

Research Paper

Family-School Partnership in Supporting Level 4 Students at a Community Education and Training College

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Abstract

Family-school partnership is essential for achieving quality school and academic performance to level 4 students at a Community Education and Training (CET) College. The partnership comprises the ability of families and schools to provide holistic support and guidance to students as they progress toward independence and becoming responsible community members themselves. However, this is not prevalent in the majority of CET centres, particularly those in low-income communities (Madzinga, 2021). This study explored the role of different stakeholders within the CET Colleges in enhancing family-school partnership and supporting level 4 students. The current study intends to assist schools/centres with strategies that could be used by the centres to involve families and communities to enhance the academic performance of students in the CET College. This study was underpinned by the interpretivism paradigm. Data was gathered using semi-structured individual interviews. Epstein's model of school, family, and community interaction served as the foundation for the study. The idea was deemed appropriate for this study because it promotes parental and family involvement through mutual collaboration among many stakeholders. The findings of this study show that families want to be involved in their children's education, but they don't have the time owing to various commitments.

Keywords: partnership; school; family; family-school partnership; community; Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence

Introduction

Academic success is seen as a significant criteria for assessing the quality of higher education institutions (Alyahyan & Düşteğör, 2020), and effective teaching and learning processes are typically considered to correspond with improved student academic performance (Anierobi et al., 2021). Family-school partnerships are critical for student achievement. According to research, family-school partnerships improve academic success as well as student well-being and motivation (Blue-Banning et al., 2019; Epstein, 2018; Green et al., 2020; Hornby and Leaflet, 2019). This research aimed to explore the school-family partnership in supporting level 4 students at the Community Education and Training (CET) College and to identify strategies that the school/college employs to overcome challenges faced in the implementation of family-school partnership. For, according to Bacskai (2020), parental communication with educators functions properly when there is no significant disparity between the expectations of the family and the school, when parents can accept and support the school's goals, and when they focus on similar values. Level 4 students at a CET college are individuals who have not completed their grade 12 (matric) in conventional education due to numerous factors, including elevated drop-out rates, substance addiction, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, and, in some cases, sheer

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boredom. The gap identified in the previous studies is that research, conducted in Free State province, South Africa, focused on full-service or mainstream schools shows that little or nothing has been done for CET College students, who have not been identified in previous studies as requiring family-school partnership engagements. Wanjiku (2024) maintains that the partnership between schools and families creates a supportive network that enhances learning both at home and in the classroom, wherein parents and caregivers actively participate in their child's education, cultivating a sense of responsibility and engagement. Research indicates that collaboration among educational institutions, educators, and families can impact the academic performance, social development, and overall well-being of children across all educational levels (Boonk et al., 2018). The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," underscores that education is a communal endeavor, transcending formal schooling to include families, communities, and society as a whole (Ringstaff, 2023). Paccaud et al. (2021) emphasize the significance of collaboration between families and schools as a driver of student performance; thus, it is crucial to comprehend the variables that affect the cooperative practices between parents and teachers in secondary education. This is particularly relevant when children encounter difficulties, as effective communication can enable parents and teachers to collaboratively establish a supportive learning environment (Goodall, 2020).

The formation of Community Education and Training (CET) under the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) reflects the implementation of the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (WP-PSET), 2013. CET colleges represent a distinct institutional category designed to embody contemporary perspectives on community education and training in South Africa. This institution was created to serve primarily youth who have not completed their education or who have never attended school, thereby rendering them ineligible for enrolment in Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and universities. These colleges offer this support to South African citizens and students from other countries too. Furthermore, education encompasses both formal and non-formal systems, aiming to engage all educational forms, particularly primary and secondary schools, in serving the entire community. This necessitates the consideration of individuals' experiences and the social interests that arise within communities.

Penn (2019) indicated, a partnership between educational sectors and families positively impacts student outcomes. In certain instances, families may feel disheartened and hesitant to engage actively due to teachers emphasizing negative conduct and poor performance of their children (Penn, 2019). Epstein (2018) highlighted that the engagement of family and community in children's education contributes positively to students through enhanced conduct, increased motivation to succeed, consistent school attendance, and successful academic outcomes. Consequently, educators would be able to concentrate on instructing students and changing their behavior. It is essential for all stakeholders to collaborate in enhancing the academic performance of students at CET College. However, some families encounter difficulties in offering educational support to their children due to socioeconomic reasons and a lack of understanding (Kalil & Ryan, 2020). Moreover, parental educational achievement has been recognized as a substantial obstacle to their participation in their children's academic endeavours (Pek & Mee, 2020). Penn (2019) asserts that educators should engage in teacher-parent training and workshops that highlight the importance of communication with parents, equipping them with vital knowledge on successful ways to involve parents and families.

Epstein (2018) advocates for the terminology school, family, and community partnership. The school serves as a central source of information, facilitating the acquisition of essential skills and knowledge for children's survival. Parental participation is crucial to achieving this objective (Epstein, 2018). The child resides within a community where both the school and family are deeply integrated. Epstein (2018) emphasizes the importance of family participation in children's education on a global scale. Partnerships among schools, families, and communities are essential for meeting the best interests of learners, particularly in achieving optimal academic performance.

Students at CET College face numerous societal challenges that impede their academic efforts and affect their conduct within the community. Ballard et al. (2020) emphasize the significance of partnerships between schools and families, as these co-operations are essential in identifying challenges and offering support to students in navigating and overcoming obstacles, so they grow up to be upstanding individuals. My experience at CET College has revealed a scarcity of research specifically addressing this type of institution, in contrast to the abundance of studies focused on full-service and mainstream schools. The issues faced by these students also affect the pass rate in the Level 4 programme. The table below shows the number of students in CET College who registered, wrote and completed the GETC- Level 4 qualification test, 2021 – 2023.

Table 1.1: Level 4 students' results

Year	Number registered	Number wrote	Number completed	Completion rate (%)
2021	07	01	01	100%
2022	10	04	01	25%
2023	18	08	02	25%

Source: Centre Database (SLC) -2023

In summary, the target is to establish and sustain effective family-school partnerships that support the learning and development of Level 4 students at a CET college.

Research design and Methods

The interpretive paradigm was used in this research to contextualize it inside the qualitative framework. This is to say that the research paradigm governed the research technique. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2019, p. 133), several sorts of information are acquired and analysed from many viewpoints in qualitative research in order to generate a deeper and more meaningful description of a complex, multi-faceted scenario. Because this study focused on the family-school relationship in supporting level 4 students at a CET College, the study itself was context-based and its solutions to address it were also context-based. Moreover, the interpretative technique was employed because it fully accounted for the role of context in relation to meaning. A research study's design includes the technique or procedure applied to perform the specific research (Creswell, 2021, p. 5). For this study, we used a case study format, part of qualitative research methodology. It was typically used to provide a rich portrayal of the object of research by gathering the perspectives and opinions of many persons involved in the case (Hamilton, 2019, p. 1). What influenced us in choosing the case study was that it focused on one entity which was a college, and this enabled us to do an in-depth investigation of the project of the research. For this study, a purposive sampling technique was used to select a community education and training college with effective family-school relationships. With purposive sampling, the researchers selected participants based on the role they play in the study (Guest et al, 2022). To collect data, we utilized individual interviews, where seven (7) participants took part, and document analysis, where the results of the prior three years were analysed. This study made use of thematic data analysis to examine the qualitative data. Maree (2020) defined thematic analysis as the method of organizing data and identifying themes.

Table 2.1: Description of individual participants

Name	Gender	Age	Home Language	Level of Education
Centre Manager	Female	40-45	Sesotho	Bachelor's Degree
Lecturer 1	Female	35-40	Sesotho	Bachelor's Degree
Lecturer 2	Female	35-40	IsiXhosa	Bachelor's Degree
Parent 1	Female	40-45	IsiZulu	Diploma
Parent 2	Male	40-45	Setswana	Bachelor's Degree
Student 1	Female	18-22	Afrikaans	Grade 10
Student 2	Male	18-20	Sesotho	Grade 9

The interview questions corresponded with the research questions and objectives. We structured the interview guide sequentially, incorporating open-ended questions that facilitated unrestricted commentary from principal/centre management, lecturers, parents, and students throughout the interview (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014, pp. 381-382). The latter emphasized the notable benefits of a semi-structured interview. This facilitated a more comprehensive analysis of responses pertinent to the study. This allowed us to seek clarification and gather additional information beyond the limits of my scheduled interview questions (Maree, 2016, p. 93).

We used the centre registration records and final examination results analysis from 2021-2023. These showed the number of registered students at the beginning of the year, the number of students who wrote their final exams, and the results analysis, as shown in Table 1.1. The main purpose of analyzing these results and statistics was to explore the level of family involvement in the students' academic journey. The results showed a significant discrepancy between the number of registered students and those who took the final examination, due to a high dropout rate. The data we obtained from the documents helped us comprehend and compare the data we obtained from interviews.

Results

After data was collected through individual interviews and document analysis from the centre, the following 4 themes emerged:

1. Understanding family-school partnership
2. Support
3. Challenges and barriers to family-school partnership at CET College
4. Strategies and views to enhance family-school partnerships.

Theme 1: Understanding family-school partnership

In this study, family-school partnerships emphasize the necessity of creating collaborative, supportive, and synergistic interactions throughout a student's development (Sheridan & Garbacz, 2022). Participants expressed various views on family-school partnerships in the education of CET Level 4 students, as well as how they participate and what different roles they play. It was discovered and made evident that the study entrants who were the centre manager, lecturers, parents and students, viewed this partnership as the tool that can be used to enhance students' academic lives along with the whole being of a student preparing for life before school. Also, from these, it was noticed that the whole community needs to be involved to nurture these students just as the saying goes, *"It takes a village to raise a child"*. Partnership among families, communities, and educational institutions not only improves academic performance, but also equips individuals with the skills and values required for meaningful societal participation (Cordova Jr et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Support

According to Selolo (2018), support encompasses functions aimed at increasing the quality of teaching and learning. This theme focused on support given to students by families, communities and school. The support from school to parents was also scrutinized, as allowing them to participate in their children's educational journey. The centre stated that they welcome families to collaborate in supporting students. This aligns with Bachman et al.'s (2021) assertion that schools should remain accessible to parents and communities consistently. However, they pointed out that it is not always positive as some families and parents shift all the responsibility to them, stepping back and expecting the centre to do everything to help students reach their full potential. From the responses they gave during interviews, families and parents do support their children through giving money and making sure internet is available for their children to do their studies. Another parent mentioned that he supports his child by helping with Mathematics as he understands it better, however, it was discovered that the content taught in the level 4 programs, within CET Colleges, is bizarre to most families and parents. Their willingness to help their children at home, however, makes an enormous difference in the academic performance of the child. Similarly, Epstein (1987) demonstrates that sharing information on how families can monitor and assist students with curriculum-related activities at home fosters a family-school partnership. Therefore, this model encourages families to set goals and make plans with their children at the beginning of each year.

Theme 3: Challenges and barriers to family-school partnership at CET College

Although the significance of family-school partnerships in education is recognized, there is a large gap in understanding and making collaboration of family, centre-school, and community work well (Nenadić-Bilan, & Mohorić, 2023). The following barriers were discovered during the participant interviews:

- Lack/inadequate of content knowledge
- Poor communication and knowledge of CET Colleges
- Socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. poverty, illiteracy, relationships, divorce and etc.)
- Work commitments (Lack of time)

The identified hurdles impede effective family-school co-operations in supporting students at a CET College.

Theme 4: Strategies and views to enhance family-school partnerships.

Following extensive discussions, insights, and challenges, the study participants identified several strategies that could enrich the partnership among schools, families, and the broader community. The subsequent strategies that were identified include:

- Family training and community awareness.
- Family involvement at home.
- Methods of communication.
- DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training) involvement and community agencies.

Training families and equipping them with skills is essential for promoting successful family-school synergy, thereby bettering their role in their children's education. This assertion is corroborated by Yee Von et al. (2022), who argue that family involvement yields various advantages for both students and educators, such as decreased absenteeism, heightened class engagement, enhanced motivation to learn, and improved academic performance. Epstein (2016) noted that fruitful family involvement can be facilitated at home via school communication. The school thereby conveys methods for parents and families to monitor their children's academic progress. The participants' responses indicated that the mode of communication should be refined, particularly through the adoption of new technologies such as WhatsApp, to better support students. The involvement of community agencies is essential to address the diverse needs of students at CET College (Thomas, 2024). Participants requested the DHET, for the government department to oversee these colleges, as well as to engage with and provide support to these centres.

Discussion

This research study aimed to examine the partnership of parents and families with the centre in supporting level 4 students at a CET College, focusing on their academic development and overall well-being. The aim: to facilitate the achievement of their full potential as this is supported by Epstein's theory on overlapping spheres of influence, which posits that student learning is enhanced when parents, educators, and community members recognize and work together on common education-oriented goals and responsibilities (Epstein, 2001). The centre indicated that it provides support for level 4 students who arrive with various challenges; however, it often faces resource limitations and insufficient communication with families. Families reported their general involvement in their children's education at home; however, they identified several barriers including, work commitments, insufficient understanding of the content taught at CET College, and poor communication between families and the center. This is consistent with the findings of Wildmon et al. (2024), which suggest that working parents may struggle to engage fully due to the need to proportionately balance their attention between work and childcare responsibilities. It is crucial for centres and schools to formulate strategies that engage working parents and individuals with diverse commitments through open dialogue, emphasizing the benefits of parental and family involvement in education.

All participants demonstrated an understanding of their roles and the benefits of family-school partnerships in terms of student education and well-being. For example, Parent 1 (P-1) made these remarks during individual interviews *"I try to make sure he gets my love, support. I ask him how it's going at school and if he is coping. I try also to check his books"*. The latter suggests that parental responsibility in improving their children's academic success is to aid them with homework and motivate them. This corresponds with the results of Goodall's study (2020). In addition, P-2 indicated that *"Well mine is to make sure that all the resources are available e.g. transport money, internet"*. This statement highlights that families perceive the availability of financial resources as beneficial for supporting students in their academic pursuits and improving their prospects of success in life. Moneva et al. (2020) support this assertion, denoting that parental financial support significantly impacts student motivation to learn. However, regarding the provision of resources that often require financial investment, I contend that this should not be viewed as a universal role. This is contingent upon family background, as those from less fortunate circumstances may be unable to provide their children with the necessary support, be it Wi-Fi or other technological devices. The distribution of quality education is uneven, disproportionately impacting communities residing in impoverished or rural and township areas (Venter et al. 2020). What is more, the roles of families in supporting their children's educational pursuits and potential development vary based on their available time and financial capacity.

Naite (2021) found that students with highly involved parents demonstrated better academic performance and higher test scores across all subjects compared to those with less engaged parents. Most parents suggested

several strategies that centres can adopt to effectively involve them in their children's education. The inquiry was adequately addressed by the parents and families. Parents and families showed a willingness to support their children; however, several factors hindered their participation. Those include the following: time constraints and insufficient pedagogical content knowledge regarding the CET subjects. Parents identified various strategies to strengthen their involvement, including improving communication with the centres to gain better insights into their children's academic progress. Parent participants expressed that weekends were preferable for organizing meetings, considering their work commitments during the week. The proposal highlights the improvement of communication methods, specifically incorporating WhatsApp, a platform noted for its widespread adoption (Haron et al., 2021).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with any study, limitations in research are the constraints in design, methods, or even researcher limitations that affect and influence the interpretation of ultimate research findings (Awal, 2023). This study was conducted in the Free State Province, South Africa where only one centre was selected as a research site; therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to family-school partnerships of other centres or schools but can serve as a guideline for improving specifically family-school partnerships. The other limitation experienced during the study is that parent participants had difficulty gathering more information due to working long hours, arriving to the interview tired resulting in their inactivity during the session. The use of audio recording might also have been a barrier, as some participants might not have been afraid to express their views on certain things, as it would have exposed some stakeholder and staff failure. Language was also a limiting factor. Participants understood English was the language used during the interviews, but they were not fluent in it, hindering their ability to provide additional insights and experiences, and answers to questions asked.

Based on the data collected, it is advisable that:

- As society rapidly transitions into the information technology era, it is crucial to investigate the extent to which the partnership between families and schools might be strengthened by the utilization of advanced information technology.
- A study on family-school partnerships in a CET college, with a particular emphasis on levels 1 to 3, can be conducted.
- Further research be conducted on the experiences of lecturers at a CET College concerning the conceptualization of parental and family involvement in the centres.

Conclusions

In summary, partnerships between families and schools play a crucial role in the academic development of students. The study finds that centres with low socioeconomic status demonstrate diminished family involvement, negatively affecting student academic performance and, in turn, the overall effectiveness of the centres. The findings of this study indicate that parents, families, and the wider community have a limited understanding of family-school co-operations concerning children's academic achievement. Certain parents and families demonstrate a desire to engage in their children's education but may lack the requisite skills for effective participation. Consequently, centres within CET College are responsible for fostering active engagement of parents and communities by offering support and acknowledging them as equal partners in their children's education (Shay and Lampert 2024). Furthermore, the level 4 students exhibit insufficient academic performance, resulting in a significant disparity between the number of registered students and those who actually sit for the final examination. The findings point to the fact that a significant issue contributing to the underachievement of students is the insufficient involvement of parents and family members. Additionally, the involvement of parents and families is influenced by rigid meeting schedules at the centre, as many parents work extended hours throughout the week, coupled with insufficient and ineffective communication among these parties.

This study suggests that improving communication among centres, families, and the larger community is critical for creating effective parental and family partnerships in supporting level 4 students at a CET College. An open and courteous interaction between the school and parents enables families to devote their time and resources to their children's education. The department (DHET) must interact with communities to inform them about these colleges and give resources to strengthen collaboration between families and centres in order to serve its objective of improving the lives of disadvantaged communities and families.

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