



PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTS AND SCHOOL HEADS IN RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE



Patience F. Hlanga^{1*}

Ncamisile P. Mthiyane²

Edson Muresherwa³

^{1,2}University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education Psychology of Education Department, South Africa.

¹Email: patiehlanga@gmail.com Tel: +263715118624

²Email: mthiyane1@ukzn.ac.za Tel: +27825474113

³Great Zimbabwe University, School of Education (Department of Educational Foundations), Zimbabwe.

³Email: edsmuresherwa@gmail.com Tel: +263773849744



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 2 November 2020

Revised: 7 December 2020

Accepted: 22 December 2020

Published: 4 January 2021

Keywords

Parental engagement
Parental Involvement
Sustainable learning
Engagement as a power game
Rural primary schools
School Governance.

This article explores parents and school heads' understanding of parental engagement as a precursor for sustainable learning by children in rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. The article forms part of a larger study on parental engagement for enhancing sustainable learning in rural primary schools. It sought to provide answers to the central question: What is the conceptualisation of parental engagement in enhancing sustainable learning in rural primary schools? The study adopted a qualitative research approach and was informed by Epstein's theory of parental engagement. Data were collected by use of Focus Group Discussions and face-to-face interviews, and were analysed following Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis approach. The key finding in this study is that, whilst parents and school heads shared the view that parental engagement was key to sustainable learning, conceptualisation of what this practice entails differs significantly between these stakeholders in education. Whereas school heads' perspective of parental engagement centres on parents as facilitators and financiers of education, parents understand parental engagement as involving, controlling and monitoring the work activities of both school heads and teachers up and above their resourcing and facilitation roles. In fact, parents felt they should also play an oversight role. Clearly, findings from this study contribute to scholarship by elaborating on existing knowledge and by adding new insights into existing literature on parental engagement and sustainable learning by children.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to scholarship by elaborating and in many instances bringing new insights on the work of earlier writers on parental engagement for sustainable learning in rural primary schools. It is one of the few studies that focus on parental engagement as a precursor for sustainable learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education, no matter how magnificent it can be, is limited without engagement of parents (Bailey, 2017). Literature has shown that parental engagement in the education of their children is a precursor for sustainable learning by children. That is, learning that engages one throughout life; providing individual needs in all life contexts whilst being of significant benefit to the community to which they belong (Ahiauzu & Oladipupo, 2018). This means, for all intents and purposes, parents should share the societal responsibility to ensure that learners

have a warm, loving, and safe environment in which they can develop and achieve their full potential. However, an understanding of parental engagement has been ascribed to the distinct perceptions of various stakeholders. It is not clearly understood how parents and school heads in Zimbabwean schools understand parental engagement and how this understanding influence practices by these key stakeholders. This study therefore sought in part to close this knowledge gap. It sought to provide answers to the central question: *What is the conceptualisation of parental engagement in enhancing sustainable learning in rural primary schools?* Key to this exploration is an endeavour to understand how parents and school heads understand parental engagement and its contribution to sustainable learning by children in rural primary schools in Zimbabwe. In the next section, we review literature related to the study, as we also cast our eyes on Epstein's theory which frames the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While the importance of parental engagement seems to be appreciated in most countries across the globe, there is still debate on the perceived nature of parental engagement among different communities (Umeana, 2017). For various reasons, several groups and individuals still hold diverse views concerning parental engagement (Young, 2018). For example, Durišić and Bunijevac (2017) contend that parental engagement entails a continued parental influence in the learning of children as they develop through their school years. This means parental engagement is seen to mean any parenting approaches, actions, styles, or activities that take place within or beyond school settings to support children's academic and or behavioural success in their present schools (Young, 2018). Furthermore, parental engagement may be seen to mean showing a positive presence at school by parents through communicating with teachers concerning the education of children or assisting children at home with homework (Jafarov, 2015). Mafa and Makuba (2013) see parental engagement as not only limited to roles undertaken by parents in the promotion of their children's academic achievement but include school improvement and democracy in school governance where collective decision-making is critical. According to Umeana (2017) the parent's contribution can be used to best describe what parental engagement means. Clearly, the definitions above show that parental engagement is perceived in different ways by different stakeholders.

Young (2018) asserts that in Japan, parental engagement in school communities is strong because Japanese teachers regard trust, partnership and cooperation as vital in enhancing sustainable learning. As a result, Japanese schools provide parents with yearly activities to be held and with information about school policies and expectations. Parents also attend seminars to improve their efficacy in educating and rearing children. Trainings include reading, proper use of mobile phones and internet. In addition, every month parents are accorded an hour to observe lessons in their children's classes. More than 75% of the parents in Japan are reported to be attending such seminars, and thereby gaining skills to assist their children at home (Yamamoto, Holloway, & Suzuki, 2016). The practice of involving parents as significant stakeholders in school programmes make them inspired to volunteer and work in schools, adjusting their personal programmes and schedules to meet school goals. In Africa, countries such as Namibia also emphasise on engaging parents in the education of their children.

Chindongo and Mbukusa (2015) affirm that the Namibian Education Act of 2001 encourages parental engagement through legally constituted school boards. As a result, parents are seen engaging in their children's schooling through various ways including driving their children to school in the morning and picking them up in the afternoon. Maluleke (2014) also submits that in the South African context, the Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) authorises the incorporation of parents in school activities.

In the Zimbabwean context, the Statutory Instrument (SI) 87 of 1992 for non-government schools and SI 379 of 1998 for government schools provide parents with the right for engagement in school programmes through School Development Committees (SDCs) in order to support government effort in educating the child. Mutasa, Goronga, and Gatsi (2013) provide reference to some Zimbabwean rural parents participating in schools through construction works and attending parent forums as part of parental engagement. In a study carried out by Mafa and

Makuba (2013) in Zimbabwean schools, findings revealed that parental engagement was characterised by some parents assisting children to read at home while some were elected as members of the School Development Committees.

It is evident from the various definitions and practices given in this section that conceptualisations of parental engagement vary across school contexts and hence still demands attention by researchers. However, despite variations on how parental engagement is conceptualised across school contexts there is profound evidence to support the centrality of parental engagement in enhancing sustainable learning. These include improvement in learners' school attendance and academic performance as parents assist children at home. Researchers seem to agree that, combined effort of parents and schools is important in encouraging learners to attain positive development for self, families, school, communities and nations at large. It is also believed that an increased self-confidence among parents in their parenting and decision-making skills is developed as they share experiences with each other thereby improving their parenting skills. This also creates a good relationship between the school and the community for the good of children. Teacher motivation is enhanced in the process, thereby leading to sustainable learning by children (Hamlin & Flessa, 2018; Park & Holloway, 2017; Ugwuegbulem, 2018; Umeana, 2017).

Our review of literature shows that various studies have been conducted on parental engagement in Zimbabwe. For example, studies have been carried out in the Midlands province (Mandina, 2012) Matabeleland province (Mafa & Makuba, 2013; Tshabalala, 2013; Tshuma & Ncube, 2016) Harare province (Muchuchuti, 2014; Mutasa et al., 2013). However, none of these studies was carried out in rural primary school communities in Bikita district. It is evident from literature as reviewed in this section that earlier studies on similar concepts were carried out mainly in the Matabeleland province of Zimbabwe. This is a region mostly consisting of the Ndebele ethnic group. In contrast, the current study was carried out in an area mostly consisting of the Karanga ethnic group whose culture may be considered significantly different from that in the Matabeleland provinces. It was therefore assumed the current study may present interesting findings since the study was carried out in a different context than earlier studies on related topics. The current study therefore sought to expand on existing knowledge as it also sought to contribute to scholarship by adding new insights into existing knowledge.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by Epstein's theory of parental engagement. According to Hamlin and Flessa (2018) Joyce Epstein, the Director of Centre for School, Family and Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, developed an all-embracing theory of parental engagement in the late 1980's. This theory explains the collaborative and complementary nature of schools, parents and communities (Ntekane, 2018) in promoting sustainable learning by children in schools. The theory outlines six fundamental characteristics of parental engagement that should exist between schools and parents for school success (Young, 2018). The six characteristics which also illuminate the current study are reviewed below, starting with parenting:

3.1. Parenting

According to Epstein's theory, one of the key elements of parental engagement is parenting (Epstein, 2010). Parenting in this context refers to the process of teaching and guiding learners throughout their school years in order to instil in them self-confidence and self-esteem (Teba-Teba, 2016). According to Epstein (2007) with the understanding that parents have different life experiences and parenting skills, schools have to play an active role in supporting parents with good child nurturing skills so as to benefit learners. It is believed that lack of critical parenting skills may lead to poor parenting which also has implications on parental engagement in schools (Bailey, 2017). Clearly, lack of appropriate parenting skills also inhibits sustainable learning by children in schools.

3.2 Communication

Epstein (2010) and Toom (2018) define communication in the context of parental engagement as designing a reciprocal connection between parents and schools through various means. This can be oral and/or written including frequent parent forums, newsletters, emails and telephones. This means for effective parental engagement, schools have to create various channels of communication between home and school where they can communicate with parents on various school programmes and learners' academic progress. In addition, schools should provide room for parents to give feedback to enable effective cycles of communication to be complete. Such channels of communication should also be seen to allow parents to know when their children face challenges and what the school is doing to address the challenges as identified (Epstein, 2007). This arrangement should also ensure that parents are accorded respectful, honest and genuine opportunities to contact their children's schools freely for any issues relating to learners' education (Naicker, 2015). Clearly, where such an arrangement exists, the foundation for parental engagement is set.

3.3. Volunteering

Volunteering in the context of parental engagement entails schools allowing parents who offer to provide services and seek to be involved in school programmes to be provided with the opportunity to do so, in order to merge the concerns and competencies of parents to the requirements of learners and the need of schools (Umeana, 2017). This means, schools need to design various programmes where parent volunteers are provided with activities to do so as to meet the needs of the school and promote learning by children. Volunteering would enable parents to spare their time and efforts, and get motivated to support schools in contributing their part in educating children (Hamlin & Flessa, 2018). For Epstein, volunteering may include parents offering to help schools in fund raising activities organised by the school, joining learners during sporting activities and monitoring learners' school attendance (Epstein, 2010; Epstein, 2007; Ntekane, 2018).

3.4. Learning at home

In the context of parental engagement, schools and parents are expected to ensure that they cooperate and assist each other in educating learners both at home and school (Bailey, 2017; Epstein, 2007). This means, homes should be stocked with stimulating and age-appropriate learning materials that are easily accessible by learners (Teba-Teba, 2016). This practice enables parents to motivate and to track their children's progress. This also provides the basis for effective dialogues between parents and teachers concerning the performance of the child (Young, 2018). For this to be successful, schools need to provide parents with information on how to assist learners in the home environment and share their targets for success (Shiffman, 2013; Yamamoto et al., 2016). Clearly this also demands that parents possess the necessary knowledge to handle learning materials to which their children are exposed.

3.5. Decision-Making

The success of any school programme such as parental engagement is critically linked to effective decision-making (Epstein, 2007). Pietarinen, Pyhältö, and Soini (2019) supported this position and go on to say that decision-making is highly dependent on the capability of schools to involve all stakeholders in fundamental school development and improvement programmes. Hamlin and Flessa (2018) regard parents' forums as essential for making such decisions. According to Ntekane (2018) assessments of seminars conducted in schools have shown that parents, as a consequence of their contributions to the education of their children, become contented enough by their involvement in school activities and expect to appear in upcoming events when given another chance to be included in decision-making processes in future. It is felt teachers should also develop awareness of parents' abilities to help achieve instructional aims (Naicker, 2015) if parental engagement initiatives should yield positive results.

Without this positive awareness and importance of partnerships in sharing ideas, poor decision-making may occur and likely impinge on the success of parental engagement initiatives and, healthy relationships and well-being of stakeholders (Shiffman, 2013).

3.6. Collaborating with the Community

Parental engagement requires in part that schools engage all stakeholders in contributing towards the development of the school (Epstein, 2007). Collaborating with the community involves recognition and amalgamation of resources and provisions from the community to enhance school programmes, parent customs and learners' progress (Ntekane, 2018). This entails the responsibility of the entire community in shaping its school which takes us to the African truth that, 'It takes the entire village to raise a child' (Teba-Teba, 2016). Clearly, according to Epstein's theory which informs the current study, parental engagement denotes an agenda which encompasses schools, parents and other stakeholders from distinct backgrounds to collaborate and find new progressive solutions which are collectively agreed (Ugwuegbulem, 2018; Umeana, 2017). Incorporating various stakeholders into the engagement plan can be of precise help to the provision of educational assistance that may not be received in the home alone (Young, 2018) or in schools working on their own.

Naicker (2015) admits that school heads should exercise leadership skills that allow participation by parents and other stakeholders. Parents should be accorded a chance to contribute in discussions affecting school management, through gaining appropriate information, skills and attitudes (Albright, 2018). This means school heads should be in a position to share and openly discuss with parents issues that concern the school. Thus, tactical strategies such as planning and preparation are vital administration kits that school heads should utilise in order to ensure positive transformations in schools and in the education of children, irrespective of the geographical place of the school (Naicker, 2015). In short, good leadership and collaborative skills are essential for any major development as parents get motivated to engage with the school for sustainable learning. However, Ni (2020) posits that disqualified leadership and dysfunctional leadership have been widely observed in reality and thoroughly researched as intensifying power politics between contesting groups. It is important to note that in parental engagement schools and parents represent forces of change.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to enable a better understanding of participants' perceptions in their natural and free environmental settings. Participatory Action Research (PAR) design was employed. The PAR was seen to be a democratic, transformative, liberating and life-enhancing approach (Mthiyane, 2015; Raynor, 2019). As a result, this was deemed important for providing all participants with chances to contribute freely in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in one-on-one interview discussions.

The study sample consisted of twelve participants drawn from two (2) rural primary schools (school A & school B). These included two (2) school heads (one from each school), and five (5) parents from each school. Participants were purposively selected basing on their teaching experience, and hence knowledge regarding parental engagement. School heads were involved as gatekeepers and therefore, were expected to provide rich data with respect to the study's aim. Parents were drawn from various school committees where they had high opportunities for interacting with the school authorities therefore, could also provide rich data essential for this study.

4.1. Data Generation Procedures and Analysis

The research was conducted in two (2) rural primary schools in the Bikita district of Masvingo province of Zimbabwe. Permission to conduct the research was sought first from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) in Zimbabwe in line with the ethical standards expected of a study of high standard. Informed consent was also sought and obtained from all research participants. Research

participants were informed of the aim of the study and research methods. Ethical considerations including the use of pseudonyms to maintain anonymity, voluntary participation, and keeping data confidential were clearly explained to participants and adhered to. We also sought permission to audio-record participants' responses during the discussions. To show consent, participants were made to sign consent forms. The venue, date and time to conduct the discussions were agreed upon by all participants.

Data were generated utilising Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with parents and face-to-face interviews with school heads. The discussions lasted forty-five minutes and were conducted with aid of a semi-structured interview guides. Data were collected first at school A, before moving to school B. The discussions were audio-recorded. The audio-recorded data from FGDs and one-on-one interviews were transcribed and analysed following Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. The thematic approach was utilised in presenting the data. The three dimensions of CDA (text analysis, discursive practice and social practice) were followed in analysing data.

5. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This part of the study focuses on the presentation, analysis and discussion of the findings.

5.1. Data Presentation and Analysis

Data in this article are presented in line with themes that emerged from an analysis of responses given by research participants in line with interview questions given.

5.1.1. Conceptualisations of Parental Engagement

Research participants were asked a number of questions during interview discussions. On being asked as to what they viewed as comprising the concept parental engagement, the school heads responded as captured in the verbatim responses below:

Parental engagement is all about allowing parents to participate in educational programmes involving their children. I mean it entails parents being involved in providing teaching and learning resources that are necessary to facilitate and enhance learners' progress at school. For example, since education in this country is not free, parents should be involved in paying fees and levies for their children's education, assist in building classrooms and in buying textbooks and other resources for the benefit of their children. The key here is facilitation, facilitation and facilitation [smiling] (Mr Badza).

I think parental engagement entails the support given by parents for the well-being of children in the school and for enabling teaching and learning activities to take place effectively... This includes activities such as paying school fees and levies to make sure that teaching by teachers becomes possible. In fact, parents are key providers of teaching/learning resources and are caregivers of children at home. Ideally, parents should prepare the ground for learning by children. They also should make sure that learning which happens at school is maintained at home. ...They should encourage children to read at home and to provide all material resources needed for the purpose... At the same time, they should allow people trained for the job to do what they know best without interference (Mrs Mutema).

The verbal quotations above indicate that school heads see parental engagement as concerned mainly with involvement of parents in providing materials and infrastructural resources necessary for learning. Parents are expected to participate in activities that facilitate teaching by teachers such as providing children with materials essential for effective learning and payment of school fees. School heads seem to believe that parents should not be directly involved in the day-to-day teaching and learning activities in schools. The thinking seems to be that some parents are ill-prepared for the purpose. Mrs Mutema thus said, "...they should allow people trained for the job to do what they know best without interference." Mr Badza also regarded parental involvement as central to children's

education within the context of facilitation. He thus said, “*The key here is facilitation,*” when talking about his understanding of parental engagement in the education of their children.”

Responding to the same question regarding their understanding of parental engagement, the parents that participated in this study expressed:

I think parental engagement involves parents and schools helping each other in the learning of the child... What I mean is that, as parents we should also have a say on what our children are learning and how they are taught. Schools should not just decide alone concerning what our children learn and do as they desire. Remember some of us are Christians and we expect our Christian ethos to be also included in what our children are taught and not allow children to be taught on ancestral spirits only [emphasis] without us involved (Mr Chirandu).

Parental engagement is when parents get involved in the learning of their children... I think I should also pay school fees in time and help my children with homework if I should be seen to be adequately involved and engaged in their education (Ms Mukundi).

In my view, parental engagement entails the existence of a strong bond between parents and schools in promoting the learning of our children. This bond should allow us as parents to meet teachers of our children and assist each other on how best to assist children. From the stories told by our children, we know better their classroom worries and the strengths and weaknesses of some of the teachers in this school. As a form of engagement, parents should have the opportunity to share these experiences with school heads so that children’s education is improved (Mrs Chitima).

Parental engagement means the involvement of parents in ensuring effective teaching and learning is taking place in classes, including making sure that school funds are used appropriately and accounted for. SDC (School development committee) for example, should serve as the eyes of parents... The SDC members should monitor school programs and financial expenditure on behalf of other parents... This is why I say they are our eyes [emphasis] (Mr Gonese).

The excerpts above show that parents understand parental engagement in broad sense. Parental engagement is seen as centred on the involvement of parents both directly and indirectly in teaching and learning activities. Collaboration of parents and schools was emphasised. This is evident in the choice of words in which such terms as “*strong bond*” seem to portray a strong desire for a genuine and long-lasting relationship between parents and school authorities with the aim of facilitating sustainable learning. Both school heads and parents agreed on the need for involvement and collaboration in order to promote learners’ progress in schools.

Whilst there are similarities in the way school heads and parents understand parental engagement, there are also important differences in this conceptualisation. One key similarity showing from data analysis is that both school heads and parents believe that parental engagement was important for sustainable learning by children. However, there appears to be differences in the understanding of what parental engagement actually entails. Whereas parents believe they should also be involved in direct classroom activities, school heads believe these should play a facilitating role. Parents also believed they should play an oversight role on school activities, including financial management activities by school heads and classroom activities of teachers. School heads however believe some of these activities could best be carried out by people trained for the job as parents play resourcing and facilitative roles. Since data as presented above seemed to have implications on practice, questions were asked to research participants concerning the role they played in contribution to parental engagement for sustainable learning by children. Data to this effect are presented in section below. The next section thus presents data on the role played by parents in nurturing sustainable learning.

5.1.2. Parental Engagement Activities

When school heads were asked as to what role parents were playing by way of parental engagement to nurture sustainable learning by children, responses were as captured in the verbatim quotes below:

Parents are seen making provisions for their children through buying uniforms and paying levies. We also expect them to supervise and encourage children to do homework and study their books when at home. Whilst we don’t expect

parents to be assisting in doing the homework as it were, since they are not trained for that, parents are expected to create an environment that enable children to work at home. They also are expected to supervise that work is done and they are doing exactly that (Mrs Mutema).

Parents are providing fees, uniforms, books, food, shelter and other learning materials needed for their children. They also are engaged in infrastructural development (Mr Badza).

The verbatim excerpts above show that school heads saw parents as involved in providing material resources which were essential for promoting effective learning by their children. School heads also felt, by paying school fees and levies for their children and by participating in school development projects such as construction of classroom blocks, parents were engaged in the education of their children. Clearly, these responses are in sync with what school heads believed parental engagement for sustainable learning entails. Responding to the same question on what role they played to nurture sustainable learning of their children, the parents that participated in the study, some whom responded in Shona had this to say:

Kubatana kwevabereki nechikoro kunosanganisira kugona kvedu vabereki kutsvakira vana vedu mari dzechikoro, mabhuku ekunyorera nemayunifomu.” [Parental engagement involves our ability as parents to source money for our children’s school levies, writing exercise books and school uniforms] (Mr Trymore).

We pay school fees, buy uniforms and books for our children. In addition, we also are involved in construction of classrooms and teachers’ houses. This shows we have a stake in the education of our children. As a result, we also demand that we are appraised on everything which happens in the school, including how our money is used [emphasis] (Mrs Dube).

Tinopa chikoro vana vedu vatinozvara isu nokuti kana tikati vana vedu vasaenda kuchikoro zvinoreva kuti panenge pasina kudyidzana” [We give schools our children that we bear. If we do not send our children to school it means there is no engagement] (Ms Hamandishe).

We try by all means to make sure that we pay school fees for our children and buying school uniforms bearing in mind that our children cannot learn well without these things... In addition, we also attend parents’ meetings where we contribute our part concerning the education of our children and elect our representatives to advance our interest and those of our children in the SDC... In as much as we may want to assist our children directly, such by helping them doing their homework, we are unable to do so especially with the new curriculum... In practice, we do what we are able to do and leave for professionals all professional matters [smiling] (Mr Muswe).

The responses as given above show that parents view parental engagement as comprising their contribution to children’s education through paying school levies, providing learning materials and other resources such as uniforms. Data as presented above also show that school heads also viewed participation in parents meeting in which they contribute in decision-making and select members to represent their interests and those of their children constitute engagement in the education of their children. In addition, they also believe that since they are key stakeholders who contribute in school infrastructural development, they need to be appraised on what happens in their respective schools, through effective communication. In line with this understanding, research participants were asked questions concerning their assessment of the effectiveness of communication between parents and schools in promoting parental engagement in school teaching/learning programs. Responses to this effect were as captured in the verbatim quotations below.

5.1.3. Communication between Parents and Schools

When research participants were asked questions concerning their assessment of effectiveness of communication between parents and schools in promoting parental engagement, school heads’ responses were as captured in the verbatim quotations below:

Schools effectively communicate with parents through various platforms and channels. We hold Annual General Meetings and school development meetings which we use as platforms to reach parents and to involve them in the

education of their children. As head, I think we are able as a school to communicate with parents on everything they need to know about how their children are learning (Mr Badza).

Communication with parents has been so dynamic in schools. This has been achieved through word of mouth through children, social media platforms like WhatsApp, phone calls, and texts messages (Mrs Mutema).

The verbatim excerpts above show that school heads viewed communication between parents and schools as being effective. The same data also show that different media were used by schools to reach parents. Responding to the same questions concerning the effectiveness of communication between parents and the school in nurturing parental engagement in the education of their children, the parents that participated in the study responded as follows:

Our communication with the school is usually through our children who are sent with messages concerning school issues. However, the challenge is that at times children may forget along their way home or may decide to avoid passing some messages to us... Imagine when a misbehaving child is asked to invite parents to school by word of mouth so that they are apprised of the misbehaviour. Do you think they will communicate such information? It would be better that school authorities write us, or even phoning (Ms Chenesai).

Schools are communicating with parents but mostly through word of mouth making some of the messages fail to reach the majority. I think it may be better if school authorities write letters, like they do when they invite us for parents meetings (Mr Muchinezuro).

We make use of school parents meetings to communicate with schools on various issues... Personally, I have seen communications through parents meetings very important... As a result of these meetings, we get to understand the school vision. I think teachers also get to know our expectations as parents... However, I believe, full parents meetings should be more frequent... Schools seem to concentrate more on SDC meetings ignoring full parents meetings which involve all parents (Ms Shamiso).

Our communication is usually passed orally through learners for example, when we are being invited to meetings or if the teacher of my child requests me to visit the school (Mr Murefu).

Data as presented above show that both school heads and parents shared the view that communication was an important element of parental engagement in the education of their children. An analysis of data as presented above however shows that whilst school heads believed that there was effective communication between the school and the parents concerning the education of children, available data seem to suggest that parents believed the communication system was not up to scratch. Parents also had reservations on sending messages with children. They felt children may deliberately avoid passing the messages to parents or forget to do so. Clearly, data as presented above point to parents' eagerness to participate in issues affecting the education of their children. Given this situation, we also wanted to understand if parents also volunteered to offer service to schools in line with the principles of parental engagement. Data to this effect are presented below.

5.1.4. Voluntary Participation in Educational Activities

Responding to questions on whether parents undertook any voluntary participation in the learning of their children, school heads had this to say:

There are no incidents where I have seen parents willingly coming to volunteer for school activities but parents are always in school through invitations or by cohesion. In most cases, we use community leaders like village heads, headmen and councillors to push parents to participate in school activities. For example, the school feeding programme has become a success only after the influences of the village heads and our local councillor in making sure that parents come to school to prepare meals for their children (Mrs Mutema).

Parents normally want to be paid for the services they render to the school. Typical volunteering is not seen in schools. Where they offer free assistance it will be through efforts of school management and community leaders summoning them to do so or where such activities involve entertainment or personal benefits to the parents involved (Mr Badza).

The responses as captured above show that school heads believe, parents are not volunteering to partake in any school development programmes/activities. In cases where parents are seen volunteering, this is done as a result of a push from respected authorities in their communities, personal benefits accruing from such participation or that the activities will be of an entertainment nature. More often than not parents were seen to take part in activities where they look forward to payment. Responding to the same questions on volunteering participation in school activities, parents had this to say:

Parents come to cheer up sporting activities (Mrs Mambo).

We volunteer in providing free labour on most construction needs in our school. We have been building toilets, moulding bricks for constructing classroom blocks and fencing the school premise (Mr Shumba).

Parents are building classroom blocks (Mr Mhazi).

We help in school feeding programmes where we make turns as villages to prepare meals for our children and supplying relish (Ms Hamandishe).

We help our children with homework (Ms Chenesai).

We assist our children by providing them ample time to study and do their schoolwork in the home. Things like furniture and lighting are provided for children to learn at home... I think this is part of volunteering effort towards the education of our children. As you may be aware all parents in this country are motivated to educate their children unaided... I mean people are prepared to finance the education of their children all by themselves (Mr Dube).

The verbal excerpts above exposed that whereas parents felt that they were doing enough by way of volunteering to participate in activities of their children, school thought otherwise. Responses from parents revealed that they were assisting their children academically at home through buying resources for learning, assisting on homework and on time management. Parents also felt they volunteered in the provision of infrastructural and material resources needed to facilitate learning by children. However, school heads believe parents' involvement followed push from the respected authorities such as village heads and/or local chiefs. Alternatively, voluntary participation occurred where issues of entertainment were involved. Findings as emerging from this study point to the idea that there were both similarities and differences in the way school heads understand parental engagement for sustainable learning by children. These differences have implications on practice as further discussed below.

6. DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

In this section, we discuss the findings from the study. The discussion is guided by the themes that emerged from data analysis as presented above.

6.1. Parental Engagement as a Power Game

Data on school heads' understanding of parental engagement show that they saw parental engagement as primarily comprising the contribution, establishment and participation of parents in activities that facilitate teaching and learning activities. When talking about his perceived role of parents in parental involvement in the education of children, Mr Badza for example emphatically stated, "*The key here is facilitation.*" Clearly, this shows that school heads do not expect parents to be directly involved in the day-to-day activities of the school. Instead, they felt that parents should be playing the role of creating an environment that enables trained people to function. This was evident when Mrs Mutema said, "*Ideally, parents should prepare the ground for learning by children. ... At the same time, they should allow people trained for the job to do what they know best without interference.*" Used of the term interference here shows an element of school heads resenting direct engagement of parents in what they believed were professional activities that should be spared for professionals.

Clearly, this finding contradicts parents' conceptualisation of parental engagement which seems to be centred on direct involvement, controlling and monitoring of work activities of teachers. The desire by parents to control

school activities was illuminated when one parent in a focus group discussion expressed, *Schools should not just decide alone concerning what our children learn and do as they desire. Remember some of us are Christians and we expect our Christian ethos to be also included in what our children are taught and not allow children to be taught on ancestral spirits only, without our input on what our children learn.*"

Whereas both school heads and parents seemed to agree that collaboration and involvement of parents in the education of children was a critical contributor to the success of any educational program meant to promote sustainable learning, there seem to be differences on what these key stakeholders believe parental engagement should focus on. One of the school heads thus said. Whereas school heads felt parents should adopt a facilitative role, parents believed they should adopt an oversight role. This oversight expectation of parents for example made one parent to emphasise that, *"The SDC (School Development Committee) for example should serve as the eyes of parents... The SDC members should monitor school programmes and financial expenditure on behalf of other parents..."* Clearly, findings in this study show that parents also believe that they need to have a hand on curriculum issues.

Findings in this study show that, parental engagement as conceptualised by school heads and parents depicts a power game (Ni, 2020). For example, school heads viewed parents as having nothing to do with direct instructional activities. On the other hand, parents saw themselves as having an oversight role in all school programmes that affect their children. The parents seem eager to establish a collaborative relationship with the school authorities in which they play an oversight role. This is evidenced by their choice of words in which such terms as *"strong bond between parents and schools"* are used. Whereas findings in this study are in line with Epstein (2010) theory which emphasises the need for collaboration and complementary relations between the schools and parents for sustainable learning by children, it appears the concept and practice of parental involvement is understood differently by school authorities and the parents' communities as key stakeholders in education.

The obligations of parents in the education of their children are provided for in Statutory Instrument (SI) 379 of 1998. Among other things, this policy instrument provides that, parents should be involved in the education of their children through their participation in teacher/parents meetings either individually or through their elected representatives; the School Development Committees. Finding from this study however seem to suggest that, even in the backdrop of an enabling policy framework, there is some form of discord on conceptualisations of parental engagement by school heads and parents; two important stakeholders in promoting sustainable learning by children. It appears parents have inadequate knowledge on the exact roles they should play in their engagement. At the same time, school heads seem to have areas of their job which they see as none-go areas for people who are not trained in the field of teaching and school leadership. This is regardless of the fact that school heads still believe parents should be involved in the education of their children especially in line with facilitative responsibilities. Whilst Epstein's theory indicates that schools have the responsibility to educate parents on engagement practises (Epstein, 2007; Teba-Teba, 2016) it seemed the schools have not done enough to create a proper interface between parents and school authorities with respect to parental engagement for sustainable learning by children. The power game (Ni, 2020) between school heads and parents' understanding of parental engagement in the education of children as discussed above has implications on parental engagement practices in schools as discussed below.

6.2. Nurturing Sustainable Learning through Parental Engagement

Findings in this study show that parents were engaged in the education of their children in various ways. Evidence in this study also shows that conceptualisation of parental engagement by both parents and school heads has implications on practice by school heads as further discussed below.

6.2.1. Engagement through Communication

Both school heads and the parents that participated in this study concur that communication between the school and the parents was important for promoting sustainable learning. This is also in sync with (Epstein, 2007)

who opined that, whenever two parties engage for any development agenda, communication is fundamental. Both parents and school heads shared the view that communication through Annual General Meetings (AGMs), parents/teacher meetings and messages sent with children were important. This is in line with Toom (2018) and Epstein (2010) who also concur that various means of communication including meetings, telephone calls and text messages should serve a purpose in making sure that information best reaches majority of parents in modern times. According to Toom (2018) such channels may serve to ensure that parents and school heads engage frequently for the good of children.

Whereas school heads saw the communication channels available in schools as adequately and effectively serving as conduits for parental engagement in the learning of their children, an unanticipated finding in this study is that the parents felt otherwise. In fact, the parents that participated in this study felt that irrespective of the existence of an array of channels of communication in the socio-educational environment, schools were utilising only limited channels of communication. In particular, schools were seen to rely mostly on the word of mouth via children and AGMs. The later comes only once a year. This discrepancy between the views of school authorities and those of parents is a cause for concern since sustainable learner learning is guaranteed where there is a harmonious relationship between parents and school authorities (Epstein, 2010).

6.2.2. Engagement through Voluntary Participation in School Programmes

School heads viewed free will by parents to participate in school programmes as an important element of parental engagement for enhanced and sustainable learning. While parents admitted that they were volunteering to partake in school programmes, school heads dismissed the idea citing that parents were not prepared to participate in school activities that required volunteering. Parents were seen to be motivated to participate in school programmes, only in cases “*Where ... community leaders force them to do so or where such activities involve entertainment or personal benefits to the parents involved.*” This finding is contrary to apparent motivation by parents to participate in activities that promote learning by their children.

Findings in this study as discussed above illuminate the idea that parents were not taking self-initiatives to volunteer in school activities. This lack of personal drive by parents to volunteer their participation in school programmes where there are no prospects of personal benefits jives in the face of the key tenets of parental engagement. Hamlin and Flessa (2018) regard such self-initiatives by parents to devote their time and efforts, and get interested in assisting schools to promote effective learning by children as an important element of parental engagement with serious ramifications in sustainable learning. Ideally, parents with skills for example in coaching soccer should volunteer using such skills for the benefit of learners instead of making schools out-source such skills for a fee, something that may drain otherwise scarce financial resources from schools.

6.2.3 Engagement through Provision of Instructional Assistance at Home

The parents and school heads that participated in the current study concurred that parents had an important duty to play in assisting children with their academic work when at home. However, school heads felt that since parents were not trained to teach, their duty should focus on centre on supervising and encouraging children to do the work assigned from school. One of the school heads said that, parents are expected to “... *supervise and encourage children to do homework and study their books when at home... Whilst we don't expect parents to be assisting in doing the homework as it were, since they are not trained for that, parents are expected to create an environment that enable children to work at home.*” Clearly, school heads felt that since most parents were not trained for the job of teaching, parental engagement in line with instructional activities should centre on creating an enabling environment and supervising to make sure that, children do the work as assigned from schools. Creation of a positive environment in this respect includes providing learning materials that stimulate and are needed for learning. This finding concurs with Teba-

Teba (2016) who contends that stimulating, thought-provoking and age-appropriate learning materials and opportunities should be provided in the homes for effect learning to take place.

An interesting finding from the current study is that, whilst parents believed they should directly participate in everything that involved their children, they also felt that direct teaching should be spared for reserved professionals. One of the school heads for example thus said, "... *In as much as we may want to assist our children directly, such by helping them doing their homework, we are unable to do so especially with the new curriculum... In practice, we should do what we are able to do and leave for professionals all professional matters.*" Clearly, parents and school heads share the view that whilst parents should be engaged in the education of their children, there are obviously some aspects of the job of educating children that require direct participation of teachers. Parents were particularly worried about their challenges on handling the new curriculum. Epstein (2007) and Teba-Teba (2016) support the idea that parents may be unable to handle some of education in which they may not have specialist training. They therefore challenge schools to train parents so that they are better able to work with learners. The applicability of this recommendation in rural primary schools may still need to be further explored.

6.2.4. Parental Involvement in Decision-Making and School Governance

Findings in the current study show that parents were also engaged in the education of their children through their participation in parents' meetings either directly or indirectly, through their elected representatives, that is, the SDC or School Development Associations members meetings. This participation is in line with policy provisions as provided in SI 87 of 1992 and SI 379 of 1998, and is in sync with Epstein (2007) which informs this study. However, it also emerged in this study that, whilst parents believe that they should be involvement in making all decisions affecting their children and also play an oversight role for example financial management activities by school authorities, school authorities seem to feel that parental involvement should mainly focus on provision of learning resources. An interesting but unexpected finding is that of conflicting views by parents and school heads, where parents seem to see school heads as imposing themselves on them while school heads also viewed parents as trying to impose themselves on school authorities apparently, without a clear understanding of each other's boundaries. This is irrespective of the existence of government policies that provide for parental engagement in children's learning. The reasons for the dissonance between school heads' expectations and those of parents on the extent to which parents should be engaged in school governance and participation in decision-making in the backdrop of the existence of government policy still need to be further explored. At the face of it, findings in the current study seem to point a training need among both parents and school heads issues of parental engagement for sustainable learning interpretation of existing policy of this key element of education. Whether the existing policy is not amenable to multiple interpretations, is also an area which may further be explored.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings as discussed above, the following conclusions were made:

7.1. Dichotomous Conceptualisations of Parental Engagement

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the current study is that whilst both school heads and parents concur that parental engagement in the education of their children is key to sustainable learning, the meaning and content of parental engagement seem to be contested among these key stakeholders in schools. Whereas school heads believe that parents should play a facilitative and resourcing role, the parents themselves believe they should play an oversight and supervisory role on the work of school heads. For example, school heads' understanding of parental engagement was centred on parents' involvement in paying fees for their children, procurement of teaching/learning resources such as stationery, school uniforms and reading materials and creating a home environment that promote learning. Parents were also expected to contribute in infrastructural development

activities such as in construction of classroom blocks and teachers' houses where they were expected to contribute both financially and through volunteering their labour. School heads did not expect parents to be engaged directly in activities to do with the professional aspects of teaching and school leadership, including financial management issues. On the other hand, parents seem to believe that since they are responsible with financing education through paying levies, resourcing their children whom they send to school and contribute in infrastructural development for the respective schools where their children are attending, they are the owners of schools. This is oblivious of the fact that the Government which employs and deploys teachers to schools also claims a big stake in these schools, and that, each school has a responsible authority who is deeply involved in issues of school governance. As a result of their perceived ownership of schools, parents believe they should be involved directly monitoring and controlling the work of teachers, including curriculum, instructional and financial issues. In effect, parents believe they should play an oversight role on the work of both school heads and classroom teachers, even as they also believe they have problems in handling instructional activities, especially in the context of the new curriculum. In emphasising this perceived oversight role, one parent thus said, "*SDC (School Development Committee) for example should serve as the eyes of parents.*"

7.2 Parental Engagement as a Power Game

The second conclusion derived from the findings of this study is that parental engagement in rural primary schools in the Bikita district of Zimbabwe is depicted in practice as a power game that is characterised by mistrust and resentment between parents and school heads as key stakeholders in education at a school level. Whilst school heads see parental engagement in the context of facilitation, school resourcing and assistance in infrastructural development, the parents who send their children believe they should play an oversight role up and above their facilitation and school resourcing expectations. In other words, against expectations of school authorities, parents believe they should be involved in controlling and monitoring the work activities of both school heads and teachers up and above their roles of financing and resourcing education. Clearly, the differences school heads and parents' conceptualisation of parental engagement has ramifications on sustainable learning of children which may need to be further explored. According to Epstein's theory which informs the current study a shared understanding of parental engagement which is based on, collaboration, communication and co-operation between parents and the school is a precursor for sustainable learning by children.

8. FINAL THOUGHTS

Findings from this study contribute to scholarship by elaborating on existing knowledge and by adding new insights into existing literature on parental engagement and sustainable learning by children. For example, the study elaborated on the notion that parental engagement is important if schools should promote sustainable learning among learners. However, what the meaning and understanding of what parental engagement should actually involve seem to be a contested phenomenon among school heads and parents as key stakeholders in a school system. This divergence in understanding of what parental engagement should actual entail between school heads and parents has ramifications on practice. In particular, this situation results in parental engagement practices in schools to appear as a power game, something which is detrimental to sustainable learning by children. It is recommended that if parental engagement interventions should be successful in promoting sustainable learning by children, effort should be made to promote congenial relations based on mutual trust and collaboration. This also calls for parents to be appraised of the roles they should play in promoting sustainable education through engagement in the education of their children. At the same time, school authorities should also be trained to fully understand and be able to give parents their actual place in the education of their children. The conflict ridden and antagonistic relationship which seems to characterise parental engagement in rural primary schools as emerging in the current study is not good for sustainable learning in the schools in question.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Acknowledgement: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

REFERENCES

- Ahiau, B. E., & Oladipupo, R. (2018). Connecting the individual to lifelong and life-wide reading culture in Nigeria: The imperatives of the United Nations sustainable development goal 4. *International Journal of Academic Library and Information Science*, 6(6), 157-162. Available at: 10.14662/IJALIS2018.050.
- Albright, A. (2018). *Effective means of communication in rural schools*. Masters Thesis, Fort Hays University.
- Bailey, T. (2017). *The impact of parental involvement on student success: School and family partnership from the perspective of students*. PhD Thesis, Kennesaw State University.
- Chindongo, I. C., & Mbukusa, N. R. (2015). Exploring the barriers that impede parental involvement in children's education at Sauyemwa junior secondary school. *Journal of Education Research and Behavioural Sciences*, 4(12), 298-305.
- Durišić, M., & Bunijevac, M. (2017). Parental involvement as a important factor for successful education. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 7(3), 137-153.
- Epstein, J. L. (2010). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(3), 81-96.
- Epstein, J. L. (2007). Connections count: Improving family and community involvement in secondary schools. *Principal Leadership*, 8(1), 16-22.
- Hamlin, D., & Flessa, J. (2018). Parental involvement initiatives: An analysis. *Educational Policy*, 32(5), 697-727. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904816673739>.
- Jafarov, J. (2015). Factors affecting parental involvement in education: The analysis of literature. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18(4), 35-44. Available at: 10.5782/2223-2621.2015.18.4.35.
- Mafa, O., & Makuba, E. (2013). The impact of parents in the education of their children in Zimbabwe rural primary schools. The case of Matabeleland North Province. *IOSR Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 1(3), 37-43.
- Maluleke, S. G. (2014). *Parental involvement in their children's education in Vhembe district*. Masters Thesis, University of South Africa.
- Mandina, S. (2012). Quality rural secondary school education in Zimbabwe: Challenges and remedies. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 3(5), 768-774.
- Mthiyane, N. P. (2015). *Chronicles of the experiences of orphaned students in a higher education institution in KwaZulu-Natal*. PhD Thesis, University of Free State.
- Muchuchuti, N. (2014). The influence of parental involvement on learning: A case study of primary school children in Matabeleland regions. *International Open and Distance Learning Journal*, 2(2), 288-299.
- Mutasa, J., Goronga, P., & Gatsi, R. (2013). Parental involvement: An untapped potential for transforming special needs education in Zimbabwe. *American Based Research Journal*, 2(6), 21-35.
- Naicker, I. (2015). School principals enacting the values of Ubuntu in school leadership: The voices of teachers. *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, 13(1), 1-9. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0972639x.2015.11886706>.
- Ni, A. J. (2020). Leadership and power game in a multi-polarizing world: The competition between the US and China. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 10(02), 253. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2020.102017>.
- Ntekane, A. (2018). *Parental involvement in education*. Masters Thesis, North West University.
- Park, S., & Holloway, S. D. (2017). The effects of school-based parental involvement on academic achievement at the child and elementary school level: A longitudinal study. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 110(1), 1-16. Available at: 10.1080/00220671.2015.1016600.

- Pietarinen, J., Pyhältö, K., & Soini, T. (2019). Shared sense-making in curriculum reform: Orchestrating the local curriculum work. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 63(4), 491-505. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2017.1402367>.
- Raynor, K. (2019). Participatory action research and early career researchers: The structural barriers to engagement and why we should do it anyway. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 20(1), 130-136. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2018.1556501>.
- Shiffman, C. D. (2013). Locating common ground: An exploration of adult educator practices that support parent involvement for school-age children. *School Community Journal*, 23(2), 185-206.
- Teba-Teba, N. C. (2016). *The influence of parental involvement in formal education at high schools in Mophale's Hoek District of Lesotho*. Masters Thesis, Central University of Technology, Free State.
- Toom, A. (2018). School culture, leadership and relationships matter. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(7), 745-748. Available at: [10.1080/13540602.2018.1503855](https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1503855).
- Tshabalala, T. (2013). Perceptions of school heads on parents' Involvement on the Zimbabwean primary schools. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 3(3), 645-656.
- Tshuma, R., & Ncube, R. (2016). Parental involvement in children's education in Zimbabwe: A case of Collen Bawn cluster of primary schools in Gwanda district. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 21(3), 12-21.
- Ugwuegbulem, L. N. (2018). *Exploring parental involvement in public secondary schools in Imo State, Nigeria: The role of socioeconomic status*. Doctorate Thesis, Seton Hall University.
- Umeana, F. P. (2017). *Parental engagement with schools and students in Nigeria*. PhD Thesis, Michigan State University.
- Yamamoto, Y., Holloway, S. D., & Suzuki, S. (2016). Parental engagement in children's education: Motivating factors in Japan and the US. *School Community Journal*, 26(1), 45-66.
- Young, S. M. (2018). *Understanding parental involvement*. Bachelor's Dissertation, Murray State University.

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s). International Journal of Asian Social Science shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.