

## THE ROLE OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP IN PROMOTING INCLUSIVE AND QUALITY EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

This study investigated the role of school community partnership in promoting inclusive and quality education. The study was conducted at two primary schools in the Mankweng Circuit in Limpopo Province. Schools in Mankweng operate without guidelines regarding how to collaborate with the community to promote issues of inclusivity and quality education. The study followed a qualitative approach with a case study research design. The study population consisted of 38 participants made up of school governing body members, community leaders and school management teams. Purposive sampling was used to select three participants from each of the two schools, making a total sample size of six. Data was collected through individual interviews. A thematic approach was employed to analyse the data, by way of identifying themes emerging from the interviews. The results of the study reveal that the school management team did not involve the community because it was assumed that the community lacked knowledge on issues of education. The school management teams found it difficult to work with some community members due to their level of education. The study recommends that training should be made available to educate the community about school-community partnership to promote inclusive and quality education.

**Keywords:** Partnership, inclusivity, community, School Management Team; School Governing Body.

### Introduction and Background of the Study

The practice of school-community partnerships is viewed variously, both nationally and internationally. Internationally, school-community partnership is construed as a practice that should focus on collaboration and working together to educate children (Adelman & Tylor, 2006; Aydin, 2005). Adelman and Tylor (2006) argue that the working together of schools, homes and communities can promote inclusive and quality education in schools. Schools can be efficient and effective if they form an integral part of the community. Although there is some literature on school-community partnership, it does not explicitly unpack how such partnership can work to promote inclusion and quality education. Researchers such as Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004), Brown and Duku (2008) and Msila (2007) argue that parents are

partners in school governance, and their participation inherently promotes inclusion and quality education in schools. In Thailand, for instance, school-community partnership is centred on the working together of school and community to promote quality teaching and learning in schools (Pennefather, 2008).

Inclusion is about supporting all learners, educators and the system as a whole so that the full range of learning needs can be met. The focus is on teaching and learning, with an emphasis on the development of good teaching strategies that will be of benefit to all learners. Inclusion focuses on overcoming barriers in the system that prevent it from meeting the learning needs of all learners. The South African Education White Paper 6 appreciates that a broad range of learning needs exists among the learner population at any point in time, and if they are not met, learners may fail to learn effectively or be excluded from the learning system. Differences in learning needs arise from a range of factors including physical, mental, sensory, neurological and developmental impairments, psycho-social disturbances, and differences in intellectual ability, particular life experiences or socio-economic deprivation (DoE, 2012).

According to Berg (2012), school-community partnership can be defined as an intentional effort to create and sustain relationships among a school or school district and a variety of formal and informal organizations and institutions in the community, for the purpose of guiding and monitoring learners. This guidance and monitoring will make it easier for schools to promote inclusive and quality education.

### **Positive Behaviour Support, Inclusivity and School-Community Partnership in South Africa**

Positive behavior support (PBS) aims to build environments in which positive behavior is more effective than problem behavior. It emphasizes prevention, teaching and reinforcement to achieve meaningful outcomes regarding student behavior in schools. The PBS process teaches learners appropriate behavior using motivation and responsibility to encourage positive interactions and discourage problem behaviors. It emphasizes a common language and common understandings about learners' behavior among staff, parents and the learners themselves (Berg, 2012). It is partly for this reason that this study seeks to investigate the views of school governing bodies, teachers and community members on how school- community partnership can promote PBS, with a view to promoting inclusion that will result in quality education in schools.

In Thailand, school-community partnership is centred on the school and community working together to promote inclusive quality teaching and learning (Pennefather, 2008). There is some evidence that school-community partnerships promote PBS to enhance quality education. Cameron (2006) notes that poor discipline in schools may result in the destruction of teaching and learning. Cameron (2006) therefore emphasizes the need for schools and the community to work together to strengthen quality education and promote an inclusive environment.

In the context of South Africa, school-community partnership is based on the notion of working together to solve some of the challenges that the schools and the community are facing. These include bullying, drug abuse and poor discipline, and together they result in poor education (Mathe, 2008). The question of inclusion in schools becomes crucial since it is imperative to include previously marginalised groups. The issue of quality is undoubtedly of grave concern in the schools under study here. However, there is a need to align quality with inclusivity, because the kinds of practices still occurring in most of these schools exclude most of the learners; and this is a situation requiring investigation.

Poor inclusivity in schools might negatively affect the community and will probably result in a high drop-out rate. The work of Mtsweni (2008) advanced the view that most learners who drop out of school are those excluded from the general curriculum of the education system. In line with Mtsweni's argument, Mestry (2010) maintains that inclusion in school is not only about students living with disabilities. He argues that there are a lot of exclusions taking place in the classroom that teachers are not aware of. This is a reminder of the important study by Nelson (2010), who argues that in a classroom, learners learn differently, and the moment teachers use only one teaching strategy they do so to the exclusion of other students. In a classroom all learners need to be accommodated or included, while teachers need at the same time to ensure that such inclusion is aligned with quality. Schools in Mankweng operate without guidelines regarding how to collaborate with the community to promote issues of inclusivity and quality education.

According to Mestry (2010), in Malawi, teenage pregnancy is one of the challenges that schools are facing, and that early and unwanted pregnancies in schools can be attributed to poor school discipline. Ciderhead (2006) claims that when schools and communities work together as partners, learners' benefit. On the other hand, unstable partnerships among schools, families and communities do not create safe and inclusive school environments. According to Pasiardis (2006), there is a need to strengthen learner discipline and mutual respect, encourage community services and improve academic skills to achieve the desired goals for learners of all ages and grades.

In Botswana, school-community partnerships can weave together a critical mass of resources and strategies to enhance caring communities that support all the youth and their education and enable success at school and beyond (Garne & Epstein, 2004). Strong school-community connections are critical in impoverished communities where schools are often the largest piece of public estate and may also be the single largest employer. Garne and Epstein (2004) emphasise that comprehensive partnership in Botswana represents a promising direction for generating essential interventions to address barriers to learning, enhance healthy development and strengthen families and neighbourhoods. Building such partnerships requires an enlightened vision, creative leadership, and new multifaceted roles for the professionals who work in schools and communities, as well as for all who are willing to assume leadership. The present study seeks to

contribute to this goal, strengthening the working together of schools and communities with a view to promoting inclusion and quality education.

In the context of South Africa, the concept of school-community partnership refers to collaborative relationships and activities involving school staff, parents and community members (Kemal, 2009). The South African constitution stipulates that everyone has a right to education. Therefore, it is important to remove all barriers and promote inclusive, quality education in schools. According to White Paper 6, a school that upholds the concept of inclusivity maximally should be:

- Acknowledging that all children and youth can learn and that all children and youth need support
- Enabling education structures, systems and learning methodologies to meet the needs of all learners
- Acknowledging and respecting differences in learners, whether due to age, gender, ethnicity, language, class, disability, HIV or other infectious diseases
- Acknowledging that education is broader than formal schooling and also occurs in the home and community, and within formal and informal settings and structures
- Changing attitudes, behaviour, teaching methods, curricula and the environment to meet the needs of all learners
- Maximising the participation of all learners in the culture and the curriculum of educational institutions and uncovering and minimising barriers to learning.

The government's obligation to provide basic education to all learners and its commitment to the central principles of the Constitution are also guided by the recognition that a new unified education and training system must be based on equity, on redressing past imbalances and on a progressive rising of the quality of education and training. This fundamental right to basic education is further developed in the Constitution in Section 9 (2), which commits the State to the achievement of equality, and Sections 9 (3), (4) and (5), which commit the State to non-discrimination (inclusivity). These clauses are particularly important for protecting all learners, whether disabled or not (Department of Education. Education White Paper 6, 2001).

### **Problem Statement**

In South African, the Constitution grants learners the fundamental right to basic education that is non-discriminatory and promotes equality. This clause clearly pertains to all learners, regardless of age, race or disability. Subsequently, White Paper 6 has suggested that at the school level, parents and the community have to participate effectively in the planning and implementing of inclusion activities (Education Department. Education White Paper 6, 2001). Moreover, Education White Paper 6 emphasizes that parents and community members should play a more active role in ensuring that their children receive quality education. Schools in South Africa operate without a framework to guide them on how to work with the community to promote issues of inclusivity and quality education. Researchers such

as Berg (2012) argue that poor school-community partnership results in discriminatory practices that affect the quality of education in schools. The current study explores the role of school-community partnership in promoting inclusive and quality education in schools. The theoretical perspective of Arstein's (2008) life cycle of a partnership was used to suggest to how best school-community partnership can be practised in schools in Mankweng Circuit.

### **Research Question**

- What role does school-community partnership play in promoting inclusivity and quality education in schools?

### **Research Objective**

- To explore the role of school-community partnership in promoting inclusivity and quality education in schools.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Arstein's Theory of the Life Cycle of a Partnership**

Arstein's (2008) theory of the life cycle of a partnership was used. According to the theory, partnerships are best seen as processes for building relationships and getting things done – not just formal structures. The theory is very relevant to this study because it clearly outlines the various stages of beginning and maintaining school-community partnerships to promote inclusivity in the classroom and quality education. Four key elements in the theory are outlined below:

**Initiating:** the person who starts the partnership influences its initial style of operation, and this may need to change. The spark for starting might be, for example, funding, but this might not be enough in itself to keep the partnership together in the longer term. In the context of this study, schools were expected to open lines of communication to promote quality education and inclusive classrooms. The community should be informed about school initiatives for promoting quality education and an inclusive school environment, and the responsibility to roll out such activities should be shared by both the school and the community (Arstein, 2008).

**Starting:** this reviews what is already happening in the area, and some of the initiatives taken by the school and the community to promote inclusivity and ensure quality in education. Arstein (2008) emphasises that one needs to look at other partnership projects and programmes for ideas. One must also get to know one's partners, their styles of working and preferred means of communicating. In the context of this study, the schools were expected to know the preferred way of communicating with the community, and it was assumed that such communication would be smooth and efficient in addressing issues of inclusivity and quality education (Arstein, 2008).

**Doing:** this refers to developing and projects once begun. Arstein (2008) places emphasis on paying attention to partners and the people involved as well as the projects, with training, support and socialising. Furthermore, Arstein (2008) highlights the involvement of others outside the core partnership who have a stake in projects and/or the overall programme. In this study, the schools were expected to involve the community in issues of inclusivity and quality education, and to train the community if necessary (Arstein, 2008).

**Following through or finishing:** According to Arstein, (2008) one has to reflect on what is working and what is not, and plan for the longer term or finishing. Is your partnership still really needed – is it adding any value? In the context of this study, the schools were expected to reflect on the nature of the partnerships they had with the community to see if there was a need to improve. This can be evaluated by scrutinizing the nature of inclusivity in a school and the quality of education being offered (Arstein, 2008).

### **School-wide Positive Behaviour Support Theory**

School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) provides an organizational approach and framework for improving the climate of social behavior in schools, supporting or enhancing the impact of academic instruction on achievement and increasing proactive (positive/preventive) management. SWPBS is comprised of evidence-based behavioral interventions and practices that can be implemented effectively to address and support the socially and educationally important behavioral needs of students and their families (Horne, Sugai & Anderson, 2010). In the context of this study, SWPBS in school-community partnership would aim ultimately at promoting inclusion and quality education.

#### **A systems Approach to SWPBS Considers Multiple Points of Support (Sugai & Horne, 2006):**

- **Individual Student:** intensive and individualized behavior intervention planning based on function-based behavior assessments and implementation for students who are unresponsive to school-wide (primary) interventions.
- **Classroom:** expectations, routines, structures, and practices for presenting curriculum, designing instruction, and managing the social climate of classroom environments that serve as the basis for individual student behavior support planning
- **School-wide:** behavioral expectations and support (i.e. proactive discipline) for all students and staff, across all school settings that together serve as the foundation for classroom and individual student behavior support
- **District:** specialized behavioral supports, organizational leadership, and implementation resources in combination serve as a foundation for effective implementation
- **Community:** collaborative intervention and support efforts for students and families that involve mental health, public health, juvenile justice, and other community agencies and resources

- **State:** behavior support policy, organizational leadership, and resource management that collectively serve as the foundation for district and school-wide implementation of PBS.

## **Research Methodology**

The approach used in this study is qualitative and can be characterized as exploratory, descriptive and contextualizing. Exploratory research was undertaken to venture into a relatively unknown area in order to gain insight and understanding of a particular phenomenon. The purpose of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of individuals and events in their natural state, taking into account the relevant context (Hill & Tyson, 2008). This study aimed to establish the role of school-community partnership in promoting inclusive and quality education. Descriptive research was also conducted in this study. The aim of descriptive research is to accurately examine events or the case (Le Compte & Preissle, 2005). Thus descriptions must be conveyed as precisely and completely as possible.

## **Research Design**

The research employed two descriptive and instrumental case studies. Descriptive case study enabled the researcher to obtain extensive information relating to the topic. According to De Vos (2011), quoting Yin (2003), a case study of this kind strives to describe, analyse and interpret a particular phenomenon. De Vos (2011), quoting Mark (1996), postulates that the purpose of such a case study is not to understand a broad social issue, but merely to describe the case being studied. On the other hand, an instrumental case study permitted the researcher to build knowledge from theory and acquire new knowledge to assist and inform policy development. In this way, it furthers the understanding of a researcher about a general phenomenon or condition (Thomas, 2004).

## **The Descriptive Case Study**

A descriptive case study stresses both theory-building and the testing of knowledge. Case studies can be particularly constructive for manufacturing theory and new knowledge which to assist policy makers. Thomas (2004) claims that because a case study involves a detailed exploration of a complex entity or process, it can produce theoretical insight closely grounded in real experience, in contrast to what can be described as more speculative theorizing. According to Yin (2003) the case study can be used for theory-testing or more specifically, critically testing a theory's proposition.

## **Population and Sampling**

### **Population**

The population consisted of members of school governing bodies (SGB), community leaders and school management teams (SMT) of three primary schools in Mankweng Circuit. The total population was 38.

### **Sampling Procedures**

Purposive sampling was used to select two schools accused of discriminatory activities in academic years 2017 and 2018. From each of the two schools, one community leader, one SGB member and one SMT member were sampled. The total sample size was six.

### **Data Collection**

In order for a researcher to carry out an investigation, data must be gathered from participants. Data collection in this study was guided by the research question and the scope of the study. There are different methods and procedures for collecting data. Creswell (2012) argues that each method is appropriate for certain sources of data, yielding information of the kind and in the form that can be most effective. In this study, data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gain detailed insights into collaborative practices (Creswell, 2012). De Vos (2001) argues that semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to follow up particular interesting avenues of enquiry as they emerge. In this study, the researcher was able follow up with participants on how they worked collaboratively to promote issues of inclusivity and quality education in schools.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher reduced the data to essential units which were then broken down systematically into unambiguous units. These were later shared to provide an overall view of the phenomenon. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) point out that through analysis the unique nature and structure of the data are revealed so that they can be described, elucidated and interpreted. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed to provide a complete record of each encounter. The interviews were scrutinized for trends. This was done by categorizing the contributions that repeatedly appeared in the interviews. As Sarantakos (2000) puts it, at this stage the researcher applied data decrease, presentation and interpretation. The difficulty of data analysis depends largely on the degree of organization given to the research process. The production of ground notes can be rendered easier if consistent forms of report writing are in place.



## **Results**

The results of this study are summarized in the following themes: **Working together of school with other stakeholders; sharing problems of parents and educator; regular communication; conducting workshops; policy issues; and education about community participation in school matters** which are used to guide the discussion below:

### **Working Together of School with Other Stakeholders**

School is there to serve the community. Therefore, it is important to work together with other stakeholders to improve issues of inclusion and quality education in schools. When SMT members were asked how they understood the concept of partnership, different views were presented. The response of **IISMT1** was as follows: *“I understand partnership as working together of school with other stakeholder. They say it takes a community to raise a child. Therefore, partnership with regards to inclusion and quality education means working together of schools and parents if not community to ensure that no student is excluded and to maintain quality in a school”*. From this response, it is clear that a school should create a good collaboration with the community in order to promote inclusion and quality education.

### **Regular Communication**

In order for a school to enjoy a successful school-community partnership, there is a need for good communication between the two. To support this statement, **IISMT2** mentioned that:

*“Parents should be involved in school partnership 100%. The reason is that if parent share their problems educators especially those that affect learners directly, the learner will see that there is good partnership between my parents and the school therefore I must not disappoint any of them”*

The response quoted above suggests that for any partnership to be successful, SMTs need to involve parents, and that communication between the two should be regular.

### **Conducting Workshops**

Conducting workshops is important for teachers and parents, to enable them to share ideas on how to promote inclusion and quality education in schools. Community members were asked what measures might be taken to strengthen the partnership between the school and the community to promote inclusion and quality education. IIP1 and IIP3 presented similar responses along the following lines:

*“The school must conduct workshops where parents are well informed about inclusion and how to promote quality education and other activities in the school”*.

From the above responses it is clear that community members are willing to participate in a partnership between the school and the community on inclusion and quality education. However, schools need to come up with strategies to conduct workshops to teach community members about issues of inclusion and quality education.

### **Policy Issues**

Policy documents such as the Education White Paper 6 should guide the school and the community on issues of inclusion, equal and quality education. IIP2 and IIP4 mentioned that:

*“There must be a policy in the school that explains how to improve partnership and issues of inclusion and quality education. Learners, community members, together with the school should participate in the drafting of the policy”.*

From the response quoted above, it would appear that community members could indeed help with issues of inclusion and quality education.

### **Education About Community Participation on School Matter**

IISMT4 also mentioned the issue of educating the community as a way of strengthening participation between the school and the community on issues of inclusion and quality education. She mentioned that:

*“Meetings must be arranged whereby parents and other community members will be taught about the importance of being involved in their children’s education. Parents should regularly receive update regarding the progress of their learners.”*

In the light of this quotation, it can be argued that the key is to educate the community about issues of school-community partnership on inclusivity and quality education.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study were summarized under the following sub-themes: conducting of workshops; policy issues; working together of schools with other stakeholders; regular communication.

### **Conducting of Workshops**

In terms of conducting workshops, the participants maintained that the school should conduct workshops where community members could sit with skilled people to discuss issues of inclusivity and quality education. For example, the school could communicate with social workers, nurses, police and other motivational people to help training learners and the community about how to establish a culture of mutual respect in schools. Outsourcing skilled people to workshop educators, community members and learners about school-community partnerships might be the best model. The conducting of workshops would help teachers and community members to build an

inclusive society with the spirit of Ubuntu. Social workers could come to schools and advise teachers on how to teach learners to accept each other's differences and behave in an appropriate manner. Conroy (2012) argues in favour of workshops or meetings in which parents are informed and updated regularly about activities in the school. From the point of view of this study, workshops would be based on ways to sustain and manage school-community partnership with respect to inclusivity and quality education.

### **Policy Issues**

The study found that policies should be developed in order to promote school community partnership on inclusivity and quality education. A policy would serve to direct both the school and the community regarding issues of inclusivity at the school level. Moreover, the study revealed that policies such as those contained in Education White Paper 6 should be discussed during school meetings, and both the school and the community should be familiar such policies. Peter (2013) argues that it is important for schools to have meetings and draft minutes to maintain quality education and address issues of inclusivity.

### **Working Together of School and Other Stakeholders**

Working together is the key element in accomplishing a project. Schools and communities should work together in order to address the issue of inclusivity and quality education. It was found in this study that participants understood school-community partnership as the working together of the school with other stakeholders. This means that the school should create a good relationship with the community that it is serving. For example, parents and community leaders could be invited to come to school to talk to learners and motivate them on issues of Ubuntu and acceptance of one another at school. Furthermore, the school and the community's working together should also improve the academic performance of the school. The community would respect the school and know that the school is on a mission to transform their children and community into better citizens. Germane to this point is Nelson's (2010) study of urban schools in Malawi (middle district), about the importance of schools and communities working together. The results of his study revealed that when there is common purpose through working together between the school and the community, the school is likely to produce good results.

### **Regular Communication**

Communication is a key element of good partnership between individuals. It was found that the schools should involve community members through regular updates. Regular update in this context refers to ongoing communication between the school and the community. To involve the community on issues of inclusivity and quality education requires a lot of focus and intensive collaboration. The study revealed that there was poor communication between the school and the community. Poor communication cannot lead to the improvement of school-community partnership and will probably translate into poor results. Good communication practices start with the school and

spread to the community. From the community it would spread to families and learners would be able to see that good lines of communication existed between their parents and the school. Poor communication and a lack of cooperation from the school could delay implementation of the kind of initiative described above, since some teachers might pull back from committees that are important to promote inclusivity. Researchers such as Jackson (2010) argue that every teacher in the school has his/her own responsibilities. However, it was found in this study that some teachers and principals do not actually know what school-community partnership all is about.

## **Conclusion**

The study concludes that school-community partnership is very important for the success of the school. The study further concluded that schools should work with other stakeholders to promote issues of inclusivity and quality education. The school should have regular communication with the community, and policy issues should also clarified to the school community. If need be there should be workshops about inclusivity and how quality education can be sustained in schools.

## **Recommendations**

The study recommends that schools should have a school-community partnership policy that will enable them to have continuous contact with the community. Moreover, the study further recommends that schools should have committees that deal with issues of inclusivity and quality education. With regards to workshops on inclusive education, it is recommended that schools should hold workshops to enlighten communities about issues of inclusive and quality education. The study also recommended the use of Brookfield's lenses on evaluation to look at issues of inclusivity using policies of inclusion (literature), peer evaluation (educators evaluating each other, and the level of inclusivity in their teaching), and also the use of self-reflection as a tool to promote inclusivity. On the other hand, a reflective practice in schools is recommended to be made compulsory to ensure that schools uphold issues of inclusivity to promote quality education. At operational level, it is recommended that each and every school should have policy on inclusivity and quality enhancement.

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