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What do parents really want? Parents' perceptions of their children's schooling

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International evidence confirms that parental involvement has substantial benefits for families and schools, as well as long-term economic benefits for developed and developing countries. To implement sound parental involvement two-way communication between home and school is essential. Schools worldwide tend to focus on communication from the school to the home, and afford parents fewer opportunities to express their perceptions of the quality of schooling. However, researcher-based, national and international surveys of parent opinion indicate that school endeavours to improve learner outcomes depend to a large extent on the data provided by parents. This article examines parents' perceptions of their child's schooling, gathered by means of an annual questionnaire administered in a public primary school in Gauteng, South Africa. A researcher-designed questionnaire administered annually over two consecutive years (2012 and 2013) was used to gauge parents' opinions of school culture, home-school communication, classroom instruction and classroom organisation. The results indicate that parents were generally satisfied with all four areas. However, parents indicated concerns about reporting on an individual learner's progress, academic achievement, and social and emotional wellbeing, as well as academic enrichment opportunities, and ways for parents to assist learning at home. In terms of classroom instruction and organisation, variations in parent responses emerged according to grade levels, and over the two-year reporting period. Recommendations were made, which could benefit other schools wishing to improve two-way communication with families through parent questionnaires.

Keywords: classroom organisation; classroom teaching; family-school partnership; home-school communication; learner progress; parent surveys; quality of schooling

Introduction

Schools and families have been described as partners in the education of their children (Epstein, 2011a, 2011b; Epstein & Associates, 2009; Lemmer, 2013). Both share the common goal of wanting to assist children to develop their full potential (Bray, 2001). A large body of research in a variety of community and country settings strongly supports an argument for the benefits of family-school partnerships (Moles & Fege, 2011). Positive parental involvement in schooling leads to learners' improved academic achievement and socio-emotional development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2011; Redding, Murphy & Sheley, 2011). Parents and teachers enjoy reciprocal support and satisfaction in achieving positive changes in learners and in the school (Lemmer, 2013). Furthermore, Nobel Laureate and distinguished economist, James Heckman points out the broad developmental role played by parental involvement across developed and developing countries. Heckman and Mosso (2014) propose an economic model of human development, which emphasises the positive impact of parents in education on a child's human capital accumulation. This in turn contributes to a country's long-term economic growth, through the rate of return on child human capital accumulation and skill development. This finding makes parental involvement a crucial topic for policy makers in the international arena.

In spite of these well-documented benefits, parental involvement is often weak and limited to the participation of parents in governance, the payment of school fees and fund-raising (Van Wyk, 2010). In South African schools, comprehensive parental involvement models are infrequent (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2007; Venter, 2013). Although education should be a shared activity, in practice, the bond between parents and teachers is not always spontaneous. Schools and families do not always share the same ideas on what is needed in the child's best interests (Krüger & Michalek, 2011). Establishing an effective link between schools and homes, regular two-way communication is essential (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004). To promote effective communication with families, schools should design a variety of *school-to-home* as well as *home-to-school* communication strategies with all families each year about school programmes and learners' progress (O'Connor, 2008). Furthermore, this communication should be part of a co-equal relationship (Spry & Graham, 2009). Teachers often regard themselves as being somewhat superior to parents, because of their professional expertise; parents often feel less adequate than teachers, as parenting is seen as something that everyone can do (Hanhan, 2008). The nature of home-school communication frequently reflects this situation. Although virtually all schools usually invest time and energy in communicating with parents, most communication between home and school tends to be one-way: from the school to the home. One-way communication predominates in the use of written circulars and general parent meetings, which schools use predominantly to communicate their expectations and requirements to parents. Individual parent-teacher interviews allow for greater two-way communication, but often end as brief exchanges (Lemmer, 2012). In most schools, little effort is made by school staff to listen to important information parents have about their children, the home culture, and their views on education (Gestwicki, 2012). However, researcher-based surveys (Dauber & Epstein, 1989), national

surveys in the United States (Child Trends Data Bank, 2013) and the United Kingdom (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) and international surveys of parent opinion facilitated by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicate that school endeavours to improve learner outcomes depend to a large extent on data provided by parents (Kelley-Laine, 1998). If schools want parents to be authentic partners in education, they must consistently and respectfully invite parents to voice their opinions in a co-equal relationship with teachers (Griffith, 2001; López, Sánchez & Hamilton, 2000). A useful strategy to gauge parental feedback about the school and to elicit their views and recommendations is to conduct a regular parent survey. The findings can be used to assist parent-teacher action teams and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to set goals for continuous school improvement over the medium and long term (Epstein & Associates, 2009).

This article presents the findings of an inquiry undertaken in a public primary school in Gauteng, South Africa, to gather parent perceptions of schooling using a questionnaire administered over two consecutive years. The aim was to engage parents as full partners, by affording them the opportunity to appraise the school culture, home-school communication practices, and classroom instruction and organisation, with a view towards the continuous improvement of the school.

Theoretical Perspectives

To inform the inquiry, attention is given to key theories dealing with the role of two-way home-school communication in parental involvement: Epstein's (1987, 1995) and Epstein and Associates' (2009) theory and typology of parental involvement; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (2007) as well as Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) five-level model of parent involvement; and Redding's (2000, 2006, 2011) model of schools as communities.

Epstein's contribution to parental involvement theory is the building block on which most parental involvement research rests (Redding, 2000). Epstein's (1987, 1995, 2011a, 2011b), and Epstein and Associates' (2009) theory of overlapping spheres of influence posits that the work of families and schools overlaps, and they share goals and missions. Children learn in three major contexts – the family, school and the community – and these contexts can be drawn together or pushed apart. Based on the theory of overlapping spheres, Epstein (1987) developed a typology of six major types of parental involvement: parenting; communicating; volunteering; learning at home; decision making; and community involvement. In this paper, attention is focused on Epstein's (2011a, 2011b) second type of parental involvement, namely

communicating. The school is tasked with the responsibility of developing effective forms of school-to-home communication and home-to-school communication regarding school programmes and students' progress. Communication should take place in multiple ways in order to connect schools, homes and communities. Epstein emphasises the importance of giving parents ample opportunity to voice their expectations and concerns about their children and the school. According to Epstein (1995), effective communication is never uni-directional, but always allows for and encourages communication from the parent to the teacher, from the family to the school. So important is communication in the Epstein typology, that Keyes (2002) argues that home-school communication should be elevated to an overarching type of involvement, which penetrates the other five types of parental involvement, and on which their effective realisation is dependent.

Building on Epstein's contribution to the field, Green et al. (2007) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) developed a five-level process model of parental involvement. In place of Epstein's six types of parental involvement, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler identify four forms of parental involvement: the communication of parental values, goals, aspirations and expectations to their children; parent activities at home; parent activities at school; and home-school communication. Of pertinence to this paper, is the authors' emphasis on the latter. The benefit of home-school communication is generally the most powerful when it is consistently characterised by mutual respect between parent and teacher, listening to one another, and school responsiveness to parents' concerns. Hoover-Dempsey and Walker (2002) maintain that when schools welcome parents' views and input, parents feel more satisfied with the quality of their children's education. Parental satisfaction with the child's progress and the activities of the school, in turn, creates spinoffs for teachers. Teachers enjoy a more positive supportive relationship with parents, and they can more easily recruit parental support for the curriculum, homework supervision, learning at home, and extra-mural activities. Conversely, where positive parent-teacher communication is lacking, interactions between teachers and parents may emerge primarily from situations motivated by problems around the child and the curriculum. This engenders dissatisfaction from one or both parties – teachers and parents. Interactions under these circumstances increase the separation between families and schools, leaving parents and teachers to struggle independently in their own spheres to help children learn.

Finally, effective home-school communication plays a definitive role in Redding's (2000, 2006, 2011) model of the school as a community,

which comprises diverse stakeholders, namely parents, teachers, students, administrative and support staff and volunteers. All are knit together by a common goal – the welfare of the child. However, the school as a community is not automatically established; for a school to function as a community, intentional effort is required, whereby every member is accepted and respected. A school community is premised on the following assumptions: all parents desire their child's success; all teachers are motivated by their professional commitment to the child's success; the child's success is dependent on the cooperation of all members of the school community; and school leaders are responsible for driving endeavours to improve the school. Redding (2011) emphasises the importance of communication and continuous improvement in a school community. If the school is to adhere to continuous improvement in all areas, it requires systematic, regular data gathering to discern areas of excellence which can be strengthened as well as areas of weakness. Continuous improvement of the school is impossible without relevant, accessible and actionable data (Weiss & Lopez, 2011). Such data is found in the answers from parents to the following question: What do parents think about the activities provided for them by the school, the instructional activities provided for students and the organisation of the school? To obtain this data schools should conduct parent surveys and focus groups.

This discussion has grounded this study in key parental involvement theory which stresses communication *from* the parents to the school and the more conventional communication of school *to* the parents, within the broad area of home-school communication. Based on this framework, we argue that an annual parent questionnaire is a useful instrument to realise this aim.

Method

A cross-sectional survey design was used to administer a researcher-designed questionnaire in 2012 and in 2013, respectively, to parents of a suburban public primary school in Gauteng Province, South Africa which caters for children in Grades 1 to 7. The school is well-established and has received a provincial award for excellence several times. Parents are from a middle-income group and entertain high expectations for their children's education. The SGB, teachers and parents are committed to continuous improvement in all areas of school life and the survey formed part of the school's ongoing endeavour to improve parental involvement and the instructional programme in the school with the long-term goal of increasing learner outcomes. The elected SGB as representative of the parent community and the school management team requested an independent researcher to design and implement the parent

questionnaires to gauge parent perceptions of the quality of schooling. The questionnaire content was approved by the school principal and SGB. Parents were informed and invited to participate in the survey. Participation was voluntary, and completion of the questionnaire indicated parental endorsement of the aims of the endeavour.

A non-probabilistic convenience sampling procedure was used (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010), and all families were invited to participate in the survey. One questionnaire was distributed to each family (in many cases, a family had more than one learner enrolled in the school). A separate questionnaire per child per grade was not considered feasible, due to the time that parents would require to complete multiple questionnaires and the possible negative effect on return rates. In 2012, 950 questionnaires were distributed, and in 2013, 1,072 questionnaires were distributed, in both cases, at the beginning of the third quarter. The response rates for the two years were 39% and 43% respectively. A covering letter stipulated the purpose of the study, the protection afforded the respondents by keeping their identities confidential, instructions for completion, and thanks. The responding parent, however, was asked to indicate the grade(s) of the child(ren) without disclosure of identity.

The questionnaire comprised 49 closed items in 2012, and 63 closed items in 2013, intended to obtain descriptive data arranged according to four sections: Section One (school culture); Section Two (home-school communication); Section Three (classroom instruction); and Section Four (classroom organisation). A separate section allowed for open-ended comments. Perceptions were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where: 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = disagree; 4 = strongly disagree; 5 = not applicable. Each section concluded with an open-ended item. Parents with children in Grades 1 to 3 only completed Sections One and Two; Sections Three and Four pertained to classroom instruction and classroom organisation in Grades 4 to 7. However, parents with children in Grades 4 to 7 were able to indicate responses to the items according to the respective Grade, thus providing nuanced results. Data was analysed with the assistance of statistical experts. Composite frequency tables (Tables 1–4) on the questionnaire items that described each of the four sections listed provided detailed information on the response pattern of individual items, and gave an overall view of parent perceptions on the designated topics for 2012 and 2013. Scores for 'strongly agree' and 'agree' and 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' have been combined and rounded off. The open-ended comments were manually coded, and organised according to Sections One to Four, and selected comments have been incorporated into the discussion to enrich the findings. A full exposition of

open-ended comments was not deemed possible in this paper, due to journal constraints on length. The results of both applications of the questionnaire (2012 and 2013) were disseminated to all parents in general school meetings by the school management team and SGB. The results of the surveys were also reviewed by the school management team, the SGB and teaching staff with a view to school improvement strategies. As a consequence of the 2012 feedback session, 14 new items were added to the questionnaire distributed in 2013. Improvement strategies were implemented in 2013, as a result of the 2012 findings, and in 2014 as a result of the 2013 data. Finally, the limitations of the study are acknowledged. The results present the perceptions of parents in a single school embedded in a particular context, and are not more widely applicable. In particular, certain items in the sections dealing with the quality of classroom instruction and organisation depend on feedback from the child to the parent, and not on direct observation.

Results

School Culture

Section one (four items) dealt with parents' perceptions of school culture for the period 2012 and 2013. In designing the questionnaire, the researchers recognised the wide repertoire of components making up school culture, such as the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes and written and unwritten rules that influence all facets of school functioning, as well as concrete applications, such as student safety, the orderliness of classrooms, and public spaces or the school's approach to diversity (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013). However, due to the considerations about questionnaire length and the time required for completion, the concept of school culture was unpacked in only four items, dealing with an invitational approach to parents, orderliness of facilities and learner access to teacher's assistance. Table 1 indicates that parent respondents generally agreed that the school culture was positive. Parents' overall satisfaction with school culture was also confirmed by many positive open-ended comments. The overwhelming majority of parents (95.7% in 2012 and 97.2% in 2013) agreed that they were welcome at the school (Item 1). Most parents (73.4% in 2012 and 79.3% in 2013) knew who to contact if a problem arose (Item 2). Similarly, the majority (77.5% in 2012 and 82.5% in 2013) agreed that there is a teacher available for the child to consult regarding non-academic problems. The majority (78% in 2012 and 79.4% in 2013) also agreed that the school grounds are clean and tidy (Item 4). Notwithstanding these positive results, the questionnaire was aimed at identifying areas for further continuous improvement, and it should therefore be noted that 10%+ of parents disagreed about Item 3, while approximately 20% of parents

disagreed about Items 2 and 4. This implies some uncertainty about whom the parents or the child ought to approach in the event of a problem, particularly non-academic problems; and that the appearance of the school grounds was not always satisfactory. Open-ended comments added insight to the questionnaire results of Items 2 and 4. Regarding the school-grounds, parents were satisfied with renovations (e.g. paving around the classrooms) but were dissatisfied with littering. A disturbing issue that emerged from the open-ended comments was bullying ("my child is often teased"). Connected to this was Item 4: the availability of a teacher in the event of social or emotional problems ("teachers do not give attention to the little ones who are bullied"). The results suggest that clearer reporting channels should be established in terms of social and emotional problems at school: the names of appropriate persons, contact details and consulting times should be communicated to all families every quarter, in order to inform new cohorts of parents. School management and support staff should ensure that the grounds remain tidy, especially after intense use and high traffic. Further, the questionnaire uncovered the occurrence of bullying, an issue which should be incorporated into future questionnaires to track such misconduct.

Home-School Communication

Section two (10 items) dealt with parents' perceptions of opportunities for home-school communication for the period 2012 and 2013. According to items 1 to 10 in Table 2, parent respondents generally agreed that the school succeeded in maintaining home-school communication through conventional means, such as parent meetings and school reports. However, the school was less successful in informing parents about the progress, achievement and well-being of individual children, and about academic enrichment opportunities and parental assistance for learning at home. This was also borne out by the open-ended data.

Items 1 and 8 dealt with parent perceptions of parent-teacher meetings. The overwhelming majority of parents (Item 1) (90.5% in 2012 and 89% in 2013) agreed that parent-teacher meetings took place at convenient times, and over two-thirds of parents (Item 8) (69% in 2012 and 73% in 2013) agreed that invitations to the meetings were adequate. Parent opinion was equally divided on the issue of print versus electronic newsletters. More than half the parents (59.2% in 2012 and 58.9% in 2013) preferred to receive printed parent newsletters (Item 2); virtually the same percentage of parents (58.2% in 2012 and 57% in 2013) preferred electronic parent newsletters (Item 3). This suggests that, for the present, the school should retain a blended approach in the form of the option of either print or electronic newsletters.

Open-ended comments referred to the need for a more user-friendly school webpage and requests that the electronic communicator (a computer programme which communicates detailed school-

related matters) should not be limited to mainly administrative matters, but should be updated daily on cultural and academic events.

Table 1 School culture

Item	Strongly agree and agree		Strongly disagree and disagree		Not applicable	
	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013
1. I feel welcome at the school.	95.7	97.2	3.1	2.6	1.2	0.2
2. I know which person to contact at school if I experience a problem.	73.4	79.3	25.8	20.5	0.8	0.2
3. There is a teacher to whom my child can go if he/she experiences a problem of a non-academic nature.	77.5	82.5	16.8	12.9	5.7	4.6
4. The school grounds always look tidy and clean.	78	79.4	22	19.7	0.0	0.9

Table 2 Home-school communication

Item	Strongly agree and agree		Strongly disagree and disagree		Not applicable	
	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013
1. The school schedules parent-teacher meetings at convenient times.	90.5	89	8.3	10.4	1.2	0.6
2. I prefer print copies of the parent newsletter as a means of communication.	59.2	58.9	37.9	38.9	2.9	2.2
3. I prefer electronic copies of the parent newsletter as a means of communication.	58.2	57	40.9	39.8	0.9	3.2
4. The school informs me regularly of my child's academic progress.	82.3	83.7	16.2	15.9	1.5	0.4
5. The school contacts me if my child does not progress academically.	44.1	44.2	20.1	26.0	35.8	29.8
6. The school contacts me if my child achieves academic success.	31	31.5	52.6	52.8	164	15.7
7. The school contacts me if my child experiences emotional or social problems.	35.6	38.6	32.1	34.4	32.3	27.0
8. I am invited to parent-teacher meetings to discuss my child's progress.	69	73	21.8	18.8	9.2	8.2
9. The school informs me of extra classes to strengthen class teaching.	41.5	40.1	45.5	47	13	12.9
10. The school provides information on how I can assist my child academically.	40	41.3	48.9	50	11.1	8.7

Importantly, parents are satisfied with the regularity with which their child's academic progress is reported (Item 4) (82.3% in 2012 and 83.7% in 2013). Additional information provided by the principal in an informal interview indicated that parents receive a detailed progress report every quarter. Items 5, 6 and 7 dealt with personal contact with parents about the academic achievement and the social and emotional wellbeing of individual learners. The results for these three items indicated

areas for improvement in home-school communication. Less than half of the parents (44.1% in 2012 and 44.2% in 2013) agreed that the school contacted them personally if their child was not progressing satisfactorily (Item 5). Roughly a quarter of parents disagreed on this issue and a large proportion of not applicable responses (35.8% for 2012 and 29.8% for 2013) were reported. This indicates some uncertainty among parents about communication from the school regarding academ-

ic problems, unsatisfactory grades or other indicators of poor performance. Less than a third of parents (31% in both 2012 and 2013) agreed that the school contacted them if their child achieved academic success (Item 6). Roughly half the parents (52.6% in 2012 and 52.8% in 2013) disagreed on this issue, and a substantial percentage of not applicable responses (16.4% in 2012 and 15.7% in 2013) indicated uncertainty. This finding is corroborated by the literature, which indicates that schools communicate primarily on problem issues and neglect to inform parents of a child's successes (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010; Lemmer, 2012). In similar vein, 35.6% of parents (2012) and 38.6% (2013) of parents agreed that the school contacted them when the child experienced social or emotional problems (Item 7). A third of the parents (32.1% in 2012 and 34.4% in 2013) disagreed on this issue, and an almost equal proportion of non-applicable responses were reported, which indicated uncertainty. Open-ended comments endorsed these results for items 5, 6 and 7. Parents requested more frequent and well-timed feedback on all their children's school activities, not merely the quarterly report card, where one noted, for example: "I would like more regular reporting on the results of tests, the Annual National Assessment and other assessment[s], not only on report day, so that we can motivate or work on a problem". Parents were divided on the issue of extra classes to strengthen classroom teaching (Item 9) and ways that they can support their children academically at home (Item 10). Nearly half of the parents felt that the school did not provide information about extra classes to strengthen class teaching (Item 9) (41.5% in 2012 and 40% in 2013) and that the school did not provide information on how they could assist their children academically at home (item 10) (40% in 2012 and 41.3% in 2013). Moreover, a proportion of non-applicable responses indicate uncertainty on the issue.

Classroom Instruction

Section three dealt with parents' perceptions of classroom instruction for 2012 and 2013. This paper reports on the results for classroom instruction in only the core subjects: Afrikaans, English, Mathematics and Science/Technology, Grades 4 to 7, according to the responses for six items (see Table 3). The results for parental perceptions of elective subjects are not included in this paper.

Most parents (+90%) agreed that subject teachers know their subject matter (Item 1). More than 80% of parents in Grade 4 to 7 agreed that lessons were well presented (Item 2). However, Table 3 indicates a difference in the percentage of parents who disagreed on the quality of lesson pre-

sentation in 2012 and in 2013, respectively. In 2012, the results indicated disagreement as follows: Grade 4, 9.6%; Grade 5, 13.7%; Grade 6, 14.4%; Grade 7, 13.5 percent. In contrast to this, in 2013, the percentage of parents who disagreed on the quality of lesson presentation was substantially reduced (Grade 4, 6.3%; Grade 5, 6.8%; Grade 6, 7.1%; Grade 7, 5%). This may be ascribed to the effect of the 2012 questionnaire on school improvement: teachers may have addressed the quality of lesson presentation in 2013 as a consequence of parental dissatisfaction.

The results indicated variation according to grade in parent responses to Item 3: "my child has the confidence to ask that content be explained again if he/she does not understand". Regarding Grade 4, 80% (2012) and 85.2% (2013) of parents agreed on this issue. However, in Grade 5, there was a less positive response: 73.2% of parents (2012) and 79.3% of parents (2013) agreed. This suggests that Grade 5 learners are less likely to obtain additional explanations of content when needed. Regarding Grade 6, 78.8% of parents agreed in 2012; however, this improved in 2013 (90.5% of parents agreed). Regarding Grade 7, 82.6% of parents agreed in 2012, but in 2013, this percentage of parents who agreed declined to 66 percent. A considerable proportion of non-applicable responses (22%) suggest uncertainty on this issue. Open-ended comments put forward a possible explanation: children were afraid to ask for additional assistance once a topic had been dealt with ("my child is afraid to ask questions in the class").

Most parents (over 86%) commenting on all grades and in both years (2012 and 2013) agreed that clear instructions were given on how to complete assignments and tasks (Item 4). Similarly, most parents (over 80%) commenting on all grades and in both years (2012 and 2013) agreed that deadlines for tasks were given well in advance (Item 5). A substantial proportion of parents (\pm 20%) commenting on all grades in 2012 disagreed that feedback on assignments and tasks was given within an appropriate response time (Item 6), although this percentage decreased in 2013, possibly due to the impact of the questionnaire on school improvement.

Other matters arising from the open-ended section were: the disadvantages of generic grading for group work, the need to instil enthusiasm for a subject, more appropriate homework and tuition in basic language skills.

A final item in this section required parents to indicate satisfaction with the overall quality of instruction. The results indicated that 90.3% of parents were satisfied.

Table 3 Classroom instruction

Item	Grade 4				Grade 5				Grade 6				Grade 7											
	Strongly agree and agree		Strongly disagree and disagree		Not applicable		Strongly agree and agree		Strongly disagree and disagree		Not applicable		Strongly agree and agree		Strongly disagree and disagree		Not applicable							
	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013						
1. The teachers know the subject matter.	94.4	93.3	1.5	2.5	4.1	4.2	91.9	95.2	3.3	3.2	4.8	1.6	83.7	97.6	6.6	1.8	9.7	0.6	94.3	72.0	4.3	3	1.4	25.0
2. Lessons are thoroughly presented.	86.5	87.8	9.6	6.3	3.9	5.9	85.3	85.3	13.7	6.8	1	7.9	85.2	91.1	14.4	7.1	0.4	1.8	83.7	70.0	13.5	5	2.8	25.0
3. My child has the confidence to ask that content be explained again if he/she does not understand.	80	85.2	12.0	13.1	8	1.7	73.2	79.3	25.2	19.6	1.6	1.1	78.8	90.5	12.5	8.3	8.7	1.2	82.6	66	10.3	12.0	7.1	22
4. Clear instructions are given on how to complete assignments and tasks.	92	91	6.2	7	1.8	2	86.7	91.1	10.1	6.5	3.2	2.4	87.3	90.5	8.5	9.5	4.2	0	88.5	72	8.9	4	2.6	24
5. Dates for the completion of tasks are given well in advance.	91.7	87.3	2.5	4.6	5.8	8.1	81.5	93.4	8.4	3.3	10.1	3.3	85	85.8	9.6	8.9	5.4	5.3	83.6	71	6.8	4	9.6	25
6. Feedback on assignments and tasks are given in an appropriate time.	75.5	87	20.9	11	3.6	2	76.6	91.1	19.4	5.9	4	3	74.1	82.7	22.1	16.7	3.8	0.6	63	67	32.5	8	4.5	25

Table 4 Classroom organisation

Item	Grade 4				Grade 5				Grade 6				Grade 7											
	Strongly agree and agree		Strongly disagree and disagree		Not applicable		Strongly agree and agree		Strongly disagree and disagree		Not applicable		Strongly agree and agree		Strongly disagree and disagree		Not applicable							
	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013	2012	2013						
1. The teacher maintains discipline.	82.9	94.3	8.1	3.1	9.0	2.6	82.6	85.3	14.3	7.2	3.1	7.5	86.5	83.2	8.5	0.6	5	16.2	82.5	71.5	14.3	4.0	3.2	24.5
2. The teacher is respected.	76.6	88.5	12.7	6.5	10.7	5.0	84.5	92.2	15.5	3.3	0	4.5	78.3	77.5	14.9	4.4	6.8	18.1	84.5	70.8	15.5	4.5	0	24.7
3. The teacher treats learners fairly.	82.7	91.5	7.9	4.8	9.4	3.7	83.5	85	13.3	10.4	3.2	4.6	87.6	77.5	7.8	4.4	4.6	18.1	83.5	66.1	13.3	10.2	3.2	23.7
4. Classroom displays create a subject-related environment.	89.5	95.1	2.5	1.5	8.0	3.4	74.5	87	18.9	5.3	6.6	7.7	74.4	70.1	15.9	6.3	9.7	23.6	74.5	70	18.9	5.7	6.6	24.3

Classroom Organisation

Section three (four items) dealt with parents' perceptions of classroom organisation for 2012 and 2013 (see Table 4). Most parents (80%) agreed that teachers maintain discipline in the classroom (item 1). A higher proportion of Grade 5 and 7 parents (14.3% for both grades in 2012) than Grade 4 and 6 parents disagreed on this issue. However, this percentage was reduced in 2013 to less than 10% for both Grade 5 and 7. Open-ended comments identified the problem of teachers who absent themselves from the classroom to deal with administration or sport. Most parents (75%) agreed that the teacher was respected in the classroom (item 2). A proportion of parents (over 12%) disagreed on this issue in 2012, but this percentage was considerably reduced in 2013 (6.5%) indicating evidence of school improvement. Open-ended comments identified inappropriate enforcement of discipline: "some teachers yell at the children and threaten them". Most parents (over 80%) agreed that the teacher treated learners fairly (item 3). A higher proportion of Grade 5 and Grade 7 parents (13.3% for both grades in 2012) disagreed that children are treated fairly, with only a small reduction in this percentage in 2013. Open-ended comments related to a lack of criteria for misbehaviour and related penalties. More than 70% agreed that classroom displays created a subject-related environment (Item 4). A proportion of Grade 5 and Grade 7 parents (over 18%) disagreed on this issue, but this proportion was reduced to less than 10% in 2013. In general, the results indicate a lower proportion of disagreement in 2013 than in 2012 on items 2, 3 and 4, which suggests the success of improvement strategies implemented after the 2012 questionnaire. Variations, albeit small, in the percentages of parents commenting on the items in terms of different grades, are useful to school management, who may wish to pinpoint specific grades where classroom organisation is weak. Furthermore, open-ended comments brought to light specific issues, which require school management's attention and should be addressed in future questionnaires.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings and informed by the literature review, we argue that an annual parent questionnaire is an effective means of achieving two-way communication from home to school. The latter was identified by Epstein (1987, 1995) and Epstein and Associates (2009) as an essential component of effective parental involvement. In this study, parents were afforded the opportunity to express their perceptions on a variety of topics, and where the closed items did not meet their needs, open-ended items provided a useful channel for communication. More conventional means of parent-teacher communication, such as the general

parent meeting and the individual parent-teacher conference, seldom provide sufficient opportunities for parents to reflect on all aspects of the school and give input (Hoover-Dempsey & Walker, 2002). In this respect, a parent questionnaire allows parents ample time to consider their own and their child's experience of the school, and to provide anonymous feedback. Frustration and feelings of distance that parents may experience regarding the school are reduced (Hoover-Dempsey & Walker, 2002). The cohesiveness of the school community is thus improved, because parents feel that their perceptions are heard by school management and teachers (Redding, 2006).

To further improve practice in this regard, we recommend that annual parent questionnaires administered in schools should be complemented by focus group interviews with selected parents and teachers, organised according to grade level. A questionnaire, however well designed, can seldom exhaust all topics of interest, and focus groups provide a safe environment in which parents and teachers can raise issues not included in a questionnaire. In this study, the number and richness of open-ended comments confirmed that the questionnaire did not fully cater for many important and useful parent perceptions. Effectively, facilitated focus group interviews would provide a vehicle to address this issue. Moreover, future questionnaires should be adapted to include new issues identified by open-ended comments and focus group interviews. Finally, we recommend that schools should appoint a parent-teacher action team under the guidance of the school management committee, in order to appraise the annual questionnaire results and to identify areas and strategies for school improvement (Epstein & Associates, 2009). The inclusion of teachers and parents in such a team is essential if the school is to achieve the ideal of authentic partnership in which both families and school cooperate as equitable partners (Spry & Graham, 2009).

Finally, engaging parents in schooling by providing them with a voice through annual surveys can contribute to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. As such it is not only an educational issue; parental involvement is a form of investment in educational goods, which ultimately leads to a high rate of return in national economies (Heckman & Mosso, 2014).

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