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## Empowering rural parents to effectively contribute to their children's education

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The high level of inequality in South Africa has widened the gap between rural and urban schools, and the performance of rural schools has been continuously declining compared to urban schools. Poor performance in rural schools is perpetuated by parents being absent from their children's education because the socio-economic conditions and their educational background do not allow them to commit their time and energy towards education. Learners are left on their own to decide their future. The disparity between rural and urban schooling was further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As schools were closed during lockdown, teaching and learning was suspended in rural schools, however, in urban schools teaching and learning continued through online platforms. The lockdowns gave parents an opportunity to teach, advocate, and create conducive spaces to help their children focus on learning. During lockdowns, parents were expected to act as teachers in their homes to educate their children, and therefore, school closure presented opportunities for parents to actively participate in their children's education. However, their socio-economic conditions and poor educational backgrounds continue to threaten effective parental engagement, posing a threat to the academic success of rural learners. Despite attempts by the government to introduce school governing bodies in schools as a structure to integrate schools and parents, the problem of little parental engagement remains unresolved. The purpose with this study was to empower parents in rural areas to effectively participate in their children's education.

**Keywords:** empowerment; leadership; poor educational background; rural setting; socio-economic status

### Introduction and Background

Poor socio-economic conditions and educational background hinder parents in rural areas from participating in their children's education. Disparity in education between developed and developing countries continue to disadvantage parents in rural communities, with only 75% of children from the poorest families completing secondary school education, compared to 90% of children from the richest families (Walker, Pearce, Boe & Lawson, 2019). South Africa's level of inequality has affected the political, economic, and social landscape. Education is also affected, and rural schools are under-resourced compared to urban schools. Government inaction on inequality threatens the future of rural learners (Chakanika, Sichula, Sumbwa & Nduna, 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the disparities because rural schools had to close during the pandemic while teaching in urban schools continued online. These disparities disempower the current and future generation of parents. Therefore, political willingness, economic reform, social cohesion, and moral regeneration are required to close the gap between the rich and the poor by ensuring that resources are channelled to areas where they are needed, particularly in rural areas.

Parents' poor educational background silences their voices in their children's education, leading them to shift their responsibilities in educating their children to teachers. The purpose with this article was to empower parents to assume their roles and responsibilities as primary educators to ensure that a culture of participation in education is entrenched in rural communities.

### Literature Review

#### *Parent empowerment*

Parents are the primary role models for their children and must create a foundation upon which to build formal education. This must be done intentionally to instil commitment and determination in their children. Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of every individual to use local resources in a productive and creative way (Santosa, 2014). This implies transforming the thought life of rural parents to innovatively use what they have to contribute to their children's education. Hsiao, Higgins and Diamond (2018) assert that empowerment results in a change in individuals' proactive behaviour. Parents in rural areas often do not participate in their children's education because of lack of empowerment, depriving rural children from the quality of education they deserve. Ng (2007) states that parents of children in rural schools must be empowered to achieve school effectiveness.

Parent empowerment makes parents active participants in the educational and economical life of their children. The Kenyan Ministry of Education (2019) defines parent empowerment as an enhancement of knowledge, skills, attitude, and practices in pursuit of a mutual goal. When parents are empowered, they more confidently participate in their children's education. This secures the future of the present and future generations because education takes place beyond the walls of schools, and there is a continuity in teaching and learning between the home and school. Empowering parents is working in partnership with the parents, which means sharing of responsibilities, roles, skills, and knowledge. When there is synergy between what the school does and

the inputs of the parents, the broader objectives of education are achieved. School leaders are enlightened stakeholders who should prioritise parental empowerment as a critical element for effective parent engagement.

Parental empowerment is not confined to improving learner performance but also ensures that other stakeholders, such as non-governmental organisations and the broader community, join the partnership. This ensures that children are holistically developed by integrating the culture and values of the community (Xaba, 2015). When all the stakeholders show interest in children's education, children's social and academic learning are broadened. Stefanski, Valli and Jacobson (2016) contend that schools cannot meet learners' needs on their own but must work with social partners.

#### *School leadership*

School leaders' influence is critical to improve the performance of the school, and their influence depends on their ability to execute leadership practices. Cabral, Alves, Tintoré and Cunha (2019) list the following five leadership practices: setting direction, building relationships and developing people, developing the organisation to support the desired practices, improving the instructional programme, and securing accountability. In this study, we focused on building relationships and developing people. Building relationships is critical for effective partnerships between the school and parents (Quezada, 2016). This relationship depends on the principal's ability to welcome parents and integrate them into the school. When parents begin to understand their roles in the curriculum matters of the school, the relationship between the school and the parents can yield the desired results, which are improved learner performance. However, if there is no relationship, the process of empowering parents will yield little results.

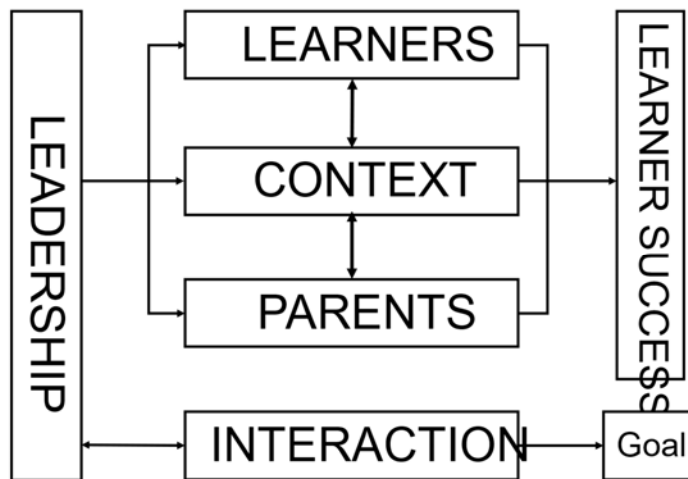
School leaders should give parents space to use their newly developed skills of engaging in their children's education. They should also develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of parents to engage effectively in their children's education. The key facilitator of increased parental engagement is the school leader (Mleczo & Kington, 2013).

#### *Parent engagement*

Parent engagement means making parents aware of their responsibilities to help their children attain educational outcomes. Gross, Bettencourt, Taylor, Francis, Bower and Singleton (2020) define parent engagement as a shared responsibility to actively support children to achieve learning and developmental outcomes. This implies that learners can academically and economically succeed when the school and parents collaborate. Caño, Cape, Cardoso, Miot, Pitogo, Quinio and Merin (2016) assert that parent engagement is a direct effort to increase their children's educational outcomes. The need for parent engagement confirms that children's education cannot be left to schools but should be a shared responsibility between the school and the parents. Studies in different countries have shown that parent engagement is critical to learners' success regardless of ethnicity, geographic location, and socio-economic background (Appiah-Kubi & Amoako, 2020; Durišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Mandarakas, 2014; Matshe, 2014; Munje & Mncube, 2018; Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014; Yamamoto, Holloway & Suzuki, 2016).

#### *Conceptual Framework*

The conceptual framework that underpinned this article was the context-responsive leadership construct, and has four concepts, namely, leadership, learners, context, and parents (Abba, Yahaya & Suleiman, 2018). Bredeson, Klar and Johansson (2011) refer to the construct as "wisdom in action", which manifests in a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are appropriately used by effective leaders as they engage in continuous conversation with dynamic situational variables. Context-responsive leadership is expressed through actions and how the leader behaves. In order to examine how leaders can establish successful school-parent engagement in rural Limpopo schools, leadership, learners, context, and parents were collectively explored in line with their realities. Context-responsive leadership is goal focused, in which learners' success is the goal, and therefore, the interaction of learners, parents, and context was explored as shown in Figure 1. The four components that describe the conceptual framework are discussed individually to substantiate the application of the framework in this study.



**Figure 1** Goal-directed interactive relationship between leadership, parents, context and learners

#### *Leadership*

Leadership is the process of setting goals and creating strategies to achieve them. Sharma and Jain (2013) define leadership as a process through which an individual influences the group to achieve a common goal, and in this study, the common goal is learners' success. However, a leader needs skills, knowledge, and wisdom to influence the stakeholders to work together to achieve the goal (Adebiyi, Adebiyi, Doramola & Seyi-Oderinde, 2019). School leaders must create environments where effective interaction takes place to achieve the set goals.

#### *Learners*

Learners depend on teachers, school leaders, and parents to provide them with knowledge. Learners are capable of achieving anything if teaching and learning take place in a conducive context, which means that it responds to the needs and aspirations of the learners. Learners' aspirations include discovering themselves and achieving success. This happens when learning takes place in totality, which involves cognitive, social, and physical development (Power, 2011). In order to understand the cognitive, social, and physical development of learners, leaders must understand the context in which learning takes place (Du Plessis, 2017).

#### *Context*

Context refers to a real situation in which human activities take place. Hollowell (2019) defines context as a concept that creates the social system that guides individuals and group behaviour for effective interactive dynamics that occur within the

organisation. Context influences leadership practices, and therefore, affects organisational performance. However, good leadership can also influence the context to achieve the set goals. If leaders fail to diagnose context, context prevents achieving organisational goals. In this study we focused on the rural context.

The rural context is under-developed with few physical, economic, and human resources. Du Plessis (2014) defines a rural context as a disadvantaged context with a lack of basic infrastructure such as sanitation, water, roads, transport, and electricity. A rural context offers less hope to its residents and a bleak future in terms of jobs, education, and economic freedom. Leaders should use the resources available in this context to empower parents.

#### *Parent engagement*

Parent engagement means that parents assume full responsibility for their children's education. Povey, Campbell, Willis, Haynes, Western, Bennett, Antrobus and Pedde (2016) define parent engagement as parents' initiatives to promote children's academic development, ability to learn, and educational outcomes. Baker, Wise, Kelley and Skiba (2016) define parent engagement as inviting parents to partner with the school and listening to parents' wishes for their children. Therefore, parents are valuable assets, and when engaged, they help achieve learner success (Jensen & Minke, 2017; Mleczko & Kington, 2013). Parents' absence from their children's education deprives rural learners of the opportunity to succeed in life. Despite the evidence that parent engagement is important,

parents are still excluded in rural schools, placing rural school learners at a disadvantage. Learners in rural schools generally underperform compared to learners in urban schools, and the lack of parent engagement in rural areas is one reason for this.

Successful parent engagement is not automatic and leaders must empower parents for effective collaboration by communicating the vision and mission of the school. School meetings and book viewings arranged by the school is an opportunity to train parents on how to monitor their children's school work and provide the necessary support. Myende and Nhlumayo (2022) state that parents should be helped to benefit their children. When parents know how to support their children academically and socially, children's attitudes towards education change, contributing to improved learner performance. Parents can be empowered by sharing the school's code of conduct with them in order to share the responsibility of creating an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning. The school can also arrange evening classes for parents to educate them on how to academically support their children. Parents must understand educational processes and their role in order to support their children at home (Xaba, 2015). Most parents in rural areas have little education, making it harder for them to support their children's education. It is essential to also integrate the community into the schooling system to create a culture of collaboration. Parent participation in school activities allows them to voice their opinions on operational decisions and policies and to hold the school accountable (Gertler, Patrinos & Rubio-Codina, 2012).

### **Methodology**

In this study we adopted a qualitative research approach, which allowed us to interact with the parents and principals of secondary schools to examine how school principals can empower parents in rural schools. The study was interactive and constructive and warranted using a case study design to enable sufficient contextualised data to be collected from participants. This allowed us to gather rich data on empowering parents for successful school-parent engagement.

We used purposive sampling to sample 13 secondary schools in the Sekhukhune East district of the Limpopo province, South Africa. These schools are all located in rural areas of the province and classified as Quintile 1 schools with limited resources. The schools' matric performance for the past 2 years was also used as selection criterion by selecting schools that performed below 60% and above 80%. We selected schools in rural areas that performed below and above matric pass requirements to establish the effect that parents' engagement has on learner performance and the role

that school leaders play to ensuring parent engagement.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with both parents and principals to collect the participants' viewpoints and life experiences (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis to build themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured by using the criteria of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability.

**Credibility:** pre-interviews were used to prepare questions that resonate with credibility and to ensure that the questions were reliably answered to achieve credibility (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen & Kyngäs, 2014). The credibility of the study was also enhanced using prolonged engagement with the participants, peer debriefing, member-checking, and an audit trail (Connelly, 2016).

**Transferability:** the clear description of the research setting, research methods, and selection criteria for participants helped to improve transferability.

**Confirmability** was achieved using an audit trail, a reflexive journal, and triangulation (Connelly, 2016). The research findings were subjected to peer debriefing and member-checking to prevent intrinsic bias that might have compromised the results.

**Dependability:** We clearly set out all the steps for data collection, recording, and analysis to ensure dependability.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In this study we abided by the conditions set out by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria. Before starting the research, we applied for and received ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria's ethics committee, and we received permission to conduct the study from the Limpopo Department of Education and the school principals. Before agreeing to participate in the study, we informed the participants of what we would ask them, how the data would be used, and what the consequences could be for them. Participants were required to sign informed consent to participate in the research. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they had a right to access the information, and that they could withdraw at any time (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). We preserved their confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms to refer to them and by not revealing their names and identity in sampling, data collection, data analysis, and the reporting of the study findings. The digital data were stored on password-protected encrypted devices (Arifin, 2018) and the written material was kept in a locked

cabinet. All data will be stored in the University of Pretoria archives for 15 years.

### **Findings**

Codes (P1–P13) were used to identify both parents and principals. The following themes were identified: The role of principals in establishing empowerment; monitoring and support; challenges affecting parent empowerment; and contextually responsive leadership strategies. These are discussed in the following subsections.

#### *The Role of Principals in Establishing Empowerment*

This finding shows that principals must carry out their practices effectively and responsibly to successfully empower parents. The finding shows that principals' roles include communication, empowerment, and conducting regular meetings.

#### *Communication*

The participants in this study acknowledged that there was a communication breakdown between the schools and the parents, which has led to strained relationships between them. Ozmen, Akuzum, Zincirli and Selcuk (2016) assert that effective communication between school leaders and parents is critical for learner achievement. Lack of communication can derail plans to empower parents. Baker et al. (2016) also contend that a lack of communication affects the relationship between the school and parents. Effective communication is necessary to address absenteeism, drop-out rate, truancy, late coming, and drug abuse.

#### *Empowerment*

Empowerment is needed to unearth participants' hidden potential and competencies and can result in a proactive attitude from all involved (Hsiao et al., 2018). The findings show that many parents in rural communities have an academic knowledge gap, and therefore, principals should make it their business to empower parents to get their constructive support. Empowerment can give parents the confidence to participate in their children's education.

We would like to propose a mandatory agenda for rural schools to conduct quarterly capacity building sessions for parents for the educational well-being of the children. School governing bodies should also be reconfigured into learning centres that prioritise parents' education and curriculum knowledge. Curriculum education should be done at every parent meeting because the curriculum is the core business of the school, and parents should be empowered to also see it as their core business.

#### *Conducting regular meetings*

We found that school meetings were common platforms used in rural schools to interact with parents. The reliance on school meetings to empower parents suggests that they should be held

regularly to strengthen the relationship between the school and the parents. Erdener (2016) asserts that school meetings have a significant effect on student learning. At these meetings, code of conduct issues, instructional programmes, learner performance, and practical strategies to improve learner performance may be discussed.

#### *Monitoring and Support*

We found that there was a lack of monitoring and support from parents. As much as principals should exercise their roles for effective teaching and learning, parents should also be the primary educators. Durišić and Bunijevac (2017) assert that successful learners have solid academic support from their parents. Therefore, principals and parents should work together to define their roles and play them effectively, guaranteeing positive outcomes for learners. Accountability, motivation, and volunteering were found to be essential for successful monitoring and support.

#### *Accountability*

Currently, all principals must account for the matric performance of their learners, whether they had less than 65% in matric performance or more. However, parents should also account for learners' poor performance. Learners' academic success is not the sole responsibility of the principals but a shared responsibility between the school and the parents. Organisations that live by the principle of accountability tend to do better because accountability is a mechanism through which goals are achieved (Usman, 2016). Accountability should be prioritised to achieve quality teaching and learning.

#### *Motivation*

This finding suggests that the environment in rural areas is hopeless, demoralising, and without prospects for improvement, and therefore, learners who pass matric migrate to urban areas. Parents, principals, and learners must be motivated to believe in themselves. The motivation can come from internal and external sources to inspire rural confidence (Ghazi, Ali, Shahzad, Khan & Hukamadad, 2010).

#### *Volunteering*

The findings show that a lack of projects at school discourages volunteering. Parents are willing to serve schools but often principals do not create opportunities for them to volunteer. However, some principals said that they could not ask for volunteers because parents expected payment for voluntarily work. Volunteering is an opportunity for parents to offer their input into their children's education. The findings suggest that principals should initiate gardening, cleaning, and cooking projects to create opportunities for parents to get involved in school matters.

## Challenges Affecting Parent Empowerment

### *Illiteracy level*

Ghanney (2018) asserts that children's academic performance is closely linked to parents' educational levels. In this study, parents and principals acknowledged that poor educational background in rural communities affects school-parent engagement, which in turn, affects learners' academic performance.

This study showed that parents' illiteracy negates the progress made at school because the home environment contributes very little to the education agenda. However, despite the high levels of illiteracy in rural communities, parents still want their children to succeed. Another study showed that literacy difficulties can lead to social, economic, and community problems such as high drop-out rates, juvenile delinquency, and welfare costs (Menheere & Hooge, 2010). The findings of this study suggest that illiteracy affects parents' outward thinking and makes them dependent on principals and teachers. When learners do not perform well, they do little to help their children because they are unaware of its impact on their children's lives.

This study confirmed the link between the literacy level of parents and learners' success in schools. Parents with a good educational background can provide resources and emotional and academic support to their children. Parents with low literacy levels struggle to understand their children's educational needs, and the children are left with little prospect for academic success. Due to poor education, these parents feel pessimistic, causing them to rely entirely on the school to educate their children. However, it remains critical for parents to be empowered and engaged because it improves learners' performance. Lara and Saracostti (2019) assert that parental involvement is vital for good academic outcomes for their children.

### Contextually Responsive Leadership Strategies

The positive relationship between parent empowerment and learner achievement is undisputed. Therefore, it is critical to mitigate the challenges that prevent successful parent empowerment. The current findings suggest that this can be done by changing school leaders' mindsets, fostering school-parent partnerships, engaging other stakeholders, and addressing parents' self-efficacy.

### *Changing school leaders' mindsets*

Change can be difficult but is inevitable. Leadership styles must change to drive the agenda of parent empowerment. Leadership should be context-responsive and effectively adapt to changing situations. Parents in this study argued that principals were autocratic, which makes the school environment unwelcoming. The parents felt that their economic and social status made them unwelcome, undermined, and marginalised, and that their input was not taken seriously. Contextually

responsive leadership means not only listening to parents' voices but also to the voices of other stakeholders. If this leadership style is adopted in a school environment, parents' ideas will form part of the developmental agenda of the school. The developmental agenda is the targets set and achieved for the growth and development of the school. Involving parents encourages them to participate in their children's education. The findings show that some principals still believe in the master-servant leadership, but this kind of leadership undermines parent engagement and reduces parents to obliging individuals. Principals should rather regard themselves as servants employed to serve the community. Parents' willingness to participate in schools depends on the principals' attitudes towards them.

Marishane (2020) reports that the traditional role of the principal must shift to meet the increasing demand for accountability in education, which means that principals should account for every decision they take to benefit the community they serve. Principals should see themselves as carriers of hope for parents and children, and therefore, they should be held accountable when the community's expectations are not met. Another study found that contextually responsive leaders promote a school climate that includes the marginalised in the school context (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016). School leaders who adopt inclusivity acknowledge that parents in rural areas can add value to school development despite their living conditions. With this study we confirmed that contextually responsive leadership is not based on hierarchy but is defined by context. School leaders should allow themselves to change as contexts change and advocate for community-based issues such as infrastructure development, skills development, preventing gender-based violence, and building a self-sufficient community.

### *Fostering school-parent partnerships*

Adams, Harris and Jones (2016) point out that collaboration is an important strategy to generate creativity to improve schools' educational programmes. The finding suggests that parents and principals want to work together for learners' success, but a school-parent partnership cannot happen overnight. Both parties should continually work on effective collaboration. Principals should regard parents as equal partners and create a welcoming environment to assure parents of their place in its core business. On the other hand, parents should not allow their socio-economic disadvantages to discourage them from making their voices heard in their children's education.

If principals belittle parents because of their social and economic status, a partnership between parents and principals is unattainable. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (2012) argues that parents and principals should have an equitable relationship, which means that there should be no fear, favour, or prejudice. An equitable relationship will help principals empower parents as partners rather than demonstrate their own academic prowess. We argue that the relationship between parents and the school should be based on trust instead of status. When parents and principals regard each other as partners, a high level of creativity can be achieved.

Such a partnership will enhance learner performance, and it will no longer be the sole responsibility of the school to provide education to learners. This partnership will help principals to see parents' vulnerability as an opportunity to share their plight and be willing to upgrade the standard of education. This shared responsibility will ensure that children are supported emotionally, physically, and academically.

#### *Engaging other stakeholders*

This finding suggest that education is a societal issue. Therefore, prevailing conditions in rural communities, such as poverty, child-headed families, single-parent families, and orphans mean that the commitment of all the stakeholders is critical. Gamede and Uleanya (2021) affirm that rural schools face unprecedented challenges unique to their environment. These challenges affect learners' ability to cope with teaching and learning demands, and consequently, affect learner performance. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) report that some rural schools' challenges are attributed to a lack of parental interest, insufficient funding from the state, a lack of resources, under-qualified teachers, and multi-grade teaching. Some of these challenges are from within the school, while others originate outside the school environment, but all influence learner performance.

#### *Developing parent self-efficacy*

Yamamoto et al. (2016) assert that parents who do not feel capable of teaching, disciplining, or interacting with their children lack self-efficacy. The findings from this study suggest that a lack of self-belief means that parents cannot play their roles effectively for learner achievement. The participants said that the people who know the children best are their parents. However, parents shift their responsibilities to principals and teachers, who do not know the children as well.

#### **Conclusion**

We argued at the beginning of this article that disparity exists in the provision of education. Education in rural schools is not the same or equal to education in urban schools. Rural schools underperform due to their poor context, and one of the reasons for this underperformance is a lack of parental empowerment, which deprives parents of

the opportunity to engage in their children's education.

The findings we present suggest that school leaders should engage with parents by forming a partnership with them to ensure that education is not confined to the school but also involves parents. According to the literature, school leaders are failing to empower parents by forming partnerships, but this study offers ideas for successful school-parent engagement (Munje & Mncube, 2018). Although it does not offer a conclusive answer to the question of parent empowerment for successful school-parent engagement, our study does provide knowledge about how parents can be successfully engaged in their children's education.

We propose that parent empowerment be mandatory for parents in rural schools for effective parental participation in education and learner achievement. It would be fruitful to pursue further research about parent empowerment in order to ensure that rural and urban learners are offered equal educational opportunities. If policy-makers take parent empowerment seriously, they should prioritise parent empowerment when forming and promulgating policies.

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#### **Authors' Contributions**

SMM conceptualised and researched the topic and wrote the article. RNM played an oversight role and proofread and editing the article. He also reviewed the article and provided guidance on how the article should be structured.

#### **Notes**

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