collecting information rich data on proper parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner progress. In selecting the participants that were involved in effective communication on a daily basis, rich and illuminative information emerged because of participants' insight in the phenomenon of the study.

The participants were purposefully selected which relates to selecting participants for a particular purpose based on particular indicators (Bogdan, 2007:143). The indicators related to an involvement in active communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development. Participants were also selected because they were information rich and illuminative, that is, they offered useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest (Bogdan, 2007:143). In line with what was already discussed in 1.6.2.1 participants meeting this criterion were the four school principals of the selected Ocean View primary schools because of their pivotal involvement in and management of effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships in their selected schools. Eight teachers, two per school, were selected as participants. Together, they were in charge of organising and co-coordinating communication on a daily basis with parents within the school district regarding the learning, participation, and school work activities of their children. Eight parents, two from each school, were selected as participants. They were active participants in the Parent Teacher and Learner Organization (PTSO) in school communication programmes and they actively participated in strengthening parent-

teacher relationships on a daily basis. Seven learners, one from each grade, were selected from the four schools as participants. The learners were selected after the group interviews with parents on the basis that their parents are active participants in daily communication with the school so as to strengthen parent-teacher relationships. Owing to their parents' active involvement, learner participants were exposed to healthy home-to-school and school-to-home communication on a daily basis and in that regard they were involved in the "what", "why" and "how" of improved learning activities due to proper parent-teacher communication. A total of 27 participants took part in the empirical investigation.

4.6   DATA COLLECTION

To satisfy the information needs of any research or study, an appropriate methodology has to be selected and suitable tools for data collection have to be chosen (Mouton, 1996:32). Linked to what was already discussed in par. 4.4, the qualitative research design was considered appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to personally administer semi-structured interviewing. By referring to interview schedules to ensure that all relevant aspects are dealt with during interviewing, sufficient data were collected to answer the research questions.

4.6.1   Interviews of a semi-structured nature

Interviews of a semi-structured nature entails that the researcher has a list of questions on specific topics to be covered within the interview. Such questions and/or topics are included in an interview guide which the researcher refers to while conducting the interview. The interviewer has, however, a considerable deal of leeway in how to utilise the interview schedule during the interview (Kornuta & Germaine, 2006:126). Questions may not necessarily follow the exact order as is stipulated in the interview schedule. Prompting questions not included in the guide are asked to follow up on matters for a deeper understanding of the specific issue in relation to the interviewees' responses.

All of the questions included in the interview schedule are, however, addressed which implies that with semi-structured interviews the interviewer does follow a structure to a certain extent (Kornuta & Germaine, 2006:126).

With regard to structured and unstructured interviews, the choice of whether to veer towards one type of interview rather than the other is likely to be affected by a variety of factors (Bryman, 2006:97-113):

- Researchers who are concerned that the use of even the most rudimentary guide will not allow genuine access to the world views of members of a social setting or of people sharing common attributes are likely to favour an unstructured interview.
- If the researcher begins the investigation with a fairly clear focus, rather than a very general notion of wanting to do research on a topic, it is likely that the interviews will be semi-structured, so that the more specific issues can be addressed.
- If more than one person carries out the fieldwork, in order to ensure a modicum of comparability of interviewing style, it is likely that semi-structured interviewing will be preferred.
- It the researcher is doing multiple-case study research, he/she is likely to find that they will need some structure in order to ensure cross-case comparability.

In this study, the researcher applied a semi-structured approach to all the interviews conducted. Because of the specific topic focused on, namely the importance of effective communications in the primary schools to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development, the semi-structured approach was most suitable to ensure that all aspects relating to the topic be covered with each interview.

4.6.2   Focus group interviewing

Wiersma and Jurs (2008:166), defined focus group interviewing to be limited to those situations where the assembled group is small enough to permit genuine discussion among all its members. Ary et al (2009:284) suggest that interviewing more than one person at a time proves very useful in that, for example, young people such as learners need company in order to be emboldened to talk, and some topics are better discussed by a small group of people who know the topic and who know each other. In that regard, focus group interviewing capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data. Although group interviews are often used simply as a quick and convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously, focus group interviewing is a means by which each participant is selected as an authority on the topic under discussion and group interaction is explicitly utilised for valuable data collection (Wiersma & Jurs, 2008:169). The implication is that instead of the researcher asking each person to respond to a question in turn, participants are encouraged to talk to one another asking questions, and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view. This method is particularly useful for exploring participants' knowledge and experiences and could be used to examine not only what they think, but how they think and why they think that way.

In this study on the importance of effective communication in the primary schools to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development, the researcher made use of focus group interviews where the participants (in this case the learners, parents, and teachers) knew each other fairly well. All the teachers and parents are part of the Advisory Committee at the district that meets once a month to discuss the daily operation and planning within the district. Because of the childcare activities when meetings are scheduled, the learners got to know one another. The ease brought about by being familiar with each other contributed to honest responses based on personal experiences which resulted in improved insights and an improved understanding of the phenomenon of study (Patton, 2002:105).

Focus group interviews can be used at any time during a research programme. Steward and Shamdasani (1990:15) and McMillan and Schumacher (2010:201), summarised the more common uses of focus group interviews to include:

- Obtaining general background information about a topic of interest.
- Generating research hypotheses that can be submitted to further research and to testing with the aim of confirming by using more quantitative approaches.
- Stimulating new ideas and creative concepts.
- Diagnosing the potential for problems with a new program or service.
- Generating impressions of interest.
- Learning how the participants talk about the phenomenon of interest which may facilitate quantitative research tools.
- Interpreting previously obtained qualitative results.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010:201), and which is the case with any data collection instrument, there are advantages and disadvantages with regard to using interviewing to collect data. The advantage with interviewing is that it is flexible and adaptable to any kind of situation and types of persons such as, for example, the illiterate or participants that are too young to read and write. Nonverbal as well as verbal behaviour can be noted in face-to-face interviews. The interviewer has an opportunity to motivate and prompt the participant in order to collect more and deeper information. Interviews result in a much higher response rate from participants, especially when topics that are dealt with in the interview concern participants' personal qualities and their negative feelings about the discussed matter (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:210).

Disadvantages of interviewing include the potential for subjectivity and bias and the higher costs involved that relate to the time-consuming nature of conducting and transcribing interviews. The participant may be uncomfortable in the interview and unwilling to report true feelings. The interviewer may ask leading questions to support a

particular point of view or the interviewer's perceptions of what was said may be inaccurate (Barbour, 2008:73).

4.6.3   Individual interviewing

As a formal discussion between the interviewer and the person chosen specifically for the discussion, the individual interview is one of the most widely employed methods in qualitative research (Wiersma & Jurs, 2008:207). The goal is not to represent the population as a whole (as it would be with a quantitative investigation), but rather to gather points of view. The flexibility of individual interviewing makes it attractive for the researcher in that he/she avoids getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness but instead pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge (Patton, 2002:43).

The researcher used individual interviews to collect data from each of the four school principals.

4.6.4   Questioning with interviewing

As was said in paragraph 4.6.1, an interview guide was constructed to refer to during the interviews with participants (Kornuta & Germaine, 2006:126). Included in the interview schedule were all the questions that were asked during interviewing (Annexure B). The questions were related directly to the objectives of the study and although a given sequence was not followed, care was taken to address all questions included in the interview schedule with each interview.

As interview questioning should flow directly from the research questions that are impetus for the research, McMillan and Schumacher (2010:210) suggest two principles to consider in formulating questions to be addressed during an interview:

- Questions must be ordered from the more general to the more specific.

- Questions of greater importance should be placed earlier in the interview schedule while the questions of a lesser significance should be scheduled at the end of the interview schedule.

Kornuta and Germaine (2006:127) note that interviewing may be highly formalised and structured, using standardized questions for each participant or they may be informal and unstructured conversations. In between, there are intermediate positions. One typology commonly used to relate to the level of formality and structure of the interview is thus known as categorising interviews as either structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviews.

Semi-structured, open-ended questions as were applied to this study, allowed participants to answer from a variety of dimensions. Questions were carefully selected and phrased in advance to elicit maximum responses by all participants. McMillan and Schumacher (2010:212) emphasise that questions that include words such as how, why, under what conditions, and similar probes suggest to participants that the researcher is interested in gaining deep knowledge and therefore wants to facilitate discussions constructively. Kornuta and Germaine (2006:128) however, argue that "why" questions should be sparingly used in focus group-interviewing as such questions force participants to provide quick answers that seem rational or appropriate to the situation without contributing to the topic of discussion authentically. Instead, Kornuta and Germaine (2006:128) suggest using closed-ended questions such as "do" or "did" because of their controlling and/or confining quality.

In this study, the researcher started with general questions, moved to more specific questions and then went back to a set of more general questions. This funnel approach (from general to specific) was one way of quickly engaging the interest of the different participants. The researcher made sure that the very important questions of which the answers were anticipated as high frequency towards a solving of the research problem, was asked early in the interview. This arranged for participants to immediately focus on the topic of discussion.

4.6.5   Interview protocol

In this study, the interviewer focused on staying neutral when information was exchanged so that the presence of the interviewer could have no effect on the perceptions or answers of the participants. A few minutes were spent for introduction purposes and on reaching common ground pertaining to what would be dealt with during the interview.   In this regard, the researcher explained the purpose of the interview and asked whether anybody had any questions or concerns. This contributed to the establishment of a proper relationship between the researcher and the participants. The questions were then addressed to the participants in a natural and unforced manner with a reference to the interview schedule to ensure completeness of topic coverage.

The researcher recorded the answers from individual and focus group interviews as the participants responded by means of written notes and voice recording.   Voice recordings were not allowed during individual interviews due to the private policy law in California Schools on cameras and tape recorders (California Health and Safety Code, section11755 of Title 8). With the exception of a television project, performing arts, and school assignment, videotaping, and voice recordings are not permitted in California schools at any time. During the individual interviews, the principals of the four California Schools were aware of the restrictions of voice recording and therefore allowed the researcher enough time between questions to record data by means of written notes. Recording was allowed during the focus group interviews in that the participants were interviewed after school hours in a private venue on the school premises. This method allowed the researcher to collect information optimally (Gay & Airasian, 2008:218). The researcher allowed sufficient time for the participants to answer to avoid anticipating and curing a potential answer. For the purpose of future interviews, questions that resulted in probing in order to gain more clarity and a deeper understanding of the matter under discussion, were noted next to the questions. After everything included in

the interview schedule was addressed, the researcher thanked the participants for their time and prompted them for final questions, comments, or suggestions.

Gay and Airasian (2008:218) suggest that regardless of the method of data collection, the researcher should make field notes to facilitate data analysis. In this study, the researcher took field notes during and after each session.

4.7   DATA ANALYSIS

The object of analysing qualitative data is to determine the categories, relationships and assumptions that inform the participants' view of the world in general and of the topic in particular (Patton, 2002:431). According to Gay and Airasian (2008:219) the analysis of qualitative data is a dynamic, intuitive and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorising in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study and to continually refine interpretations of data collected

Throughout analysis, qualitative researchers attempt to gain a deeper understanding of what they have studied and to continually refine their interpretations (Patton, 2002:431). Gibbs (2007:73) defines analysis as the careful scrutiny of data, line by line, to uncover new concepts and novel relationships and to systematically develop categories in terms of their properties and dimensions. According to Gay and Airasian (2008:219), the object of analysing qualitative data is to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the participants' view of the world in general and of the topic in particular.

Researchers, over the years, have pointed to the complexity of data analysis. Patton (2002:432) warns that there are no short cuts and one must allow plenty of time and energy for the task. Further, the analysis of qualitative data continues throughout the research and is not a separate self-contained phase. Patton (2002:432) points out that we come to qualitative research with whatever understanding of analysis we bring from

previous work, conversations of our respective disciplines and professions, the advice of our mentors and the models we have internalized from whatever we have read.

Merriam (2009:169) used the terms 'data condensation' or 'data distillation' as a description of the eventual outcome of a qualitative analysis, implying that the body of data did not merely become smaller and manageable in the analysis process because there was less to deal with, but was the result of interpretation and organisation. The establishment of categories are viewed as an organising tool and an important part of the outcome. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003:42) suggest that qualitative data analysis consists of three procedures namely:

- Data reduction - this refers to the process whereby the mass of qualitative data you may obtain through interviews, transcripts, field notes or observations is reduced and organised, for example coding, writing summaries and discarding irrelevant data. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003:44) suggest that all irrelevant data previously considered unnecessary, should be accessible if later required as unexpected findings may need to be re-examined.
- Data display - to draw conclusions from the mass of data, Auerbach and Silverstein (2003:44) suggest that a good display of data, in the form of tables, charts, networks and other graphical formats are essential. This is a continual process rather than one to be carried out at the end of the data collection (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003:44).
- Conclusion drawing and verification - the researcher should be able to develop conclusions regarding the study. Initial conclusions can then be verified, that is, their validity examined through reference to existing field notes or further data collection (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003:44).

The analysis of qualitative data continues throughout the research and is not a separate self-contained phase (Gough & Scott, 2000:456). Patton (2002:105) notes that with qualitative data, the emphasis is on detailed inquiry, and relies on direct quotations from participants' personal perspectives and experiences. According to Brink (1999:5), the

aim of data analysis is to reduce and synthesise information to make sense out of it and to allow inference about a population. The aim of interpretation is to combine the results of data analysis with value statements, criteria, and standards in order to produce conclusions, judgements and recommendations (Brink, 1999:5).

Inductive analysis of qualitative data is to immerse oneself in the details of the unfolding data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships. Inductive analysis begins by exploring and ends with confirming and is guided by analytical principles rather than rules and ends with creative synthesis (Merriam, 2009:135). In immersing herself in the details of the unfolding data, the researcher discovered hidden dimensions and interrelationships and examined open questions. This characteristic of qualitative research appealed to the researcher as a refreshing way to gain insight into the phenomenon.

According to Best and Kahn (2003:259), the method of organising data will differ, depending on the research strategy and data collection techniques used. The researcher used the model of Tesch and the Strauss and Corbin (1998:19) approach to analyse the qualitatively collected data. As was said in par. 1.6.2.3, the first step in Tesch and Strauss and Corbin's data analysis and data interpretation approaches requires the open coding of transcribed data. Each interview was read and re-read to ensure an overview of the contextual data. Codes were selected on sentence level. Axial coding was the second step in that the related codes were categorised and categories named by using the data as a guideline for labelling purposes.

4.7.1   Data coding and the emerging of categories

Raw data can be very interesting to look at, yet they do not help the reader to understand the social world under scrutiny, and the way the participants view it, unless such data has been systematically analysed to illuminate an existing situation (Gibbs, 2007:73). Coding or categorising the data has an important role in analysis. It involves subdividing the data as well as assigning categories (Gibbs, 2007:73). Codes or

categories are tags or labels for allocating units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to chunks of varying-sized words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. They can take the form of a straightforward category label or a more complex one, for example, a metaphor (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003: 42). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003:42) view the role of coding as noticing relevant phenomena in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns and structures.

For this study, the researcher used categorisation to include the themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews' data. As the researcher determined themes that emerged from the interpreted data, questions were constantly asked as to whether the information was relevant to an answering of the research question. For each theme that emerged, a code was given as labelling purpose in order to determine the most high frequency themes. For example: to one of the questions included in the interview schedule for school principals, namely "Of all the factors raised, which are the most important?" (Annexure B), the majority of participant school principals answered: "honesty and individual communication." This became evident with similar coding for similar responses.

In each case, the researcher looked for differences and similarities in the data (Poggenpoel, 1998:335) in order to establish whether there was a concept that could unite them. The researcher noted only themes that were common in all cases as responses of participants in all interviews conducted. The researcher considered the information from each interview. The technique of open coding enabled the researcher to code each piece of data into as many themes as could possibly be represented. Differences and commonalities were included to ensure that the researcher retained all the unique context of each case and that all the data were interpreted within the context (Poggenpoel, 1998:336).

4.7.2   Processing interview data

With regard to the generating of qualitative meaning from interview data, Miles and Huberman (2002:283) identified the following procedure:

- Counting frequencies of occurrence of themes
- Noting patterns of themes, which may stem from repeated themes.
- Seeing plausibility – trying to make good sense of data, using informed intuition to reach conclusions.
- Clustering which implies setting items into categories.
- Identifying and noting relations between themes.
- Building a logical chain of evidence – noting causality and making inferences.
- Making conceptual coherence – moving from constructs to theories to explain phenomena.

For the purpose of this study, data gathered from the focus group and individual interviews were analysed according to a combination of the aforementioned processes which pertained to the following:

- The researcher read the data from each interview without writing anything down.
- The researcher read the data a second time and noted the themes and patterns that transpired from the collected data.
- The researcher then wrote down the themes as categories as they appeared in each data set. These themes were laid out on a chart so that the information from each case was visible. The researcher then developed codes for these themes that were related to the research question.
- Using the codes for each theme, the researcher went back to the data sets and coded the relevant segments in each theme.
- The researcher prepared the codes for each theme and excerpts taken from each data set related to the theme. For example, in each case of interview data,

the researcher included words that each participant used in their answers to the questions.

- From the data based on the themes, the researcher constructed answers to the relevant research questions.

4.8   TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSFERABILITY

The aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the research findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1990:290; Wiersma & Jurs, 2008:267). In any qualitative research project, four issues of trustworthiness demand attention, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the participants' original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1990:296; Wiersma & Jurs, 2008:268). Transferability is the degree to which the findings of this inquiry can be applied or transferred beyond the bounds of the research. Dependability is an assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. Conformability is a measure of how well the researcher's findings are supported by the data collected (Wiersma & Jurs, 2008:268). The researcher accounted for trustworthy evidence that was credible, transferable, dependable, and conformable in that data collection was enhanced by the researcher's openness for different meanings attached to reality.

4.9   ETHICAL MEASURES

Researchers should be aware of ethical responsibilities and legal constraints that accompany the gathering and reporting of information in such a way to protect the rights and welfare of the participants involved in the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:136). Leedy and Ormond (2001:56) claims that most ethical issues in research fall into one of four categories such as informed consent, right to privacy, protection from harm, and honesty with all participants.   Using this framework, the ethical issues

inherent in this research are discussed next, together with the methods to address these issues.

4.9.1 Informed consent

The school community was informed in March 2010, that the research was being conducted and participants were invited to express any concerns they might have about the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants participating in this study (Appendix A).

4.9.2 Right to privacy

The following measures were put into place to protect participants from harm and to ensure participants' rights to privacy (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:136):

- Confidentiality was ensured through the aggregation of data, and every attempt was made to maintain anonymity so that participants could not be identified.
- Only the researcher had access to focus group interviews, so that voices could not be recognised on audiotape due to the privacy laws of the California School Districts.
- All paper documents were kept securely in the researcher's office.

4.9.3 Protection from harm

Individual and focus group interviews elicit information about participants' values, attitudes and behaviour and therefore needed to be protected from harm, real or perceived (Wiersma & Jurs, 2008:166). The researcher showed understanding without judgement and showed respect to all participants. The researcher was responsive, sensitive and aware of any situations that could be harmful to all participants.

4.9.4   Honesty

When the researcher is a participant, there is a particular need to demonstrate to the research community that the research findings are trustworthy (Smith & Holian, 1999:1). Because of the researcher's involvement as a teacher in the research community, the reporting of the research findings to an external audience and issues of validity such as bias and subjectivity, were addressed in order to safeguard the research against possible claims of bias emanating from the researcher's position within the school.

4.10   CONCLUSION

With reference to Fouché (2005:47) and as was clear from this chapter, the research design represents a blueprint, detailed plan on how to conduct a research study. It was apparent that the research design ensured that there was a functional structure for the manner in which data was collected and analysed and with clear guidelines on the procedure to be followed in the interpretation of data. With this chapter, the research design and research methodology of the present study was explained. It was clear that a qualitative research approach is the best research approach to enable the researcher to understand the phenomenon of study, namely the role that communication plays to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development in primary schools.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS OF THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

5.1   INTRODUCTION

Chapter five reports on the research findings of the empirical investigation conducted to address the research problem and the accompanying research sub-questions outlined in par 1.4 and repeated in par 4.1. The primary aim of the study was to investigate the role of communication in strengthening parent-teacher relationships to ensure optimal learner development in primary school.   The literature study that was conducted in Chapter Two and Chapter Three partially addressed the four sub-questions outlined in par. 4.1. The first sub-question, "How do learners benefit from constructive parent–teacher relationships?" was partially addressed in par. 2.5. Views gathered through the collection of data from the participants were thus analysed, compared, interpreted and discussed in this chapter. The second and third sub-questions namely, "What are the main challenges facing teachers in arranging constructive parent–teacher relationships?" and "What are the main challenges facing parents to become involved in the education of their children?" were discussed in par. 2.4 and par. 2.6 consecutively. The fourth sub-question: "How can school principals manage effective communication to strengthen parent–teacher relationships?" was discussed in par. 3.4.

For a deeper, contextually based understanding of the phenomenon under study, an empirical investigation was conducted to further address the research questions. The presentation of the empirical research findings are based on a scientific analysis of the collected data and an interpretation and evaluation of the analysed data. The data were collected from the individual interviews with participant principals and the focus group interviews with participant teachers, participant parents and participant learners. Views gathered through the collection of data from the participants are thus analysed, compared, interpreted and discussed in this chapter to further provide answers to the postulated research questions.

5.2   RESEARCH SITE PROFILES

The four primary schools at the Ocean View School District representing the research sites for this study (par 1.6.2.1; par 4.5) are distinguished as schools, A, B, C and D. Ocean View school District has two national schools of excellence. The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program honours schools that are either academically superior or that demonstrate dramatic gains in learner achievement. The National Blue Ribbon Award is considered the highest honour that a school can achieve. School A and school C have been recognised as Blue Ribbon Schools.

Another programme that identifies and honours the state exemplary and inspiring public schools is the California Distinguished School Award. The award is highly sought after by schools in all regions of the state. Approximately five percent of California's public schools are selected each year. The duration of the distinguished school honour is four years. In order to be invited to apply for Distinguished School honours, schools must meet a variety of eligibility criteria including designated federal and state accountability measures based on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and the Academic Performance Index (API) requirements. Fourteen of the fifteen schools in the Ocean View School District have been recognised as outstanding schools by the state of California. School B and school D are distinguished primary schools.

The NASA Explorer School (NES) project links educators and learners to resources and facilities that are normally beyond reach in the public school system. This direct contact plays an integral part in impacting individual learners and entire school communities. NES connects NASA to communities at a personal level that allows learners, teachers, parents, administrators and the local community to experience and interact with NASA. Educators and learners in a NASA Explorer School become involved in the excitement of NASA research, discoveries and missions through participation in engaging NASA learning adventures and scientific challenges. Ocean View School District is proud to have school D as NASA Explorer School as one of their outstanding schools.

The four schools in the Ocean View School District are multicultural in that there are Mexican, Asian, European, and American learners. Even though all these learners have different home languages, for example, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, French, and English, communication from school-to-home in all Ocean View schools are in Spanish and English due to the high percentage of learners as well as parents that speak those languages. Instruction at all schools is given only in English. The combination of representative cultures in each school is as follows:

Table 5.1 Representative cultures

School	Number of learners	English	Spanish	Other
A	590	49%	45%	6%
B	523	40%	42%	18%
C	497	46%	45%	9%
D	529	45%	46%	9%

All schools in the Ocean View School District follow the same teacher-learner ratio to ensure effective instruction. Kindergarten, first and second grade teacher-learner ratio is 20-1. All other grades including special education have a teacher-learner ratio of 30/35-1. Table 5.2 explains teacher representation from different culture groups.

Table 5.2 Teacher culture representation

School	Number of teachers	English	Spanish	Other
A	31	82%	9%	9%
B	28	92%	8%	0%
C	30	73%	18%	9%
D	29	94%	6%	0%

Bilingual teachers are able to assist learners that speak other languages. Apart from teachers, each participant school has two speech and language specialists on site. All incoming learners that can speak more than one language need to be tested by the speech and language specialists in order to know if they need any assistance in English. Schools provide weekly one-hour assistance to learners that have trouble communicating with teachers and learners.

5.3   PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS

The American system of education differs from that of other countries in many aspects, but especially with regard to its decentralized nature (Rose, 2009:2). In many countries in the world such as for example Asia, education is very centralised. This implies that the Ministry of Education of the central Asian government controls education provisioning and that all schools simply carry out the policy, curriculum, and regulations established by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry is in charge of teacher preparation, teacher licensing, teacher recruitment, teacher appointment, and teacher dismissal for all the schools in the Asian nation. There is one uniform curriculum and one set of text books for all Asian learners.

The American educational system is different (Rose, 2009:2) in that parents should understand the structure of public schools to help their children make appropriate decisions concerning their education. The Constitution of the United States of America does not vest the power to control education in the central (federal) government. The states have reserved powers to regulate civil matters, police, and education. Therefore, the U.S. Department of Education does not have direct control of the local school or school district. Based on a school-based management approach, all schools in the district are directly controlled by the school board, elected by the local citizens which include the parents. This board is also called The Board of Trustees or Board of Education. The power of education belongs to the state, but the state delegates the administration of the schools to the school board for day-to-day operations and policy-making. Because the control of the local schools is in the hands of the school board,

elected by the local people, education is controlled by local people, including parents. They have the right and obligation to be involved in their child's education and contribute to the betterment of the local school for the benefit of their children (Rose, 2009:2). Attendance of all public schools in America is free of charge as are all textbooks and other school supplies.

Learner academic success is greatly enhanced when teachers and parents are partners in the education process. Teachers play an integral role in the education success of learners in that, apart from parents, teachers may be the adults that have the most significant impact on learners. Therefore, effective parent-teacher relationships are important for learners and parents in understanding the American school structure in order to help make appropriate decisions concerning children's education.

In addition to what was said in par. 4.5 on research sampling, participants were carefully selected based on indicators that relate to an environment in which active parent-teacher communication prevails so as to strengthen relationships for optimal learner development. As was stated in par. 4.5, four public schools from the Ocean View School District were selected as they offered useful manifestations of the phenomenon of study. The four public schools were selected because of their demographic location in that they were all governed by the same district office. The local school district has more bargaining power to increase student achievement for all learners than any other point in the education system in that the superintendent and other educational leaders have profound influence on their districts as holistic systems. The district sets policies, practices, and direction that determine the quality of teaching and learning. It also provides the connective tissue between schools, the state, and federal governments. As such, the district is a key lever of systemic, sustainable change at scale.

In this study, the four public schools were distinguished as schools A, B, C, and D (par 5.2). The principals of the four research sites are all highly qualified females with master's degrees in either management or administration depending in which state they had studied. For example, in California, teachers acquire a master's degree in

education management and in Arizona they acquire a master's degree in education administration. The two degrees are, however, similar. The principals of the four research sites are distinguished in the study as Principal A, Principal B, Principal C, and Principal D. Principal A has ten years of teaching experience and five years of management experience in public primary schools and is part of the District Advisory Committee on curriculum advisement and implementation. Principal B has seven years teaching experience and two years primary school management experience. Principal C has ten years of teaching experience which she had obtained prior to working in the private sector. After working in the private sector, she returned to public education, where she obtained six years of management experience. Principal D has four years of teaching experience and one year of management experience. Considered comprehensively, all participant principals have forty five years of teaching or management experience among the four of them.

Eight teachers, two from each school, were chosen because of their involvement in the District Advisory Committee, where they represented their school in advising, planning, and connecting all schools, parents and the community (par 4.5). These teachers met once a month at the district offices to discuss all relevant information that would be sent out to the rest of the school district. It was apparent that these teachers would be able to contribute by providing valuable information to the phenomenon of study.   These participant teachers are distinguished in the study as Teacher A1, Teacher A2, Teacher B1, Teacher B2, Teacher C1, Teacher C2, Teacher D1 and Teacher D2.

The selection of the eight participant parents, two from each school were based on the criterion of their representing the local parent corps of their different schools to serve with the selected two teachers of their school on the District Advisory Committee (par 4.5). Parents are nominated and chosen through an annual election to represent parents on the Advisory Committee. Parents that are nominated must belong to the Parent, Teacher, and Learner Organisation (PTSA) of their schools where they gain experience in organising school and classroom activities and working together with teachers to involve parents in daily activities in school. In this study, the parents are

distinguished as Parent A1, Parent A2, Parent B1, Parent B2, Parent C1, Parent C2, Parent D1 and Parent D2.

Because of the participant parents' active involvement in their children's learning process and in school functioning in general, the researcher asked permission to interview the participant parents' children in order to find answers to the specific benefits for learners when their parents are involved in their schooling. Seven learners, one from each grade, were selected as participants. As was said in par. 4.5, these seven learners were selected and a focus group interview conducted with them directly after the scheduled focus group interviews with the parents. These learners participated in daily home-to-school and school-to-home communication and therefore had a clear understanding of the benefits for themselves because of their parents' active involvement and effective communication with their teachers. Learners were distinguished as Learner A1, Learner A2, Learner B1, Learner B2, Learner C1, Learner C2 and Learner D1. As was pointed out in paragraphs 1.6 and 4.4, all participants were purposefully selected based on their active involvement in a functional programme of strengthened parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

5.4   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

With reference to the various interview schedules (Annexure B), six categories emerged from the encoded data collected via individual and focus group interviewing. These categories represent different aspects pertaining to parent involvement and the importance of arranging for the successful involvement of parents in their children's learning. The six categories related to the following: the benefits of parent involvement for learners, challenges facing teachers in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships, challenges facing parents to get involved in their children's learning, qualities of principals who are successful in arranging effective parent involvement, the role of communication in effective parent-teacher relationships, and parents as volunteers with regard to strengthening effective parent-teacher relationships. These six categories are discussed next.

5.4.1 The benefits of parent involvement for learners

The first objective with this qualitative investigation as stated in par. 1.5 was to determine how learners benefit from constructive parent involvement. From the responses of the participant parents the evidence of positive effects was clear in that all four school principals recognised the increase in self-esteem that learners show when their parents are involved in their schooling. Principal A pointed out that primary school learners love to be with their parents. It gives them the satisfaction that '*mom/dad is always there to answer their questions*' (Principal A). Principal A further pointed to the dedication of her school's parents in that one of the parents at her school, for example, is a medical doctor who chooses to volunteer to assist with classroom activities on a Wednesday afternoon rather than to play golf with colleagues and friends. This, for Principal A shows the importance of family values at her school.

In School B, the Student Environmental Learning Facility (SELF), a two acre 'farm', is used by parents and learners to integrate and extend learning through real-life experiences. Learners gain information about plants, farm animals, and the environment through their personal experiences and the reading and active researching of various environmental related topics. Parents and learners work side-by-side with staff members in their mutual tending of the 'farm' during weekends and summer breaks. This contributes to an improvement of communication between stakeholders and a strengthening of parent-child, child-teacher and parent-teacher relationships, all for the sake of optimal learner development. Principal B pointed to the improvement in learners' and parents' social skills and their ability to effectively adjust to their school environment with this unique learning environment. For a participant parent, an important added benefit of the SELF program for learners is the fact that learners '*learn responsibility through caring'* (Parent B1).

Principal C pointed out that with parent involvement, learners feel comfortable in their school setting and their communication skills improve to such an extent that *'they feel*

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comfortable to communicate with other learners and with members of the community' (Principal C). With regard to learners with special needs and learning disabilities, Principal A believed that involved parents make it easy for learners to adjust to their school environment to the extent of being optimally accepted by other learners.

The fact that learners of involved parents feel loved by their parents and that these learners consider themselves to be important to their parents was something that teacher A1 emphasised. When parents are directly involved in their children's education on a daily basis, *'it gives them a feeling of self-worth that brings about self-discipline'* (Teacher A1). The same teacher also pointed out that when parents are involved, the parents can monitor their child's behaviour and progress on a daily basis because of their presence. Teacher participants from school A and B pointed out that parents understand the school culture when they are involved and it makes the learning process successful. Teacher D1 acknowledged the fact that parents that are involved in the District Advisory Committee, contribute to a refining of the curriculum content in that they are involved in the decision making of what they want their children to learn. These parents not only contribute to a revision of the curriculum in the beginning of the year, '*they make decisions on what books the learners will read during the year'* (Teacher D1). The same teacher explained that parents are accordingly able to provide an input to the extension of their children's interests in literature so as to add to their knowledge in general and therefore, with the help of teachers, bring numerous choices with regard to valuable literature that result in quality provisioning.

One hampering effect with regard to parent involvement was, however, pointed out during the focus group interview with the teachers. For Teacher D2, it is sometimes a challenge to liaise with parents who tend to become too overwhelming in their involvement with their children's education. This sometimes occurs to such an extent that over ambitious parents actually attempt to take over the teacher's role regarding the schooling of their children. Every teacher has a parent (room mom) that assists on a daily basis with administrative tasks and communication with the parent corps. Teacher D2 pointed out that '*it could put more stress on the teachers if the parents do not know*

their place in school'. Principal B acknowledged that not all teachers are fully capacitated to actively and effectively involve parents on a daily basis. To have the assistance of a parent in the classroom on a daily basis is, however, beneficial to all learners because it results in learners enjoying more instruction time with their teacher. For that reason '*it is important that teachers consolidate with other teachers in how to handle overwhelming and difficult parents'* (Principal B).

Participant parents had consensus that being involved in their children's schooling has many benefits for themselves and their children. One such benefit pertains to the fact that parents involved with their children are well known at school by other learners. This results in improved self-images for the children of involved parents in that these learners have no problem in communicating with fellow learners in the classroom or with fellow learners in school. Parent A1 attributed this improved self-esteem to the fact that her child '*feels save in the school environment knowing that her mother is there'.* The same parent pointed out that her child's test scores improved because she as the mother was able to assist her daughter more constructively with her homework because of a better understanding of what was being taught. This supports Principal A's opinion that the children of involved parents feel secure because of the assurance that they can approach their parents for assistance whenever needed. Parent B2 felt strongly about the fact that parents who have children with special needs should become actively involved in their children's school activities and they should liaise very closely with their children's teachers. Her own child was diagnosed with autism and due to her close liaison with her child's teacher, parent B2 emphasised as follows: '*I explained my child's condition to the teachers and learners and told them what the effects of autism are… now I am not afraid that my child will be bullied by other learners'.* The result was that her child's behaviour improved at home and at school because '*my child knows that everybody accepts him'* (Parent B2).

From the focus group interview with the learners it was evident that participant learners all had a healthy self-esteem. Learner A2 pointed to the value of parents organising all social events such as, for example, the annual Halloween Parade. Owing to teachers'

hectic work schedules they do not have sufficient time to arrange social events properly. The benefit for learners is that '*parents go to town*' (Learner A2) in arranging these events which results in '*much fun and joy*' (Learner B2) for the learners. With regard to self-esteem due to parent involvement, learner C2 pointed out that she is very proud of her mom and everybody at school loves her mom '*because my mom reads to my class on Mondays and she makes funny voices when she reads.*' Learner D1 mentioned that his parents are never at home to help him with his homework or any other questions he might have concerning his schooling.

It was clear to the researcher that the benefits of parents' involvement in their children's schooling not only improves the children's morale, attitudes and academic achievement across all subject areas, but it also promotes better behaviour and social adjustment at home and at school.

In all of these ways, parent involvement at school benefits children's self-esteem to grow up to be productive and responsible members of society. When parents are involved in their children's schooling either at home or at school, they create a partnership between themselves and the school. The resulting partnerships manifest in developing effective communication with regard to home-to-school and school-to-home arrangements. Through communication, parents share information and resources regarding the learners and together these efforts connect families and schools to help learners succeed in their education development.

5.4.2 Challenges teachers face to arrange constructive parent-teacher relationships

The second objective with this qualitative study was to determine the challenges facing teachers in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships. It was clear to the researcher that it was becoming more difficult for teachers to get parents involved in their children's schooling due to the decline in the global economy and the impact thereof on parents' available time for school involvement. To increase productivity in

order to counteract declining economy tendencies, parents' daily working hours increased. Teacher B1 pointed out that parents with a low income are increasingly '*under-represented among the ranks of parents involved with their children's schooling'*. The lack of time and energy which working class parents encounter due to long hours of intense physical labour in order to care for their families, makes it difficult for parents to get involved and therefore *'learners need to stay at school for the duration of the day while underpaid teachers take care of the parents' responsibilities with homework assignments and after school care'* (Teacher B1).

Teacher C1 mentioned that less educated parents are sometimes embarrassed to get involved in the schooling of their children due to '*lack of understanding school structure'*. Teacher B1 pointed out that some uneducated parents stand on the side-line and have unrealistic expectations of their children's education in that they assume that the teachers and the school are solely responsible for their children's education. The involvement of parents with such opinions is *'limited and the time they spend at school goes along with negative complaints'* (Teacher B1)*.* The same teacher pointed out that indifferent parents are a big concern in that teachers spend a lot of time and energy to resolve the parents' lack of interest in their children's progress as well as the learners' problems as a result of indifferent parents. Teacher C2 pointed out that *'sideline parents are ignoring behaviour issues and making excuses when it comes to their children'.* In conjunction with Teacher B1's comments on indifferent parents and working class parents who have not enough time and energy to get involved in their children's schooling, teacher C2 acknowledged the fact that where there is no history of societal expectations of parental involvement in schools and the education of their children*, 'educating the child, is treated as an exclusive school prerogative.* Owing to the lack of interest from the side of the parent corps, few parents know what schools expect from them or how they might contribute to their children's schooling. This lack of knowledge acts as a sustained *'barrier to the establishment of high levels of parental involvement'* (Teacher C2).

According to teacher D1, the biggest challenge in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships relates to parents with language barriers that results in such parents being apprehensive to get involved in their children's school activities. Parents from language minority groups need guidance on being actively involved in the education of their children because of their limited proficiency in English, their lack of significant levels of education and their lack of familiarity with the American education system. More than 45% of the children's parents of school C are English second language speakers and many of them cannot speak English at all.   Although the school communicates with parents in both English and Spanish, the communication and information on daily school functioning and on daily schoolwork which is only in English, makes it *'difficult for the learners especially in the higher grades to communicate with their parents due to the fact that they* (the parents) *are uneducated and not able to read in their own language'* (Teacher D1).

Teacher A2 pointed out that difficult parents withdraw from school completely when their children face a negative event where they, for example, are caught being guilty of a misconduct.   Learners take advantage of their parents' readiness to defend their children whenever they get in trouble at school. When teachers then fail to clarify the matter with parents regarding their children's negative behaviour, negative parent-teacher relationships result in limited or no parent involvement in their children's education. This leads to indefinite postponement of decisions that needs to be made by parents on their children's progress, learning needs and general well-being at school. In this regard, teacher A2 emphasised the unconstructiveness of communication with negative parents which takes up considerable amounts of time in that she needs to *'prepare herself when communicating with negative parents as well as document all communications to avoid new conflict'* (Teacher A2).

With regard to curriculum matters and the content to be included in lessons, teacher D2 expressed concern about parents that want to make decisions on curriculum content albeit their limited knowledge on what needs to be taught to their children.   In this regard, teacher D2 pointed out that *'parents that are part of the District Advisory*

Committee are getting too involved in decisions that need to be made by educators'. Even though the participant teacher thought that parents should make decisions on issues concerning daily effectiveness at their children's school, they need to '*leave the curriculum content to the educators'* (Teacher D2).

From the interviews with the teachers, it was clear that there were concerns with regard to aspects pertaining to parental responsibility such as after school supervision of their children and supervision of proper behaviour in general. These responsibilities were foisted onto teachers who are overloaded with curriculum-related matters. The situation was exacerbated by the economic recession experienced in the USA and the influence thereof on parents' time consuming responsibilities to meet financial obligations. In order to establish an effective relationship with teachers which are conducive to their children's schooling, parents need to know what their responsibilities are as primary educators. With regard to parents' tendency to be involved in curriculum-related matters however, they need to be sensitised to what boundaries they may not cross. Partaking in decision making on curriculum-related matters and what their children should learn at school should be left to principals with their staff as authoritative professionals that are able to take informed decisions on the matter.

5.4.3   Challenges parents face to get involved in their children's schooling

The third objective of this study was to determine the challenges parents face in getting involved in their children's education. It was clear that language barriers and related differences in culture are the biggest challenges parents of the Ocean View School District face in getting involved in the education of their children. According to parent B1, Spanish speaking parents as well as Asian parents are seldom involved in their children's school activities. These parents feel that they have no knowledge of the American school system owing to their differing culture backgrounds as immigrant parents. Owing to the world language status of English, they place their children in English speaking schools where they can learn the language and adapt to a new culture. With regard to their hesitance to be involved in their children's schooling, a

participant parent from the minority language group pointed out that she felt that her children have *'a chance to better education than their previous generation with or without any involvement'* (Parent B1).

Parents of Asian children are very supportive at home and expect their children to achieve high academic scores in their schoolwork. All participant parents had consensus that Asian learners have good working habits and are therefore the high academic achievers of their schools. Schools therefore '*welcome these learners'* in order to achieve high Academic Performance Index (API) scores for their school (Parent C1). Every school has an API score from low, 200 to high, 1000 that measure the year to year achievement in academic performances and principal B pointed out that '*these ratings can have substantial consequences for schools in that schools with low scores can be closed by the district officials'* (Principal B). Parent A2 pointed out that many parents still assume that the education of their children is the sole responsibility of the school. This is particularly true with regard to parents representing the Spanish language minority groups. These parents' hesitance to get involved in the learning of their children relates to a common opinion that prevails that '*parents provide children with shelter, food, clothing, and love, and the school provides their educational needs'* (Parent A2).

With regard to the importance of active involvement of parents in the schooling of their children, participant parent A2 was of the opinion that the parents of language minority groups seldom realise that parents play '*a very important role in the achievement of children in school'*. Participant parent A2 who is also a teacher with first-hand experience of the involvement of parents from different cultural groups, felt that when more parents of minority groups are involved in the schooling of their children, parents that are part of the Advisory Committee, will have the opportunity to consult with these parents about decisions affecting their children. Minority group parents will then be able to contribute to the content of the curriculum so as to arrange for curriculum content that is more responsive to the needs of their children. With regard to proper behaviour and appropriate work ethics, parent D1 felt strongly that a joint effort by parents and

teachers is *'essential to deal more successfully with problems of discipline, motivation, and the development of good work habits at home and at school'.*

Motivation and the practice of what one preaches is an approach that is very important to the child's learning and development and parent C2 therefore believes that children must see and be under the impression of the need for learning through motivation and example from their parents. Children must be sensitised to the high value which their parents place on a proper education. Many parents are involved at school on a daily basis but they do not demonstrate the same rigour with regard to supporting their children's learning at home. In this regard, parent C2 acknowledged that 'w*hen children are not motivated, they will not learn, despite the teachers' efforts'.* Related to parents' support for the learning of their children is the child's learning climate at home. Parent A2 and C2 felt that a focused psychological and moral environment in which the child is protected from anxiety, uncertainties and frustration is important for the child's learning. A negative home atmosphere will hamper the work of even the most brilliant and hard-working child. High achievers tend to be involved in a number of enrichment activities at home such as '*craft projects and playing music together with their family*' (Parent A2). In contrast, the family activities of underachievers focus on '*passivity and leisure'* (Parent C2).

Parents that want to get involved in their children's classroom activities are not always successful due to the teachers' hesitance to promote parent involvement in the classroom. Parent C2 pointed out that not all teachers are comfortable with parent support in their classrooms and that parents therefore *'feel like intruders'.* Owing to possible time constraints, some teachers are also reluctant to empower parents with regard to support for their children's schoolwork in that '*teachers don't want to teach the parents how to give support'.* This results in a snowball reaction of withdrawal from school involvement because *'when parents feel uncomfortable with one teacher, they withdraw from all school involvement'* (Parent C2).

From the interviews with parents it was clear to the researcher that healthy parent-teacher relationships are contingent on communication to establish what each stakeholder's role should be in the promotion of children's proper development through schooling. Parents must feel secure in an inviting school environment in order to provide effective assistance to the teachers regarding the schooling of their children. It was also clear that teachers need to assist one another on how to involve parents effectively, whether it is parents who have language barriers or parents who are indifferent to their children's progress. Participant parents had consensus that optimal learner development is contingent on involved and motivated parents and that teachers should fulfil their task effectively in arranging for an inviting school environment that is conducive to parent involvement.

5.4.4 Qualities of principals who are successful in arranging effective parent involvement

The fourth objective of this study was to elicit the role of school principals in managing effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships. From the responses of the participant principals it was clear that they had consensus that high-achieving schools establish and sustain school wide commitment based on inspiring mission statements that articulate into clear learning goals which are promoted throughout their schools and school communities. As was mentioned in par. 5.2 all participant principals are highly educated in that they have master's degrees in either school management or school administration. This was confirmed by principal B who concurred that *'all principals, assistant principals, and district level administrators, are required to have a master's degree in education management or administration in California'.* Principal B pointed out that well qualified managers have an influence on school excellence in that they are '*results-oriented individuals with a strong sense of accountability to all stakeholders in education who translates high expectations into intellectual development and academic achievement for all learners'*. This includes the involvement of parents in the schooling of their children in order to ensure improved academic achievements.

Principal A emphasised the importance of a clear '*visible school mission that is shared by all stakeholders to create an agenda for action'.* She pointed out that a clear mission enables a school to assess current policies, practices, programs, and performance indicators to be able to '*identify discrepancies between the existing conditions in the school and those described in the mission statement'.* School A strives to make learners confident in order for these learners to be responsible builders of their future. Parent involvement in building learners' confidence is identified as non-negotiable in school A. Principal A therefore works toward an integrated curriculum that reaches across disciplines and age levels and which relies on parent support at home for their children's learning to encourage learners to meet '*academic challenges with openness, enthusiasm, and willingness to solve* problems' (Principal A). School A aims for an atmosphere of cooperation, '*with respect for individual differences and community values'* (Principal A). The importance of seeking to be a model American school offering a broad and challenging educational program to learners from diverse cultural backgrounds is a priority for principal D. She is committed to inspire learners to achieve the '*highest standards of intellectual and personal development through a stimulating and comprehensive program'* (Principal D) and through incorporating sound parent-teacher relationships. Within a caring, respect for one another, multicultural environment, Principal D is committed to instilling in each learner a desire to learn, to take appropriate risks, and to accept challenges. Principal D is committed to develop learners who are '*resilient and adaptable, equipped with knowledge, skills, and disposition to continue their education and become personally fulfilled, independent, socially responsible adults'* (Principal D).

With regard to the challenges effective primary school principals are facing, Principal A pointed to the changes within her school which forced her to motivate and manage these changes as effectively as possible in order to maintain optimal learner development with the support from the parent corps. Principal A explained that '*teachers were laid off due to budget cuts and numerous teachers had also taken on new curricular areas and/or grade levels'.* This resulted in teachers encountering high

levels of stress and uncertainty about their future in the teaching profession. Principal A tried to stay focused with a calm approach and to maintain her focus on what matters most to the learners and parents, and she motivated her teachers to do the same. Principal B explained that the biggest challenge she faces as a primary school principal, is the responsibility for learner achievement that relates to a high Academic Performance Index (API) score. As was mentioned already, low API ratings can cause low performing schools to be closed by the district authority. Principal B therefore interprets her biggest challenge as a primary school principal as pertaining to make sure her school meets the API requirements. She motivated her teachers and learners by arranging for a positive climate through the development of the '*Golden Rules'* that pertained to the motto of '*be respectful, be responsible, be safe'* (Principal B). In all of these, the principal with her staff, relied on the support and involvement of parents so as to maintain high API scores. Principal C added that with the decrease of provisioning of programs such as music and art that is accompanied by the decrease in teacher positions for those programs, it is difficult to maintain a level of quality education to learners owing to larger classes. With smaller classes, her school could provide better quality education and principal C therefore experiences the retaining of staff as a huge challenge. Principal C explained as follows: '*motivating teachers to stay in education is my biggest challenge as a primary school principal'*. The same principal motivates her teachers by hosting a teacher banquet each year to which parents are invited to acknowledge all accomplishments of teachers and to hand out awards for excellence. Principal C explained that she believes in being '*an advocate for teachers and parents in my school and to solve problems as a team'*.

The biggest challenge principal D faces as a primary school principal is parent involvement in general. She explained her approach with the challenge of increased parent involvement as pertaining to the approach of '*a small, but growing group of individuals that I focus on so as to gradually involve more parents'* (Principal D). She therefore started a parents' room at the school where parents can meet and plan activities with other parents. The school also provides a babysitting club for parents during parent meetings once a month in order to make it possible for the parents to

attend the parents' meetings. Principal D convinces her teachers that she cares by having an open door policy. She arrives at school in the mornings before the teachers do and is the last to leave the school in the afternoon. She puts aside her own issues and does what is best for the learners, parents and teachers in a sensitive and caring way. She believes that morale is a very tentative issue because '*you can do a hundred things right and make one mistake that will shoot morale forever*' (Principal D). She recognises teachers' efforts by offering positive feedback both publicly and privately.

With regard to their best traits as primary school principals in arranging constructive parent involvement at their schools, principal A believes that she is a communicator in that she prepares herself to '*listen and respond to individual learners and parents in a positive way, to get answers for all their needs*'. Teacher A2 mentioned that principal A respects teacher authority in that she '*supports teachers' risk taking and protects instructional time*'. Principal B believes that she inspires her staff and parent community and explained as follows: '*I am an activator in that I have the ability to motivate my teachers and parents in effective ways to achieve a safe environment for learners to learn*'. Teacher B2 pointed out that she admires Principal B most for her "*walk her talk*" which serves as a valuable role model for the behaviour principal B seeks to instil in others. Parent B2 believed that principal B's actions are noted and interpreted by others as what is important to be pursued in school and in the broader community life. Parent B2 pointed to the virtues of Principal B by emphasizing that '*she has an open door policy were parents and learners can solve problems*'. Principal B's compassion for her school and her teachers was noted by all stakeholders including the parent community and Parent B2 pointed out that '*she (*Principal B*) loves her learners and her school and that is what parents care about most*' (Parent B2). Learners highlighted principal B's arrangement of making provision for them to voice their concerns and providing them with the opportunity to develop solutions to their school related problems in the presence of the principal. Learner B explained that Principal B has '*an open hour where we learners can go to solve problems, it makes us feel safe talking to her*' (*Learner B).

Principal C believes that her best trait as a primary school principal pursuing sound parent involvement is the fact that she is focused on outcomes and the delivering of concrete results. In that regard, Principal C stressed that '*when people work hard, you see results'.* Her parents, teachers and learners therefore know that she wants her and their school to be a '*high academic achieving school'* (Principal C) and that this should be sustained every year. Principal C explained that her school consists of a large group of parents who are highly qualified and therefore she knows how important academic achievement are for these parents who want their children to follow in their parents footsteps. Teacher C1 reported that principal C does not only monitor and report learner academic data to all teachers, but she also '*ensures that findings are used to improve the instructional programme'.* The same teacher mentioned that Principal C is creative in finding ways to secure the resources necessary to make professional development opportunities available to all her teachers for the sake of improved teaching and learning. In this regard, teacher C1 emphasised that '(they) *are constantly enrolled in one or other education program'.* Teacher C2 pointed out that Principal C annually recognises staff and learner achievement with the opportunity for the winners to spend a day at Disneyland. This incentive functions as a major motivational factor for all learners which learner C2 confirmed as follows: '*We all want to go to Disneyland, so we work hard to be the best learner in our class'.*

Principal D believes she is a facilitator. According to her, she has good human relations skills and '*can easily talk to parents, learners and the community and build individual relationships'* (Principal D). She started programs such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) program that involves teamwork and she collaborates with community leaders to get results. The NASA program is an annual Rocket Night where learners and families build and launch their own rockets. They learn about rocketry and prizes are given to the longest flight, highest flight, and best decorated rocket. The winners then go to NASA to conduct and design an experiment that would be flown in reduced gravity. Learners' experience what real astronauts do by flying in a plane called NASA's Weightless Wonder that creates the feeling of weightlessness due to reduced gravity. Learners then compile a final report based on findings and how the

rockets fly in gravity and reduced gravity. With regard to parent involvement for optimal learner development and for improved community engagement, principal D commented as follows on the value of this annual Rocket Night event: '*This event brings the parents to school were they become involved in the science classrooms to share their knowledge with learners. Not only are the parents involved, but the whole community participate' (*Principal D). The same principal makes sure that her school receives the necessary exposure in the media and that everything is communicated to parents and the broader community. In this regard all fundraising events and important information pertaining to matters such as skate night events and open school board meetings are published in the local school newspaper. Principal D is also a member of the School City Council that makes decisions about sustaining the city such as, for example, cleaning the beach. Principal D's membership of the school city council serves as an enhancement of school-community involvement all for the sake of establishing an environment conducive to parent involvement and optimal learner development.

In order for principals to construct effective parent-teacher relationships, it was clear that principals need to be self-directed instructional leaders with a strong intellect and with depth of personal knowledge so as to experience a high sense of self-efficacy. Principals need to have a high level of technical knowledge with regard to the school curriculum, teaching methods, and learning that motivates and facilitates the intellectual growth and development of themselves, their learners, the teachers and the parent community. With all the economic recession inspired changes in American schools such as budget cuts that affect the termination of teacher positions, school principals need to be the change-masters in their schools. In order to ensure effective change for the sake of optimal learner development, it became clear that the participant school principals are flexible, futuristic and realistic individuals who are able to both motivate and manage change in an organised, positive and enduring fashion which implies sound and sustained parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development.

5.4.5 The role of communication in effective parent-teacher relationships

The main objective with this qualitative study was to determine the role of effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships. From the responses of the participants, the evidence of positive effects were clear in that all four school principals as well as teachers, parents and learners recognised effective communication to benefit learner development. Participants acknowledged the importance of not only voicing one's own personal needs, but, to focus on hearing and understanding what others had to say.

With all the different cultures and language barriers in school C, Principal C pointed out that she had to become '*cross-culturally competent in order to communicate with diversity*'. Principal C therefore came to understand the important ways in which cultures differ and how it affects the ways in which her learners and parents behave. For example, some learners and parents from different cultures will not make eye contact when talking to an authoritative person such as the principal or teachers, because to do so would show lack of respect in their culture. Principal C explained, for example, that '*learners will smile, not because they are happy, but because they are embarrassed, do not understand the question, or are afraid to ask a question*'. Principal C and her teachers began to recognise that cultures have different ways of communicating non-verbal messages and teaching staff are now less likely to be offended or to misinterpret parents' and learners' non-verbal clues. To arrange for a sound understanding amongst cultures, parent D1 emphasised the importance of hiring a local parent as a community liaison spokesperson. Such a person can purposefully '*visit families at home that would act as a buffer*' so as to arrange for improved communication across cultures. This would help parents from different cultures understand the communication chain of their children's school in order for parents to effectively communicate with the school principal and teachers.

Principal D pointed to the parents' guidelines in the form of a parents' handbook that are sent out to all parents prior to the start of every school year. These guidelines outline

school functioning in terms of rules and procedures in order to assist parents and learners in facilitating school/home communication. Principal D pointed to the importance of assisting parents in understanding the different channels of communication possible as explained in the parents' handbook and on the school web-site, in order to enable parents to have their questions answered. School D has a visual display of the channels of communication in terms of chain of command at their school office. This shows the lines of authority for school functioning and parents' formal upward communication with the school as depicted by the chronological order of teacher, assistant school principal, school principal, school superintendent, and finally the Board of Education. With regard to professional top-down communication, principal A pointed to the day-to-day communication in school A's chain of command that starts with the school principal firstly informing the teachers of her intended actions before informing the parents or learners. In this regard, Principal A explained that when parents send notes to school requesting the dismissal of learners, for example for a dentist appointment, *'they should follow the appropriate chain of command and send the parents' note to the assistant principal, allowing her to act upon the request'.* The hampering effect of a breakdown in communication according to the chain of command often results in unfortunate consequences for an effective parent-teacher relationship. It is therefore compulsory for all parents and learners at school A to read through all written directories in the parents' handbook at the start of every school year, and '*to indicate that they have done so by signing a document'* (Principal A).

In school B, the channel for communication according to the chain of command starts with the assistant principal. The first hour of the school day before the lessons start is known as "communication hour" or "open hour" where parents, learners and teachers accustom themselves, through communication, with the day's events and with all school functioning related clarifying efforts. Problems with learner achievement, homework and/or behavioural issues are discussed during this hour. Assistant Principal B facilitates all major queries and reports to the principal at the end of the day. Parent C1 pointed out that understanding school policy made it easy for parents to get involved, for example, with their children's problems at school. Parents realised that '*their questions*

would be answered' and therefore felt safe to go to school for the benefit of their children's development.

At school B it was believed that effective communication is a key determinant for constructive parent-teacher relationships. In addition to regular contact with parents through daily folders, newsletters, e-mail, and phone calls, teachers at school B agreed on making test results and formative progress checks available on the school's website. One of principal B's biggest challenges is therefore to manage the maintenance of the school's web-based system by ensuring a daily update. Through this daily update the arrangement of the school's homework occurs that is posted by all teachers for all their classes. Parent A1 explained the importance of the system of web-based communication for learners, parents, and teachers as a functional effort of working together for the progressive success of each learner's academic progress. According to parent A1, mutual access of the school's website '*allows parents to feel the strong connection between home and school on a daily basis*'. Access to the web-based system of communication makes it easy for learner C1 to do his homework. His mathematics teacher, for example, has put some practical examples of the mathematics problems on her lesson related website and has made it therefore easy for learners with their parents to understand the approach with doing the mathematics homework according to what has been taught in the classroom. Parent D1 pointed out that one of the tasks of volunteer room moms is helping with the update of teachers' websites on a daily basis. The room moms make sure that teachers have addressed questions from parents through e-mail and assist in the daily communication of important information, homework that needs to be done and updates of all class related communication.

Principal D believed personal contact, such as home visits, to be the most effective form of communication between home and school for the sake of sound parent-teacher relationships. She is of opinion that, with the exception of home visits, all other communication methods such as memos, phone calls and notices posted in local newspapers are ineffective in convincing parents to participate in school activities. The strategy most powerful for sound parent-teacher communication according to principal

D is 'face *to face conversation with the parents, in their primary language, at their homes, or at the school'.* (Principal D). Teacher D1 explained the value of an arrangement of school personnel visiting children's homes before the start of every school year. This enables learners '*to become acquainted with the teacher before school begins'* (Teacher D1). The same teacher believed that home visits set a tone of mutual understanding which makes subsequent school-home communication more successful. Especially with regard to parents from minority groups, home visits are more successful in involving the parents in the education of their children, rather than inviting them to visit the school. Teacher D1 explained that with minority group learners both parents and teachers benefit from home visits in that *'teachers gain knowledge of learners' backgrounds and living environment and parents can inform teachers in a safe environment what their children's needs are'.* Participants of school C however had a different opinion on home visits in that teacher C explained that home visits can '*cause anxiety for both parents and teachers'.* Teacher C1 explained that parents who have no experience of school personnel coming to their homes are uncertain of what to expect. She also pointed to the possible detrimental consequence of home visits in that it can be 'misunderstood *by parents as teachers coming to their homes to spy'* (Teacher C1). As is the case with all schools, school C provides an 'open week' at school where parents and learners can meet the new teachers and discuss any problems, needs, or concerns they may have. During this open week, all parents need to attend in order to receive their children's 'back to school folders', which contain valuable information about what they need in order to be fully prepared to start the new year. Teacher C1 believed that during this open week, parents and learners can '*communicate in a more relaxing atmosphere in the classroom'* than what would have been possible with home visits.

It is important for schools to keep lines of communication open at all times. Teacher D1 emphasised the importance of communication with the parents by means of notes and newsletters in the language that parents understand, and obtaining feedback and information from the parents by means of phone and in writing. Teacher D1 expressed concern however with regard to parents that are not proficient in English and which could result in '*confusion with information that is sent home that may not be*

understood'. Therefore, school D with a significant population of 46 % Spanish speaking learners, translates all notices intended for Spanish parents in Spanish in order to make sure parents can respond in their own language. Teacher A2 pointed out that some parents of language minority groups are illiterate, even with regard to their mother tongue. To reach this group of parents, school A relies on its bilingual teachers on the teaching staff, or volunteers from the community to communicate with parents about their children's behaviour and academic achievement (Teacher A2).

Keeping all parent-teacher communication professional and ensuring that communication does not deteriorate in unprofessional gossiping was a high priority of all participant teachers. Because of their involvement in all the classes, the room moms have access to all learner information and behaviour and therefore schools must ensure confidentiality of sensitive information with regard to learner conduct and achievement. In this regard teacher C1 emphasised that teachers must be fully prepared for each lesson and '*they must be certain on communication in their classroom to decide what information to share with the room mom'* (Teacher C1). Principal C acknowledged that the biggest challenge she experienced in communication with her teachers and parents was the disregarding of confidentiality that causes legal problems. Teachers and parents who work closely together can be held *'legally liable for disclosing information about learners without the parents' permission'* (Principal C). Because parents that voluntarily serve as room moms in her school do a total of 1200 hours of annual classroom support, principal C makes sure those parents know and follow the school policies and procedures regarding confidentiality.

Teacher B1 pointed out that teachers need to tailor communications to fit every situation. By using different styles and methods of communication when talking to angry or difficult parents, could be conducive to improved parent-teacher relationships. All the participant teachers emphasised the importance of timeous communication before problems start. Parents do not like surprises when it comes to their children's academic achievements or misconduct and must therefore be informed '*as soon as possible when learners show changes in achievement or behaviour'* (Teacher C1). Parent-teacher

conferences in the form of parent evenings are therefore important to all participant teachers to discuss learner progress and problems. Teacher B2 pointed out that parent-teacher conferences should be planned in advance and parents should be informed of the nature and frequency of these conferences. During the conference, Teacher B2 pursues a relaxed atmosphere in which parents feel at ease to communicate freely, to share information constructively and to feel at liberty to ask any questions. Teacher A2 believes that, at the beginning of a conference, teachers should allow parents to ask questions and express their concerns regarding class-related conduct or their children's progress. She emphasised that when parents sense '*an inviting school climate, their participation increases'* (Teacher A2). Such attributes as compassion, openness and sensitivity on the part of the teacher during a parent-teacher conference have *'a positive influence on the parent-teacher relationship as well as the learner-teacher relationship'* (Teacher A2).

With regard to salient factors of good communication in their teaching philosophy, teacher B2 emphasised that she practises active listening skills by looking people in the eye when listening and talking to them. She explained the difference between effective teachers and their less effective colleagues in that successful teachers learn early in their careers that the '*ability to listen isn't just a nice thing to do, but an essential skill in surviving and thriving as a teacher'* (Teacher B2). Teacher A1 believed she creates stronger parent-teacher relationships via communication in which she focuses on sharing personal experience in order to show others that they are not alone and that teachers are humans too. She is very sensitive to the kinds of responses and attitudes that teachers display that could result in angering parents, and she therefore tries to make decisions only after she has heard the full story. She pursues the motto of '*let me think about it* ' more often and does not readily accept everything at face value (Teacher A1). Highly effective teachers know that only in their dreams will everyone agree with all their decisions and they therefore have mastered the skill of accommodation by *'have learned to disagree in agreeable ways'* (TeacherA2). In this regard, teacher A2 explained that after she had listened carefully to the speaker and had internalised the idea that was proposed to her and which she realised she could not agree on for very

sound reasons, will she tell and substantiate her disagreement with the speaker and will she actively invite the creation of a situation of mutual compromise.

When asked the question of how to handle aggressive parents who want to dominate every situation, Principal A responded that her communication is always clear and direct. She prepares herself mentally before talking to parents and teachers and she listens without allowing herself to get overwhelmed.   Principal A has the ability to effectively communicate with individual learners and believed that, when learners are happy in school, everybody is happy. She practises an open door policy where teachers, learners and parents can communicate with her in a safe environment in which she invites everyone to her motto of '*respect yourself, respect others and respect the environment'* (Principal A). Principal B pointed out that teachers get caught between the wants of learners and the wants of parents. For example, learners instinctively want to gain their parents' attention and approval. It is therefore not surprising then, that learners try to gain their parents attention by recounting classroom events in an exaggerated fashion.   Depending on the incident, this often results in parents angrily demanding an explanation. Principal B, with her teachers, then attempts to *'assuage their (parents) anger by tactfully presenting a more balanced picture of the events in question'* (Principal B). Principal C was concerned about communicating with anxious parents who are overprotective of their children and who want to shield their children from danger, disappointments and failures. Owing to the distortion of reality by being overprotective of one's child, Principal C emphasised that she needs to convince them of the hampering effect on their children of such an overprotective approach. Anxious parents dislike surprises and therefore Principal C has to inform these parents as soon as possible when things go wrong. With regard to communicating with angry and controlling parents, Principal D mentioned that she always remains calm and tries to view a situation realistically. She pursues a philosophy of being polite and professional at all times and she offers a sincere apology when one is called for.

Incorporating technology in effective communication is important in strengthening parent-teacher communication for the sake of optimal learner development. All teachers

in the Ocean View School District own a phone in their classroom where parents can phone or leave messages when questions need to be answered. Principal C pointed out that she feels strongly about answering these concerns as soon as possible. Her parents must feel that their questions are answered in a positive way and for teachers to respond to these answers *'brings about commitment from both parents and teachers'* (Principal C). In school B, communication through the website and voice message system is a most effective way in which all stakeholders communicate. Every teacher has his/her own website that is updated daily with news and homework as a useful resource for parents and learners. When asked about parents who do not have access to a computer or who are not computer literate, principal B pointed out that the assistant principal in collaboration with a designated teacher are responsible for making sure everybody has access to a computer or to a phone system directed to voicemail to all teachers for daily updates on homework or important information. However, what was clear was that in school B every parent had daily access to a computer at home. Principal B also referred to the communication channels in place in case of an emergency such as a school lockdown or an earthquake. In such cases, the designated district official will send a voicemail message to all parents' landline phones in order to communicate the steps that will be taken in such emergencies. Parent A2 felt that, with the emergency phone call arrangements, all parents are committed in sharing information and it brings about reassurance for parents to know that their children are safe at school.

When discussing strategies to maintain communication with parents on a daily basis, teacher D1 pointed out that they have developed a simple, yet effective, method of communicating with parents through the "Friday Folder". On a Friday, each learner takes a folder home that is signed by the class teacher and which includes a calendar of what happened during the week with information on upcoming events at the school. The principal also includes a weekly "Tip sheet" that consists of suggestions to help parents make the home learning easier. Friday folders also include all the tests and assignments completed by the learner during that week. In this way, parents are provided with regular updates of what is happening in the classroom. The folders are

returned to the teachers each Monday morning, signed by the parents to indicate that they have reviewed the content. The folder is one example of how parents cooperate at school D, while at the same time, becoming more informed. Teacher D1 pointed out that, because parents are aware that all material is sent home on Fridays, they are alert to engaging with their children's folders over the weekend which results in a successful project and effective communication.

Participant parents had consensus that effective communication from home-to-school and school-to-home benefit their children's learning development. For parent A2, a telephone call gives her the opportunity to speak directly to the teacher without having to schedule face-to-face meetings at school. For parent C1, the introductory call from the teacher at the start of the school year, gives her a feeling of satisfaction that her child will be in good hands. With this introductory call, teachers asked about things such as the child's birthday, special interests, number of siblings, and special awards. This provides the opportunity for teachers to interact directly with parents and react immediately to their questions, concerns, and comments. Communication via e-mail was for parent A1 *'the most effective way to send home an introductory letter or make introductory comments that will put the parents at ease to what they can expect from their children's new teachers'.* Parent B2 pointed out that with her autistic child, meeting the teacher at the start of every school year, gave her the opportunity to discuss what previous teachers found to work with autistic behaviour. She felt that teachers must know what makes her child feel comfortable in a school setting and therefore communicated with teachers on a day-to-day basis. Parent B2 acknowledged her child's behaviour problems and, with the support of teachers due to effective communication, they work together to solve problems which made schooling easier.

Communication is often complicated by an inability to accurately interpret what is communicated. Owing to misinterpretation and consequent inappropriate response, serious and often long-lasting difficulties are created for others and for oneself. Effective communication strategies are therefore crucially important to counteract any possible communication distortion. It was clear to the researcher that at all the research sites, the

participant principals, participant teachers, and participant parents have developed effective communication strategies that were appropriate to their contextual situations in order to build relationships that benefitted their learners' academic development.

5.4.6   Parents as volunteers in strengthening parent-teacher relationships

It was clear to the researcher that parent involvement in education can take on many forms, as the participant parents illustrated. Parent involvement varied from efforts to make educational decisions, to activate participation within the classroom as support to the teacher, to activities parents can do at home to assist their children with their learning. It was evident that the four research sites in the Ocean View School District were reaching out to make parents true partners in their children's education.

Parent A2 was part of the District Advisory Committee and believed that more parents should be involved in the planning and decision making about what their children should learn at school. Not only does such involvement give parents the opportunity to be involved in their children's education, but it reassure parents that what their children learn at school *'will benefit their children for years to come'* (Parent A2). The same parent also pointed out that it makes teachers more aware that parents have knowledge, not only of curriculum, but also of ways to see results in the academic performance of their children.

The other effort already mentioned that helps parents get involved in their children's schooling is the establishment of a parent's room. At school D such a parents' room was established where parents are welcome to meet with other parents. The parent room is equipped with resources such as books and videos on parenting skills and education management. The school also offers monthly evening and weekend workshops on such topics as 'Discipline' and 'Preparing children for their first day at school'. Parent D1 pointed out that these social events are designed *'to make parents feel more comfortable at school'*.   A parent involvement bulletin board that lists the names and contributions of participating parents in the school is displayed in the

parents' room. Parent D2 pointed out that Principal D sends a certificate of appreciation home to frequent parent visitors to encourage them to return. School D also hired a local parent as a community liaison representative to visit families at home to encourage them to become involved in their children's schooling. The liaison representative also acts as a buffer to help dispel negative feelings between parents and teachers. Parent D1 confirmed that the parents' room at school D effectively promotes parent involvement in that it is a constructive place *'where parents and teachers can meet informally to receive information and materials on how to help their children at home as well as the opportunity to meet other parents'* (Parent D1).

For parent B2, the Parent Assistant Learning (PAL) program at school B that she is part of, is an effective way in which parents can get involved in their children's learning at home. The PAL program was initiated several years ago by the kindergarten and first-grade teachers as a way to get parents involved at home. PAL packets are sent home with learners on a rotating basis during the week. These packets contain games, activities, and a book to read, that are designed in collaboration with the current curriculum. Parents complete the activities of these packets with their children at home and then return the packet to school as soon as they have worked through all the content. At a special year-end ceremony, parents who have worked with their children at home with these packets on a regular basis, receive a gold PAL pin along with a certificate to congratulate them on their efforts.

In line with the PAL program at school B, a "Friday Night Club" was implemented at school C by an active parent-volunteer group. This weekly event is focused on arranging for learners with their parents to have a socially constructive Friday night option where parents can meet one another in a relaxed setting. They invite all primary and high school learners and parents to attend where music, board games, pizza-sharing, and all kind of activities offer learners *'opportunities to make friends and socialise in a positive environment'* (Parent C2). The evening is both sponsored and chaperoned by parents and high school learners and is financially self-supporting.

Parent C2 felt that parents support the Friday Night Club because they know that their children are enjoying themselves in a safe and supervised setting.

When parents take initiative in developing volunteer programs to strengthen their relationships with teachers and the school, positive outcomes are implied. It was clear to the researcher that the participant teachers and parents were focused and organised in their approach to strengthen parent-teacher relationships through parent volunteer programmes, all for the sake of optimal learner development.

5.5   CONCLUSION

The findings of the empirical investigation revealed the strategies participants followed to ensure effective communication in order to strengthen parent-teacher relationships at their respective settings. Participants were congruent on the value of these strategies in strengthening parent-teacher communication for the benefit of learner success. Strategies such as knowing your schools' communication chain of command and opening lines of communication before problems start to become serious were strongly emphasised by all participants.

It was clear to the researcher that all four research sites in the Ocean View School District were committed in involving parents in all school related activities, not only for the benefit of the learners, but also for the benefit of all stakeholders. With a positive and supportive school environment which included the support of the parent corps, effective principals contributed to the quality of their schools academic achievement. Effective teachers are skilled in communicating with parents and they recognised that a big part of creating a positive and supportive parent-teacher relationship is through strong and effective communication.

With regard to parent involvement, it was clear that parents with language barriers and culture differences had difficulty getting involved in the schooling of their children because they were unfamiliar with the American school culture. All school principals

and teachers interviewed explained the effective strategies which they had developed at their respective schools to get these parents involved. Outcomes of the investigation showed that parent involvement empowered parents in that they were equipped with a more realistic view of classroom situations to help their children applicably at home and their understanding of the school system in general increased. Teachers benefited from parent-involvement in that their understanding of parents with concerns improved and they were better able to understand the behaviour of learners from foreign culture backgrounds.

Chapter Six, as the final chapter will focus on a summary representing the integration of findings from the literature study and the empirical investigation. This will be followed by a deduction of conclusions emanating from the interpretation of the integrated literature and empirical investigation. These conclusions will serve as answers to the formulated research questions. Recommendations will be made regarding the role of effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

CHAPTER 6
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1   INTRODUCTION

With this study it was firstly confirmed that sound parent-teacher relationships contribute to learners developing optimally. Various nuances of parent involvement were elicited and it became clear that although school principals with teachers all have various interpretations of the 'what' and 'how' of parent involvement, they all agree that with the involvement of parents as the primary educators of their children the stage is set for possibilities of learners developing optimally. It became clear that successful school principals have identified their strengths in arranging for constructive parent involvement and they know how to tap and develop the talents and strengths of parents, teachers, and learners at their schools all for the sake of learner development.

6.2   SUMMARY

The summary and conclusions are guided by the aims and sub-aims of this study as set out in paragraph 1.5. As explained in paragraph 1.5, these aims are as follows:

- To determine how learners benefit from constructive parent-teacher relationships.
- To determine the main challenges teachers face in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships.
- To determine the main challenges parents face to become involved in the education of their children.
- To elicit the role of school principals in managing effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships.
- To provide guidelines on effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

With the ensuing paragraphs a realisation of these aims are succinctly discussed.

6.2.1 The role of communication in strengthening parent-teacher relationships in primary schools

The main aim of the study was to determine the role of communication in strengthening parent-teacher relationships in primary school. With regard to the empirical investigation, this was done by means of individual and focus group interviews with principals, teachers, parents, and learners of four selected primary schools. A total of twenty seven participants from the Ocean View School District in Huntington Beach, California were purposefully selected to take part in the investigation (par 1.6.2.1; par 4.5).

As was evident from the literature review, the role of communication in strengthening parent-teacher relationships is to ensure that informed parents feel part of the education team that serve to motivate learners to explore further (par 1.2.2). To avoid misunderstanding between parents and teachers, clear, regular, established communication is necessary so that parents can be supportive of their children's schooling. Bender (2005:4) confirmed that any indication of acknowledgement that teachers show about parents' importance as primary educators of their children, is perceived as supportive and effective communication (par.3.2.1). Appreciation, recognition, encouragement, constructive criticism, and demonstrating trust were examples of supportive communication that participants highlighted as essential for effective communication in primary schools (par 3.2.1).

Communication is often complicated by the lack of accurately interpreting how a message is communicated (par 3.2.1). When teachers misinterpret and respond inappropriately to the communication of parents from different cultures, they may create serious and sometimes long-lasting difficulties that will result in parents losing interest to participate in their children's schooling. Therefore, with the cultural diversity prevailing in the Ocean View School District and the ways in which these cultures differ in

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communication behaviour, principals and teachers had to become competent in cross-cultural communication in order to be able to communicate effectively in diverse contexts (par 5.4.5). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004:17) expressed concern about teachers not being equipped with the skills to communicate effectively with parents of diverse cultures and diverse backgrounds (par 3.2.2). It was clear from the empirical investigation that it was experienced as meaningful to appoint a designated community liaison person to visit families from different culture backgrounds at their homes (par 5.4.5). These community liaison personnel acted as constructive buffers between families from foreign cultures and the school and assisted with mutual understanding between families and the school owing to the establishment of a constructive communication chain with the school.

Having a clear and visual display of their school's chain of command was endorsed by all participant school principals as important for constructive communication. Parents need to be familiar with regard to the procedures and the contact personnel to approach in order to get answers to all their questions regarding their children's schooling (par 5.4.5). A breakdown of communication in terms of confusion with regard to the chain of command to follow often results in unfortunate consequences that can harm parent-teacher relationships (par 5.4.5). From literature it was clear that parents need to learn the school's established chronological channels of communication in order to ensure constructive and administratively hassle-free communication (par 3.2.2.4).

Written communication as a one-way communication strategy is determined as one of the most efficient and effective ways in which schools can maintain valuable ongoing correspondence between school and home in order to communicate crucial information to parents (par 3.2.2.1). Participants identified one-way communication through daily folders, newsletters, and e-mail to be effective in daily communication between school and home. An example of a highly effective strategy of one-way communication determined at one of the research sites in the Ocean View School District to maintain contact and accord with parents, is the Friday folder that parents receive at the end of

every week. With the Friday folders, parents are provided with meticulous updates of what is happening in the classroom (par.5.4.5).

Proper two-way communication occurs when teachers and parents interact with growing trust and an appreciation for and accommodation of contrasting perspectives (par 3.2.2.2). To establish collaborative interaction between new parents and their children's teacher, communication via telephone was used in participant schools in that teachers phoned new parents at the beginning of every school year (par 3.2.2.2). Another two-way communication strategy followed at some of the research sites was the personal home visits by teachers to the parents of learners from minority groups. This was experienced as a most effective way of communication between home and school in that learners, together with their parents, had a better chance to become acquainted with the teacher as spokesperson of the school by having a face to face conversation with the teacher in their own language within the familiarity of their own homes (par 5.4.5). The home visits were therefore supported to set a tone of mutual understanding that makes subsequent school-home communication more succesful (par 5.4.5). One problem related, however, to misunderstanding by some of the parents of minority groups with regard to the aim with home visits in that they anticipated these visits as the school spying on their private lives (par 5.4.5). An alertness to the possibility of such initial communication distortion assisted in ensuring parents of the school's good intent with these visits.

The two-way communication strategy rated most effective at all four research premises was the communication possibilities prevailing at the open week for parents and learners where they met with teachers to discuss any concerns or problems relating to teaching and learning (par 5.4.5). Parent-teacher conferences were important to especially all participant teachers in order to discuss learner progress so as to arrange for common ground on the tackling of possible problems with progress. These conferences should be planned in advance and parents should be informed in advance of the nature and frequency of these conferences (par 5.4.5). A crucial factor relates to determining an appropriate conference meeting time that suits all parents and to

arrange for parents reviewing their children's files in advance so as to be informed and well-prepared when attending these conferences to avoid any possible surprises of whatever nature (par 3.2.2.1). When parents sense an inviting school climate during conference week, participation is increased which has a positive influence on parent-teacher relationships and on learner-teacher relationships (par 5.4.5).

An example of a highly effective strategy of two-way communication and which also contributes to the fostering of a culture of caring for the environment is the cultivating of the two acre farm by parents, learners and teachers. In their working side-by-side on the farm during weekends, parent-child, child-teacher and parent-teacher relationships are improved in that communication is strengthened through caring for the planted vegetation (par 5.4.1).

Part of effective communication is the ability to listen to what is been said. As an essential factor in effective two-way communication, active listening was practiced at the research sites by looking people in the eye when listening and talking to them (par 5.3.5). This was in line with the literature emphasising that in addition to eye contact, the practice of active listening requires teachers to pay close attention to the conversation and to ask pertinent questions in order to receive the correct answers (par 3.2.2.4).

Further communication strategies perceived at the research sites to be effective in building stronger communication with parents related to the ability to share personal experience in order to show parents that they are not alone and that teachers are humans too. Linked to sharing personal experience was the approach of listening conceptually and not interpreting everything at face value only (par 5.4.5). Teachers communicating their disagreement when confronted with situations that they could not agree with is crucially important so as to arrive at constructive and accommodating compromises to fit the specific situation applicably (par 5.4.5). Another strategy contributing to positive relationships with parents and productivity of communication is the strategy of thinking about and preparing positive, reassuring responses before meeting with anxious and angry parents. Good parent-teacher relationships are also

enhanced by a pro-active alertness to possible problems that may arise and to arrange for measures of precaution. Remaining calm in every situation and trying to view every situation realistically contributes to improved interpersonal relationships with parents (par 5.3.5).

With the compelled involvement of room moms in every classroom to assist with administration related matters so as to capacitate teachers with the availability of more teaching time, sensitivity for respect of confidentiality and the avoiding of any possible gossip was important. A challenge existed relating to the possibility of legal pursuit on account of disregard for confidentiality (5.4.5). From the literature review it was clear that people are reluctant to discuss personal problems or disclose personal information if they feel their comments might be indiscriminately shared with others (par 3.2.2.4). Teachers therefore needed to be certain of what information to share about learners without parents' permission.

Incorporating technology in effective communication is important in strengthening parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development. Having an effective web-based communication system proved to be the most functional way in which stakeholders at school could communicate with each other on a daily basis (par 5.4.5). In this regard, web-based communication systems are indispensible for learners, parents and teachers working together for the progressive success of each child. Parents experienced the strong connection between home and school on a daily basis in that their children could connect with teachers on their websites after hours to complete homework. Room moms' assistance in this regard was vital in that these moms helped to maintain and update the teachers' websites on a daily basis. This enabled the effective completion of homework in a short period of time which contributed to learner progress comprehensively. Literature findings stated that a homework website can start with a simple format providing basic information to parents and learners, and progressively increase in sophistication to create electronic assignment logs and individualised homework modifications for learners, incorporating appropriate password protection (par 3.2.2.3).

6.2.2 The benefits of parent involvement for learners

As the first objective of this study was to determine the benefits of parent involvement for learners (par 1.5), literature confirmed the positive effects of parent involvement on their children's progress, family well-being, and school excellence when schools and parents mutually support and encourage learner progress (par 2.5.3). What became clear to the researcher was that the most accurate predictor of learner achievement in schools is not income, social status or cultural differences, but the extent to which parents and teachers are able to express high, but realistic expectations of learner achievement within an encouraging learning environment.

In line with literature findings, it was clear that the effect of parent involvement contributed to high academic achievement by learners (par 2.5.1). This was enhanced by proactive constructive communication between parents and teachers which resulted in learners' test scores improving. The improvement of learners' academic performance related to the development of an enabling environment for parents to assist their children more constructively with their homework owing to a better understanding of what is being taught (par 5.3.1). This is supported by literature findings that pointed out that communication between teachers, parents and learners on homework assignments plays a valuable role in strengthening parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development (par 2.5.1). Owing to the general security of children created by a reassurance of their parents' honest involvement in their school activities, learners achieve higher grades and test scores which is also attributed to satisfactory school attendance which, among other things, ensures that homework is done (par 2.5.1). With the empirical investigation it was confirmed that learners feel comfortable in their schools' settings knowing that their parents are involved which motivates learners to take responsibility for their own learning bringing about higher academic achievements for these learners (par 5.3.1).

When learners are assisted with their school work through their parents' active involvement in the class situation, learners' social skills are improved which capacitate

them with the ability to adapt more appropriately to their school environments (par 2.5.3). With the improvement of their social skills, learners' self-esteem is increased which enables them to communicate more effectively with other learners. All the participant school principals recognised the increase in self-esteem that learners encountered when their parents are involved in the day to day functioning of the school. It gave learners the satisfaction that their parents are always there to answer their questions. It was also evident that learners' feeling of self-worth increased when their parents were involved in school functioning on a daily basis (par 5.3.1). The increase of learners' self-worth was accompanied by increased self-discipline to complete homework satisfactorily and on time. Increased self-esteem, self-worth, and self-discipline impacted on learners' ability to adjust to their school environment and to communicate with ease with their fellow scholars and the broader community (par 2.5.3). It was ascertained through literature that with all the positive changes that learners show when their parents are involved in their schooling, learners feel that they have adequate control over their destinies and that they can earn an honourable place in society (par 2.5.3). It was also documented that learners from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to achieve better in all school activities when parents and professionals work together to bridge the gap between the culture at home and the culture at school (par 2.5.2). Involved parents of learners of diverse cultural backgrounds and learners with special educational needs made it easy for these learners to adjust to their school environments as these learners are accepted by other learners in school owing to their parents' communication of their children's specific dispositions.

6.2.3 The main challenges teachers face arranging for constructive parent-teacher relationships

The second objective in this study was to look at the main challenges teachers face in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner progress. What was evident was that low-income parents are often underrepresented among the ranks of parents involved with their children's school due to the lack of low-income parents'

lack of time and energy since these parents need to work long hours (par 5.3.2). It was documented that many parents today feel insecure, misunderstood, and overwhelmed by the demands pertaining to the worldwide economic recession in order to get involved in their children's schooling (par 3.3). To address these challenges, teachers are sensitive to the fact that every positive interchange will serve to increase trust and build stronger relationships with parents for the sake of learner progress.

Lack of understanding of school structures due to uneducated parents' hesitation to get involved in their children's schooling resulted in some parents having unrealistic expectations of their children's education (par 5.3.2). When their children are involved in negative behaviour at school, unrealistic parents tend to withdraw completely from any school involvement (par 5.3.2). It was also evident from the empirical investigation that some parents on the periphery are ignoring behaviour problems of their children and are making irrelevant excuses for their children's misconduct. Many parents are unable to see problems or difficulties that their children sometimes face at school, especially when it is a serious and long lasting behaviour problem flowing from home background problems and which parents struggle to deal with (par 2.4.2.2.1). These parents negate their responsibilities as primary educators of their children and assume that teachers are solely responsible for their children's schooling (par 5.3.2). Schools need to encourage participation and school involvement by understanding these parents' specific needs for support and for creating a comfortable environment for them to get involved in their children's education (par 2.4.1). Schools also need to communicate with unrealistic parents without raising their unrealistic expectations or underplaying their children's misbehaviour and avoid using any potentially aggravating language or blaming boisterous learners (par 2.4.2.2.1).

Language barriers were identified as a major challenge in arranging constructive parent involvement. Parents from language minority groups are often uncertain about how to get involved in their children's schooling owing to limited capacities in speaking English resulting in not understanding the school structure (par 5.3.2). At the other pole of a continuum of challenges with parent involvement is the challenge of parents that are too

involved in school matters and who want to make decisions about what their children should learn at school. Tactful communication makes parents understand that curriculum content decisions reside exclusively with professional school personnel (par 5.3.2).

6.2.4   Challenges parents face to get involved in their children's schooling

The third objective of this study was to determine the challenges parents face to get involved with their children's education. Based on the four types of parental involvement with regard to parents' support to their children at home and their active involvement in their children's school activities (par 2.2.2), major factors that influence parents' lack of support and participation in their children's learning relate to poverty, parents' level of education, and the cultural differences between home and school (par 2.3).

It was clear to the researcher that at the Ocean View School District, cultural differences and language barriers were the two major challenges for effective parent involvement. Most Spanish and Asian speaking parents were supportive of their children at home, but because of their cultural differences, limited English language proficiency skills and lack of understanding of the school culture, they were seldom involved at school (par 5.3.3). Another barrier parents faced getting involved in their children's schooling was their assumption that education is the sole responsibility of the teachers and the school (par 5.3.3). These parents were ignorant of the value of their involvement in their children's learning and the benefits of their involvement for learner progress in general.

Without the encouragement and motivation from their parents, learners cannot understand and experience the importance of learning and all the efforts from teachers are lost when parents demonstrate no value of supporting their children's learning at home. A negative home atmosphere due to anxiety, worries, and frustration, was a big concern encountered at some of the research sites hampering the positive work that is been done at the school (par 5.3.3). A related problem for hampering parent involvement was the fact that parents did not feel welcome in some classrooms due to

some teachers who are not comfortable with parent support in their classrooms. This results in such parents withdrawing completely from all school activities (par 5.3.3). In line with literature findings, teachers are not always prepared to work with parents and therefore schools should provide parents with information about parental rights and obligations so as to embark on a functional parental involvement strategy (par 1.2.2).

Parents' own negative school experiences may impact on positive relationships with the school causing problems with their children's behaviour becoming problematic when these parents need to interact with the school (par 3.3). The parent handbook that is sent out to all parents in the Ocean View School District (par 5.4.5) assists with the managing of parents' concerns in a constructive manner. With appropriate guidelines, parents are encouraged to approach the school with their concerns about their child's learning in order to gain clarification and an understanding of the situation (par 3.3).

A further challenge parents face in building relationships with the teachers of their children and the school, is the lack of technology that can limit communication opportunities from home-to-school. Even though all parents in the Ocean View School District had access to the internet, it was important that teachers should never assume that learners and their parents have access to the internet (par 3.3). In addition, and as was reported in literature, many parents are still uncomfortable with the use of technology; schools therefore need to continue with paper-based communication as their fundamental channel of communication with the parents (par 3.3).

6.2.5   Qualities of principals who are successful in arranging effective parent involvement

The fourth objective of this study was to elicit the role of school principals in managing effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships. In this regard, the researcher discovered that the school principals of the research sites achieved good results as they empowered, energised, and motivated their staff, parents, and learners. They habitually displayed the actions and attitudes associated with the ten traits of

highly effective principals, namely of being highly qualified; being result-orientated; having a strong sense of accountability to all stakeholders; translating high expectations into the intellectual development and academic achievement of all learners (par 3.4). These traits can be acquired and practiced to the point of automaticity by all principals. Whether novice or experienced, participant principals were endeavouring to make a difference to the academic success of their schools' learners.

From the empirical investigation it was clear that all participant principals believed in a clear mission to be shared with all stakeholders and to create a school environment that benefited academic learning. Participant principals were motivated by a sense of calling and of purpose and were guided by a school mission having the best interest for all stakeholders (par 5.4.4; par 3.4). In the light of numerous changes in American schools owing to budget cuts, participant principals became change masters with flexible and realistic approaches to motivating and managing changes within their schools in the context of the uncertainty that teachers face about the future in education (par 5.4.4). In this regard, participant principals were supportive of their personnel in managing uncertainty and ambiguity and they stayed focused, with a calm approach, on what mattered most, such as teachers' instructional time (par 5.4.4; par 3.4).

In order to maintain high academic performance index (API) score ratings, participant school principals were result-orientated individuals with a strong sense of accountability to their teachers, parents, and learners. They translated high expectations into intellectual development and academic achievement for all their learners through measures such as an open door policy and being facilitators with outstanding human relation skills (par 3.4; par 5.4.4). Challenged by the decrease of teacher positions and motivated by quality education for learners participant school principals encouraged teachers to stay in the profession with a positive outlook on the benefits for all learners (par 5.4.4).

Participant school principals pursued sound parent involvement strategies to benefit learners to achieve optimal academic excellence. Improving their schools' instructional

programmes, participant school principals ensured that learners' academic data are monitored and teacher professional development opportunities are arranged (par 5.4.4). School principals recognized staff and learner achievement and were therefore sustainers of sound cultures of teaching and learning based on a clear vision on achievement, responsibility, and accountability (par 3.4; par 5.4.4).

With regard to constructive communication, the participant school principals had the capacity to listen and to connect parents with their teachers in order to develop strong parent involvement in their respective schools (par 5.4.4). At some research sites, parents' rooms were established where parents can connect with one another for encouragement and empowerment for the benefit of learner development. Being facilitators, school principals could communicate with their learners' parents and build individual relationships. In one instance the school principal connected parents and the community with the NASA programme believing that events happening at the school should be published in local newspapers in order to enhance school-community involvement (par 5.4.4).

6.3   CONCLUSIONS

Parent participants of the Ocean View School District in Huntington Beach, California had an awareness of and involvement in schoolwork. They understood the interaction between parenting skills and learner success in schooling, and had a commitment to consistent communication with educators about their children's progress. In line with literature findings, and pursued at the research sites, the most consistent predictors of children's academic achievement and social adjustment at school are parent expectations of their children's academic attainment and parents' support to their children's education (Fan & Chen, 2001:3).

With regard to effective communication in primary schools, it is important for teachers and parents to know the child in different contexts, and that each is aware of what the child is like in the other context. It is also important to know that different people have

distinct but disparate perspectives on the same issue. For many parents, a fundamental part of the parenting role is to be their child's strongest advocate with the teacher and the school. Other parents, however, may be reluctant to express their concerns because of cultural beliefs related to the authoritative position of the teacher or because of lack of sufficient language skills. Others may have difficulty talking with teachers as a result of memories of their own school years, or they may be unsure of how to express their concerns to teachers.

As with some parents, some teachers, especially new teachers, are equally anxious about encounters with parents. Most teachers have received very little training in fostering parent-teacher relationships, but with the growing understanding of the importance of parent involvement, they are encouraged to pursue meaningful parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development.

Direct involvement of parents in their children's education influences learner success optimally. Parent involvement activities that are effectively planned and that are well implemented result in substantial benefits for learners, parents, teachers, and the school (Fan & Chen, 2001:3).

With the challenges teachers face to arrange constructive parent-teacher relationships, it is essential for teachers to have an understanding and knowledge of every learner's background in order to understand the methods to be used in connecting with their parents (Fan & Chen, 2001:3). In order to establish an effective parent-teacher relationship, teachers need to overcome the challenges they face in order to obtain parents' trust. Teachers need to give choices to parents on how to get involved in their children's schooling as well as asking parents for their input in decision making on issues relating to their children without crossing boundaries relating to decisions on curriculum matters.

Despite the challenges that parents with different cultural backgrounds face to get involved in their children's schooling, it is important for schools to establish the trust of

these parents in order to communicate on a daily basis. Personal contact with these parents at home or at school, is necessary for these parents so as to develop effective parent-teacher relationships for optimal leaner development. Keeping lines of professional communication open at all times result in positive responses from parents. School principals that are effective in arranging for constructive communication for the sake of good parent-teacher relationships adhere to the traits of effective principalship which relates to monitoring and adjusting their academic performances to benefit learner involvement. They are responsive and adaptive to change. They have a sense of what attitudes and actions are most appropriate in which situations and can calibrate them to fit the situation. They identify their strengths to be used to complement and enhance their less developed traits. They are sensitive to tapping and developing the talents and strengths of teachers and parents in order to benefit learners' optimal development.

6.4   RECOMMENDATIONS

Although generalisations cannot be drawn due to the qualitatively orientated investigation comprising a small sample, several recommendations are offered within the context of primary schools in order to understand the role that communication plays in strengthening parent-teacher relationships.

To strengthen parent-teacher relationships by means of effective communication:

- Inform parents on a constant basis by means of clear and regular communication about what is happening in school in order for them to feel part of the education team that serve to motivate their children.
- Show concern and interest to parents applying appreciation, recognition, encouragement, constructive criticism and a demonstration of trust as essential factors for effective parent-teacher communication.
- Master cross-cultural communication in order to communicate with parents from different cultures competently.

- Arrange for a community liaison person to visit families from foreign cultures at their homes so as to act as a functional link between parents and the school.

- Communicate the chronological channels for communication to parents properly so that parents have a clear visual display of the chain of commands arrangements at school in order to know who to approach with their questions.

- Employ open communication like daily folders, newsletters, e-mails and phone calls appropriately in the day-to-day communication between parents and teachers to establish on-going communication that strengthen parent-teacher relationships.

- Establish and maintain a web-based related communication system to communicate learners' formative and summative progress to parents in order for parents to monitor their children's academic progress.

- Arrange that homework is available on a daily basis on teachers' web-sites for parents to access and to monitor their children's daily homework activities.

- Invest in the employment of 'room mothers' to assist teachers in the classroom with administrative tasks such as daily updates on homework on teacher web-sites.

- Consider home visits if parents feel comfortable in receiving home visits in order to get a clear understanding of learners' home situation and for mutual understanding which increases school-home communication.

- Arrange for a relaxing open week at the beginning of every school year where parents and learners meet to discuss needs and concerns.

To ensure that learners benefit from constructive parent-teacher relationships

- Encourage parents to get involved in the learning of their children by arranging for continuous information sessions where parents are alerted to the benefits for their children when they are involved in their children's learning.

- Arrange for environmental related projects where learners, teachers, parents and the community work together and where everyone learns responsibility

through environmental caring so as to contribute to improved communication between stakeholders and to strengthen relationships.

- Arrange for the assistance of a parent in the classroom on a daily basis in order for the teacher to have more time available for instruction.
- Encourage parents with children with disabilities to communicate their children's special needs properly so as to ensure that these learners show an improvement in behaviour because of a feeling of safety and belonging at school.

To address teachers' challenges to arrange for constructive parent-teacher relationships

- Acknowledge less educated parents' equally crucial role in the support provided to the education of their children.
- Explain reality with regard to the school environment and the children's abilities to parents with unrealistic expectations in order for parents to understand their children's achievements in perspective.
- Remind parents constantly of their crucial roles as primary educators of their children.
- Arrange for proper communication with parents from minority groups who encounter language barriers.
- Be well prepared when communicating with negative parents and document all communication to avoid new conflict while pursuing better relationships.

To address parents' challenges to get involved in their children's schooling:

- Arrange for liaison personnel with proper language skills in the foreign languages to communicate with parents from minority cultures who encounter language proficiency problems so as to ensure that these parents get involved in their children's learning.

- Empower parents by convincing them of their crucial role as primary educators and make them realize how important their role is in the achievement of their children at school.
- Arrange for teachers who are successful in involving parents in the class situation to assist teachers who are less successful in involving parents in their classroom to avoid parents feeling like intruders.

To be a school principal who is successful in managing effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships:

- Develop an inspiring mission statement that articulates into clear learning goals and promote these learning goals throughout the school and community to establish and maintain school wide commitment.
- Be sure to be highly educated, result orientated individuals with a strong sense of accountability to all stakeholders in order to have an influence on school excellence.
- Translate high expectations into intellectual development and academic achievement for all learners including parent involvement in the schooling of their children.
- Show respect for individual differences and community values.
- Manage change effectively through motivation and a focus on what matters most to learners and parents.
- Demonstrate commitment by being the first on campus and the last one to leave and practice an open door policy of approachability to teachers, parents and learners.
- Practice communication in the true sense of the word by listening, empathizing and connecting with individual stakeholders in order to find answers to all their needs.

6.5   SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

With regard to parent involvement and the strengthening of parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development, the following suggestions are made for further research:

- In order to achieve effective communication between stakeholders at school, technology should be used in primary schools and investigations should be conducted on the 'how' and 'what' of effective implementation.
- To ensure that proper communication between parents and teachers is maintained and the confidentiality of information is respected, further investigations into the barriers of parental involvement in primary schools should be undertaken so as to develop strategies for the counteraction of these barriers.

6.6   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study investigated the role of communication in strengthening parent-teacher relationships in primary schools. This study has the following limitations:

Firstly, the small sample size based on purpose and convenience does not allow for a generalizing of the findings to be representative of all primary schools.

Secondly, a limitation pertains to the geographical area in which the investigation was conducted as the conditions in the Ocean View School District, California may not be representative of other areas in the same society. The Ocean View School District is situated in an opulent neighbourhood where the majority of parents are highly qualified.

Thirdly, principals from the Ocean View School District are considered higher qualified than the average school principal within the specific society and do therefore not represent principals in all primary schools.

6.7   CONCLUSION

Human development on account of learning processes results from multiple inputs and contains an interactive and renewing process that is influenced by all stakeholders of the community (par 1.1). In order to create effective parent-teacher relationships and with regard to constant changes in the external environment influencing learner development, principals, teachers and parents create diverse and adaptive ways to support each other in their pursuit of learners' optimal development. Parents are responsible for the emotional and cognitive wellbeing of their children and support schools to enrich learners' intellectual lives through effective teaching for the sake of successful learning.

Communication with learners and parents is carried out in a diverse number of ways, all of which are focused on conveying essential knowledge and information with regard to learners' scholastic development. Communication with learners includes a significant element of motivation in order for learners to explore further so as to gain increased knowledge and skills. With parents, communication is focused on building long-lasting relationships for the sake of supporting learners optimally in their development to responsible adulthood. In all of this, effective principalship based on essential traits including achieving high levels of pedagogical thoughtfulness, developing relationships characterised by caring and civility, and achieving increases in the quality of learners' performances (Sergiovanni, 2001), is crucial for the arrangement of constructive parent-teacher relationships.

Schools with their teacher corps alone cannot help learners achieve their full academic potential. This is not an indictment on schools and their teachers; rather, this is a fact of learner development. Learners' personal investment in and interest for learning is, for example, significantly influenced by parental messages. Therefore, the approach for interacting with families is characterised by focusing on the importance of the relationship and establishing meaningful co-roles for all stakeholders. Working as

partners is a way of thinking about how to create constructive connections between parents and teachers. Forming connections and ongoing relationships between teachers and parents are designed to enhance learners' learning, and to address the obstacles that impede it. It requires delivery of the right message that mutual respect and interdependence of home, school, and the community are essential to learner development.

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ANNEXURE A

- **Letter requesting permission to conduct research in Southern California Schools, Huntington Beach, California.**

- **Letter requesting participants to participate in focus group and individual interviews.**

- **Letter requesting permission to conduct research in Southern California Schools, Huntington Beach, California.**

From: Elsie [mailto:elsiejooste@verizon.net]
Sent: Thursday, May 06, 2010 12:38 PM
To: 'eburney@ovsd.org'
Subject: FW: Research

Christina Elsie Jooste
17362 Madera Lane
Huntington Beach
CA.
92647

Elaine C. Burney
Ocean View School District

I am currently enrolled at the University of South Africa for the Masters Degree study in Education Management and doing research on **THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN STRENGTHENING PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS IN CALIFORNIA ELEMENTARY/MIDDLE SCHOOLS.**

For this study, I would like to enquire the possibility of selecting my sites and participants within the Southern California School District. Four primary schools would be a purposeful selection. Participants meeting this criterion would be the school principals of the selected schools, eight teachers/two per school, eight parents/two from each grade and seven learners/ two from each grade. A total of 27 participants will therefore take part in this research. No personal information (names of districts, schools, principals, teachers or students) will be used in the research document.

Selection of parents and learners would therefore be selected within the four schools. Each principal would select two teachers working with the parent-teacher communication strategies in their school. An individual interview that consist of eleven

questions will be done at each principal's scheduled time. A focus group interview will be done with the selected teachers at the Creative Minds School site. A creative art lesson would follow the interview to teachers (focus group) for their input in this research.

Schools of interest: Golden View, Harbour View, Circle View

Please advise me in the willingness to participate in this research
Thank you for your time.

Christina Elsie Jooste
1714 596 5005
1714 206 8606 (cell)

-----Original Message-----

From: Elaine Burney [mailto:eburney@ovsd.org]

Sent: Sunday, May, 09, 2010 1:28 PM

To: Elsie

Subject: Re: FW: Research

Hi,

If we could please talk about this a little more before I commit, I would greatly

appreciate it.

Thanks,

Elaine

-----Original Message-----

From: Elsie [mailto:elsiejooste@verizon.net]

Sent: Sunday, May,09,2010 9:58 PM

To: 'Elaine Burney'

Subject: RE: FW: Research

Hi Elaine

I will make an appointment with your secretary to come and see you. Thanks

Elsie

Letter requesting participants to participate in focus group and individual interviews with consent

Research study for M.Ed. (Education Management)

- Data collection conducted at
- Ocean View School District
- Huntington Beach
- California, United States of America
- September - October, 2010

Dear Educator, Parent, and Learners.

- My name is Christina Elsie Jooste and I am currently a graduate student at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. I am in the process of completing a research project as a requirement for my Masters in Education Management with the emphasis on Effective Communication in strengthening Parent-Teacher Relationships.

AIMS OF MY STUDY

To strengthen the communication between the home and school in pursuit of optimal learner development, opportunities to participate should be provided to all stakeholders (Fields, 1987:12). For that reason investigation into the effective communication in primary schools (elementary schools) to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for optimal learner development, is a meaningful study. The aims of the study are thus as follows:

- To determine how learners benefit from constructive parent-teacher relationships.
- To determine the main challenges teachers face in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships.

- To determine the main challenges parents face to become involved in the education of their children.
- To elicit the role of school principals in managing effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships.
- To provide guidelines on effective communication to strengthen parent- teacher relationships for optimal learner development.

Since I am currently a parent, working as an art teacher, and live in Huntington Beach, I thought the Ocean View School District would be convenient, beneficial, and accessible for my research. I want to ensure you that there will be no risks associated with this study.

Principals, teachers, parents, and learners names and schools will not be mentioned in this research. This information will be strictly confidential. You can terminate your participation at any time with no penalty.

There will be several tools used to measure the data in order to find answers to the questions: individual interviews and focus group interviews. I would be very happy after completing my research to share the results of my findings with you and the school faculty.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at elsiejooste@hotmail.com .Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Consent

I (_____) participant/parent/ guardian have read and understand the information provided above. I willingly agree to/ do not agree to participate in this research project.

ANNEXURE B

Interview schedules and semi-structured questions asked at individual interviews and focus-group interviews to principals, teachers, parents, and learners.

School Principals

Individual Interviews Schedules

June, 16, 2010, 4pm. Golden View Elementary
June, 17, 2010, 3pm. Harbor View Elementary
June, 23, 2010, 4.30 pm. Circle View Elementary
June 25, 2010, 2pm. Mesa View Middle School

School Principals

1. What do you perceive as the most important sentiment in your mission?
2. What role does communication play in addressing this challenge?
3. What role does communication play in motivating your teachers?
4. What communication challenges do you experience with parents and learners?
5. What are the advantages/ disadvantages of your communication chain of commands?
6. What different strategies do you follow when communicating with angry, controlling, demanding and indifferent parents?

7.   There are four types of parents: parents who are committed to their children but do not participate, those who participate but are not necessarily supportive, parents that supports and participate, and parents who neither support nor participate in their child's education. What strategies do you follow in getting all parents to participate and support their children at home and at school?

8.   What is the best trait a school principal should have to arrange for and maintain functional parent involvement for the sake of optimal learner development?

9.   How do you think do learners benefit when parents are involved in their learning?

10. Which are the most important factors with regard to effective communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships we have raised?

Teachers

Interview Schedule: October, 4, 2010, 3 pm–

Creative Minds Art School

1. What is your teaching philosophy?
2. What role does communication play in your teaching philosophy?
3. What are the main challenges facing teachers in arranging constructive parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development?
4. How do learners benefit from constructive parent-teacher relationships?
5. What strategies do you take to increase parent-teacher involvement for the sake of optimal learner development?
6. How do you use technology in strengthening parent-teacher communication for the sake of optimal learner development?
7. What Strategies do you follow to maintain communications with parents on a daily basis?
8. It is important to have good relationships with the external community. What strategies do your school follow in building relationships with your external community that benefit learners' optimal development?
9. There are four types of parents: parents who are committed to their children but do not participate, those who participate but are not necessarily supportive, parents that supports and participate, and parents who neither support nor participate in their child's education. What strategies do you follow in getting parents to support and participate in their child's learning?
10. Have we missed something about communication to strengthen parent-teacher relationships for the sake of optimal learner development?

Parents

Focus Group Interview Schedule: October, 13, 2010, 3pm.
Creative Minds Art School

1.   What is the most important benefit of being a parent?

2.   There are four types of parents: parents who are committed to their children but do not participate, those who participate but are not necessarily supportive, parents that supports and participate, and parents who neither support nor participate in their child's education. Where do you as a parent fit in?

3.   What role does communication play in your parent-teacher relationship?

4.   How does effective communication from school-to-home and home-to-school benefit your child's learning development?

5.   When you have a serious problem with a teacher, what procedures do you follow to resolve the situation?

6.   What are the benefits for children when parents are involved in school?

7.   What are the main challenges parents face to get involved in their child's school?

8.   In what way is your community involved in the school that would benefit your child's development?

9.   What about parents with language problems? How does the school assist them?

10.   Schools operate effectively when the school principal meets the needs of all parents and learners. What is your principals' strongest quality (trait)?

Learners

Focus Group Interview Schedule: October, 12, 2010, 3pm.

Creative Mind Art School

1. What do you like most about your school?

2. If you have a problem at school, who do you talk to in order to get your problem solved?

3. How do you feel when you see your parents work at school?

4. What do your parents do when you get into trouble at school?

5. How do you know what homework to do every day?

6. Do your parents help you with your homework?

7. How do you feel about your parents' being actively involved in your schooling?

8. Do you like your parents to be continuously involved in your school related activities? Why?