

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND AIM OF STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The intention of this study was to investigate the practice of parental involvement in academic education of learners as it is happening in Namibia's rural lower primary schools. Specifically, the study investigates whether and how principals and teachers (professional educators) from northern Namibia's rural area perceive and practise parental involvement for the promotion of learners' academic learning. The same study further investigates what parents do to support schools in educating children academically. Moreover, the study further seeks to understand how parental involvement as an approach to education is context bound, i.e, the ways parents are involved in their children's academic education depending upon the context and conditions in which the school operates as well as the culture of the people who live in a specific environment.

Before Namibia's independence in 1990, the government under colonial rule (the former South African government) did not take advantage of the role that all stakeholders, especially parents, were capable of playing in the education of learners in schools. Instead of making use of parents and other community members to contribute to learners' effective learning and academic growth, the colonial rule denied parents this opportunity to support their own children. Parents were not allowed to constructively criticise or give valuable input into the education of their children.

Since Namibia's independence in 1990, the country's education system has been in transformation inspiring politicians (education is a legitimate political issue) and educators to recognise the importance of parental involvement in education. They believe such involvement will raise the standard of young people's education (Snyder, Angula, Makuwa & Hailombe, 1999). The education transformation attempts to create a paradigm which is characterised by the acceptance of parents' involvement rather than exclusion, recognises the need for connections and partnerships, tries to redress the discriminative policy (Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), 1993) that promoted poor and ineffective education in Namibian schools, and tries to remove the barriers that kept Namibian children from experiencing quality education. Reform looks backward and seeks to recapture that which requires restoration and alternately looks forward to successful redress (MEC, 1993). Education reform is an acknowledgement of the fact that the world is changing faster than it

was, and the pace of change accelerates. Whitaker (1993) concurs as he states that *“For an education system to be in tune with change it needs to be flexible, adaptable, and responsive to constantly changing circumstances and needs”* (Whitaker, 1993: 6).

The starting point for the education transformation process in Namibia is Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution (1991), which states that:

“All persons shall have the right to education. Primary education shall be compulsory and the State shall provide reasonable facilities to render effective this right for every resident within Namibia, by establishing and maintaining State schools at which primary education will be provided free of charge” (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) 1991: 12).

The right to education includes the right to be involved in, contribute to and support education processes. Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution gives parents the right and legal responsibility for supporting schools in providing education to Namibian children. Families have a right to participate in and support school activities that affect their lives and the lives of their children. As representatives of their children, they have a right to contribute to the decisions that affect their children’s education (Olsen, Chang, Salazar, Loang, McCall, Perez, McClain, & Raffel, 1994). Until 1990 these fundamental rights of access and the right to education were for so long denied to most parents and their children in many African countries and in Namibia in particular. This was particularly true for blacks and marginalised people because of the colonial and apartheid education systems. I find it proper for the understanding and the aims of this study to use the term ‘black’ as the racial classification of disadvantaged people in Namibia. Dahlstrom (2002) argues that, *“it is almost impossible to understand anything in post-colonial African society if we pretend that this classification does not persist as a social signifier in the post-colonial society”* (Dahlstrom, 2002: 8).

The South African system of Bantu and Discriminatory (Swarts, 1998) or Segregatory (MEC, 1993) Education as provided to the people of the then South West Africa (SWA) resulted in school-dropouts, lack of interest in and understanding of the value of education to many black Namibian adults, and eventually poorly skilled and unskilled individuals. In addition Swarts (1998) states that the rudimentary curriculum of Bantu and Segregated education equipped black Namibians to perform unskilled work, consistent with Verwoerd’s policy, which according to Ellis (1984) declared that *“there is no place for the native in the European community, above the level of certain*

forms of labour When I have control of natives education I will reform it so that the natives will be taught from childhood to realise that equality with Europeans is not for them ...” (Ellis, 1984: 23). Furthermore, segregated education in the then SWA, was reflected by the system specially designed to fashion black people into ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ (Swarts, 1998) as well as garden layers and house builders for European settlers (United Nations Institute for Namibia, 1986). Swarts further explains that the discriminatory system “*with a restricted curriculum spanning not more than four years, consisting of reading, writing, arithmetic, religion and singing in the vernacular*” was designed to equip black Namibians to perform unskilled work. Some black adults in Namibia have never been to school. Many of those who were fortunate enough to go to school or receive some schooling (Swarts, 1998) never proceeded beyond basic education (MEC, 1993; United Nations Institute for Namibia, 1986). As parents, they were denied opportunities to be involved in the decision-making process affecting their children’s lives, because “*schools were simply not open to most of our parents*” (MEC, 1993: 27). As a result of the undemocratic character of the discriminatory system of the education system in the then SWA, parents had a little chance of supporting school activities. Moreover, due to the former education system’s lack of enlightenment about education and its importance to indigenous people, large numbers of parents had little or no interest in supporting the education system (MEC, 1993).

Today, Namibia has an apartheid legacy of many uneducated and uneducable, unemployed and unemployable people. A serious education backlog in Namibia caused too little (if ever) development of the skills that are needed (MEC, 1993). These sad people are the true legacy of the apartheid education system of the past (Swarts, 1998; Amukugo, 1993; Ellis, 1984). Hence, parents cannot react effectively to the education-related challenges they face or are faced by their children. It is a fact that a discriminatory system kept Namibian parents from going to school to receive education (MEC, 1993). MEC (1993) further states that parents’ basic literacy is a pre-requisite for the success of child education. Therefore, literacy empowers parents to participate more fully in the life of society of which schools are part, and acquire skills and confidence in their own abilities to exercise their rights and responsibilities in supporting their children’s education. If we are really committed to education for all, then our commitment should promote parental involvement and support parents’ life long learning (MEC, 1993). Therefore, it is now the responsibility of the schools to nurture the idea of lifelong learning among parents and community members in order to empower them for school support. Namibia, as a signatory to the “World Declaration on Education for All” (5-9 March, 1990, Jomtien), interpreted its constitutional intentions into a policy for educational reform and development by publishing “*Towards Education for All*” (MEC, 1993).

Education for all means access to education and amending education for quality and better education, and is necessarily a partnership between the schools and parents (Cherryholmes, 1998; MEC, 1993). The then new government in Namibia was desperately seeking means of redressing educational imbalances of the past, and preventing the recurrence thereof by improving and changing educational policies. Changes in Namibia's educational policies emphasise the implementation and promotion of education for all, expansion of access to education and improvement in the quality of education in schools, hence proclaiming the practice of involvement, partnership and networking between schools and families as policy in schools (MEC, 1993). Achieving this important reform goal depends heavily on the active participation and support of potential partners including parents who have had no strong relationship with schools in the past (Fullan, 1998). The Ministry of Education and Culture in Namibia states that, "*Improving the quality of our schools is a responsibility we share*" (MEC, 1993: 40).

In a contextual sense, accessibility to education will become meaningful if the former marginalised and disadvantaged communities are encouraged and welcomed to participate in the education of their children. In line with this understanding, Namibia's education reform tries to address the barriers that keep Namibian people from contributing to and experiencing quality education and lifelong learning which, according to our constitution, are now fundamental rights. Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution gives all residents of a new democratic Namibia the right and legal responsibility for supporting educational opportunities for all children in Namibia (MIB, 1991). Namibia needs educators and parents who devote themselves to the enhancement of the learners' education in schools so that the education system may succeed in producing an educated, skilled and employable population.

Therefore, it was thus registered that the act of educating is indivisible and cannot be split into isolated spheres of home and school as this would be detrimental to the social, emotional and cognitive development of the learners. Hence, parental involvement has moved to the forefront of Namibian education reform (MEC, 1993). In line with education reform, the new Namibian government encourages schools to aim for quality education and higher academic achievement, improved school attendance, positive student attitudes toward school, and better student grades (MEC, 1993). It should be the purpose of all schools to increase the teachers' efficacy and consequently provide effective education to children. Provision of effective education includes recognition of the educational benefits of parental involvement in children's education. Tapping the knowledge and skills of parents through school-to-home communication makes a concrete and great

contribution to instruction and curriculum enrichment (Hornby, 2000). These goals should motivate schools to work toward greater involvement with parents.

Advocates of parental involvement suggest that it requires the recognition of parents by educators as co-responsible partners in the learning process of learners (Haggis, 1991; Dekker & Lemmer, 1993; Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994; Fullan, 1998; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). School management teams aim for good school governance. According to Namibian Education Act, Number 16 of 2001, involving parents and collaborating with community in school governance issues and decisions is an effective and wise decision making strategy (Ministry of Basic Education and Culture (MBEC), 2001). Hence, parents should also participate in school improvement teams and school boards to contribute to effective and good governance of the school. Sanders (1996) asserts that schools should get parents' perspectives and influence in school life, policies and decisions. Therefore, according to Burke and Picus (2001); Chapman and Aspin (1997); Dekker and Lemmer (1993); Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis (2002); Olsen et al. (1994); Phelps (1999) and MEC (1993), it is the school's role and responsibility to:

- invite and encourage parents to visit the school, and offer them entry into some of the learning activities,
- make parents aware of their rights and responsibilities with regard to the support of the child's whole development,
- provide education opportunities for parents in the development of their understanding of social and economic issues, curriculum, learning methods and the school organizational changes, which make parents to respond and contribute to the learning process.

Parents should work together with schools to establish Parent-Teacher Organisations, thus ensuring sustained parental engagement in the life of school.

Supporters of parental involvement further contend that parents are obliged and responsible for showing their children that school and education are important (Holmes, 1998). It is vital for parents to understand that in the absence of their responsibility and genuine support for schools, academic education for their children is almost impossible. Parents need to understand that the success of their children's academic education in schools depends on their cooperation, support and active involvement in school activities (Mhlambo, 1994; Holmes, 1998). Therefore, it is the parents' task to parent children well and send them to school on a daily basis ready and motivated for academic success in schools.

Chapman and Aspin (1997) and the Namibian Education Act No. 16 of 2001 (MBEC, 2001) present the roles and responsibilities of families relative to supporting their children's academic education. Among these, parents need to assume roles as teachers, policy and decisions makers, advisors, problem-solvers, partners, inspectors and supervisors. However the big question remains. Do parents and families really know and understand what their roles, rights and responsibilities are concerning their involvement in the academic education of their children? Do they know that they have an obligation to support schools in educating children academically? Do they know how to go about fulfilling their roles and responsibilities in partnership with schools? Research results suggest the answer to these questions is no (Burke & Picus, 2001 and Lapp, Fisher, Flood & Moore, 2002). Many parents and family members are still not aware of their legal rights in accessing appropriate services to support their children's education in schools (Mhlambo, 1994; Holmes, 1998).

Another crucial question is, "Do schools value and accept parent's rights to their children's academic education?" Olsen et al. (1994) indicate a strong anti-parental sentiment among professionals. Schools regard parent involvement as a problem. They do not show support for it (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002). They feel teaching is the responsibility of educated and professionally qualified people. Parents do not have resources and skills to be advocates for their children's needs and to assist in academic learning. Therefore, when parents want to be involved, "*teachers appear to feel that parents trespass on their authority and autonomy. They feel their rights are being infringed upon when parents demand to know about curriculum*" (Olsen et al., 1994:101).

The previous few pages are presented in an attempt to contextualise the study. The brief introduction about the background of education in Namibia before and after independence indicates how the topic is established in the literature and built on the experience of education in Namibia. The remaining pages of this introductory chapter present an overview of the whole dissertation. It introduces the aims and objectives of the study, specifies research questions, indicates the design and methodology followed to address the research problem, clarifies main concepts used throughout this thesis and concludes with the outline of the rest of the dissertation.

1.2 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The rationale of the study is the reason that motivated the researcher to embark on a study of a specific topic (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Circumstances that motivated me to undertake this study relate to my experiences in education before and after the independence of Namibia as well as to the

information acquired from reviewing the comprehensive literature. The rationale for the study is briefly described in the following section.

For seventeen years I have served as one of the implementers of educational reform in colleges of education in Namibia, training teachers for Basic Education (grade 1-10) in the Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD) programme. I was responsible for teaching Educational Theory and Practice (ETP). One of the rationales of ETP is to ensure that the philosophy of quality education, embedded in educational reform, is taught throughout the BETD programme, and that this philosophy should be reflected in educators' professional practice in the field (ETP Curriculum (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture (MBESC) & Ministry of Higher Education, Training and Employment Creation (MHETEC), 2001). The rationale of ETP translates in practical terms the important goal of Namibia's main educational reform policy improvement for quality education in schools.

Against this background, I had a sincere desire to find out whether and how lower primary schools involve parents in the education (particularly academic) of learners. Interest in finding out how a policy for education reform and development (as far as parental involvement is concerned) is contextually realised partly motivated the carrying out of this research (Brubacher, Case and Reagan, 1994). Chatterji (2004: 7) concurs as he states "*social experiments can involve the testing of governmental policies*".

Moreover, the quest for understanding of how parental involvement is practised in rural lower primary schools was further enhanced by a comprehensive review of the findings of research studies on the implementation of parental involvement in schools to support children's education done in other African countries as well as countries outside Africa (Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Burke & Picus, 2001; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Phelps, 1999; Sanders, 1999; Fink & Stoll, 1998; Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Richardson, 1997; Heneveld & Craig, 1996; Dekker & Lemmer, 1993). The recommended approaches, sometimes referred to as types or activities of involvement, are: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision- making and collaborating with community (Burke & Picus, 2001; Epstein et al., 2002; Phelps, 1999; Sanders, 1999; 2001; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). These researchers studied parental involvement in the education of learners as an aspect of school innovation.

According to Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (1981) as cited in Heneveld and Craig, (1996: 13), school improvement is the school's attempt to "*implement an innovation with the*

ultimate aim of producing positively valuable changes in student learning outcomes, in teachers' skills and attitudes and in institutional functioning.”

Effective approaches to parental involvement that serve as frameworks for implementation to be used by schools are well described and praised by many of the researchers. Many of the research findings reviewed indicate that parents of all ethnicity and classes are similar in one respect: they value and desire education and thus consider education of their children important (Dekker & Lemmer, 1993; Phelps, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1994). In agreement, Hornby (2000) asserts that parents are willing to collaborate with teachers and are able to contribute more to school activities that result in their children making greater progress. To the contrary, other researchers' findings indicate that parents are reluctant to support schools to promote learners' academic education (Dekker & Lemmer, 1993; Fink & Stoll, 1998; Epstein et al., 2002). In addition, Richardson's (1997) findings indicate that teachers and administrators want to involve parents more but they do not know the best ways to do so.

The literature also indicates that although parental involvement is crucial for learners' education, parents and families from poor socio-economic backgrounds lack interest and willingness to support the academic aspect of their children's education (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Burke & Picus, 2001; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000).

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The literature indicates that the conclusion drawn by most studies is that if schools encourage parental involvement skilfully and with welfare of learners as the focus, it guarantees:

- A remarkable educational growth and significant academic improvement of learners,
 - An increment in teachers' morale and effort, and
 - A tremendous growth in parental support for schools and learners' learning
- (Epstein et al., 2002; Hammond, 2001; Lindsay, 2001; Wisconsin Centre for Educational Research (WCER), 1995).

However, other findings reveal that despite successful and appropriate planning and implementation of parental involvement in low socio-economic status areas, in practice this meets with a lack of parental support and resistance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Lapp et al., 2002; Sanders, 2001). Moreover, other researchers share the same findings that strongly indicate that the involvement of

parents from distressed backgrounds is the most problematic and difficult aspect of changing and improving learners' education in schools (Epstein et al., 2002; Fink & Stoll, 1998; Dekker & Lemmer, 1993).

Some of the findings from studies of parental involvement seem to contradict each other. Some findings say that all parents of all classes are interested and want the best for their children. Therefore, it would seem that well-planned parental involvement would guarantee parents' support for children's education that would culminate in effective learning.

Other findings say parental involvement, regardless of being well planned, is difficult to implement among poor and less-educated parents (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Lapp et al., 2002; Sanders, 2001). Further, still other findings conclude that teachers and administrators do not know the best way to involve parents (Finders & Lewis, 1994). The question is: Who does not know the 'what', the how and the 'why' of parental involvement? These contradictions triggered my concern. If all parents of all ethnicities and classes are similar in the respect that they all value and desire education and thus consider education of their children important, then why is parental involvement difficult to implement in schools, specifically those situated in economically distressed areas? Why are poor, low-income and less-educated families reluctant to support schools for children's education? Were the strategies tried to involve parents compatible with such conditions? Is it parents who lack support or that schools do not know appropriate ways of involving parents? A few researchers' findings report that parental activities identified are not fitting and are not important for high-need and resource-poor schools in 'at-risk' communities (Sanders, 2001). However, the research findings did not elaborate on activities and strategies which are compatible with resource-poor schools in at-risk communities. Their findings do not indicate how parental involvement can be improved and practised differently in a contextually appropriate way in rural schools. Furthermore, Fink and Stoll (1998) argue that international attempts to replicate one country's findings elsewhere or examine the same factors are faced with difficulties. Therefore, they recommend studies to understand the precise context in terms of learners' social class background and school locations.

Moreover, the literature indicates that most schools where parental involvement is functional, parents are more involved in non-academic school-based spaces (activities) than in school-based academic spaces (Civil, Andrade & Anhalt, 2000; Heneveld & Craig, 1996). In addition, Edwards and Knight (1994: 118) found that "*most parental involvement initiatives have not been premised on any analysis of the cycle of children's learning*".

Against this background, I feel that there is insufficient empirical research-based information on whether and how parental involvement can be practised differently and compatibly in economically distressed contexts, especially in Africa. There is insufficient information about parental involvement focusing on supporting learners in academic related activities. For these reasons, I found it worthwhile to conduct an investigation into schools in the rural areas. Consequently, this study investigates typical rural lower primary schools' ways of getting parents involved in and sustaining their involvement in their children's academic education. The following main research question can be formulated as follows:

Whether and how do professional educators (principals, teachers) and parents of rural, lower primary schools in Namibia perceive, think about and practise involvement in the academic education of learners?

The following sub-questions are relevant for the study:

- How is parental involvement perceived and practised by professional educators for supporting learners' academic education in rural lower primary schools?
- How do parents demonstrate their parental involvement in the education of their children?
- How do lower primary schools with high parental involvement organise their involvement strategies and activities differently from schools with intermediate and low parental involvement in rural Namibia?
- What barriers to parental involvement do rural lower primary schools in Namibia experience?
- How do rural lower primary schools in Namibia deal with factors that challenge their efforts to involve parents in learners' academic education?

Research questions provide preliminary direction for the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). They regulate the research methodology and control the study's direction. Examination of parental involvement includes a questioning of "what", 'how' and 'why' (Chatterji, 2004; Edwards & Knight, 1994). Meaningful and critical analysis of a phenomenon, in this study context, parental involvement, is based on relevant research questions. The research questions indicate information this study wants to generate and reasons for and practice of parental involvement, professionals' and parents' experiences, thoughts, opinions and needs related to involvement (Creswell, 2003).

However, because of the nature of this type of research, it is expected that the specification and clarity of the research questions of this study may improve as the research unfolds.

1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is positioned in a context where rigorous educational reform in Namibia is expected to take place, namely the rural areas. Although some of the expected changes in Namibia did happen, such as replacing sheds with proper wall buildings to make the learning environment conducive, others still need more attention and encouragement. Contextually and democratisation- based education of involving all stakeholders is an example (MEC, 1993). This study focuses particularly on a critical analysis of the involvement of parents in the academic education of their children in Namibian lower primary schools situated in disadvantaged areas from professional educators' and parents' points of view. It is against this background that this study aims to critically analyse whether and how rural lower primary schools in Namibia involve parents in academic education of their children.

The objectives are:

- To explore the perceptions of, and thoughts about parental involvement among lower primary schools and the extent to which those schools in northern Namibia involve parents in their children's academic education.
- To explore how parents demonstrate their parental involvement in the education of their children
- To critically analyse and identify how schools with high parental involvement organise their activities differently from schools with low parental involvement in rural Namibia.
- To identify and critically analyse and describe lower primary schools' ways of dealing with barriers that affect teachers' efforts to involve parents in learners' academic education.

Furthermore, I envision the results of this study to:

- Add new evidence about which specific parental involvement activities and approaches are compatible with Namibia's depressed socio-economic settings and disadvantaged environment;
- Guide Namibian professional educators and parents in the process of educating children to conceptualise the parental involvement issues;

- Enrich perspectives of policymakers, educators and community members at regional and national levels in Namibia where concerns for promoting parental involvement are examined; and
- Contribute to the knowledge base on parental involvement issues in rural areas of Southern Africa.

Moreover, in doing this research I built my expertise and contributed to my professional growth, research skills and knowledge of involving parents in their children's academic education.

1.5 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The conceptual framework of the study addresses my understanding of the topic of the study (parental involvement) and makes the understanding of the topic explicit (Punch, 2005). Therefore, this study's conceptual framework presents the clarifications of key concepts and a model of parental involvement (which explains the central focus of the study) by describing how environmental systems (principals, teachers and parents) relate to and support each other for the benefit of learners' academic learning and development. The model shows factors (approaches) and indicators (strategies) of parental involvement which have clarified my understanding of the concept of parental involvement. While the clarification of terms is considered appropriate to be presented in Chapter One, approaches and strategies for parental involvement are discussed in Chapter Two of this study. The concepts I would like to define (definitions overlap) in this introductory chapter are Academic Education, Home-School Partnership, Involvement, Communication, Participation, Presence, Relationship, Co-operation, Support, Critical Analysis, Rural, Professional educator and Parent.

1.5.1 Conceptual clarifications

Through concepts elucidation, the researcher radiates light on essential meanings of those concepts and their presumed relationship with each other for the reader to understand the purpose of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Some researchers suggest the delay of the definition of terms until they emerge from the data (Creswell, Plano-Clark, Gutman and Hanson, 2003). They believe that terms should rise during the research and be defined in the findings section of the final research study. However, I consider it important and helpful to clarify

some terms I have used to help readers understand the research problem and the questions in this study.

1.5.1.1 Critical analysis

Critical analysis is an approach this study took to interrogate the doubtful dispositions, suppressive ideologies and normative theories about parental involvement practices in rural schools (Morrow & Brown in Creswell, 1998). Using ideological methodology, positioned in Critical Theory, this study penetrated and critically questioned the purposes, interests and reasons behind an accepted theory that states that parental involvement practice is very poor (if ever) in schools situated in rural contexts. Using ideological methodology, it was further hoped to evaluate and uncover the interest, power and legitimacy of existing research knowledge (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The critical question on the outcomes of existing research is whether that knowledge operates in general interest or it reinforces the status quo.

By critically analysing the vested and generalised theory, critique ideology intended to reveal to rural lower primary schools that the claimed theory about difficulty of parental involvement in rural schools is not natural. The methodology aimed to emancipate rural schools from this oppressive assumption and/or beliefs of existing research orientations, and enlighten them on how they might perform and perpetuate parental involvement processes which are compatible with rural contexts (Creswell, 1998).

1.5.1.2 Academic education

Academic education is defined as affording learners the opportunities for acquiring knowledge and skills in formal academic space or spaces that reflect curriculum and instruction (such as teaching of literacy, mathematics and science) required to learn this content (Barton, Drake, Perez, St Louis & George, 2004; Sigh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Hornby, 2000). Drawing upon these researchers' ideas, the concept of academic education could be understood as scholastic support aimed at enhancing learners' understanding and consequently boosting their performance in academic disciplines. Academic education includes parents' presence, observation and willingness to intervene in their children's classroom activities, and reflects their (parents) involvement in academic education of their children. According to the purpose of this study, the academic education in which parents should be involved includes school activities that parents engage in and those activities, which support and reflect the qualities of schooling directly implicated in learners' learning of academic subject areas or disciplines. I support Bourdieu's extant argument that in

academic areas interactions move parents, teachers and children toward a shared optimal outcome, usually the academic development of the learner (Bourdieu, 1977).

1.5.1.3 Home-school partnership

In general, this catch-all term, according to Crowson and Boyd (1998), means the connections, interactions and all activities happening between the school and home as a thrust toward dismantling the disconnections between them, and to directly or indirectly support and promote the development and growth of learners. The partnership focused by this study agrees with Crowson and Boyd's definition as it understands partnership as the school's ways of making families act as a supplement to promote learners' academic development and growth. Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) refer to families and schools in this collaboration as critical friends who together operate to complement and mutually support each other to ensure that learners get effective and quality education. Anderson, Herr and Nihlen further clarify their view of a 'critical friend' as a trusted person who offers constructive critique of a person's work within a context of support. Therefore, they recommend that in partnership, families should become critical friends who play devil's advocate roles for the schools so that learners benefit the most (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994).

1.5.1.4 Involvement

Involvement is recognition that parents play a critical part in their children's education. Therefore, this word (involvement) implies that chances are given to parents to support the schools and make them more effective in reaching learning goals (Rugh & Bossert, 1998; MEC, 1993). Barton et al. (2004) present involvement as "*a dynamic, interactive process in which parents draw on multiple experiences and resources to define their interactions with schools and among school actors*". Therefore, they equate involvement with 'engagement' (Barton et al., 2004: 3). Hornby (2000) also relates involvement to participation as he uses these two concepts interchangeably.

Some researchers' understanding of the concept of involvement includes collaborative contributions, communication, resources (Hornby, 2000; Smith, Connel, Wright, Sizer, Norman, Hurley & Walker, 1997), and engagement (Barton et al., 2004). Hornby (2000) further maintains that parents are willing to collaborate with teachers and are able to contribute more to school activities that result in their children making greater progress. Therefore, involvement, which is directed by this study, is clarified as schools' ways of making optimum use of parents as valuable resources for promoting higher academic performance and intellectual development of learners.

1.5.1.5 Communication

Communication refers to openness and contacts through effective channels between schools and parents about the rights and responsibilities of each. Bastiani (cited by Hornby, 2000) and Shah (2001) say that the concept of communication as involvement includes an open door policy in which both parents and school feel comfortable about contacting each other on a continuous basis for assistance and support for learners' optimal learning. Parents have time, ability, skills, knowledge and special talents to act as resources and provide support to a school's curriculum (Barton et al., 2004; Sanders, 2001; Hornby, 2000).

1.5.1.6 Participation

Barton et al. (2004) explains involvement as making parents participate in the education of their children and increasing effective communication, good relations and cooperation between the school and home or parents. Parents and teachers work together to share ideas, skills and resources to improve and increase the effectiveness of children's education (Shah, 2001).

Drawing upon critical theory, participation can be described in terms of critical activities or those things parents do when they carefully examine, constructively question, support and influence practices and policies of schools for the benefit of children's academic education. Barton and Drake (2002) and Barton et al. (2004) claim that this kind of parental involvement challenges the parents when it comes to activities that are prescribed by the policies such as attendance at parent-teacher meetings. This kind of action positions parents as framers of school structures rather than receivers (Civil, Andrade & Anhalt, 2000). This study focuses on parents' active participation in which schools and parents together create and maintain means for parents' involvement in the curriculum and support teachers in their daily task of teaching. Simultaneously, teachers provide either home-based or school-based education to parents in order to empower them for the responsibility of reinforcing school learning.

1.5.1.7 Presence

The presence of parents enables them to observe children and their teachers, mediate problems as they arise, extend their own learning in order to help their children seek help when needed, and keep the entire system in control. This notion has been drawn from Spillane, Diamond, Walker, Halverson and Jita's (2001) explanation of parents' presence. Involvement as a presence means that parents become a part of the fabric of the school. This kind of involvement is what Hornby refers to as '*collaborative working relationships*' as parents and teachers listen to each other, give due

consideration to each other's views, and share control in order to provide the optimum education for children (Hornby, 2000: 20).

1.5.1.8 Relationship

Parental involvement goes beyond parents and their participation in events. It includes ecologies (whole system – parents in relation to their environments) (Barton et al., 2004). The context that surrounds parents' decisions to participate in their children's education, including their productive relationship with other individuals and resources, makes parental involvement a relation process. Productive relationship refers to a respectful, empathetic, genuine, open and honest relationship that values parents' opinions and considers their requests, needs and wishes (Hornby, 2000). Bloom's (1997) understanding of relationship refers to mutually beneficial and an ongoing involvement and shared responsibility between schools and parents that is designed to enhance learners' education (Bloom, 1997). Franklin and Streeter (1995) interpret the concept of relationship as schools and families or parents working together with the aim of developing initiatives that improve learners' learning. Phelps' description of relationship includes “*support, open communication, common goals, compromise and partnership between parents, community and schools*” (Phelps, 1999: 2). I share the same understanding of the concept relationship as the connections, interactions and activities happening between the school and families and as a thrust toward dismantling the disconnections between them to directly or indirectly support and promote the learners' development and growth. Schools and parents should share the responsibility of educating learners together.

1.5.1.9 Co-operation

The idea of co-operation refers to the practice of combined effort, collaboration, unity and teamwork by parents and schools on issues concerning augmenting children's learning and development. Smith et al. (1997) explain cooperation as when home, school and community combine their efforts and agreed to work together to develop initiatives that will improve education for the benefit of children. Haggis (1991) equates cooperation with a close link between school, home and the wider community to provide a solution to potential cultural clashes between school, home and community.

This study focuses on the cooperation, which implies the importance of profitable education. According to the current trends in education, profitable education emphasises a move from individualistic education towards interdependence and mutuality between schools and families. This

shift in thinking about education is supported by an affirmation of values such as cooperation and collaboration. Therefore, policy makers should espouse cooperative education in schools so that teachers and families work together to achieve shared goals of learners' learning and maximise children's academic success.

1.5.1.10 Support

Crowson's and Boyd's definition of support maintains that, "*support is a term long used by educators to describe the responsibilities of parents and of the community if schools are to do their jobs effectively*" (Crowson & Boyd, 1998: 884). Therefore, schools should make sure that procedures are in place to meet parents' needs and to make sure that parents' potential contributions are being fully utilised. It is the schools' responsibility to provide parents with opportunities to receive guidance whenever they need it about their children and the problems, which concern them.

1.5.1.11 Rural

The Population and Housing Census Report A in Namibia (1991) describes rural localities as remote areas/regions excluded from urban classification of the 1981 population census. A rural area is a place where most of the people make a living from pastoral and/or agricultural productions (The Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder, 1993). The remote area focused on by this study is a region consisting of many villages where most of the inhabitants make their living from agricultural production, and a few small towns in northern Namibia where modern facilities such as libraries, electricity, running water, television, cellular phone network reception, telephones and post offices are either nonexistent or insufficient.

1.5.1.12 Professional educator

The quantitative results of this study show that all principals and teachers who responded to the questionnaire were professionally trained as teachers. Moreover, the analysis of the quantitative data established internal consistency and similarity between principals' and teachers' responses. Therefore, I found it appropriate to refer to them together as professional educators.

1.5.1.13 Parent

The concept of parent in this study is used as a generic term encompassing biological and/or non-biological parents, guardians and all family members actively involved in a child's learning.

1.5.2 Theoretical framework underpinning the investigation

The theoretical framework of this research is positioned within Namibia's policy for Educational Reform and Development that advances a generative critique of educational process and a growing appreciation of contextualisation and ecological settings (MEC, 1993). The interest in this research is to understand how rural lower primary schools in Namibia involve parents in the academic education of learners.

Critical theory claims that an individual's thoughts and behaviours are the product of society, hence knowledge, skills and values of all stakeholders in children's education should be respected (Leonardo, 2004). Jansen (1998) supports this trend as he argues that critical analysis of educational practice should not exclude indigenous ways of supporting learning of the formal school curriculum.

Research done in some African countries (Heneveld & Craig, 1996) found that parents are only involved as resources going into education, e.g. unskilled labour (such as improving and maintaining schools' physical facilities) and school funds rather than as a mechanism for creating and maintaining partnerships for learners' academic learning. The negative attitude shown by research towards some parents as potential learning resources is a subject to be constructively criticised as follows. According to critical theory, there is no absolute fixed knowledge that people can grasp. It is subject to change by continuous research. Therefore, appreciation and understanding of the learning potential from the multi-directionality of family-school relationships and positive school-parent interdependence is a paradigm that needs to be explored intensively.

The ecological belief that children's learning does not exclude the influence of social interaction is tantamount to accepting that development of children's learning of the formal curriculum becomes absurd if it disregards the home-school interconnected and supportive role. The framework of critical theory in support of ecological theory strongly posits the establishment of strong and beneficial relationships between family members and schools, empowerment of parents, and through these the enhancement of children's learning, achievement and wellbeing.

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

According to Delpont (2005), Punch (2005) and Creswell (2003), research design refers to a research structure that shows the different parts of research, how they connect with each other and in what sequence. Moreover, Fouche and De Vos (2005) claim that research methodology indicates the procedure to be followed for data collection and analysis, and reporting of the findings. Therefore, drawing upon the literature reviewed, the design and methodology of this study denotes a decision made about the overall type design to use, sampling, data sources, what data, how data were collected, what structure the data have and how they were analysed.

The design of this study is a Mixed Methodology type operates on two sequentially conducted phases in its overall process: Phase 1 uses quantitative (survey) research and Phase 2 uses qualitative (interview) research strategies for data collection.

1.6.1 Data collection strategies

This study used a variety of data collection strategies including surveys of the perceptions of professional educators, interviews with professional educators and parents, and the review of literature. Multiple sources of data increase the reliability of the findings. Moreover, the data were triangulated across perspectives (theory triangulation) to overcome some of the limitations. Stake (2000) defines triangulation as *“a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation, and clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen”* (Stake, 2000: 443). Evidences from the data and from the literature supported understanding and explanation in argument (Babbie & Mouton, 2002; Janesick, 2000).

1.6.2 Data analysis

The analysis of the entire data of the study is characterised by the collection and analysis of quantitative data (Phase 1) followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data (Phase 2).

1.6.2.1 Analysis of Phase 1 data: quantitative study

After the data were collected, they were coded and captured in the Excel program. SAS v8.2 was used for analysis. To start the analysis process with an error-free data, the data file was checked for

errors. Descriptive statistics described the characteristics of the sample. The meaning of the data was sought through frequency analysis. The calculation of total parental involvement per school was done to identify schools for Phase 2 of the study. Six schools were identified for Phase 2.

1.6.2.2 Analysis of Phase 2 data: qualitative study

Qualitative data analysis in this study means transforming, interpreting and making sense of interview data thus depending on ‘analytic induction’ which means that categories, themes and patterns come from the data (Punch, 2005; Janesick, 2000). On the basis of this premise, the analysis process of data at this phase level of the study emerged and was being done concurrently with data collection. Creswell (2003) and Neuman (2003) found out that the simultaneous activities of collecting and analysing data are due to the iterative thinking process of a qualitative researcher.

Although the two activities (data collection and data analysis) were conducted concurrently, the emphasis was greater on collection at first and greater on analysis as the process continued. Operations such as data transcription, coding, identification of themes and developing categories, unfolding and incorporating theory and writing a report (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005) were considered. The procedures followed were reading, coding and memoing. However, I was not rigidly confined to one procedure at a time or to undertaking them in any particular order. Rather, I moved from a reading to a close coding to writing intensive analyses and then back again (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005; Punch, 2005). Punch (2005) and Janesick (2000) argue that there is no single right or best system (way) to do qualitative data analysis. The ultimate decision about data analysis resides with the researcher.

1.6.3 Research population and sampling

This section of the study presents the evidence of parental involvement practice in all lower primary schools in the Ohangwena Region, which was sampled from the four northern regions in Namibia. Punch (2005) defends the idea behind sampling as he states that researchers select samples and collect data only from the sample because they (researchers) cannot study the whole population. Punch clearly contends that “no study can include everything: you cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything” (Punch, 2005: 187).

1.6.3.1 Sampling for Phase 1 of the study

There are 764 lower primary schools in rural northern Namibia. The area is divided in four regions. Omusati has 258 lower primary schools, Ohangwena has 205, Oshana has 134 and Oshikoto has 167. Ohangwena Region (with 205 lower primary schools) was found dialectically most amenable, and sufficient to be studied on behalf of all the four regions in rural northern Namibia. At Phase 1 of the study, all lower primary schools (n = 205) in Ohangwena Region were surveyed.

1.6.3.2 Sampling for Phase 2 of the study

After the analysis of the all schools' survey in Phase 1, six schools (two high, two intermediate and two low parental involvement schools) were chosen for in-depth study. For each school, a principal, two lower primary teachers and two parents were interviewed. The total number of interview participants per school was five and from all six schools was 30.

1.7 CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE STUDY

1.7.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues refer to conducting research that benefits participants in positive ways. Piper and Simons (2005: 56) explain an ethical act as "*doing no harm*" to research participants. Ethical issues in this research stems from how I acted toward human subjects, indicates the appropriateness of the methodology for the current research and highlights the moral dilemmas I encountered in this study. Ethical issues considered in this study were:

Informed Consent – the purpose of the research was explained to those interviewed. A cover letter requesting participants' consent (See Appendix A for a consent form for professional educators and parents) and explaining the purpose and value of the study was sent with questionnaires to the principals of all lower primary schools in Ohangwena Region. All participants were notified of how the information they contributed was going to be utilised (Creswell, 2003). Principals were asked to complete one questionnaire and give one copy of a questionnaire to one of the lower primary teachers (grade 1-3) at their schools to complete. It is in the Research's Code of Ethics that participants must agree voluntarily to participate without physical or psychological coercion, and their agreement must be based on full and open information (Christians, 2000). The Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Education had notified the Regional Directors about this study. The Regional Directors had notified school Inspectors (See Appendix B for permission letter from the regional director). School Inspectors had notified schools. School principals and teachers were

asked to sign consent letter to verify their willingness to participate in the study. Parents were asked orally to give their consent for participating in the study. The consent form states clearly that participation was voluntary (see Appendix A: Consent form for professional educators and parents).

Confidentiality and Anonymity – during the data collection process, interviewees were informed of their right not only to talk in confidence, but also to refuse to allow publication of any material that they think might harm them in any way. In the same vein, participants were assured of the protection of privacy and anonymity of individuals in reporting. I tried to remove from the research records any element that might indicate the participants' identities. I changed participants and schools' real names to pseudonyms and letter numbers respectively when reporting data. One dilemma faced when it comes to anonymity was when an interviewee indicated a wish to be acknowledged in the report for his outstanding individual contribution (his own perception) to the operationalisation of the phenomenon under study. For example, during our informal discussion (after the interview) with parent Weyulu of School A, he mentioned that sharing information (by mentioning names) about how parents can contribute to the strategies for encouraging learners to work hard in schools might serve as a good example to other parents. That parent referred to a floating trophy he gave to the school. I explained to that parent that it would be impossible to identify his name because it would reveal the identity of the school and eventually the identity of the principal of that particular school. Interviewees were granted a freedom of choice for their responses to be tape-recorded or not. This served as declaration that those participants' rights were protected.

Accuracy of data transcription was checked and the transcribed data were edited before analysis was done. Falsification of data was avoided by reporting exact findings that emerged from the study. Simple and easy language has been used for writing a report on the findings. The report includes the detailed procedure followed to arrive at the description of the study's findings.

Prepublication access - I wanted to adhere to the principle of respect for persons by giving all participants the opportunity to read a research report before it went public. Prepublication access offers an opportunity for the participants to comment upon and possibly add to the report, and it demonstrates greater respect for potential difference of interpretation and the right to a fair voice (Piper & Simons, 2005). Unfortunately, due to the participants' inability to read and/or write (parents) as well as clearly understand (lower primary teachers and principals) the English language, this was not an easy thing to do. Once analysed, the data are kept for a reasonable period

then will be discarded. The data will not be shared with individuals who have not participated in the study.

1.7.2 Delimitations

The study was restricted to lower primary schools in northern Namibia in one region, Ohangwena. Janesick (2000) suggests for researchers to select sites and develop rationales for the choice of these sites. Based on this suggestion, the Ohangwena Region was purposefully chosen because the language spoken in that region is my Mother Tongue. Therefore, I understand the language spoken in that region very well (Schurink, 2000) and would not have to use interpreters. This fluency and understanding of the language as a researcher afforded me the benefits of clear communication and understanding of the responses of the research participants. Moreover, clear communication ensures accurate understanding, analysis and interpretation of data. An English-based interview would be an impediment to clear communication (Mertens, 2003). *“Becoming immersed in a study requires passion: passion for people, passion for communication, and passion for understanding people”* (Janesick, 2000: 393). Parents can often make other contributions directly related to their children’s education. However, the decision to focus this study on involvement of parents in academic education was because most of parent contributions indicated in the literature seem to neglect mechanisms to bring school and parents together for learners’ academic education. Moreover, little explicit attention is given to involving parents as learning resources people.

1.7.3 Limitations

The study was limited to the professional educators who were either principals of schools with lower primary phases and/or teachers for lower primary grades (Grades 1-3), and parents constrained by geographic boundaries of the school neighbourhood. The study did not include learners’ views due to their level of development. The study focused on the input (practice of parental involvement by schools and support of parents for academic activities) required to produce desired output (increased academic learning and achievement). However, this study did not look at the output, learners’ academic achievement.

The study’s reliance on a questionnaire results alone to identify schools with high, intermediate and low parental involvement could also be a potential limitation of this study. Low return rate of the questionnaire due to participants’ unfamiliarity with the culture of research and negative attitude

towards private research (see Section 5.6 for inspectors' personal observations) limited the collection of broad perspectives.

Finally, this study had to be completed within a settled time limit, which reduced the magnitude of the study. A longitudinal study to do direct observations of involvement would add depth to the study's results.

1.8 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The report of this study is organised into five chapters. Each of the chapters deals with a specific aspect of the investigation. They are briefly explained below.

Chapter One is the introduction chapter. Its purpose is to give the motivation for the study, present a brief background on which the study is cemented, and clarify the problem that instigated the study. The same chapter also states the research purpose, aim, questions, and objectives. This chapter further introduces the theoretical and conceptual framework that has informed the study. The chapter briefly describes the sampling procedure, limitations of the study, defines basic concepts and clarifies aspects to be considered as part of ethics. The chapter ends by demarcating the remainder of the research report.

Chapter Two presents the main findings, arguments and conclusions of relevant literature reviewed. It mainly deals with the explication of parental involvement and its educational implications. The foundation for this educational approach is also considered. The same chapter concerns itself with the general background of the conceptual and theoretical framework that has informed the phenomenon under study, parental involvement. Indicators as well as challenges and common barriers associated with parental involvement in rural areas are described in this chapter. This chapter concludes with critical analysis of other empirical researchers' findings and presents the silence in the existing knowledge base, which justifies the inquiry.

Chapter Three presents the research design and methodology of this study. The chapter shows how the quantitatively focused research questions of this study were addressed. Sample design, sampling techniques and criteria used in the choice of sample size are explained. Full details of data collection techniques, procedures used for data gathering and analysis as well as settings of data gathering, are all explained in this chapter. It concludes with the summary of main ideas discussed in this section.

Chapter Four discusses the use of qualitative methodology in Phase 2 of this study. The chapter presents the data collected through interviews to investigate the processes and strategies used in the six identified lower primary schools in the Ohangwena Region to implement parental involvement in academic education of learners. The findings are interpreted, summarised and presented in descriptive-narrative form.

Chapter Five is the concluding chapter that presents the end product of what has been studied. It presents threads of both Phase 1 and Phase 2's main results and findings respectively, shows how the results confirm or deviate from the study's expectations, recommends and offers suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

THE FOUNDATIONS AND APPLICATIONS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The review of literature for this study has been done before and during planning, and it is continuing throughout the process. The purpose of reviewing literature on a continuous basis is for the literature to become a fruitful source of input to the whole research process (Punch, 2005). Reviewing literature enables me to gain further insight in the phenomenon under study (parental involvement) (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) and places my study within the conceptual and theoretical context of the general body of scientific knowledge (Punch, 2005). Identification of major relevant constructs and the appropriate measurement instruments of the study were determined by the review of literature (William, 1999). Literature review empowers me to be able to challenge the previously accepted ideas (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

Therefore, Chapter 2 of this study presents a critical review of the theoretical and empirical literature on parental involvement in education in order to justify my particular inquiry. The meaning of parental involvement is given and a model that identifies the indicators of parental support based on extensive review of literature is provided. Simultaneously the promising theories that influence a generic notion of parental involvement and the findings of empirical studies on the importance of parental involvement in education related to activities in schools are also presented. The chapter indicates the foundations behind the development of the parental involvement approach and challenges of this practice in rural schools and among rural families, and ends with the explanations of the gap found in the literature to be filled by the results of this study.

To explore the practice of parental involvement in children's education, I reviewed specifically research studies and resources (theoretical and empirical) relating to parental involvement. Some of them are Faughnan, 2005; Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005; Kakli, Kreider & Ross, 2005; Barton et al., 2004; Kantor & Lowe, 2004; Stern, 2003; Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Wright & Stegelin, 2003; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Epstein, 2002; Sanders, 2002; Cooper & Gandara, 2001; Lindsay, 2001; Holmes, 1998; Heneveld & Craig, 1996.

The purpose is to uncover what research says about the importance of parental involvement, how to implement effective parental involvement practices, how schools can involve the low-income population of parents, common barriers associated with parental involvement especially in rural schools, and what schools can do in general to overcome those challenges. In this literature, parental involvement is multi-dimensional, ranging from parents directly helping with homework to parents establishing high expectations for their children's learning in schools. The literature reviewed includes sources on quantitative and qualitative research designs (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005; Punch, 2005; De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2005; Creswell, 2003; Neuman, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

2.2 EXPOSITION OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parental involvement is an integrative kind of thinking and approach to school improvement now emerging from education systems especially with respect to learners' learning. Its rationale is rooted in the belief that in order for schools to educate all youth effectively, parents and families should become fully involved in the process of educating learners (Sanders & Epstein, 1998; Fullan, 1998; MEC, 1993). Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004) and MEC (1993) view parental involvement as an important way to improve the quality of education, and the way to facilitate access to progression within education.

Kantor and Lowe (2004: 6) define quality education as "*a strong academic curriculum taught by engaged, engaging (sic) and well-educated teachers in schools committed to the promotion of intellectual development*". However, Kaplinski (1992) and Rothstein (2005) argue that no matter how qualified, competent and professional teachers are, how good the curriculum and how caring the school may be, families still carry the major responsibility in contributing to their children's education.

Currently, education policies articulate the realisation of what education systems cannot possibly achieve if schools alone are seen as responsible for learners' learning. Policies in education stimulate new field-level thinking about what it takes to educate children for the 21st century. 'It takes a village to educate a child' (Brown, 2001). In practice the notion of this African proverb means bringing together all complementary learning supports, including family support and family involvement, to promote children's learning and contribute to their school success. The concept of complementary learning supports forms a framework for aligning multiple resources and building on their strengths for a more effective way to improve children's learning (Rothstein, 2005). In

addition, Kakli, Kreider and Ross (2005), Maynard and Howley (1997) and Olsen et al. (1994) identify important statements about parental involvement. They purport that parents have a right to democratic participation in their children's school, successful schools have parents who are involved, successful learners in schools have parents who are involved, and schooling improves when a variety of adults share their talents and model successful strategies of life management.

Education of children is a joint endeavour between home and school. Parents' involvement strengthens this bond of partnership (Faughnan, 2005; Kaplinski, 1992). Parental involvement is seen as a productive relationship between home and the educational setting in which the practitioners are responsible for involving parents in the work that they do for educational reasons. It should rather be regarded as a meaningful, respectful and authentic relationship schools and families co-constructed with genuine enthusiasm, and implies responsibility, sharing and balance of power over educational activities between parents and school to prevent practitioners from considering their own value positions and those embodied by the curriculum they are operating. Edwards and Knight (1994: 111) accede and thus reason that the importance of this relationship should not be simplified and "*seen as a bridge for the child between home and school in order to ease the transition into schools*". Therefore, parental involvement should not be used as a system to release teachers from mundane work, or as a grudging obedience to policies (Stern, 2003). It rather should serve as the best means schools can use to convey a sense of parental rights and responsibilities within the school to parents and establish a set of expectations of parents as partners.

The philosophy of educational reform purports that improvement in public education happens only when there is improvement in society (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999), because schools are part of society. Educational reform suggests that teachers need to draw on the outside world, including the world of learners' families, tapping into knowledge and skills of parents. Stern (2003: 37) further argues that

"the teaching profession should be an ecological profession, connected to what is happening locally, nationally and globally. Parents are really part of those contexts, and their knowledge and understanding of, and interest in local, national and global issues must be made use of in classrooms."

These ideas imply that parents and teachers might be equal partners in the education of young children.

2.3 CRITICAL AND ECO-SYSTEMIC THEORIES AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

A generic notion of parental involvement is influenced by critical theory. Critical theory claims that our thoughts and behaviours are the product of society. According to Higgs and Smith (2002:86) “...*the first society we know is the family, and a little later, the school.*” Smith et al. (1997) argue that families do not exist out of context not in a vacuum, but interact with their surroundings, i.e. within the community. Therefore, an ecological approach to parental involvement provides a conceptual framework that acknowledges that families and schools are embedded in communities.

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child must be what the society wants for all of its children. Concurring with this notion, Stein and Thorkildsen (1999) contend that improvements in public education can happen only when there are improvements in society. This indicates how the child’s world is viewed as a series of nested structures. Therefore, the framework of this study draws upon ecological theory that regards both family and school as valuable contributors to children’s learning, both at home and at school. This study’s framework also draws upon critical theory’s criticism of traditional parental involvement, which claims that schools tend to maintain the ideals and beliefs of a capitalist culture, positioning the space (activities), capital (knowledge), resources and cultures of poor families as subordinate (Creswell, 2003; Villenas & Dehyle, 1999). The capitalist culture has a long-held assumption about parental involvement that parents especially from rural contexts and poor backgrounds lack the knowledge, skills, and network of resources to know how to enter into the kinds of conversations and activities that make a difference in educational development of their children (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Hammond, 2001; Villenas & Dehyle, 1999). Such beliefs are positioned as central processes in inhibiting quality education especially to children among parents with poor socio-economic status. Nevertheless, the critical or liberatory education theory (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000) encourages intellectual engagement with such form of oppressive belief. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) affirm that a critical social theory is concerned with reformation, issues of justice, and the ways the matters of class, ideologies, education and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system. This study is compatible with Critical Theory because it partly aims at generating knowledge that breaks down the constructed belief that emanates from political domains and reproduces oppressive ideologies (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004) in this study’s context that parental involvement is difficult to practice in rural contexts.

The critical educational paradigm claims that positivist and interpretive paradigms present incomplete accounts of social behaviour as they neglect the political and ideological contexts of much educational research. Critical theorists would argue that positivists and interpretivists are technicians who seek to understand and accept existing research knowledge rather than question the interest and legitimacy of the knowledge. It is the critical theorists' caution against produced and general accepted knowledge to be handled with care because, they (critical theorists) reason that knowledge can have the agenda of keeping the empowered in their empowered position and the disempowered in their powerless positions, meaning reinforcing and perpetuating the status quo (Leonardo, 2004).

In this enterprise, critical theory identifies the 'false' or 'fragmented' consciousness that has brought an individual or a social group to relative powerlessness, and it questions the legitimacy of this. Critical theory argues that much behaviour/research knowledge is the outcome of particular illegitimate, dominators and repressive factors (Freire in Leonardo, 2004). Hence, critical theory seeks to uncover the interests at work in particular situations and to interrogate the legitimacy of those interests – identifying the extent to which they are legitimate in their service of equality and democracy (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

Through ideology critique methodology, this study intended to uncover the vested interests in accepted and generalised knowledge that parental involvement is difficult to implement in rural schools. Through ideology critique, the study would reveal to rural schools that compatible processes and activities schools can perpetuate and keep themselves empowered in working with parents for learners' academic learning. Ideology critique hoped to reveal situations, which might be other than those taken for granted as natural (Leonardo, 2004; Creswell, 1998). The claimed situations in rural schools are not natural, but they are the outcomes or processes wherein interests and powers are protected (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000), and one task of ideology critique methodology in the current study was to expose this. Rural schools need to become aware of how the assumptions of existing research orientations might be ideological distortions that, in their effects, are perpetuating a social situation that works against teachers and parents democratic empowerment (Creswell, 1998).

Although the end goal of this study might be the desire to comprehend the underlying orders of social life, its design intended to change how people think, encourage professionals in schools and parents to interact and form networks for the benefit of effective education of learners, and help teachers and parents to examine the conditions of their existence.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1986) the eco-system theory emphasises the meaning of each factor contributing to human learning and development. Therefore, factors such as process, person, context, and time are the main concern of eco-systemic perspective. The following paragraphs explain the three mentioned factors:

Process refers to mechanisms of human development, which in this study's context include parent support for learners' learning. The need to consider mechanisms for the learning process and the learning environment was based on Halverson's (2001) argument that not inquiring into the process may result in loss of valuable information. Through the eco-systemic perspective, a person is inseparable from his/her environment and the environment can explain his/her behaviour. Time refers to the historical period of learning and development. Context means the environment that influences learners' learning and development (Halverson, 2001). According to the eco-systemic perspective, context has the most important meaning for development and it includes four levels of structural environment: micro-system, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

The micro-system is a face-to-face/ classroom and/or family setting in which the learner experience a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations. The meso-system is a relationship between the parents and teachers. The exo-system is a linkage between parents and/or their working place and the community. The macro-system is the linkage between the community (in which parents, teachers and learners are consisted) and its value systems. The context factor of the eco-system was dealt with most in this study. Therefore, the eco-systemic perspective influenced this research. Moreover, examining environmentally related issues with Bronfenbrenner's level systems facilitated the development of systemic ideas about processes of parental involvement, which encourage learners' learning.

Researchers have revisited the perceived deficits in the home environment based on a set of assumptions about the supremacy of middle-class attitudes and values. The critical and postmodernism theories claim that there is no absolute knowledge that people can grasp. It is the interpretive constructivists' stance that no one perspective is any truer than any other perspective (Mertens, 2003). All people experiences are opinions and according to the interpretivists, all theory is revisable (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). The critical and postmodernism theories encourage human beings to become free of all forms of oppressive ideas. Hence, this study challenges other researchers' findings, which conclude that parental involvement is difficult to

implement in rural schools and its practices are more likely to take root in schools that serve urban populations than in schools that serve rural and low-income populations. Creswell (2003) presents a view that conventional studies have suppressed members of oppressed and marginalised groups. In addition, this oppression remains if disadvantaged people accept their social status as natural, inevitable and inviolable. Moreover, the literature reviewed indicates that the social scientists from developed countries view African origin families as pathological and incapable of preparing their children for school. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) argue that privileged groups often express ideological hegemony that cannot be separated from the production of ideology that produce consent to the status quo and individuals' particular places within it.

The privileged groups' view is against the transformative emancipatory paradigm in general and the Freirian approach in particular. The Freirian approach is characterised by an educational philosophy of pedagogy for progressive and democratic schools. People's education and pedagogy of democracy include aspirations, knowledge, skills and values of all stakeholders (irrespective of race, social class, gender, etc.) in which all parents from all different backgrounds are covered (Freire, 1993; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; Higgs & Smith, 2002). Therefore, Jansen's (1998:132) thinking is in line with the liberation argument as he reasons that: "*The critical analysis of education practice is one of the strands in the critical theory and should incorporate indigenous ways of supporting learning the formal school curriculum.*" The liberation argument of critical theory is based on the belief that the way we think, reason and argue comes from our social contexts (Higgs & Smith, 2002).

According to the reviewed literature, it is the assumption of ecological theory that one's own personal experiences, along with those of one's neighbours, contribute to perceptions of education and opportunity (Smith et al., 1997). This assumption implies that together the members of neighbourhood (i.e. families and teachers) form a collection of people encouraging educational endeavours. Hence, critical, postmodernism and ecological theories value the importance of involving parents and abilities of all parents to contribute towards learners' education. Schools as venues of hope could become sites of resistance to the oppressive ideas by working within a liberatory pedagogical framework and create democratic possibilities of involvement for all stakeholders in education of children. These theories (Critical, Postmodernism, Ecological and Ecosystemic) share the same view that parents bring many meanings, which need to be assimilated into school curriculum (Higgs & Smith, 2002).

Learning cannot occur in a vacuum state. Rather, it does always in its context. Therefore, it was found necessary to study the contextual mechanism (i.e. support of parents) that nurtures learners' learning. The role of parents or how schools facilitate parental involvement at the micro-system, meso-system and exo-system level would be the most basic context of children's learning because, they are the nearest and the most familiar environments to them. If schools allow and facilitate involvement of parents at the aforementioned levels, it would influence children's academic learning and achievement. In order to understand what the focus of this study had been, the following paragraphs present the conceptualisation of parental involvement.

According to Punch (2005) a conceptual framework shows the conceptual status of the factors and variables or phenomenon researchers usually study in a diagram or narrative form. The phenomenon under this study is parental involvement in academic education of learners. Therefore, this study intends to (a) investigate whether and, if so, how, the processes used to involve parents in learners' academic education and growth and (b) understand and identify the activities and processes of parental involvement in learners' academic education and growth that are contextually appropriate and compatible with rural conditions in Namibia's lower primary schools. The quest for understanding how parental involvement is practiced in rural contexts was enhanced by a comprehensive review of research study findings on the implementation of parental involvement in schools to support children's education done in other African countries as well as other countries outside Africa. Although the literature presents compelling evidence of positive correlation between family/parent involvement in education and increase in learners' learning and achievement, it also further indicates a strong relationship between poor involvement and parents' socio-economic background. There is no indication of whether attempts were made to find out how parental involvement can be improved and sustained in relation to the rural contexts. Information on how to ensure the practice of parental involvement that specifically improves and promotes learning in academic subjects in rural schools is frequently lacking.

The focus of this study is based on an argument proposed by Heller, Holtzman, and Messick (1982) in Harry, Sturges & Klingner, (2005), who argue that an understanding of the issue must be based on a thorough analysis of the process through which the phenomenon occur, because inappropriate practice casts doubt on the validity of the outcomes (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005). In accordance, Wright and Steglin (2003), Maynard and Howley (1997) and Anderson et al. (1994) feel that contexts are unique. Therefore appropriate practices of parental involvement are context bound. Maynard and Howley further stress that approaches used to study parental involvement processes that produced negative results in rural areas by other researchers were not done with rural

contexts in mind. Against this background, I have a sincere desire, and am curious to explore and critically analyse the issue of parental involvement for supporting learners' academic education in one region of the northern Namibia. The concept, academic education, could be understood as parents and teachers scholastic support for learners aimed at enhancing learners' understanding of school curriculum and instruction and consequently boosting their performance (Barton et al., 2004; Hornby, 2000). Ecological theorists believe that parents have time, ability, skills, knowledge and special talents to act as resources and provide support to schools' curriculum. (Sanders, 2001; Hornby, 2000; Smith et al., 1997). Therefore, involvement focused by this study should be clarified as rural lower primary schools' ways of making optimum use of parents as valuable resources for promoting academic performance of learners.

The conceptual framework of this study makes the understanding that I am using in my thinking about explicit involvement (see Table 2.1). My understanding of involvement is based on ecological theory's belief that the child's world is an interrelatedness of a series of nested environmental systems or resources, such as families, schools, churches, peers, governments and the broader culture, to mention a few, which influence each other and within which a child learns and develops (Barton et al., 2004). Therefore, series of nested structures are regarded as valuable contributors to children's learning. In many ecological studies (Epstein et al., 2002; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Hornby, 2000; Smith et al., 1997) factors such as parents, family and schools' attitudes, schools practices and school climate are all regarded as ecological contributors to involvement. These involvement factors result in children's higher educational aspirations, greater perceived competencies and evidence of higher academic achievement.

Wright and Steglin (2003) honour more than one resource from which children learn and with respect to the linkages between these resources, this theoretical orientation reflects a complementary-learning approach. I concur with Wright and Steglin (2003) as I conceptualise involvement as the issue that is influenced by social ecology and ecological systems theory. The ecological systems theory serves as an appropriate framework to position, justify and support this study on home-school relationship (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005).

2.4 CULTURAL CAPITAL: A DETERMINANT OF INVOLVEMENT

Research findings reviewed reveal that the impact of parental involvement on learners' academic performance overall is significant among children from all demographic backgrounds and income groups (Grenfell & James 1998), because parents across social classes highly value education.

However, some studies suggest that parental involvement has more beneficial effects among learners from families of high socio-economic status than learners from families of low socio-economic status. Lee and Bowen (2006) reason that, the cultural capital, which is possessed by high socio-economic parents magnifies the effects of their involvement in children's academic performance at school. Cultural capital involves a collection of individual cultural dispositions and makes them procuring additional capital that benefits their family members in the education system. In the context of parental involvement, cultural capital of parents in terms of their children's education represents the power to promote their children's academic enhancement (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

While I acknowledge the theory that states that moderated habitus of low socio-economic parents results in their less cultural capital and thus in attenuated involvement (Bourdieu's theory in Lee & Bowen, 2006; Lareau, 2001). I lend support to other researchers who claim that parents across different social classes have unique capital and thus highly value education of their children. Cultural factors have great impact on effective involvement. Therefore, cultural understanding and knowledge of a specific demographic background of the people to be studied should be seriously taken into consideration for better understanding of parental involvement in different contexts. This argument implies that rural parents may still be actively involved in one way or another in supporting school activities congruent with values and practices according to their contexts. Grenfell and James (1998) assert that parents from poor backgrounds need to make more extensive efforts to ensure their children's academic success.

Therefore, studies such as this one, that lead to greater understanding of the multiple types of involvement, which are congruent with lower primary schools situated in low demographic environments may contribute to rural lower primary schools' knowledge about how to use parent involvement efforts to increase the learners' academic performance.

2.5 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE PARENT-SCHOOL SYSTEM

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1986) Ecological Model of Contextual Influences on Children's Development, there are two central aspects of the meso-system: (1) connections among the adults in children's primary micro-systems (home and school), which are promoted when parents are

involved at school, and (2) congruence in behaviours, values, and attitudes across settings, which is conveyed when parents are supporting their children's education.

The description (Coleman, 1988) and application (Lareau, 2001) of concepts of social and cultural capital to the home-school meso-system helps to justify the contentions of the current study. The study's contention is that schools situated in low economic environments would exhibit unique types of parental involvement practice to enhance learners' academic performance. Therefore, rural schools' willingness to involve parents and rural parents' unique types of capital enable schools to involve parents in their children's academic education in their own way. Parents with low-income background may display different types of involvement due to unique cultures, contexts, financial resources, educational knowledge and experience.

Lareau (2001) presents Bourdieu's concept of social capital as actively maintained social relationships or networks that provide access to resources. However, Bourdieu finds inequality in the amounts of capital individuals (in this case, are parents) obtain from social networks due to the fit between their culture and the culture of the institution (school) (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Parents' cultural disposition or 'habits', which according to Brubaker (2004) and Lee and Bowen (2006) means individual characteristics that results from past experience of school makes them act and grasp experience in a certain way which either moderates or increases their involvement. For example, when parents' disposition is consistent with the field (school values and practice) and when the school culture is familiar to and understood by them, they are able to enjoy social advantage and thus obtain capital (Brubaker, 2004; Coleman, 1988). Therefore, social capital is a means by which parents can promote their children's school achievement and educational attainment through

- Visits to the school
- Interactions with other parents at school
- Attending parents meetings
- Providing attention to their children
- Engaging in volunteer activities
- Providing help with homework
- Discussing the child's schoolwork and experiences at school (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Brubaker, 2004; Lareau, 2001).

2.6 FOUNDATIONS FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The theoretical assumptions that comprise the foundation of parental involvement should be pursued under the banner of three major premises (Wright & Stegelin, 2003; Stern, 2003):

- The doctrine of parents' rights – parents have the right and responsibility to determine what is right in the best interest of their children ,
- The family influences on the child – the family is the child's first and most important educator. Family members know their children better than anyone else and therefore are the primary influences in their children's lives, and
- The democratic process – building relationships with families is part of a concerted effort to provide democratic and equal opportunities to all stakeholders in reaching their common goal which is to nurture and guide children to adulthood.

These premises constitute the foundation for providing accessibility, quality and equality of learning opportunities for all children of all races and social classes.

Moreover, the literature on parental involvement indicates that an appreciation and understanding of the learning potential in positive school-parent interdependence can be attributed to various causes such as:

- The school's realisation that the long-standing fragmentation of services between themselves and parents has damaged their effectiveness. If schools involve parents, children may experience advantages emotionally, cognitively and socially. Therefore, schools feel a need to encourage links with the families of children they teach.
- Parents and families' fight for the re-establishment of grassroots respect and power over their children's education.
- The thirst for an understanding of social influences on child development and a simplified view of the working-class environment as contexts, that were deficient and less effective in preparation of children for academic success.
- The attempts to address the perceived deficits in the home environment rested on a set of assumptions about the supremacy of middle-class attitudes and values

(Rothstein, 2005; Stern, 2003; Sanders, 2001; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; Waddock, 1995; Edwards & Knight, 1994; MEC, 1993)

Furthermore, the literature indicates that parental involvement started as an attempt to reverse the disconnections between schools, parents and family members in cooperation for supporting learner's education. Edwards and Knight's (1994) research indicates that in the 1980s there was an assumption that parents and educational practitioners are equal in the education of young children. This assumption made professionals feel that their status was undermined. As a reaction, parents decided to fight for their rights (Holmes, 1998). In addition, parental involvement can be attributed to the realisation of democracy in educational systems. This shift is based upon a belief that the schools' efforts to involve parents in supporting their children's education has a tremendous impact on children's attitude toward school, personal growth, and academic success (Epstein, 1995).

Parental involvement in learners' academic education can be seen from pedagogical, political and economic perspectives. From the pedagogical perspective, low achievement rate, especially among poor and marginalised children, has led educators to become more aware of the importance of parental involvement for learners' quality learning in the education process. From the political perspective, the spread of democratic systems of government in countries has sparked a dialogue about and policies to promote equal educational opportunities, and parental participation in children's education (Sanders & Epstein, 1998). Economists argue that education is too important and too all encompassing to be left only to government, school or parents. No organisation can do it by itself and complete this heavy undertaking without the support of other organisations. This means that neither state nor school alone can provide sufficient resources and support needed for learners to succeed in the larger society and to be competent citizens in the twenty-first century (Sanders, 2001; Waddock, 1995). The government, through schools, needs additional resources (parent collaboration) to successfully and effectively support children's education (Shore, 1994; Toffler & Toffler, 1995).

Critical theorists (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000: 283) claim that "*we are all empowered and we are all unempowered, in that we all possess abilities and we are all limited in the attempt to use our abilities*". Therefore, what the critical theorists are concerned with is establishment of democracy and empowerment of marginalised people. The political stance based on empowerment and capacity building regard parental involvement as an opportunity for a more democratic and participatory approach to school functioning that can revitalise and assist families, enhance learners' learning, achievement and well-being, and build stronger schools (Epstein et al., 2002). Parent representatives in school decision councils will make dramatic improvements in the school programs and lead to all kinds of social and economic advance (Sanders & Epstein, 1998). Critical theorists indulge themselves in the correction of ideologies that discourage marginalised

communities from engaging in the decisions that crucially affect theirs – and their children’s lives. From the pedagogical stance, if teachers and parents collaborate on curriculum related issues, it makes them communicate more easily and frequently, and provides opportunities to know understand and value each other better. Negative attitudes that teachers and families hold about each other becomes more positive (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). A central principle of the pedagogical stance is educational changes promise of improving learners learning, academic success, achievement and growth, attitude towards school and school attendance, self-image and social well-being (Hollzman, 1995; McKennan & Williams, 1998; Cooper & Gandara, 2001).

2.7 IMPORTANCE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004) allude that educational policy designers view community participation as a panacea for whatever is going wrong or missing in educational delivery. Parents, as part of community, send their children to schools with the expectation that they will get quality education. However, it is a common fact that throughout the world, schools endeavour to improve quality of education. Quality education is guaranteed if the endeavour becomes a shared responsibility through interaction between and among schools, families and the whole community (Shah, 2001; Hornby, 2000; Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Epstein et al., 2002). Epstein et al. (2002) debate that, if schools care about children, then they should also care about families. Caring about children is a joint venture between schools and families. If teachers view their learners as children, this means they accept the responsibility of sharing education of children with parents. Teachers cannot do their work without the support of families. Moreover, families need to know what is happening in schools in order to support schools. Epstein refers to this joint venture as “*overlapping spheres of influence*” (Epstein, 2002: 9).

Parent participation in the education of children is important in all communities, including low-income communities wherever parents feel a sense of exclusion, low self-esteem and/or hopelessness due to the attitudes of educators. Teachers should regard parents as a source of support for their work. After all, Stern (2003: 3) clarifies that involving parents is “*involving the people who have the responsibility and duty that teachers borrow.*” Morrow (1995) and Olsen et al. (1994) concur as they argue that parents know their children’s strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, parents are the child’s first and most important educators. Hornby (2000) affirms that the fact that parent involvement improves learners’ learning and performance is beyond dispute. Stein and Thorkildsen (1999) cite an unknown source who claims that teachers cannot really be child centred

unless they are family centred. In view of these arguments I concur with Edwards and Knight (1994), who caution professionals against the disrespect of this type of educational approach and admonish that parental involvement not to be made “*a vehicle for undermining the value systems of some social groups through implicit criticism of what these groups hold dear, whether dialect or craft skills*” (Edwards & Knight, 1994: 112). This warning supports a new understanding of social influences on child development and learners’ performance in schools, while refuting a simplified view of working-class environments as contexts that are deficient and less effective in the preparation of children for academic success (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999). The understanding of social influence implies that the learners’ background is considered to be a crucial factor that influences their performance, and the community, which comprises families, constitutes part of this background.

Parents are the first and most important models and teachers of their children (Morrow, 1995). They are the most stable and continuous force in the lives of children, and their involvement in schools provide a means for children to experience a continuous flow through the day, week, and year (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999). Children remain the central focus of parental involvement. Therefore, as an approach it aims to improve education in schools for children’s better learning. Parental involvement serves as one of the effective mechanisms for promoting personal and empowering experiences for the parents by involving them in decision-making bodies, classrooms, parent orientation activities and home activities with their children (Wright & Stegelin, 2003). The more the parents are involved, the more understanding and knowledgeable they become of the school programme and of the teachers’ role. Nevertheless, parental involvement’s main purpose at the school level is more to act as - and mobilise resources and support from all available sources to contribute and improve learners’ learning academic and performance and achievement (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999).

Parental involvement is a developmental process, which runs from parents as clients to parents as collaborators, and “*if the development of parents is an aim, it is desired with the educational needs of the child in mind*” (Edwards & Knight, 1994: 111). Singh, Mbokodi and Msila reason that, without collaborations between schools and communities, the rhetoric in schools about respect for cultural traditions in schools will be empty. In addition, learners will be marginalised by insensitive curricula, foreign to their traditions (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004). Moreover, school activities, which involve parents, make it more pleasant, productive, and secure for learners. Parents feel their varied expertise is recognised and used. They develop positive attitudes towards teachers and their teaching, and develop strong confidence in the school (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; Stern, 2003).

Parental presence and active participation in school activities enriches the curriculum and sends a strong message to the learners about the importance of schooling, safety, and punctuality. It creates an atmosphere of trust and co-operation, children become clearer about what is expected of them, develop higher aspirations, become more excited about learning and do better academic work (Sanders, 1996, November). Involvement improves parents' self-confidence and home support for education; increases parent-child interactions; and strengthens the relationship between school personnel and families (Wright & Stegelin, 2003; Maynard & Howley, 1997).

2.8 INDICATORS OF THE PRACTICE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Namibia's generic policy for Educational Reform and Development (Towards Education for All) provides a conceptual framework that promotes and presents an ecological approach to parental involvement. This policy emphasises the need of the multi-directionality of family, school and community relationships in support of the learners' learning.

In many ecological studies (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Epstein et al., 2002; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Hornby, 2000; Smith et al., 1997; Heneveld & Craig, 1996), the multi-directionality relationship is highlighted by family, teacher and school factors (approaches) and indicators (strategies) as the basic ways of congenial involvement. These factors influence learners' academic learning and partially determine the quality of primary education. The explanations about home and school approaches to parental involvement are as follows:

- Linking families to community resources: Schools can establish linkages between families and community resources for health care, child care, basic needs (clothing and nutrition) learning preparedness and academic assistance to free and empower the families to focus more on their efforts of education-related activities. Schools should make sure that arrangements of these services are in place because health disparities influence children's academic learning. Children who are in discomfort pay less attention than children who are not in discomfort. Children stay away from school and they do not learn if they are distracted by health problems, unsuitable clothing or malnutrition problems. Schools' attempts to link parents with resources in the community can be helpful in meeting needs within the families that might impede the healthy development of children and ensure that children are protected from these problems and stay on track in schools (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Heneveld & Craig, 1996).

- Parents provide financial and/ or material support: Parental involvement can be used as a resource to help supplement the government- restricted budgets (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Epstein et al., 2002; Heneveld & Craig, 1996; Kaplinski, 1992).
- Some staff members are made leaders in parental involvement: This refers to the school's system of having a teacher (or teachers), within the school that has the time, knowledge, skills and abilities to serve as the school's family broker and facilitates open, effective, frequent and multiple communication (oral and written) between school staff and parents.
- The use of various communication options: The use of frequent and multiple communication types with parents provides them with a wider choice of how to reach out to schools and teachers, makes parents feel comfortable with schools, gives parents a sense of efficacy and influence parents' perceptions of their children as learners (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Heneveld & Craig, 1996). The types of communication schools can use are oral- (such as telephone calls and face to face) and written communications (such as written notes and home – school diaries).
- Parents assist with classroom activities: Asking parents to participate as aides, assisting in the classrooms and in preparation of teaching- learning materials makes parents feel more positive toward the teacher and the school. The unfamiliar school culture becomes more familiar and the students' learning is enhanced by tapping into the knowledge and skills of parents and exploiting what parents are good at in curriculum areas (Stern, 2003; Heneveld & Craig, 1996). This approach also helps parents acquire knowledge, which is helpful to their understanding of their own children (Hornby, 2000). Parents get a sense of why there is a need to communicate the importance of doing well in school to their children.
- Parents involved in school policy formulation and school governance: Families should always be engaged in decision-making and policy formulations with respect to their children's care and education (Epstein et al., 2002; Heneveld & Craig, 1996). These researchers further affirm that policy- related information should be made available to parents.

- Parents' and teachers' perceptions and attitudes: Parents with positive perception of their own competency to foster academic success for their children, and their positive perception of teachers, school and education overall, are more likely to be involved. Parental beliefs in the value of education, overall, are associated with positive beliefs in the value of parental involvement in their child's schooling. Parents' positive perception is also indicated by parents' willingness to get involved in Parent-Teacher Organisations and getting involved in learners' discipline at school, not just in a power struggle between conflicting ideas (Wright & Stegelin, 2003). Teachers in schools should respect and value parents' contributions of any kind, establish free interaction between them and parents, and listen to parents' requests and critical comments about school functioning. According to Lee and Bowen (2006) and Warren (2005), these foster mutual trust and meaningful collaboration between schools, parents and other community members.
- Good relationships between the school and parents: Learning resources need to connect through deliberate and targeted strategies that focus on shared functions or common goals. This means finding meaningful ways for more learning resources such as school and families to connect so they work toward the same or complementary ends, ultimately improving one another's effectiveness (Weiss, 2005; Sigh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; Heneveld & Craig, 1996).
- Provision of educational and knowledge development opportunities: Schools should arrange knowledge development opportunities (such as parent education workshops (Hornby, 2000)) which might improve parents' ability and effectiveness to lead academic related activities, enrich the curriculum and maximise learning. Parents become aware that they are accountable to their children's education (Heneveld & Craig, 1996). Teachers should continually invite parents to contribute their expertise such as, sharing ideas in workshops and meetings, so that their abilities can be used to the fullest extent (Epstein et al., 2002; Shah, 2001). Since parent training might actually undermine parental participation, as parents may feel that the school perceives them as incompetent. There is a suggestion for a broader based ecological emphasis on consultation, which Sheridan (as cited in Smith et al., 1997) refers to as a conjoint model of consultation (Smith et al., 1997). This is a model in which parents and teachers become engaged in a collaborative process of active communication, joint problem solving, mutual support and recognition of overlapping roles (Smith et al., 1997). Ecological theory regards parent attitudes as a salient factor in parent

involvement. Therefore, programmes that provide parents with information about the importance of involvement and its impact on levels of achievement may be helpful.

- Consultation with teacher training programmes: Teachers whose training included information on parental involvement integrate practices to promote parental involvement and thus report partnerships that are more effective. Hence, consultations with those involved in teacher pre-service and in-service training should be done. Through consultations, teacher training programmes are advised to: provide teachers with more effective ways of communicating with parents and families; advise schools on involvement methods that are not too burdensome on teachers and parents; support teachers on developing home learning activities that foster parent involvement; and help teachers develop open views toward involving parents and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds.

Training and support based on these aims could help tool teachers for the task of improving parent involvement in schools.

- Positive school climate and leadership: Based upon a literature review (Smith et al, 1997; Hornby, 2000), positive school climates predict more positive attitudes toward involvement, more parent-reported opportunities for involvement from teachers, and fewer barriers to involvement in both home and school settings. Positive school climate is also associated with positive perceptions and proactive teacher efforts and strategies to encourage home-school partnership. Traits of positive school climate that can have positive impact on family involvement are safety, cleanliness, rewards, conducive learning atmosphere, range of activities offered, friendly and welcoming reception of visitors, and responsive leadership to parents' needs. (Smith et al., 1997).
- Critical but constructive questioning into school activities: Parental involvement in schools in some cases may cause conflicts between schools and parents. In these schools parents actually disagree with a school's practices and the vision from which they are derived. According to WCER (1995) this conflict may be necessary for the schools' health and vitality. It is a critical theory's stance that parents should critically but constructively question and influence schools' practices and policies for the benefit of children's academic education (Barton et al., 2004; Barton & Drake, 2002).

- Demographic information: Research suggests that background factors such as family income, parental education level, family structure (two-parent, stepparent, single parent, other), and education of teachers in relation to involvement, etc. are for the most part, indirectly related to parental involvement.

For the better understanding of parental involvement concept, Table 2.1 portrays the model of the approaches (Hornby, 2000) or factors (Heneveld & Craig, 1996) and indicators or strategies providing empirical representations of parents’ involvement in education of their children

TABLE 2.1: Model of the factors and their indicators describing parental

involvement (Adapted from Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Shah, 2001, Hornby, 2000; Smith et al., 1997; Heneveld & Craig, 1996)

Factors	Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking families to community resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are provided with opportunities for making them understand the importance of giving their children healthy food, appropriate clothes and protection from diseases. • Schools provide parents with information about parenting courses furnished by adult education centres • Schools refer parents for supportive counselling and the relevant services (e.g. social workers) within the community and outside the community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents provide financial and/or material support 	Parents’ contributions such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant monetary or in-kind (e.g. classroom building materials, food for teachers and learners, teaching aids) contributions beyond fees prescribed by government are evident • Significant labour for site preparation, building construction, and building materials and building maintenance is evident



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools invite parents to talk about their expectations, needs and possible contributions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open and frequent communication between school staff and parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools use a range of communication options (informal contacts, home visits, home-school diaries, parent-teacher meetings, telephone contacts, written notes, face-to-face talk) between teachers and parents• The principal and teachers visit learners' homes to facilitate home-school communication• Schools organise face-to-face discussions with parents about the level of their involvement at home so that parents are not pressured into commitments they cannot do or have time to do• Schools use individual parent-teacher meetings and/or visit homes to gather valuable information about learners' conditions and backgrounds (such as special needs, strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes (emotional, physical, intellectual etc.), relevant medical details and conditions, and family circumstances)• Schools use newsletters, handbooks and letters specifically aimed at parents to invite and/or inform them of the meetings• School-public events and parent-teacher meetings and conferences are frequent and of high quality



<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents assist with classroom activities /participate in academic learning related activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers ask parents to assist in teaching (as voluntary teacher aides) any curriculum area in which they have a special talent (e.g. culturally-specific knowledge)• Parents are made to support the idea of homework by cultivating the daily habit of having a time to do homework with children, and monitor it. This is done by the school organising a yearly homework meeting with parents as part of an annual review of homework policy• Schools ask parents to support teachers in preparation of teaching aids and classroom learning materials• Teachers invite parents to their classrooms to observe teaching in progress. In this way, parents serve as an audience for learners academic work
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents involved in school policy formulation and school governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Non-school board member parents are involved in the formulation of school policy by seeking feedback on school policy from all parents• School policies clearly specify parents' rights and responsibilities• School policies are distributed to all parents for information and implementation• The role, functions, and authority of the school board are agreed-upon• The school board meets frequently and makes meaningful decisions related to classroom instruction and teachers' appointments



<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provision of educational and knowledge development opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools organise and provide knowledge development opportunities such as literacy programmes for parents, and workshops about the importance of involvement and its impact on learners' achievement. Various activities (e.g. teacher-parents information sharing seminars, symposiums, parents as invited speakers, learners' work exhibitions) are used to attract parents to the school• Schools organise workshops for parents in which they are guided on how they should help their children to read at home• Schools organise parent workshops and group counselling opportunities for parents of children with reading difficulties, behaviour problems, parents whose children dropped from school, and for parents to see education as part of their job and make their children's education their business• Interpretation of the national curriculum is shared with parents for them to see where they are able to help• Teachers' discussion with parents puts emphasis on developing basic academic skills as part of the personal education curriculum. (f) Ideas of ways parents can monitor and assist their children with classroom instruction are shared
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good relationship between the school and parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools' open door policies encourage parents to visit the school and talk over any concern with the principal and



	<p>their children's teachers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schools have clear and meaningful strategies to connect learning resources (i.e. teachers and parents)• In collaboration with parents schools make learners attend classes everyday• Parents volunteer to provide labour when necessary• Parents pay their school fund on time
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive school climate and leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive school climate is associated with safe and clean environment, availability of water and toilet facilities, enough trees for shade, enough classrooms with proper windows and doors and enough space for exercise activities.• The schools' democratic leadership styles attract parents to be involved in school activities• Schools prepare food and/or give financial incentives and/or certificates to parents who participate in school activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers' and parents' perception and attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers and parents believe that rural context does not impact on a success practice of parental involvement• Parents' concerns about school issues are recognised as valid and worthy of consideration by the school• There is active Parent-Teacher Organisation at school• The school asks parents to assist in dealing with and correcting learners' misbehaviours• Parents assist in dealing with and improving learners' poor behaviour



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation with teacher training programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is communication and a memorandum of understanding between schools and teacher training programmes • Schools contribute to Teacher Education curricula content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some staff members are leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff member(s) (can be a teacher or school secretary) is assigned to organise and coordinate assistance of voluntary help from parents • When a parent does not attend parents meetings, a staff member is assigned the responsibility of conducting a survey by telephone or home-based face-to-face in order to talk with parents about why they did not attend parents' meeting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical but constructive questioning into school activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents critically but constructively question and influence schools' practices and policies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The principal and teachers are professionally trained • Teachers receive education in relation to parental involvement • Parents are able to read and write

The elucidation outlined above presents indicators this study can look at as basics in order to investigate parental involvement in academic education of learners in schools. Nevertheless, the research findings reviewed point out that these indicators are difficult to implement in rural schools and among parents from poor communities (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Epstein et al., 2002; Lapp et al., 2002; Burke & Picus, 2001; Stein & Thorkildsen 1999; Fink & Stoll, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994). The whole current study investigate the problem of parental involvement in rural lower primary schools by studying whether and how rural lower primary schools in northern Namibia in Ohangwena Region promote parental involvement in their own way and according to their contexts. However, my particular interest at Phase 1 level of this study was to identify schools in which parents are highly involved and schools in which parents have low involvement. Although the

literature reviewed indicate multiple activities of parent educational involvement, there are involvement activities which are more significantly associated with increasing learners' performance in elementary schools. WCER's (1995) findings clearly show indicators of high involvement. Moreover, most literature reviewed (Barnard, 2004; Barton et al., 2004; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Stern, 2003; Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Epstein et al., 2002; Fan, 2001; Maynard & Howley, 1997) associate high involvement with the same indicators clearly stipulated by WCER's (1995) findings. To sum up, the following factors are indicators of high involvement expected from schools. Therefore, schools which indicate most (if not all) of these indicators were regarded as having high involvement.

High involvement at schools is characterised by:

- Conducive climate to parental support;
- Provision of educational opportunities for knowledge development about parental involvement to parents and teachers;
- Use of community resources and funds of knowledge of community experts;
- Provision of opportunities for technical support (pedagogy, curriculum and assessment) for classroom activities to parents;
- Use of various options to communicate with parents;
- Involvement of parents in school policy formulation and school governance;
- Positive attitude towards involvement;
- Schools understanding and valuing of involvement
- Critical but constructive questioning into school activities

2.9 CHALLENGES AND COMMON BARRIERS ASSOCIATED WITH PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN RURAL SCHOOLS

Although parental involvement may be a worthwhile venture, it is not without its challenges. Some research findings present stereotypical judgments that say parents' economic, emotional and/ or educational deficiencies potentially inhibit their educational relationship and support to schools. According to the literature reviewed, there is a strong relationship between parents' socio-economic background and parents' level of involvement, which further implies that parents with stressed backgrounds are reluctant and are not motivated to get involved like parents with high and better socio-economic backgrounds (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999). Moreover, low achievement of academic skills among school children is associated with stressed socio-economic status (De Civita, Pagani, Vitaro & Tremblay, 2004).

Other researchers noted that parents do want to become involved in order to help their children learn, but they need assistance and guidance in order to do so. Therefore, other findings (Stein and Thorkildsen (1999) and Edward and Knight (1994) put the blame on educators as they conclude that even open-minded professionals regard cooperation with parents in terms of learners' education as the undermining of their professional status. At the same time professionals are concerned that parents might take over their responsibilities. Hence, they used increased distance as their coping strategy. Studies reviewed indicate that most parents have little knowledge of how to be involved.

To summarise, Lee and Bowen (2006); Hill and Tylor,(2004); Wright and Stegelin (2003); Stein and Thorkildsen (1999); Maynard and Howley (1997), Edwards and Knight (1994) and Finders and Lewis (1994) identify special challenges often associated with rural life. The identified challenges are isolation, poverty and lack of job opportunities, low achieving children, lack of knowledge about how each can use the other person more effectively, time constraint, lack of literacy skills and cultural mismatches/ misunderstandings and discomfort, negative experience of schooling and low educational attainment, and feeling less comfort and welcome to visit the school for events and activities. Further argument clarified that isolation restricts rural schools from making use of urban-based resources. Poverty limits parents' ability to provide for their children and to augment their children's education with resources in the home. Reduced financial resources may limit families' abilities to provide educational materials and opportunities and may influence parents' educational expectations for their children. Lack of job opportunities makes it harder for rural learners to see any financial benefit to attendance or success in school. Moreover, parents' negative experience of schooling and low educational attainment may limit parents' their ability to help their children with homework, and their familiarity with educational resources available in the community. Parents of children with low achievement are viewed as possessing less knowledge and skills to support their children and thus may encounter barriers to their involvement. Parents who are less able to visit the school for events and activities are viewed as uncaring, an attitude that may have negative ramifications for their children. These parents indicate that they possess less cultural capital therefore may not obtain information about how best to help with homework, what school related topics to discuss with children, and the importance of conveying high educational expectations.

Restricted access to the education social capital in schools may reduce the quality or impact on achievement of parents' home educational involvement. Prejudicial treatment or attitudes parents receive from school staff make them feel less able to tap the potential of the school's social and material resources and thus becomes barriers to their involvement.

Although research shows that it is difficult to overcome the disadvantages associated with low socio-economic status and rural contexts, such assertions, however, should not discourage rural schools from practising parental involvement, because research also shows that parents of every socio-economic and ethnic background are concerned about their children's education (Kreider, 2005; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999; Morrow, 1995). In addition, parental involvement has been identified to be a possible strategy for improving children's educational performance (Barnard, 2004; Jeynes, 2003). Schools are seen as venues of hope and sites of resistance to the oppressive theories. The oppressive theory states that parents from low-income population lack skills and capital needed for making a difference in educational development of their children. Since schools are the key ingredient in effective and successful parental involvement, they should reach out to parents. What rural schools can do in general to overcome those challenges is what the current study tried to realise.

2.10 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE AND SILENCES IN THE EXISTING KNOWLEDGE BASE ON PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

This study focused on critical analysis of parental involvement in academic education of lower primary learners. To narrow my research to the area of parental involvement I began by reading widely cited articles and other resources on related topics, parental/family involvement and school-family-partnership in education. Some of the literature I have reviewed for learning more about parental involvement in education of children at school and/or home was Harry, Sturges and Klingner, (2005); Barton et al. (2004); Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004); Stern (2003); Epstein et al. (2002); Epstein (2002); Epstein and Sheldon (2002); Sanders (2002); Cooper and Gandara (2001); Lindsay (2001); Burke and Picus (2001); Sanders (2001); Heneveld and Craig (1996) and Dekker and Lemmer (1993). This literature deals with the what, how and effect of family and community involvement in, and partnership with schools.

Looking at most of these researchers' findings more critically, I have realised that most of the published reports on parental involvement have been conducted among families and in schools situated in rural and urban areas of developed countries. Although the literature presents compelling evidence of positive correlation between family/parent involvement in education and increase in learners' learning and achievement, it further indicates a strong relationship between poor involvement and parents' socio-economic background. Furthermore, the research reports concluded

that parental involvement is difficult to implement in rural schools. Information on how to ensure the practice of parental involvement that specifically improves and promotes learners' learning in academic subjects is frequently lacking. Until such a time that researchers study contextually based parental involvement, rural schools will be seen as unable to practise involvement, and rural parents are viewed as deficient in some way.

If the intention of the parental involvement approach is to move all parents of all social classes into closer partnership with schools, researchers need to be realistic and consider what is contextually possible. It is disappointing that more research of this type has not been sufficiently done in developing countries such as Namibia where the implementation of change is a major problem. People in urban areas, especially of developed countries, believe that certain ideas are difficult or impossible to implement in rural areas. Critical theorists claim that it is from this sort of language labelling that critical theory seeks to free us. The philosophy of critical theory purports that the situation is by no means as hopeless as we are made to believe. People should change that form of oppressive ideas and liberate themselves from what enslaves them (Higgs & Smith, 2002; Freire, 1993).

Studies, which resulted in disappointment of parental involvement practice in rural areas and among low-income parents, do not clearly indicate whether the issue of context had been considered (Stern, 2003; Lapp et al., 2002; Burke & Picus, 2001; Sanders, 2001; Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999) i.e. whether what is contextually possible in terms of the implementation of parental involvement has been considered. These studies do not further indicate whether attempts were made to study and understand how parental involvement functions in relation to the rural context. No clear documentation was given of what and how activities were differently organised and delivered in schools among parents in high 'at risk' communities. There is no clear and sufficient indication of attempts to find out how parental involvement can be improved and sustained in rural areas. A parental involvement approach works best when it responds to particulars of the contexts it serves.

There are many strategies for collaborating with parents and families. Some strategies can be common across environments and cultures, others should be chosen and adapted and/or designed to fit the specific contexts and communities. It is arguable that the frameworks used by the researchers to study parental involvement are not equitable towards different socio-economic environments and that the researchers are not likely to have understanding of parents of all environments. In accordance, Maynard and Howley (1997) stress that approaches used to study parental involvement and produced negative results in rural areas were not developed with rural communities in mind.

Rural environments have unique features and needs, which demand unique approaches and therefore differ from each other as well as from urban and sub-urban ones. Anderson et al. (1994:43) argue: *“All educational practices are context bound, and that which might be effective or appropriate in one context might be ineffective or inappropriate in another.”*

Some studies indicate conflicting findings: Maynard and Howley’s (1997) study of 296 schools in Missouri found that parental involvement was higher in rural than in urban communities. However, their other findings from a large national survey of eighth-grade students suggest that parental involvement tends to be higher in urban and suburban communities. The same study found that suburban parents from middle and upper middle-class communities were the most involved.

Heneveld and Craig’s (1996) study has compared a selection of World Bank supported projects designed for improving the quality of primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa with world-wide research findings on school effectiveness and school improvement. The conclusion of that comparative study indicates that the World Bank projects in Africa had been particularly disappointing in this (practice of parental involvement) respect. However, the same report presents that some African educators who participated in the World Bank supported projects that formulated the framework for improving the quality of primary education in Sub-Saharan Africa indicate the potential of parental involvement when contextually modified. Two contrary views emerged in the same report.

The challenge of involving low-income parents is also indicated in Stein and Thorkildsen’s (1999) study. The conclusion of Stein and Thorkildsen’s study presents conflicting findings:

- Parents of children in rural schools participate more than parents in urban schools.
- Greater parent involvement is found among parents at the higher socio-economic status level, and more involvement is needed among parents at the lower socio-economic status level (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999).

I am not contesting the reliability and validity of the findings of other studies nor refuting their conclusions, but I am engaging with ideological formation (Leonardo, 2004) and trying to understand whether they expected one change to fit all. My argument is based on the view of critical theory that puts criticism at the centre of its knowledge production and that encourages critical thinking positively. Critical theory questions the assumption that some research results, especially produced by developed countries, are unproblematically right and unquestionable (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Critical theorists are frequently misunderstood. Therefore, as

understood in critical theory “*criticism functions not so much as a form of refutation or an exercise in rejection, but rather as a precondition for intellectual engagement with an ideological formation*” (Leonardo, 2004: 13). To borrow an idea from Hooks (1993), I can say that critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal. It should not be misunderstood as pessimistic and judged as a form of negativity. It is a pedagogical paradigm that values debate, openness to different ideas, and commitment to democratic process. Critical theory is not a form of refutation. This in itself made me question whether other findings are valid for all contexts.

I strongly believe that no matter how well designed and implemented a parental involvement approach is, it cannot be applied to the same effect in all contexts. Wright and Stegelin (2003: 69) argue that although cultural patterns are real and might affect all members of a certain racial background, families live their cultures in their own unique ways according to their contexts. Therefore, economically disadvantaged and rural contexts should not be viewed as a barrier to getting parents involved. Factors determining effectiveness of parental involvement in education are complex interwoven and dependent on the local context and conditions in which the school operates as well as on the culture of the people who live in a specific environment.

Because of the importance of the context in which each school operates, the characteristics that work in one setting may not necessarily be applicable in another. Importantly, the amount of actual research on parental involvement in the developing world, and particularly in Namibia, upon which this study’s framework is based, is limited. Some of the studies, which I have read, conducted in developing countries (Heneveld & Craig, 1996), have not clearly given enough attention to parents as sources for maximising children’s academic learning. The studies have not sufficiently indicated the types and activities of parental involvement which are compatible with poor socio-economic conditions. These studies were mostly designed to obtain parental involvement for improving the schools’ physical facilities. For example, parents were involved but not fully responsible for construction with technical support (Burundi, Chad and Somalia); providing teachers’ houses (Lesotho, Malawi); preparing the grounds and sanitary facilities (Burundi, Mauritania, Somalia); providing local materials, maintenance and unskilled labour (Ghana, Mali and Niger); feeding programs (Ghana) (Heneveld & Craig, 1996). Parents’ contributions in these countries can be regarded as resources going into education, and not mechanisms to bring the school and parents together for learners’ quality academic education. Little explicit attention was given to involving parents as learning resources people. The same studies had insufficient focus on improving parents’ assistance in academic education dimension. As Heneveld and Craig (1996) analysed the 26 World Bank supported projects on improving the quality of primary schools in Sub-Sahara Africa, they

acknowledge the shortcomings of their study of not indicating the effective process for inciting change in Sub-Sahara Africa's primary schools. Published studies on parental involvement in education of children particularly in Namibia are either scarce or not easily available. These arguments strongly add to my curiosity to explore the issue of critical analysing parental involvement for supporting learners' academic education in northern Namibia's rural lower primary schools in Ohangwena Region.

The proposed study intends to present a true life picture (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004), as far as implementation of parental involvement is concerned, in selected rural lower primary schools in northern Namibia in the Ohangwena Region. Wright and Stegeline (2003: 69) argue that *although cultural patterns are real and might affect all members of a certain racial background, families live their cultures in their own unique ways according to their contexts.*

2.11 CONCLUSION

Parental involvement is an area of pedagogical discourse based on Critical Theory as an aspect of quality education. In quality education, criticism functions to change a schools' approach of educating children to be based on Ecological Theory that is complementary teaching and learning contexts. Ecological theory influences most education systems as they come to the realisation that from birth onwards, effective learning results from multiple contexts: families, schools, community settings and institutions. This realisation drives a new and strong emphasis on shared educational accountability. I base this perception on the research findings of school's performance and on the argument that, although effective schools remain critical in many communities, children face significant barriers that schools alone cannot possibly overcome (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2002; Sanders, 2001; Chapman & Aspin, 1997). School and life success requires an array of learning supports which should complement one another. Moreover, if the intention of a new trend in education is to move all parents of all social classes into closer partnership with schools, there is a need to address research findings which indicate a view that rural parents are deficient educators, and that parental involvement is difficult to implement in rural schools and among low socio-economic status parents. This situation may not be as hopeless as indicated by some researchers. There should be a way of improving and sustaining this important approach to education even among rural communities.

Therefore, working with parents of all socio-economic status should not be undertaken lightly by schools. Parents should be seen as potential partners with associated rights and sharing aims with

professionals with the common goal of educating children to become responsible, competent, successful and useful citizens. Most research findings reviewed indicate disappointment with parental involvement practices in rural areas. Research results point out that parental involvement is difficult to carry out in rural schools and among parents from poor communities. A significant gap exists in the research findings of whether attempts were made to investigate the practice of parental involvement according to rural contexts. In Namibia, no clear documentation exists of how parental involvement can be promoted in rural schools and among parents in high ‘at-risk’ communities. Therefore, the proposed study tried to investigate how schools and parents from Northern Namibia’s rural areas (Ohangwena Region) perceive and practice parental involvement for the promotion of learners’ academic learning. The study also investigates why parental involvement as an approach to education is context bound and unique.