

Chapter 1

Introductory orientation, problem statement and methodology

"A good parent is a national treasure and we need to make parents and families partners with their children's teachers and principals in the process of education" (Riley 1994 in Edge 1998:308).

1.1 The rationale of this study

1.1.1 Education in Swaziland

The government of Swaziland prioritises education (Imfundvo Eswatini (IE) 1994:i). Approximately one third of the national recurrent budget is spent on education and a great deal of effort has been made to improve the quality and accessibility of education in the last few decades (IE 1994:ii). Considerable advances in these respects have been achieved (IE 1994:i). Nevertheless many problems remain.

Swaziland, like many other African countries, is not a wealthy country. Almost all learners, 98%, attend either government or aided schools (Swaziland government educational statistics (SGES) 2001:7) which face serious financial problems (IE 1994:iii). These schools lack qualified teaching staff, facilities and instructional materials (IE 1994:12).

Largely as a result of these financial constraints and the increasing demand placed on education by population growth, the Swaziland education system is not coping with the needs of all its learners at present (IE 1994:iii). On average 16% of learners repeat each primary grade and almost 9% of learners drop out of school at the end of each primary grade (SGES 2001:30). Only 50% of Swazi children complete their primary education, many taking as long as 12 years to do so (Development Plan (DP) 1998:172). The situation deteriorates further at high school level (SGES 2001:30).

Prince Khuzulwandle, then the Minister of Education, noted, "The importance of bringing about efficiencies in the system, that is to say, doing more with less, is more critical now than at any time since regaining our independence" (IE 1994:iii).

In order to make the system more efficient and meet the needs of more learners, the Ministry of Education has focussed on introducing continuous assessment, improving teacher training, and economic and administrative restructuring (IE 1994:40-41).

1.1.2 Benefits of parental involvement

Many governments and districts have recognised the need for legislation to ensure that parents are intensively involved in their children's education (McKenna & Willms 1998:19-20). This recognition is based upon the realisation that parents have a right to play an active role in their children's education, that parental involvement may help to alleviate some of the problems faced by disadvantaged learners, and that parental involvement benefits all the participants of education, particularly the learners (McKenna & Willms 1998:20-22).

Positive child outcomes as a result of parental involvement have included improved academic achievement, improved school readiness, greater motivation and a more positive attitude to school, fewer years of special education, lower rates of grade retention, lower school drop-out rates, better school attendance and, fewer behaviour problems (Epstein 1987a:128; Tijus, Santolini & Danis 1997:7; Miedel & Reynolds 1999:379). Benefits to teachers include improved relationships with learners and their parents, fewer behaviour problems, reduced workload, and a more positive attitude to teaching (Epstein 1987b:5; Swap 1993:10; Lazar & Slostad 1999:209). Better parent-child relationships and increased parental self-esteem and confidence in school-related activities also result from increased parental involvement (Robson & Hunt 1999:185).

1.1.3 Parental involvement in Swaziland

Cullingford and Morrison (1999:253-254) note that the government and schools of the United Kingdom recognise the benefits of parental involvement in education and the necessity of encouraging as much of it as possible. This also seems to be the case in many other countries including the United States (Epstein 1991:345), Australia (Reeve 1993:1), and Canada (McKenna & Willms 1998:21). However, the essential role of parents in their children's education is largely unrecognised in Swaziland.

Efforts to improve the quality of education in Swaziland have not included parental involvement (DP 1998:171-187) and the *National Policy Statement on Education* (NPSE 1998:1-14) includes no specific parental involvement policy. Thus, despite the difficulties faced by Swazi education and the extraordinary benefits of parental involvement, the involvement of Swazi parents in their children's education is being neglected.

This is particularly unfortunate, since parental involvement has not simply been found to be one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of education, but also one of the most cost effective (Epstein 1991:349; Desimone 1999:12; van der Werf, Creemers & Guldemont 2001:447). Although effective parental involvement does require a modest budget (Epstein 1991:349) it has been found to be more effective and cheaper than interventions centering on teacher development, improvements in educational management, or books and learning materials (van der Werf *et al* 2001:461). Thus, parental involvement is a particularly suitable means for improving education in developing countries like Swaziland.

Further, while it is almost impossible for educators to address sources of educational disadvantage that stem from family background factors such as

poverty, ethnicity, and lack of parental education, the degree to which parents are involved in their children's education is changeable (Zellman & Waterman 1998:379; Desimone 1999:12). Good parental involvement programmes have been shown to substantially increase the levels and types of parental involvement occurring at schools (Epstein 1995:703). Moreover, some types of parental involvement have been found to have a greater effect on school achievement than family background variables (Jantjes 1995:295). Thus, increased parental involvement may provide an avenue to address the problems of disadvantaged Swazi children.

Consequently, a programme that enables Swazi parents to become effectively involved in their children's education would provide a practical and cost effective means to address Swaziland's educational deficiencies.

1.2 The importance of this study

1.2.1 Benefits of the parental involvement programme to the learners, parents and teachers

This study hopes to find manageable ways of involving Swazi parents in their children's education to the benefit of learners, and also their parents and teachers. This development of recommendations for a programme of parental involvement for Swaziland is intended to enable educators, through its implementation, to help learners achieve better academic results, and decrease the high failure and drop-out rates in Swaziland. In addition, it is hoped that the implementation of this involvement programme will result in learners who are more motivated, better behaved, and more self-confident (Rogers 1989:38; Miedel & Reynolds 1999:381-382).

Further, through the implementation of this programme it is hoped that the parents themselves will recognize the importance of their own role in their children's education, feel confident and comfortable in this role, build better relationships with teachers and their children, and take ownership of the school (Jantjes 1995:297-298). Teachers, in turn, should have fewer behaviour problems from learners in class, better achieving learners and support from parents and, thus, feel more content in, and positive about, their roles (Jantjes 1995:298). Thus this study should be of great benefit to the participants of education.

1.2.2 Focus of the study

Most studies on parental involvement have focused on early childhood education because this is a life-stage at which learners are maximally sensitive to home and school influences (Entwisle & Alexander 1992:73). However, most Swazi children have no access to education before primary school (IE 1994:7). Further, the benefits of parent involvement extend throughout all levels of schooling (Dornbusch & Ritter 1988:75). Moreover, parents tend to stop being spontaneously involved in their children's education, and teachers tend to make less effort to involve them, when their children reach the senior primary level (Stouffer 1992:5). Consequently, this study shall focus on learners in senior primary school and should thus, shed light on parental involvement in this less studied but critical phase.

Moreover, this study focuses on urban primary schools. Urban and rural schools in other countries have been found to differ in terms of the degree to, and the ways in which, parents are involved in their children's education (Heystek & Louw 1999:21). Although urban primary schools only make up 25% of the primary schools in Swaziland, this is the fastest growing school sector and is

consequently of particular interest (IE 1994:28).

Further, this study is of interest since virtually no research on parental involvement has been done in Swaziland. Swaziland shares similarities with South Africa and, like other developing countries in Africa, suffers from limited resources and the legacy of colonisation. Nevertheless, Swaziland is unique in several important respects. Swaziland is a Kingdom, in which Chiefs hold sway over local communities. Further, it stands out in Africa in that its population is largely homogenous in terms of culture, language, and religion with almost 99% of the population being black, siSwati speaking, Christian people (Swaziland Annual Statistical Bulletin (SASB) 1999:8). Thus, Swaziland does not face the problems of cultural diversity faced by so many other countries in Africa. This study is the first to focus on parental involvement in this unique country.

1.3 Summary of the rationale and importance of the study

Despite the prioritisation of the provision of quality education to all learners by the government of Swaziland, not all learners' needs are being met. In primary education alone a considerable proportion of learners repeat each year and 50% of learners do not complete their primary education.

Improvements in the education system to date have not focused on increased parental involvement. However, considerable benefits to the learner, including higher grades and lower drop-out rates, result from parental involvement. Consequently, parental involvement provides a means to help Swazi learners achieve their potential. Moreover, parental involvement is a particularly effective means of improving learner outcomes because, unlike many family background variables that influence academic success, it is teachable and changeable. Further, parental involvement is cost effective and thus, suited to financially

constrained developing countries like Swaziland.

Thus the importance of this study lies primarily in its aim to develop recommendations for the design of an effective parental involvement programme that will help to address the deficiencies of the Swazi primary education system. In addition this study addresses the barely studied involvement of parents in Swaziland at senior primary level, the level at which spontaneous parental involvement tends to decrease, and focuses on the fastest growing education sector, urban primary schools.

1.4 Problem statement

This study attempts to answer the question:

“What form should a parental involvement programme take in order to maximally benefit Swazi urban primary school learners, their parents, and teachers?”

In order to develop recommendations for the design of an effective parental involvement programme for this community a number of further sub-questions must be answered.

1.4.1 Sub-questions

- 1) Does family background influence the amount of effort made by the teachers and schools to involve parents in their children’s education?
- 2) Does family background influence the extent to which parents are involved in their children’s education?
- 3) In what ways do schools attempt to involve parents in their children’s education?
- 4) In what ways are parents involved in their children’s education?

- 5) What are teachers' feelings about, experiences, beliefs and perceptions of parental involvement?
- 6) What are parents' feelings about, experiences, beliefs and perceptions of parental involvement?
- 7) What factors form barriers to the involvement of parents?
- 8) How can this information be integrated and combined with the literature to yield recommendations for the design of an effective parent involvement programme for urban senior primary schools in Swaziland?

1.4.2 Definitions of key terms

1.4.2.1 Parents

"Parents" refers not only to a child's mother or father but includes all the caregivers that provide children with basic care, support, protection and guidance (Jantjes 1995:300). Thus, this understanding of parents includes the wider family as well as any other unrelated persons who care for the child. This broader definition encourages schools to acknowledge a variety of family types and household structures and, thus, to develop a versatile range of caregiver involvement practices (van Wyk 2001:117).

1.4.2.2 Parent participation

"Parent participation" refers to the equal partnership between the school and the parents in children's education across all six of Epstein's (1995:704) types of parental involvement (see 2.2).

1.4.2.3 Parental involvement

"Parental involvement" is more limited and refers to the involvement of parents in one or more of Epstein's (1995:704) six types of parental involvement activities, but not to a full partnership between parents and the school (see 2.2).

1.4.2.4 Parental involvement programme

“Parental involvement programme” refers to any programme that is deliberately designed to involve parents in their children’s education in a systematic, structured and organised way (Hara & Burke 1998:10).

1.4.2.5 School

“School” refers to the personnel of the school including teachers, head-teachers, and administrators, as well as the school structure.

1.4.2.6 Urban areas

“Urban areas” are those areas under the control of Town Councils or Central Government (SASB 1999:2). These areas are characterised by high population, housing, and school densities (IE 1994:28-29; SASB 1999: 2, 12).

1.5 Aim of the research

The aim of this study is to develop recommendations for the design of an effective parental involvement programme suited to Swazi urban senior primary school education such that learners in particular, but also their teachers and parents, would derive the greatest possible benefits from the implementation of this programme.

1.6 Research methodology

This study combines the use of quantitative and qualitative methodology in order to acquire a more complete understanding of parental involvement in Swazi senior urban primary schools on which an effective parental involvement

programme can be based (De Vos 2002:364-365).

1.6.1 Quantitative methodology

The parental involvement literature on studies done in other countries is reviewed. Quantitative methodology is used to test hypotheses designed to determine whether generalisations about differences in the involvement of parents with different family backgrounds also apply to the parents of Swazi urban senior primary school children. A self-rating parental questionnaire based upon one used by Sitole (1993:146-148) in South Africa is used to measure the involvement of learners' parents from Swazi urban primary schools. The questionnaire also includes a biographical section. Factor analysis is done to confirm the division of the self-rating items into determinants of parental involvement. Several hypotheses are tested statistically against each of these determinants of parental involvement.

Further, the percentage of parents who gave each scaled response is calculated. This indicates the attitude of parents to the school, the ways in which parents are involved, and the ways in which the school invites parents to be involved in their children's education.

1.6.2 Qualitative methodology

Qualitative methodology is used to provide depth and detail to the more generalisable but also more superficial view of parental involvement revealed by the quantitative research (Firestone 1987:20). The qualitative methodology provides detailed information on the subjective meanings, beliefs and perspectives of a small group of teachers and parents. Descriptive qualitative

research following an ethnographic approach is conducted. Semi-structured individual teacher and parent interviews, and unstructured focus group discussions are done. Observation plays a minor but important role in the qualitative research. Interviews are recorded by video camera, transcribed verbatim, and sorted into themes, which arose both out of the data and the theory on parental involvement. Analysed data are presented as readable narrative descriptions and accompanying interpretations.

The quantitative and qualitative data are integrated and grounded inferences generated from the qualitative findings tested against the quantitative data. Thus, triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative findings is done.

1.7 Chapter division

This study comprises the following chapters:

Chapter 1 provides an introductory orientation to the study and its methodology.

In **Chapter 2** the literature on parental involvement in other countries is reviewed. Definitions of parental involvement and parental participation are discussed. The categorisation of parental involvement is reviewed and the benefits of Epstein's six types of parental involvement are examined. How parental involvement works and its determinants are discussed. Factors that influence the degree to which parents are involved are elucidated including the theories on the extent to which parents should be involved. The focus of parental involvement research, as well as criticisms of parental involvement programmes and research, are presented.

Chapter 3 focuses on what is known about parental involvement in Swaziland and South Africa. A brief exposition of the education system of Swaziland is

given. The parental involvement policies of Swaziland and South Africa, and their implementation, are discussed. The findings of parental involvement research in this region are presented.

Chapter 4 describes the methods and methodologies used in this study. The justification, rationale, and purposes of combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies is elucidated. A discussion of quantitative and qualitative methodologies follows. Issues of validity and reliability for both methodologies individually and in combination, as well as the ethics of the study, are considered.

Chapter 5 presents and discusses the quantitative results. The findings of the factor and item analysis are disclosed and discussed. The results of the testing of each hypothesis are divulged and discussed. Further, the parents' attitudes to the schools, the ways in which parents were involved in their children's education, and the efforts of school and teachers to involve parents, are exposed and discussed.

In **Chapter 6** the qualitative findings are presented and are discussed in relation to the quantitative findings. Parental involvement in each of Epstein's six types of involvement is exposed and discussed and explanations for the current picture of parental involvement in Swaziland are elucidated. A comprehensive picture of parental involvement in Swazi urban primary schools is presented and summarised.

The final chapter, **Chapter 7**, presents the recommendations for a parental involvement programme for urban senior primary education in Swaziland, based on the combined qualitative and quantitative findings and the literature on parental involvement programmes. Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research are also discussed in this chapter.