

# Parent involvement in teacher education in South Africa

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Parent involvement in South African schools has been primarily limited to financing schools and parent volunteering. Legislation extended the right to parents and the community to participate in the school's governing structures. This creates a framework for formal parent involvement but home-school partnerships should not be limited to this practice. A comprehensive model of partnership can provide a broader view of family, community and school relations. In order to prepare teachers to implement effective school, family and community partnerships, a Certificate in Parent Involvement was introduced at the University of South Africa through distance education. The curriculum is designed around the Epstein model of family, community and school partnerships. A brief review is given of the theory underlying the Epstein model and the typology comprising six types of parent and community involvement. A qualitative inquiry explored the implementation of this model in a small sample of schools. A document analysis was made of assignments written by teachers as part of their course work. Rich data (personal accounts corroborated by supporting material) was elicited by the assignment which required teachers to describe the implementation of one type of parent involvement in their school. Findings show how teachers adapted the model in pre-primary, primary and high schools in diverse communities in South Africa. Teachers created family friendly environments for parent encounters; used various strategies to communicate with the home; employed an expanded view of parent and community; introduced innovative volunteering; and illustrated positive results for teachers, learners and parents.

## Introduction

Good school, family and community partnerships lead to improved academic learner achievement, self-esteem, school attendance and social behaviour. Parents and teachers experience mutual support and satisfaction in achieving positive changes in children and the school. Resources available to children, teachers, parents and the school are expanded and useful collaboration with community agencies are established (Swap 1987). These benefits place parent involvement firmly on the national reform agendas of most education authorities. However, definitions of parent involvement vary greatly. Schools and families seldom share the same perspectives on what is wanted or needed. Moreover, government rhetoric and education department policies are not always equally matched by effective site-based implementation.

Although parent involvement is linked to school success, schools frequently fail to establish strong links between home and school and parent participation is not significant in many schools even where parents are invited (Chrispeels 1992:2).

In many countries, including South Africa, one of the strongest trends in education reform has been to give parents, and in some cases community members, an increased role in governing schools. This pattern of reform often disappoints in achieving the range of expected outcomes. A considerable body of evidence suggests that changes in governance arrangements are only weakly related to teaching and learning and thus do not improve student achievement. It appears that relatively few parents are actively involved and that involvement may drop off after the first few years (Levin 1997:262). Moreover, the preference of most parents is not for involvement through school governing bodies but for involvement in their own children's learning (Epstein 1995).

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Dietz (1997:2) explains that where schools limit parent involvement to a particular type of involvement, such as governance or fund raising, only a fraction of the parent community participates. The school truly neither involves parents nor realises the full benefits. Consequently, a comprehensive, strategic model of parent involvement that includes diverse types of parent activity which produces optimal results is recommended (Epstein & Dauber 1993:53). This conclusion is primarily based on a considerable body of research combined with on-site implementation developed particularly over three decades in the United States.

This article describes the implementation of such a comprehensive model of parent involvement in a small sample of South African schools. A research design was employed to explore the efforts of teachers enrolled in a certificate course through distance education which required them to implement the Epstein model of parent involvement in their schools as part of their course work.

### Theoretical Perspectives

According to Chrispeels (1992), two main strands of research have influenced current discussions about home-school partnerships:

- I) family learning environments that positively affect students' school achievement
- II) school initiatives to involve parents in schooling.

Moreover, during the period - mid 60's to 80's - research on family practices and school based parent involvement research coincided with research investigating characteristics of effective schools. The resulting body of findings succeeded in establishing a link between effective schools, family practices and school-based parent involvement programmes (Chrispeels 1992:9). Consequently various typologies of home-school partnerships were developed which combined, in different ways, effective family practices with effective school programmes with the view to creating effective schools (Chrispeels 1992:15). Substantial work was done by Coleman (1977), Gordon (1977), Comer (1984), Swap (1987) and Epstein (1995) to mention a few. These theories and typologies, with other similar work, created a framework for a large number of different models of parent involvement programmes implemented in various schools, districts and states across the US (McLean & Sandell 1998). Understandably each scholar and his or her projects are distinctive: some focus on family involvement in special education; early childhood education, elementary, middle and high schools respectively.

However, effective partnership models demonstrate certain common themes: They

- are school based and school driven;
- conceptualise the family and community very broadly and flexibly;
- allow for a continuum of involvement: from very active, complex school-based activities with maximum face to face parent-teacher interaction to supportive, simpler home-based activities with little, if any, face to face parent-teacher interaction;
- form part of a school improvement plan linked to specific outcomes that is parent involvement is not regarded as a panacea which produces generic results. Thus, a specific practice is linked to a specific improvement in the school.

### *Epstein's Theory of Parent Involvement*

A comprehensive model of partnership is that of Joyce Epstein, Director, Centre for School, Family and Community partnerships, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. She (1996:214) firstly developed a theoretical model to explain parent involvement based on the following underlying perspectives about family and school relations:

- Separate responsibilities of families and schools;
- Shared responsibilities of families and schools;
- Sequential responsibilities of families and schools.

Some schools stress the *separate* responsibilities of families and schools, that is, the inherent incompatibility, competition and conflict between them. School bureaucracies and family organisations are directed by educators and parents respectively, who are thought to best fulfil their different roles independently (Epstein 1987: 121). The distinct goal of parents and teachers is considered to best be achieved when teachers keep a professional distance from and equal standards for children in their classrooms, in contrast with parents who develop personal relationships with and individual expectations for their children at home. In contrast, the *shared* responsibilities of the school and home, emphasise the coordination, cooperation and complementary nature of schools and families, and encourage collaboration between the two (Epstein 1987: 121). Schools and families share responsibilities for the socialisation of the child. These common goals for children are achieved most effectively when teachers and parents work together. According to this perspective an overlap of responsibilities between parents and teachers is expected.

Finally, the *sequential* perspective stresses the critical stages of parents and teachers' contribution to child development (Epstein 1987: 121). Parents teach needed skills to children until the time of their formal education around the ages of five or six. Then, teachers assume the primary responsibility for children's education.

These major theoretical perspectives on home-school relations have a profound effect on and either encourage or discourage parent involvement in the schools. They explain the differences in philosophies and approaches of teachers and parents and produce more or fewer, shallow or deep family-school connections. The perspectives on family-school relations do, however, not explain motivations to reinforce or remove boundaries between schools and families, nor the changing patterns in home-school relations. They also fail to explain the influence families and schools have on each other or take cognisance of student development and the effect thereof on home-school relations. To address all the variables, Epstein (1987:126) proposes an *integrated theory* of family-school relations characterised by a set of *overlapping spheres of influence*.

*The theory of overlapping spheres of influence*

Epstein's (1996:214) perspective of *overlapping spheres of influence* posits that the work of the most effective families and schools overlap and they share goals and missions. The model of overlapping spheres of influence includes both external and internal structures. The external model recognises that the three major contexts in which children learn and grow - the family, school and the community - can be drawn together or pushed apart. Some practices are conducted separately by schools, families and communities and some are conducted jointly in order to strengthen children's learning (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon 1997:3). The internal model of interaction of schools, families and communities shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school and in the community. These social relationships can take place at an institutional level or at an individual level (Epstein 1997:3). The model of overlapping spheres assumes that the mutual interests of families and schools can be successfully promoted by the policies and programmes of organisations and the actions of individuals in the organisations (Epstein 1987:130).

The model recognises that, although some practices of families and schools are conducted independently,

others reflect the shared responsibilities of parents and educators for children's learning. When teachers adhere to the perspective of separate responsibilities, they emphasise the specialised skills required by teachers for school training and by parents for home training. With specialisation comes a division of labour that pulls the spheres of school and family influences apart. (Epstein 1996:104). However, when teachers and parents emphasise their shared responsibilities, they support the generalisation of skills required by teachers and by parents to produce successful students. Their combined endeavour pushes the spheres of family and school influence together, increases interaction between parents and school and creates *school-like families* and *family-like schools*.

A *family-like school* recognises each child's individuality and makes each child feel special and included. Such schools welcome all families and not just those that are easy to reach (Epstein 1995:702). A *school-like family* recognises that each child is also a learner and it reinforces the importance of school, homework, and the activities that build academic skills and feelings of success (Epstein 1992:502). In later publications, Epstein added the community as a third sphere of influence. This means that communities with groups of parents, create *school-like* opportunities, events and programmes that reinforce, recognise, and reward learners for good progress, creativity and excellence (Epstein 1995:702). Communities also create *family-like* settings, services and events to enable families to better support their children. *Community-minded* families and learners help their neighbourhoods and other families. Schools and communities talk about programmes and services that are family-friendly.

Because it is assumed that the child is the reason for the connections between home and school, the model focuses on the key role of the *child as student* in interactions between families and schools, parents and teachers, or the community. Students are the key to successful school and family partnerships. Epstein (1995:702) explains that "The unarguable fact is that students are the main actors in their education, development, and success in school." Schools, family, and community partnerships cannot simply produce successful students. Rather, partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide and motivate students to produce their own successes. According to Epstein (1995:702), if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard in the role of student, they are more likely to do their best academically, and to remain in school.

*Epstein's typology of parent involvement*

Epstein's framework of six major types of involvement that fall within the areas of overlapping spheres evolved from many studies and the work of educators in schools. Epstein et al (1997) briefly describe the six types of parent involvement as follows:

*Type 1 - Parenting:* Schools should assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each stage and grade level.

*Type 2 - Communication:* Schools should communicate with families about school programmes and students' progress with school-to-home and home-to-school communication.

*Type 3 - Volunteering:* Schools should improve recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at school or in other locations to support students and school programmes.

*Type 4 - Learning at home:* Schools should involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework, and other curricular-linked activities and decisions.

*Type 5 - Decision making:* Schools should include parents as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through PTA's, committees, councils, and other parent organisations.

*Type 6 - Collaborating with the community:* Schools should coordinate the work and resources of the community, businesses, colleges or universities, and other groups to strengthen school programmes, family practices and student learning and development.

Each type of involvement poses specific challenges for its successful design and implementation, and each type leads to some different results or outcomes for students, parents, and teachers (Epstein et al 1997:80-85). Furthermore, Epstein et al (1997:12) argue that good programmes to implement parent involvement will look different in each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the specific needs of students and their families. There are, however, some commonalities across successful programmes at all grade levels. These include a recognition of the overlapping spheres of influence on student development; attention to various types of involvement that promote a variety of opportunities for schools, families, and communities to work together; and an *action team* for school, family and community partnerships to coordinate each school's work and progress (Epstein et al 1997:18). Epstein et al (1997:13) maintain that an individual cannot create a lasting comprehensive programme that involves all families through all grades. Thus, along with clear policies and strong support from education

departments, an action team comprising parents and teachers is necessary. This can be part of the activities of a school council (or governing body). The action team should assess present practices of parent involvement, organise activities, coordinate practices and evaluate activities on an ongoing basis.

### Research Design

In the light of the success which has been achieved by implementing comprehensive models of school, family and community collaboration such as the Epstein model in schools in the US, the question arose as to the feasibility of introducing a similar comprehensive approach to parent involvement in South African schools. A qualitative study followed this line of enquiry by exploring the endeavours of a small sample of South African teachers enrolled in a certificate programme which requires them to implement the Epstein model in diverse school contexts as part of their course work. The purpose of the study was to understand how teachers, enrolled in a certificate course in parent involvement delivered by distance education, implemented one of the six types of parent involvement, according to the Epstein model, in their own institution.

#### *Data gathering and analysis*

Data was collected by means of assignments written by teachers as part of their course work. Part A of the assignment required a theoretical overview of the Epstein model. Part B required a written account together with supporting material of the implementation of any one of the six types of parent involvement as chosen by the teacher. Assignments were collected over a period of three years (1997-1999) from ninety teachers. Initially 25 assignments were selected. Several were very well-presented but comprised mainly of visual material and supporting documents with little recorded explanation. Therefore these were not considered suitable for inclusion in the final sample, although teachers had received a high grade in terms of the course. By means of purposeful sampling, fourteen assignments were eventually selected. The goal was to select data which was "information rich" with respect to the purpose of the investigation (Gall, Gall & Borg 1999: 287). The criteria for the selection of an information rich assignment was:

- A detailed written record of the successful implementation of a type of parent involvement, together with appropriate supporting documents.

These documents included: annotated photographs, videos, copies of speeches, transparencies and handouts, invitations, posters, advertisements, letters of request and thank you notes, recipes of dishes prepared for the occasions, lists of groceries purchased and receipts, reports of community newspapers on the parent activity, questionnaires and other feedback provided by parents.

A document analysis of teachers' assignments was then carried out. The documents were read and re-read and tentative themes were identified. Firstly relevant extracts in the text were highlighted and then grouped without comment under themes. Thereafter the themes were clustered into categories and compared with the Epstein model (Epstein et al 1997) and other relevant literature. Finally, extracts were paraphrased or suitable quotations were selected to illustrate the categories. The actual words of the students are used and no attempt has been made to correct grammar and idiom. Several students were underqualified and most were studying through medium of English as a second language and this may be reflected in their language usage.

#### *The sample*

Table 1 (Appendix) summarises the assignments regarding type of parent involvement reported, school type and community and location.

The schools in the study reflected a range of diverse contexts: school phases and school types, socio-economic conditions and location. Epstein et al (1997:7) maintain that a comprehensive model of partnership can be implemented in different communities with success. However, effective programmes will appear different in each context as individual schools shape their practices to meet the needs, interests, time, ages and grade levels of learners and their families. Effective partnerships must also consider the families and communities from which learners come. Schools must examine the nature of the contemporary family, effects of diversity (cultural, racial, religious etc) and the effects of income on families, particularly poverty.

In all the schools teachers felt that they were able to adapt Epstein's model suitably for effective implementation. Three independent pre-primary schools were included. The first was a multicultural pre-primary school funded by a combination of church sponsorship and school fees. It operated on a modest budget and served a parent community of varied socio-economic background in an urban area.

In contrast an institution in a small country town charged high fees and served an affluent community. Here a child could enjoy "a beautiful setting and the attention of teachers who love to be here and regard each child as special." A third school was situated in a township and was sponsored by a local business.

Five primary schools were represented. Schools varied in character and size. "A small English speaking school [is] based in an Afrikaans community...190 pupils in a multi-cultural mix ranging from Sotho, Zulu, Portuguese, Greek, Pedi, Ndebele, Taiwanese, English and Afrikaans" contrasted with the large school of a 1 000 pupils serving a working class community in a city area. Two primary schools were located on farms. In both cases the parent communities comprising farm workers were impoverished and semi-literate. "The parents are working on the different farms...cannot afford to pay school funds or buy school uniform because the money they get at the end of the month is so little." The fifth, an independent primary school with a pre-primary department, was situated in a sprawling urban area.

Five secondary schools were represented. Three were public secondary schools: one was in a township and two in rural areas. The fourth was an independent religious school located in an exclusive suburb of a major city. This school had won an international award for excellence. In sharp contrast was a school in situated in an informal settlement, where the teacher herself was living under severely disadvantaged conditions, described as "All of this was happening in K... Site B community. I am staying in a shack, which means not a brick house. Because of the terrible wind which was blowing a lot, my house burned down. So I miss my books [ie the instructional material for the course] and those documents I was keeping [supporting documents]."

Finally, the one type of involvement was implemented in Sunday School Club at a local congregation situated in a large township in a rural area, 50 km from the nearest city. The teacher, the chairperson of the Sunday school club, sketched an interesting picture of what she considered a middle class community: "This is a newly established township which is nine years old. Most families are having one child or no children yet or single parents. The parents are highly educated therefore mostly occupy government subsidized houses. They mostly go to church, watch TV and affording taking children out for holidays."

## Findings

Five major themes emerged from the analysis of the teachers' assignments: Creating a family-friendly environment for home-school encounters; home-school communication; expanding the definition of parent and community; innovative volunteering and getting results.

### *Creating a family-friendly environment for home-school encounters*

Schools must become places where families feel wanted and recognised for their strengths and potential. Frequently families do not feel welcome in school, particularly low income families. In a sound partnership, this can be overcome by creating more family-like schools (Epstein et al 1997: 3). A family-like school recognises each child's individuality and makes each child feel special. Moreover it strives to reach and welcome all families, not just those who are easy to reach. Therefore activities to involve families must take into account the needs of families and the realities of contemporary family life; should be feasible to implement and should be equitable to all types of families (Epstein et al 1997:6).

Bringing hard-to-reach parents into a meaningful relationship with the school is essential. Single working parents, low income or unemployed families often experience a lack of time, suitable transport to the school or require child care or elder care in order to be able to attend school activities (Dietz 1997:28). Teachers in the sample reported how they took pains to arrange venues which suited parents and which were not necessarily located on the school grounds: *"The Church hall was the most convenient venue due to size and most parents without cars could walk. It is also accessible to all residents since it is nearest to the crossroads"...We felt to donate R 30 for the church hall (check the enclosed receipt)."* At a school located on a farm, *"the workshop was held the community hall due to lack of transport to school."* In an unsafe informal settlement where crime is endemic, a well-chosen venue encouraged families to attend the school meeting. This was described as *"a neutral venue which is nearest to our community, trains, a bus terminus is surrounded by the police station, the clinic station and the centres."* In one case, the attendance at a workshop on parenting skills for a rural community mushroomed beyond the expectations of the organisers. Consequently, the venue became an open veld: *"our hall was too small we went outside in order to accommodate everybody."* In certain cases, free transportation to the venues was also provided. The teacher at a

school on a farm realised that farm workers living long distances from the school could not travel by foot. So she *"arranged with neighbouring farm managers to transport the parents to school because some parents are staying far from the school."*

In most cases teachers ensured that child care facilities were provided so that parents were not prevented from coming to the workshop by child care responsibilities. *"I will send the parents letters in advance to let them know that there will be a child care centre for that evening...I will ask responsible and bigger learners to care for the children....I will bring along some sweets and some to keep the children busy and happy."* Moreover, school activities were arranged at times which suited families' work schedules, rather than at the convenience of school staff. A teacher reported that *"some parents could not get release from work so we had flexi- times and parents were fully satisfied."* By organising activities on Saturday mornings and public holidays teachers promoted various activities for parents.

Some teachers were aware that the type of parent involvement activity they were arranging was the first of its kind ever to be ventured upon in their community. The event was the first time many parents had ever visited the school or attended any activity organised by the school. A teacher at a farm school described the disadvantaged parent community in this way: *"Most of the parents did not go to school due to staying and working on another man's farm. Some, in fact, most of them can't read and write. They only speak their mother tongue and Afrikaans. They are interested in dancing, fighting, gossiping, going to work, drinking, liquor and not caring for children. They know nothing about going to church as they are staying on a farm."* Yet she took great pains to create *"a first impression"* of a welcoming school for these parents. She says *"I punished myself to arrange the hall...tables and chairs...pens and paper...a guest book on the front table...a student at each table to help parents who cannot write to write their names...welcome messages all over the walls. The children made portraits of themselves, a portrait of child was placed on each table. Parents had to find their own child and then sit at that table...a mailbox for parent messages on each chair...flowers inside and outside."*

Teachers enrolled in the Certificate Course for Parent involvement are often reminded of the maxim: Food, Families and Fun as a condition for successful parent meetings (Wherry 1999: www.par-inst.com). In all cases refreshments were served to parents either free or at a small fee in order to raise schools funds. Where resources were limited, as at a rural school, *"parents were asked ... to Bring and*

*Share...everybody brought something and we had enough for the day."*

Moreover, topics chosen for parent education workshops related to actual needs. Workshops presented as part of the first type of parent involvement (Parenting) dealt with a variety of learning activities for parents including parenthood training. One teacher surveyed parent concerns and opinions before choosing to present a series of workshops dealing with parenting styles; effective communication skills and sexuality education. Dietz (1997:27) points out that for some families securing basic necessities, such as food, shelter and medical services, occupies so much time that parenting becomes a secondary priority. In this vein, the teacher at the school on a farm realised that advanced parenting skills could not be addressed effectively while families were struggling to survive without regular employment. So she organised a workshop run by a representative of the provincial Ministry of Agriculture which taught parents how to grow vegetables for own use and for sale. Only when parents are assisted to cope with disadvantaged situations are learners placed in a better position to learn and families can pay attention to appropriate parenting techniques.

#### *Home-school communication*

To promote effective communication with families, Epstein et al (1997) maintains that school leaders should design forms of school-to-home as well as home-to-school communication with all families each year about school programmes and their children's progress. Many schools do a poor job of communicating with families. Examples are schools with multilingual families that make information available in English only; schools that dismiss or fail to follow upon parent suggestions or schools that predominantly deliver bad news about children instead of good news (Dietz 1997:39).

Teachers in the sample who arranged school meetings and workshops experimented with innovative strategies to invite the parent community and did not merely rely on the conventional circular with a detachable reply slip. One school principal telephoned all parents personally asking them to attend a parent-teenage workshop on communication and held the meeting in the home of families who volunteered for this purpose. One pre-school principal keeps the school office open prior to school starting time so that parents can call on the principal and arrange further meetings if needed. This had *"cut car park gossip and a problem could be dealt with quickly and without a lot of fuss."* In most small town, rural communities and townships, invitations to the school event were not strictly limited to the parent body alone.

Where it was felt the community at large, could benefit, *"...community leaders, different organisations, churches, clinics, the police station and the community at large, [other] schools and companies"* were invited to attend the event. The workshop arranged by the teacher in the Sunday School Club was widely advertised throughout the neighbourhood. She described how *"notices were sent to parents through school children at different schools and some were posted. Some parents were invited through home visits. Announcements were made in local churches, community organisations. Advertisements in the vernacular were posted on taxi's doors, buses, at shopping centres, and in doctors' consulting rooms."* Other examples of written communication contained in the assignments ranged from sophisticated school manuals and quarterly newsletters to letters created and illustrated on word processors and letters produced on old-fashioned typewriters which were photocopied.

Reaching families whose home language is not English requires schools to make a special accommodation. Invitations, speeches and handouts were written in the home language in township and rural schools: *"We use the Xhosa language which everyone would understand."* Schools using English as medium of instruction provided interpreters, even for small numbers of minority language parents: *"There was an interpreter for the Taiwanese speaking group."* Another leaflet advertising a talk on parenting skills boasted that the event included: *"A famous multilingual interpreter is there for you."*

A less common strategy of reaching parents was home visits. A teacher in a poorly resourced school who is striving to reach hard-to-reach parents stated. *"We find it difficult to reach under-represented parents...We tried this mechanism - paying them informal visits at home."* A teacher at an elite independent pre-school also saw the value of home visits to strengthen school-home bonds. She mentions, *"the teacher is invited home...and the teachers are always invited to birthday parties. These visits are greatly looked forward to by the children ...and they give staff extra insight into where children are coming from and what problem might exist."*

#### *Expanding the definition of the parent and the community*

An assumption underlying the Certificate in Parent Involvement and endorsed by the Epstein model is that parent involvement programmes should accommodate a broad and flexible view of families which includes alternative

types of families as found in South Africa (Gerdes 1998:13). The tutorial material (Lemmer & Van Wyk 1997) informs teachers of the South African Schools Act's (1996) definition of a parent. A parent is considered the biological parent, the legal guardian or anyone else responsible for the care of the child. Teachers enrolled for the Certificate are encouraged to revisit a traditional view of parent involvement and encouraged to include grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings and step-parents in home-school programmes. All the assignments in the sample reflected an inclusive view of families and parents and appropriate endeavours to include various caregivers as the following comments show: *"Almost all mothers are working in the Industrial zone...fathers, or grandparents made it a point to be present." "I organised a Granny Day where we asked donation from shopkeepers...blankets, sheets food and sleepers. We invited all pensioners to come to school and spent day with our learners."*

Together with a flexible approach to different family types is the notion that schools can reap benefits when they make links with the community beyond those represented by the parent body alone. A community is defined by Epstein as all individuals and institutions who have a stake in the success of children in school and in the well-being of families (Epstein 1995:703). Building broadly defined community partnerships can improve living conditions in the neighbourhood adjacent to schools for all families. It has been shown that illegal activities decrease and the environment is upgraded when schools collaborate with the community agencies (US Department of Education 1994:18). Teachers living in rural areas, small towns and townships demonstrated this expanded view of the community and cherished high expectations of community support. They asked for and received generous support from the wider community for the activity which they organised. A teacher sketched an impressive picture of generous community support, *"Some parents volunteered to help with catering, to clean and decorate the venue, to bring along their cutlery, table cloths, urn and crockery...most of our local church women volunteered to donate food from their homes. Our local business men donated food and money (list follows).... Our local butcher donated...(list follows). The local greengrocer donated... (list follows). The youth of our church volunteered help in putting signs up to direct people to the venue...to usher our guests in, to put on a performance of a sketch...two boys volunteered to shoot photos."* Another teacher supported this by saying, *"We did manage to fundraise to our nearest shops. We get hall free because it was for community and not for gain."*

Moreover, families were also willing to contribute unselfishly to activities in which they felt they could play an integral role. *"Our families had to sacrifice financially by incurring extra expense in telephone calls, petrol, photocopies etc."... "We were taken aback that some parents organised themselves and bought present to the speaker eg ball point pens, handkerchief, socks and cards."*

Community participation was not limited to financial and material contributions. An independent primary school located in the suburbs implemented community collaboration as a reciprocal activity. Firstly the school established the needs of the school and drew up a community register of local agencies and organisations. Each grade was allocated a *"buddy organisation with whom they would work for the year. Grade one was given the fire department; Grade two the Alberton, Old Age home and Grade three, the SPCA. My class, Grade One, adopted Uncle Piet, a fireman, who visited the school often...to talk about fire awareness."* In turn these children were made aware of their civic obligation by clearing up open veld area which was a fire hazard in the area. Similarly, a school in a township sought the expertise of local businessmen to assist in the school rather than financial contributions. A principal explained how he had approached the manager of a local supermarket to train staff and members of the School Governing body how to draw up the annual school budget and to address parents about general financial management.

#### *Innovative volunteering*

Volunteers are a cost-effective way to expand the range of activities at the school but involving parents and community in the school is often difficult. Many parents have little time for volunteer activities and those who do have time are often not reached by the school or they are not considered suitable as they are often the elderly or the unemployed (Dietz 1997: 88). Moreover, Epstein (1997 et al) emphasise that volunteers and teachers must be screened, trained and acquainted with school policies and rules in order to have a successful volunteer programme.

In South Africa volunteers have been traditionally limited to fundraising or catering and parents have not been part of regular classroom activities (Van Wyk 1996:93). Yet every assignment in the sample described how volunteers from parents and the community had enabled the teachers to make the parent involvement activity a success. No teacher had attempted to 'go it alone'. Many assignments contained photos of parents cooking, cleaning, supervising children during parent evenings and

arranging the venues. However, one assignment was particularly striking in its description of comprehensive and innovative volunteering. A principal of a primary school located in a township described in detail, with supporting documentation, an extensive and ongoing volunteer programme which he had implemented in his school as a result of the knowledge and skills acquired in Certificate in Parent involvement. This strategy had changed the climate of the school dramatically. (Teachers were given about nine months to complete the assignment. Thus it was possible to implement and report on a coherent series of parent involvement activities). The culture of teaching and learning was improved and many tasks which had previously removed teachers (e.g. managing the school tuck shop) and children (e.g. making tea for teachers and cleaning offices and classrooms) from the classroom were stopped. The following remarks, which were all accompanied by photos, illustrate a well-organised system of volunteering atypical of South African schools.

Parent volunteers contributed to a safer school. An anti child abuse campaign was initiated and *"parents report to school manager whatever incident they have seen. In June our school property was maliciously damaged... since then two parents guard the school at night without salary."* A local nurse volunteered to run regular school clinics to improve the health of learners. Not only were the children's health needs met but the school environment improved as *"there is a great improvement...even toilets are clean...toilets are regularly visited by School Governing Body members."* A mother took over the management of the school tuckshop releasing a teacher to teach. *"I trained a mother to run our school tuckshop. This tuckshop was normally used to be run by a teacher. Time for teachers is saved."* Furthermore, parents assisted with the upkeep and repair of school buildings and property. However, parent volunteering was not limited to the maintenance of physical facilities. Parents were also drawn into the life of the classroom. The principal described a grandfather with little formal education who had been previously employed as a night watchman, who had now become a familiar sight in the Grade One and Two classes, where he *"is telling folklore for these learners. As a result the learning and listening skills of the Grade One learners was improved. This photo shows Grade Two pupils listening to the grandfather who was recruited by a teacher to come and tell African folklore."* Similarly a mother had *"volunteered to help our cultural committee with...dramas and traditional dancing."*

### Getting results

Parent involvement is an important part of any whole school strategy aimed at school improvement. Epstein (1995:705) tabulates in detail expected outcomes for teachers, learners and parents for each of the six types of parent involvement. In addition, her most recent research includes a redefinition and expansion of the six types of involvement with concomitant results for the three groups (Epstein et al (1997:80). She points out that a family involvement programme will be most effective if linked to a specific outcome which has been identified by the school. For example, a Mother-Daughter dinner or a Father-Son camp will yield positive results in terms of parenting styles and improved relationships but it will clearly not improve maths skills. For optimal success school leaders must identify problems in the school, assess these, see how they can be best addressed by home-school partnership and how the implementation can be evaluated. A six month plan, a year plan and a three year plan are recommended. Clearly parent involvement programmes run in a haphazard way at best will likely yield only average results (Dietz 1997:5). According to Epstein et al (1997), the planned approach depends on the constitution of an action team, usually under the auspices of some kind of a school governance structure (cf 3.2)

This strategic approach to getting results was not possible to achieve merely by means of the assignment that teachers had to complete. The Certificate in Parent Involvement teaches the necessity of strategic planning over a three-year period and the implementation of an Action Team under the auspices of the School Governing Body to ensure planned success. However, the assignment only required teachers to implement a 'one off' activity and thus, it was not expected that it would produce evidence of specific or long-term improvement in the school. Yet, all teachers did initiate some kind of Action Team to assist them in the planning of their activity and all reported some benefits to the school. A poorly qualified teacher working in a school in an informal settlement, expressed a new sense of self-confidence, saying, *"I am empowered. I did not know that I was capable of organising anything and now I have organised a parent workshop"*. Another teacher felt less isolated in her task, stating, *"I am no longer a one-man show leader who was overburdened. I now have support of parents."* Similarly a school principal felt that the stress experienced as school manager had been lessened, *"Involving parents as volunteers has delivered me from stress, misunderstandings, confrontations and overloading."*

Negative feelings towards parents, a common barrier to parent involvement (McEwan 1998:9) were changed. Instead of experiencing involved parents as an interference, a teacher felt that, *"parents are a source of inspiration ...they are our hero and example."*

Certain assignments contained letters of appreciation from parents or questionnaires used to gauge parent opinion after an activity. Many parents felt appreciated and were encouraged to make a contribution of their time and expertise rather than the customary financial contribution. A mother said, *"I don't have money to offer the school but I have two hands and brain to help teachers to stay in class and do other things."* Parents expressed pride in the volunteer tasks which they were fulfilling in the school. A mother who cleaned the administration block daily without pay in a primary school remarked, *"No child will be seen cleaning the principal's office and making tea, gone are those days. My husband and kids normally say I don't clean our home the way I clean the school admin block."*

Most important to South African schooling, teachers' reports evidenced that the culture of teaching and learning was improved. Teacher professionalism was strengthened merely by the presence of parents in the school, as a principal noted, *"Teachers are performing their duties with dedication because parents are always around. Noise making is reduced to nil."* Learners also felt the effect of parent volunteers on school grounds, as these learner's comments illustrate, *"When I see Mom at school I know my teacher will tell her when I make noise."* In the same school where truancy and tardiness of both teachers and learners was a serious problem, an unemployed mother volunteered to do duty each morning at the school gates to monitor late comers. As a result, the principal found that, *"Late coming on the site of educators and learners has decreased dramatically."*

Learning at home was strengthened by the new interest shown by parents in children's school work. After his parents attended a workshop on homework, a learner expressed the change in his father's behaviour, *"My father is still too busy to go to school but now he checks my books and says well done to me."* Children sensed a more positive atmosphere in the school when they saw a partnership develop between parents and teachers. A teacher observed, *"The children were the ones who were 'on top of the world' because they could see both parties with the same objective in mind."*

### Conclusion

Schools and school systems seldom offer staff any formal training in collaborating with parents or in understanding the varieties of modern family life. Clearly qualitative investigations such as the one reported here cannot be generalised but they suggest the usefulness of providing teacher training particularly in a comprehensive model of parent involvement. Findings suggest that parent involvement is a cost-effective and feasible way to improve the culture of teaching and learning so needed in South African schools. The Certificate in Parent Involvement offered through distance education is an attempt to make knowledge available to practising teachers and afford them the opportunity to develop appropriate attitudes and skills. The course is based on the premise that myriad ways exist for families to become more involved in schools. Teacher education can assist teachers in changing the traditional image of parent involvement which limits it to fund-raising or to participation in school governance. Schools should provide training for school staff and teacher education programmes should make parent involvement a core module.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Summary of assignments**

Assignment	Epstein's type of parent involvement	School	Type of community & location
1	Learning at home	Independent pre-school	City, Gauteng
2	Communication	Independent pre-school	Town, W Cape
3	Volunteering	Independent pre-school	Township, NW Province
4	Community collaboration	Independent primary school	City, Gauteng
5	Parenting and Decision-making	Public primary school	Small town, Gauteng
6		Public primary school	City
7		Public primary (farm) school	Rural area, N Province
8		Public primary (farm) school	Rural area, E Cape
9	Parenting	Independent high (religious) school	City, Gauteng
10	Parenting	Public secondary school	Town, N Province
11	Parenting	Public secondary school	Rural area, Free State
12	Parenting	Public secondary school	Informal settlement, W Cape
13	Volunteering	Public secondary school	Township, NW Province
14	Parenting	Sunday School Club	Township, N Province