THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that **THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Miss MD Letsholo

ABSTRACT

Parent-teacher conferences are an important component of parent involvement practice in any school. However, parent-teacher conferences often come short of the expectations of both parents and teachers and fail to lead to lasting solutions to learners' problems. This study focuses on the implementation of parent-teacher conferences in primary schools. The problem was investigated by means of a literature study and an empirical investigation. The literature identified approaches to and models of parent involvement, common barriers to parent-teacher communication and the characteristics of effective conferences. A qualitative investigation explored the process of a small sample of parent-teacher conferences in a selected primary school in Mamelodi, Gauteng Province. Data was gathered by participant observation. Findings showed that teacher talk predominated during conferences; the importance of mutual trust and teachers' listening to parents; guiding parents to improve learning at home and barriers to communication. Recommendations based on the findings were made.

KEY TERMS

Parent involvement

Parent-teacher conferences

South African education

Primary school

Qualitative research

Participant observation

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BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM, FORMULATION OF PROBLEM AND AIMS

1.1 BACKGROUND

Active and meaningful involvement by parents is essential for effective schooling and those schools which value parent involvement tend to be more successful. Improving parent involvement is one of the most challenging tasks of educators as this does not happen automatically at a school. According to Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders and Simon (1997) a survey of literature and research which attests to the following important reasons for parent participation in school, parents are the most influential people in a child's life, parents are primary educators, parents in general are concerned about their children's education and parents have a responsibility to support the school. Finally, parents can help teachers in understanding their children. Similarly, Macbeth (1989:1) provides five points to explain the rationale for parent participation:

· parents are responsible by law for their children's education

· if most of a child's education happens outside the school, especially in the home, and if parents are educators of the child alongside educators, then it seems logical to make the two elements of school-learning and home-learning compatible

· research indicates that family-based learning influences the effectiveness of school on a child

· teachers, as agents of the education authority, have a responsibility to ensure that parents fulfil their duties

· in a democratic decentralised system, parents are major stakeholders and should be able to influence school policy through representatives

Positive parent involvement in schooling leads to improved learner achievement, enhanced self-esteem, better school learning results and higher enrolments in post secondary education (Henderson & Berla 1994:10).

Epstein et al (1997:8) suggest that parent involvement in the intellectual and social development of the child is essential and should be broadly defined. This means, according to Epstein et al

(1997), that when one speaks of parent involvement, it should ideally be a comprehensive programme. Epstein's typology of six areas of involvement fulfils these criteria and is extensively used throughout the world. Epstein (1996:215-216) identifies six areas of home-school relations. These are as follows:

· Parenting: help all families fulfil their parenting tasks and create a learning environment at home

· Communication: communicate with families about school programmes and students' progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communication

· Volunteering: improve recruitment, training work and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programmes

· Learning at home: involve families with their children in learning at home, including homework and other curriculum-linked activities as well as decision-making

· Decision-making: include families as participants in school decisions, governance and advocacy through Parent Teacher Associations, Parent Teacher Organisations (PTA/PTO's) School Councils, committees and other parental organisations

· Collaborating with community: co-ordinate resources and services for families, students and the school with business, agencies and other groups and provides services to the community

Each type of involvement poses specific challenges for its successful design and implementation and each leads to different outcomes for learners, parents and teachers (Epstein et al 1997).

1.1.1   Barriers to parent involvement

Although there is a lot of support for establishing positive and comparative home-school relations, in practice it is often difficult to realise. Moreover, the complexity of life in the new millennium makes it even more difficult for leaders and families to meet and share ideas, values and strategies (McEwan 1998:3). Successful parent involvement depends on teachers' ability to reach the parents and to establish an inviting and non-threatening environment. In practice parents and teachers do not always work comfortably with each other to achieve these aims

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(Sandell 1998:128). In many places, parents are not actively involved in the life of the school, instead they are spending most of their time and energy organising cake sales, if they are involved at all. Teacher obstacles to parent involvement are mainly caused by a lack of training in working with parents; parents, particularly poorly educated parents or those with a negative experience of school, often experience feelings of intimidation (Lemmer & Squelch 1993:98-99). But Henderson (1986:xiv) points clearly "we must find ways to helping schools and parents work together for the sake of our children." In spite of these, and the myriad other difficulties that the family-school partnership may entail, working together is critically important for learner success.

Obstacles to parent involvement may also be systemic. Epstein (in Nadine & Morris 1999) also maintains that rhetoric about "the importance of parent involvement is without financial and technical support from educational authorities". Supporting this idea (Bastiani 1995:58-59), points out that ongoing cuts in resources and support for vital home-school co-operation is particularly affecting children in city schools. In the United States, this has happened as a result of budget cuts to urban programmes and Section II funding for minority ethnic pupils and their families. Such financial cuts combine to create a situation where those with a commitment to, and active involvement in home-school participation find there are increasing challenges to establish effective home school partnerships.

1.1.2 Home-school communication and parent-teacher interviews

Home-school communication is one of the most traditional and vital forms of parent involvement but it is often poorly implemented. According to Epstein's model of parent involvement, home-school communication should reflect a co-equal partnership between families and schools. Lemmer and Van Wyk (2004: 183) have summarised the benefits that accrue when families and educators communicate effectively:

·   students do better in school
·   teachers have fewer problems with students and report greater satisfaction with their work

- parents have more positive feelings about the school and about themselves and are more likely to support school programmes
- the community is more apt to offer financial and moral support for school-based efforts

It has been well established that both parents and teachers desire more positive communication with each other and feel that their individual efforts on behalf of children would be enhanced if they could work together. In this context, parent-teacher conferences (also termed home school conferences) are an important strategy.

The value of home-school conferences has been illustrated through several research reports. In one study (Iverson, Brownlee & Walberg 1981 in Lombana 1983) the researchers show the positive effect of teacher-parent contacts on the reading achievement of several hundred low-achieving elementary school students. The benefits of increased home-school communication are many since both parents and teachers indicate they are most satisfied when they feel mutual respect between home and school (Lightfoot 1981 in Lombana 1983). Many researchers have pointed to the effects of positive home-school communication on student performance. Iverson et al (1981) report that parent school contact improves achievement in young children. Cramer (1978:18 in Little 1988) goes on to say that, for parents, the continual evaluation of parent-teacher conferences is necessary to determine which have been successful and which have not been. The benefits of a parent-teacher conference are manifold and directly affect the education that their children will receive. Once the mutual goals and beliefs about the children have been expressed, all parties can work towards their attainments. Parent-teacher conferences are becoming more frequent as a means of communicating information about children's educational performance. One survey by Phi Delta Kaplan indicated that at least 90 percent of American school districts routinely use parent-teacher conferences as the primary means of maintaining contact between the home and the school (Lombana 1983:118).

In addition to the desires of educators and parents to use parent-teacher conferences for personal communication, recent developments in education point to the increasing importance of home-school conferences (Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004). Lombana (1983:18) points that:

- instruction is becoming more highly personalised, resulting in the maintenance of more subjective data on individual students

- report cards are losing favour as a means of reporting pupil progress to parents and there is some indication that they will be abandoned in many school systems

- traditional classroom organisation is being modified, resulting in the need for more individualised methods of communicating students progress to parents

- the school is a communication centre. Parents want to know more than traditional written reports can show

- schools have employed more specialised personnel. With the growing numbers of support staff who interact with children there is increased need for personal communication with parent

1.1.3 Parent involvement in the South African context

Within the context of South African schooling, legislation, since 1994, has introduced important educational reforms which impact on parent involvement. The South African Schools Act (SASA) No 84 of 1996 (RSA 1996) defines the concept of parent, describes basic parental duties, sets requirements for schools related to parents' right to information, and provides for parent and community representation in mandatory School Governing Bodies (SGB's). These reforms have created an environment more conducive to parent involvement in schools, however, actual parent involvement remains weak (Heystek & Louw, 1999). In terms of specific implications for home-school communication as a type of parent involvement, the broad definition of parent used by the Act (RSA, 1996) implies that schools should acknowledge a variety of family types and develop a range of home-school communication strategies accordingly. Thus, teachers should communicate regularly with non-traditional caregivers, for example, the non-custodial parent in a broken home, parents who live away from the family due to migrant labour, grandparents and other relatives or older siblings who are fulfilling the care-giving function. Although many children in disadvantaged communities are cared for by grandparents or other relatives, it is exceptional for schools to engage a learner's relatives actively and purposefully in parent involvement practices (Van Wyk, 1996). Moreover, the parent's rights of access to information concerning a child which is held by either the Department of Education or a public or private school as stipulated in the Act (RSA 1996:13) has implications for home-school communication.

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This implies the school's responsibility to communicate regularly and coherently with parents about the school programme, curriculum and the learner's total development. This has particular implications for the school's communication with poorly educated parents who may not easily grasp assessment strategies, medical or psychological jargon or who may have a limited proficiency in the language of teaching and learning.

1.2   PROBLEM FORMULATION

The above discussion indicates that parent involvement in education contributes powerfully to improving learner achievement and has several benefits for families and schools. Research indicates that in this process parent-teacher conferences are an essential link between home and school. In view of this, the main research question is, *How are effective parent-teacher conferences implemented*? Sub-questions derived from the main research question are:

·   How can parent involvement be defined, what models of parent involvement exist and how is parent involvement understood in South African context?
·   What is the contribution of parent-teacher conferences to effective home-school communication, what strategies can be used to improve teacher interviews and what are the advantages of certain types of parent-teacher conferences?
·   What is the experience of parents and teachers of parent-teacher conferences in a selected school in Mamelodi?
·   How can these findings contribute to assisting educators in implementing parent-teacher conferences more effectively?

1.3   AIMS

In view of the above research problem the following objectives have been identified. The research aims:

- to define parent involvement, discuss models of parent involvement and describe how parent involvement is understood in South African context
- to describe the contribution of parent-teacher conferences to effective home-school communication, to outline strategies used to improve teacher interviews and identify advantages of certain types of parent teacher interviews
- to investigate the experience of parents and teachers of parent-teacher conferences in a selected school in Mamelodi by means of a qualitative investigation
- to provide guidelines for improvement of parent-teacher conferences

1.4   RESEARCH DESIGN

The investigation was carried out by using a literature review and an empirical investigation. A literature study was used to identify studies, policies, articles and reports relating to parent involvement with special reference to parent-teacher conferences. Both local and international sources were used to gain a better understanding of the theory of parent involvement.

The empirical investigation employed a qualitative approach whereby the researcher investigates data by using words rather than numbers (Bogan & Balkline 1992:24). No preconceived hypothesis was used. Events were studied in their natural settings without any form of construction as researchers wanted students to speak spontaneously (Sherman & Webb 1988:5). The aim is congruent with qualitative research as it is concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Schumacher & McMillan 1993:373). Thus, in this research study, parents and teachers were given the opportunity to describe their own experiences without the researcher providing ready-made solutions or responses. The purpose of the qualitative inquiry was to explore the parents' and the teacher's experiences of parent-teacher conferences during the foundation phase.

1.4.1   Selection of a site and participants

Schumacher and McMillan (1993:372) indicated that qualitative research requires a plan for choosing sites and participants for the commencement of data collection. In this research, the research site is a public primary school situated in Mamelodi Township, Tshwane in Gauteng Province. A primary school was purposefully chosen as its organisation is more conducive to

parent-teacher participation than that of a secondary school. Moreover, the school and the surrounding community are well known to the researcher and were convenient to access for research purposes.

The selection of participants was also done by means of purposeful sampling. The researcher identified information-rich participants who were likely to be "knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon... being investigated" (Schumacher & McMillan 1993:378). In the case of this study, a teacher in the Foundation Phase and ten parents were requested to participate in the research. Subsequently ten teacher-parent interviews conducted by this teacher were observed. Accessibility and willingness to participate played a role in determining the participants to be included. Permission was sought from the parents for the observation of the interviews and they were assured of the confidentiality of the data gathered.

1.4.2   Data gathering and analysis

Data gathering was done by participant observation. Participant observation allowed the researcher to observe how the teacher communicated with the parents during parent-teacher conferences. Participant observation allowed the researcher to hear, see and begin to experience reality from the point of view of the participants. All the observed interviews were recorded on audiotape and then transcribed. Data analysis was done according to qualitative techniques and procedures.

1.4.3   Demarcation and limitations of study

Research was conducted in a primary school situated in Mamelodi Township selected by judgement sampling, and using a small sample of participants which is typical of qualitative research. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised but may alert readers to both the potential of parent-teacher conferences in facilitating parent involvement in similar schools and problems associated with this form of home-school communication.

1.5   CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

1.5.1   Parent

According to the South African Schools Act (RSA 1996:4) (SASA), the term "parent" means the parent or guardian of the learner or the person who undertakes to fulfil the obligations of a person referred to above, towards the learners education at school. Lemmer and Van Wyk (1996:2) suggest including biological parents, guardians, grandparents or any other adult who is responsible for the child when attempting to establish or improve home-school relations. Parents are those with legal or quasi-legal custodianship, whether biological, adoptive or foster parents of the child who attends a particular school. This term also includes other family members (uncles, sisters, grandparents) whose involvement may be important to the child (Henderson 1986:xviii).

1.5.2 Parent-teacher conferences

Parent-teacher conferences refer to the face-to-face interaction between parent(s) and the teacher with the purpose of discussing the progress and welfare of the child. Various terms can be used interchangeably to describe this kind of communication, such as parent-teacher conferences, parent interviews, individual parent meetings, liaison, consultation and communication with parents. Parent-teacher conferences are the teacher's best way of communicating with parents. In this face-to-face interaction, information and ideas about the child can be exchanged, insight is gained, attitudes are inspired and plans for furthering the child's best development are developed (Bailard & Strang 1964:vii). Parent-teacher conferences are also an important factor in keeping the lines of communication open between parent and teacher in order to enhance the child's development. Effective parent-teacher conferences enable teachers to make partners in a team effort to strengthen students' academic, social and emotional well-being.

1.6   CHAPTER DIVISION

Chapter 1 includes a background to the study, problem formulation and aims and research design. Chapter 2 deals with literature study on parent involvement, models of parent involvement and how parent involvement is understood in South African context. Chapter 3 describes the contribution of parent-teacher conferences to effective home-school communication. It also outlines strategies used to improve teacher interviews and identifies advantages of certain types

of parent teacher interviews. Chapter 4 presents the research design used to investigate the experience of parents and teachers of parent-teacher conferences in a selected school in Mamelodi by means of a qualitative investigation and presents a discussion of the findings of the investigation. Chapter 5 provides a   summary of the research, suggests guidelines for improvement of practice and topics for future research.

1.7   SUMMARY

Good school, family and community partnership's lead to improved academic learner achievement, self-esteem, school attendance and social behaviour. Parents and teachers experience mutual support and satisfaction in achieving positive changes in children and the school. Resources available to children, teachers, parents and the school are expanded and useful collaboration with community agencies is established. Home school communication is an important component of parent involvement. In this regard, effective parent-teacher conferences are essential and usually form part of the practice of most schools. The following chapter deals with literature study on parent involvement, models of parent involvement and how parent involvement is understood in South African context.

CHAPTER 2

AN OVERVIEW OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

2.1   INTRODUCTION

There is no general definition to what constitutes good home-school relations. Moles (1982:44 in Swap 1993) reported that more than "90 percent of teachers in all parts of the country and at all grade levels stated that more home-school interaction fell into one of two categories: (1) parent-school contacts about school performance, conferences or notes home, and (2) home-learning activities-homework supervision or enrichment activities. Teachers were less likely to welcome parental involvement in the areas of curriculum development, instruction and school governance. In addition, 'both parents and teachers recognized that most communication between them was negative'" (Moles 1982:46). (In Swap 1993) Epstein (1987:124) reported that "large numbers of parents are excluded from the most common communications with the school." More than one-third of the parents do not attend parent-teacher conferences and almost two-thirds never even talk to teachers by telephone. Indeed, "most parents are not involved in deep, detailed communications with teachers about their child's programme or progress", though "most parents believe involvement is important, ... relatively few assist at school" (Epstein 1987:125). Too often, teachers are not prepared in their training to conduct either type of parent conference and must learn on the job (Manning 1985). Learning about relationship skills can help not only in conferences, but in all aspects of life.

The primary goal of this chapter is to deal with a literature study on parent involvement, models of parent involvement and how parent involvement is understood in South African context. The benefits of parent involvement as mentioned in Chapter 1 and the barriers of effective and successful parent involvement will be discussed in more detail in this chapter as well as the way in which parent involvement is conceptualised and practised in South Africa. In many countries, including South Africa, one of the strongest trends in education reform has been to give parents and in some cases community members, an increased role in governing schools (Levin in Lemmer 2000).

2.2   ADVANTAGES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The discussion of parent-teacher interviews needs greater collaboration between the school and home relationships. Van Schalkwyk (1990:25-32) describes the advantages of parent involvement in terms of its value for the teacher, the learner and the school.

2.2.1   Advantages for the learner

The following key advantages of parent involvement have been identified:

- ·   parent involvement can improve the learner's learning performance
- ·   it can improve school attendance
- ·   it can help to eliminate learning and behavioural problems. Parent involvement can increase the learners' sense of security and emotional stability (Lemmer 2002:17)

When parents of school children are involved in the process of education, their children are likely to achieve better. This heightened achievement may be due to lessening of distance between the goals of the school and goals of the home and to the positive changes in teachers' attitudes resulting from the greater sense of accountability when parents of their students are visible in the schools. The child may also achieve better because he has increased sense of control over his own destiny when he sees his parents actively engaged in decision making in the school. Epstein et al (1997:2) indicate the advantages of parent involvement for the student by stating that "the main reason to create such a partnership is to help all youngsters succeed in school and later in life." In the same vein, Henderson and Berla (1994:1) state: "The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children succeed not just in school, but throughout life."

2.2.2   Advantages for the teachers and the school

Parent involvement can engender a more positive spirit between parent and teacher. It can work to restore trust between home and the teacher. Parent involvement means that teachers can rely on parents' support while knowledge of the circumstances of learners at home can help the teacher in his or her instructional task. It can work to improve the conduct of learners. Parents can lighten

teachers' workload. Parent participation can lower the student-teacher ratio and increase opportunity for individualised education.

It is ironic that the teachers who complain about the numbers of children they must teach are frequently the same individuals who discourage parent participation in the classroom. Counsellors too, have often discouraged parent volunteers in the guidance programme, while at the same time decrying the large number of students they must serve and non-guidance tasks they must perform. Toby and Mantinea (1979 in Lombana 1983) point out that parents can provide a partial solution to the lack of professional help in the school. In addition, parents have many skills to bring to the classroom, skills that can augment those of the teacher or counsellors and add a new dimension to the educational programme.

Van Schalkwyk (1990:25-32) goes on to say that parent involvement can improve unity and co-ordination of education. The involvement of parents can mean valuable service in the interest of the school. Parent involvement can lead to an improvement in the support from the community, as well as to greater financial support.

2.2.3   Advantages for the community

According to Epstein et al (1997:48), parent participation builds positive home-school relationships where they can work together in co-operative arrangements, they have opportunities to see each others point of view and to understand responsibilities and contributions of the other. Parent participation helps increase community support for school programmes. Parent participation strengthens parent-child relationships. Most children are pleased when their parents work in the school, attend meetings and indicate an active interest in the education programme. These actions increase a child self-esteem and built more positive relationships with parents. Such relationships are further strengthened when parents learn new ways of relating to their children.

2.3   BARRIERS TO PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In theory, parents and teachers agree on the importance of parent involvement and home-school partnership. A poll taken by the National Educational Association found that 90 percent of teachers across the USA and at all grade levels thought that the more home-school interaction would be beneficial (Swap 1993:13). Epstein discovered that almost all parents, even those from the most depressed communities, are committed to their children's education. She concluded: "Parents say they want their children to succeed; they want to help them; and they need the school's and teacher's help to know what to do with their children at each grade level" (Epstein 1989:27). One would think that with both teachers and parents supporting the principle of home-school partnership and with data confirming its benefits, such programmes would be universal. The paradox is that parent involvement in the school is minimal. Despite the urgent need for partnership and the weight of supportive evidence, parents continue to be kept at a distance in most schools. One concludes that there are powerful barriers that are inhibiting educators from reaching out to parents. These barriers are changing demographics, producing school norms that do not support partnerships, limiting resources to support parent involvement and causing a lack of information about how to establish partnerships and promote positive parent attitudes.

2.3.1 Changing demographics

Families have been changing rapidly in the last few decades. Most are aware of the changes, but the extent and rapidity of the transformation are astonishing. For example, in the United States the percentage of school-age children working has increased, compared with 30 percent in 1960. There are more single parent families. Almost half of all marriages end in divorce (Swap 1993:14). The number of children having children has increased dramatically in the last decade, particularly among children less than 15 and the number of children living in poverty is increasing (Swap 1993:14).

All these changes have made educating children more complicated. Many educators feel angry at these changing conditions and blame parents for devoting less energy to their children's education and well-being. Some of the challenges of a diverse student body are subtle and go unrecognised. Children with backgrounds that are racially, linguistically or culturally different from their teacher's may experience discontinuities in values between home and school or may lose self-esteem as they see little of their own history represented and taught in the curriculum. Sometimes,

differences in values are so profound that teachers find it difficult to accept or like certain students (Swap 1993:16).

2.3.2   School norms that do not support partnership

Adult collaboration in any form is relatively rare in schools. The traditional approach to managing schools emphasises hierarchy, individualism and technology rather than dialogue, relationship and reciprocity (Swap 1993:17). As Swap (1993:17) has illustrated, teaching has been and continues to be an isolated and isolating experience. Since most schools are and have been hierarchically rather than collaboratively organised and managed, our professional preparation institutions continue to prepare teachers for this model. It is therefore not surprising that hierarchical and authoritarian principles govern the school's relationships with parents as well.

Seeley (1985:4 in Swap 1993) sees the system of managing schools as fundamentally flawed. The essential trouble is the nature of the system itself. It has become beguiled by a delivery system mentality. Public education is a professionalised, bureaucratised, governmental enterprise attempting to deliver education as a service. The system is faulty because it is designed to deliver something that cannot be delivered. The system is failing and will continue to fail until education is rediscovered as a dimension of human development dependent on personal motivation, initiative and relationships, not on systems and "service delivery." The school-based norm of individualism affects home-school relationships (Swap 1993:17-18).

2.3.3   Fear of conflict

Swap (1993:18) emphasises that one of the reasons that schools have failed to improve as organisations is that they have failed to learn how to deal constructively with conflict. Potential home-school partnerships are affected by the norm of avoiding conflict. Lightfoot (1978:20) argues that the history of home-school relationships reveals a pattern of conflict that has caused these two systems to be "a world apart." She (1978:20) explains, "Families and schools are engaged in a complementary socio-cultural task and yet they often find themselves in conflict with one another. One would expect that parents and teachers would be natural allies, but social scientists and educators' own experience recognise their adversarial relationship - one that

emerges out of their roles as they are defined by the social structure of society, not necessarily or primarily the dynamics of interpersonal behaviours". Her conclusion about the inevitability of conflict emerges from an analysis of the different relationships that parents and teachers have with children (cf also Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004:13).

2.3.4   Limited resources to support parent involvement

Although the allocation of time and money are also important components of school culture, they are also so important in the context of home-school partnerships that they deserve their own category. In the ensuing paragraphs, Swap (1993:22-25) identified these factors.

2.3.4.1   Scarce time allocated to relationships with parents

Time is one of the most important resources in a school and almost all of it is allocated to direct teaching. A factor of school life is that in most systems the importance of collaborative planning for the continual improvement of schools is not acknowledged and honoured by the creation of a schedule that supports regular, frequent and compensated meetings of adults. In keeping with this model, outreach to parents is seldom supported by the allocation of scheduled, compensated time. Finding time continues to be a barrier to home-school partnerships.

2.3.4.2   Money not easily allocated to partnership programmes

In many states, the financial resources that are available to schools are declining. Looked at in another way, such decisions also signal that schools do not consider home-school partnerships essential to their mission. The lack of availability of money for start-up or expansion of partnership activities is a psychological and practical barrier to successful outreach.

2.3.4.3   Lack of information about how to establish partnership

In a survey of 3,700 elementary teachers in 600 schools, Swap (1993:24), found that although most teachers agreed that parent involvement contributed to student achievement they also reported not knowing how to establish parent involvement programmes. Moreover, they had

reservations about whether they could motivate parents to come to meetings or work with their children on learning activities at home. Clearly a barrier to successful parent involvement programmes is inadequate information and training.

2.3.5 Attitudes of parents and educators

Educators and parents tend to blame each other for many problems that currently exist among young people. In a representative study (Vernberg & Medway 1981 in Lombana 1983:2), the researchers asked a number of parents and teachers to describe instances of child misbehaviour (conduct, personality or achievement problems) that had produced disagreement between them. Teachers attributed home-related factors as the main cause. Parents cited home-factors less often than any other and teachers never attributed the behaviour to school-related reasons.

Many parents view teachers as uncaring individuals who teach only because they cannot qualify for more demanding positions, who do not really care for the children they work with and who are only concerned with obtaining more and more time away from school. Some of the complaints that parents expressed concerning schools included feeling helpless, powerless and ignored by school staff. They also feel that teachers will retaliate against their children if they complain about poor teaching, and that educators unfairly blame them for problems that belong to the school. Low-income parents in particular fear being intimidated by school staff. Many black parents think educators have little faith in their children's ability to succeed in school. Parents have traditionally responded to ill-treatment by the school by avoidance.

2.4 APPROACHES TO AND MODELS OF HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Swap (1993:28) presents three models of home-school relationships: protective model, the school-to-home transmission model and the curriculum enrichment model.

2.4.1 The protective model

This is the dominant model of home-school relationships. The goal of the protective model is to reduce conflict between parents and educators, primarily through the separation of parents' and educators' functions. Swap refers to this model as the protective model because its aim is to protect the school from interference by parents. This model is driven by three assumptions:

·	parents delegate to the school the responsibility of educating their children

·	parents hold school personnel accountable for the results

·	educators accept this delegation of responsibility

According to this model parent involvement in decision-making or collaborative problem solving would be seen as inappropriate and an interference with the educator's job. Swap (1993:29) indicates that many teachers share these attitudes. Here are two examples of teachers expressing viewpoints when they were interviewed by others. "Parents should be actively involved with students at home. The responsibility of parents ends at home. Teachers are responsible for teaching".

The single advantage for this model is that it is generally effective for achieving its goal of protecting the school against parental intrusion in most circumstances.

The disadvantages are that it:

·	exacerbates many conflicts between home and school by creating no structures or predictable opportunities for preventive problem solving

·	ignores the potential of home-school collaboration for improving student achievement

·	rejects rich resources for enrichment and school support available from families and other members of the community that could be available to the schools

2.4.2   The school-to-home transmission model

According to Swap (1992:58 in Van Wyk 1996) the goal of this model is to specify what parents should do to support their children at home. The primary expectation is that children's achievement is fostered by continuity of expectations and values between home and school. School personnel should identify the values and practices outside school that contribute to school success. Parents should endorse the importance of schooling, reinforce school expectations at

home, provide conditions at home that nurture development and support school success, and ensure that the child meets minimum academic and social requirements.

In contrast to the protective model, the school-to-home transmission model acknowledges the continuous interchange between home and school and the important role that parents play in enhancing the educational achievement of their children. Parents have an important responsibility to help children succeed within the guidelines established by the school culture. Their role includes preparing their children to begin school, encouraging them to succeed in school and transmitting values, attitudes and skills that characterise those who succeed.

Parents may be involved on advisory boards, on decision-making committees but if the programme is operating according to a school-to-home transmission model, their numbers are small and they are expected to play a supportive and subordinate role. Within the school-to-home transmission model, it is school personnel who define goals and programmes. Two-way communication is not sought because the goal is for parents to understand and support the school's objectives.

The focus is clear in the words of a teacher interviewed who illustrated many of the assumptions of the school-to-home transmission model. She explained that parents should be trained to parent, talk to their children more, interact with children and take them places, come to school when called and take an interest in their children's education (Swap 1993:31).

A closer look should be taken at what schools transmit. The question of what skills, values and attitudes schools transmit to homes is a very complex one, as schools have very powerful cultures. Children whose parents feel that they can and should be a part of the social mainstream have the best to acquire the school skills that will lead to school and life success (Comer 1980:192). For this reason clear transmission of information can be a welcome offering to parents, particularly when they have no hard access to the social mainstream and seek such access for their children. However, inherent in this philosophy are also four potential disadvantages.

Swap (1992:60-61) reflects that firstly an unwillingness to consider parents as equal partners can have important strengths. That is, relationships may be defined through a contract and parents

may be reinforced for meeting their obligations. Parents may or may not be consulted about what should be done at home or how it should be done. Secondly all parents may not be able to devote sufficient time and energy to parent involvement activities if such conditions as dangerous housing, poor health or stringent employment requirements interfere.

The third disadvantage of the home-to-school transmission model is that it may be difficult to draw clear boundaries between the roles of school and home in formal education. In its most exaggerated form, parents would be asked to teach whatever skills their child was not acquiring regardless of the financial or emotional costs of families (Swap 1992:61).

A fourth concern is the danger of demeaning the value and importance of the family's culture in the effort to transmit the values and goals of the school.

2.4.3   The curriculum enrichment model

The goal of curriculum enrichment model is to expand and extend the school's curriculum by incorporating the contribution of families (Swap 1993). The assumption is that families have important expertise to contribute and that the interaction between parents and school personnel and the implementation of the revised curriculum will enhance the educational objectives of the school.

This orientation has emerged for two different reasons. One of these has been to make the school curriculum more accurately reflect the views, values, history and learning styles of the families represented in the school particularly immigrants and minorities. The logic that drives this effort at curriculum reform is that continuity of learning between home and school is of critical importance in encouraging children's learning. A second reason for parents to be involved in curriculum enrichment occurs when schools can improve their curriculum by drawing on the special expertise that parents may have shared by virtue of their education and background.

In each case, two important assumptions guide the interaction between parents and teachers.

·   parents and educators should work together to enrich curriculum objectives and content

·   relationships between home and school are based on mutual respect and both parents and teachers are seen as experts and resources in this process of discovery

The curriculum enrichment model is different from other models of involvement because its assumptions do not necessarily permeate all aspects of the school culture and structure as its focus is on curriculum and instruction (Swap 1993:39).

2.4.4   The partnership model

According to Swap (1993:49), the primary goal of this model is for parents and educators to work together to accomplish a common mission for all children in school to achieve success. Two important assumptions are:

·   accomplishing the joint mission require a re-envisioning of the school environment and need to discover new policies, practices in order to realise the vision
·   accomplishing the joint mission demands collaboration among parents, community representatives and educators Because the task is very challenging and requires many resources

The partnership philosophy differs from the school-to-home transmission model in its emphasis on two-way communication, parental strengths and problem-solving with parents. It differs from the curriculum enrichment model in promoting a single unifying mission that suffuses the entire culture and galvanises all aspects of the school.

Although curriculum revision is seen as an essential tool in achieving the mission, the emphasis on partnership also extends to such areas as social events. In the partnership model, parent involvement is seen not as addendum, but as an indispensable component of school reform.

2.4.5   The social capital approach: Coleman's theory of parent involvement

Coleman (1987:32) asserts that throughout history, children grew up in the context of the household and neighbourhood. All the activities and facilities for training that would prepare them

for adulthood took place within the household. The change occurred when, with the movement of economic productive activities outside the household. Men left the farm or neighbourhood shop for the office or factory. An indication of this is the percentage of men in the labour force who are in agriculture. This has led to a weakening of family structures and an inability to fill some of the tasks previously ascribed to it, for example, the socialisation of the child.

Although Scott-Jones (1988:66) agrees that family structure has been weakened, she feels that assumptions have been made regarding different types of family structure. In this regard she sites research showing that mothers employment outside the home is not associated with low achievement, that actually for low income families, children whose mothers are gainfully employed have a higher achievement rate than comparable children whose mothers do not work outside the home.

Coleman (1987:35) states that as the formal institutions of child rearing schools and daycare centres are structured, they can provide a certain class of inputs into the socialisation process.

· the first category of inputs, opportunities, demands and rewards comes from schools.
· the second category of inputs comes only from the child's closer more intimate and more persistent environment. These inputs can be loosely described as attitudes, effort and conception of self and the environment which most affects nearly all children, the social environment of the household. This means that the children's attitudes toward and expectation of education is rooted in the home. This includes one's own effort.

However, many families at all social levels fail to provide an environment that allows their children to benefit from schools as they currently exist. But Coleman (1987:36) also points that families provide the building blocks that make learning possible. Where the variables from the home are absent, problems are likely to occur. Coleman (1987:35) concludes that the division of labour that leads a household to concentrate on careers and income, while leaving to the school the task of socialisation, merely results in an increase in the one set of inputs, the opportunities, demands and rewards, while ignoring those which interact with them, the attitudes, effort and conception of self. Coleman and Hoffer (1987:36 in Coleman 1987) note that what they mean by social capital in the raising of children is the social networks and the relationships between adults

and children that are of value for the child's growing up. Social capital exists not only within the family but also outside the family in the community.

Schleicher (1992:26 in Van Wyk 1996) adds that it is well-known that family socialisation has a greater influence on the child's attitudes, learning ability and even on his or her competence in school subjects than the school does. The failure to bridge the social and cultural gap between home and school may lie at the root of the poor academic performance of many poor minority children. (Comer 1988:25; Epstein 1987:121). Comer (1988:25) and Epstein (1987:121 in Van Wyk 1996) explain that parents lay the groundwork for students' success in school by building their children's self-confidence, self-concept and self-reliance. If these aspects of home training are not completed by the time the child starts school, they become a mutual concern and shared responsibility of the family and the school. Coleman goes on to say that an indirect and non-obvious implication of this is that the strict separation of the church and state, as practised in America, has been harmful to the most disadvantaged children, particularly those in the black community. A study by Hoffer, Kitgore and Coleman (in Solomon 1991:360) showed that students in Catholic schools achieved at a higher level than did students from comparable backgrounds in public schools. They went on to say "we concluded that the community surrounding Catholic school, a community created by the church reduced dropouts among students at risk of dropping out." In the public schools, those coming from a single-parent household increased their chances of dropping out of school. In Catholic schools, however, a child from a single-parent family was no more likely to drop out than was a child from a two-parent family. Coleman and Hoffer (in Solomon 1991:360) indicate that the separation has prevented the schools making use of the social capital provided by the church to support the goals of the school. In many black communities in the US, the most powerful community institution is the church and when linked to school goals, it can be harnessed to provide rich social capital.

2.5   EPSTEIN'S MODEL OF FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

A comprehensive model of partnership can provide a broader view of family, community and school relations.

2.5.1   Theoretical perspectives

According to Lemmer (2000:62), two main strands of research have influenced current discussions about home-school partnerships:

·   family learning environments that positively affect students' school achievement
·   school initiatives to involve parents in schooling

Research on family practices and school-based parent involvement coincided with research investigating characteristics of the effective school. The findings established a link between effective schools, family practices and school-based parent involvement programmes (Chrispeels 1992:9). Various typologies of home-school partnerships were developed which combined in different ways with the aim of creating effective family practices alongside effective school programmes with the view to creating effective schools (Chrispeels 1992:15). Substantial work was done by Coleman (1977), Gordon (1977), Comer (1984), Swap (1987) and Epstein (1955) to mention a few(in Lemmer 2000). These theories and typologies created a framework for different models of parent involvement programmes implemented in various schools, (McLean & Sandell 1998 in Lemmer 2000:62). Each scholar and his or her projects are distinctive. Some focus on family involvement in special education, elementary, middle and high schools. Effective partnership models demonstrate certain common themes. They

·   are school-based and school-driven
·   conceptualise the family and community very broadly and flexible
·   allow for a continuum of involvement from very active, complex school-based activities with maximum face to face parent-teacher interaction to supportive simple home-based activities with little, if any, face to face parent-teacher interaction
·   form part of a school improvement plan linked to specific outcomes that parent involvement is not regarded as a panacea which produces generic results. Thus, a specific practice is linked to a specific improvement in the school.

2.5.2   Epstein's theory of parent involvement

A comprehensive model of partnership is that of Epstein. She (1996:214) firstly developed a theoretical model to explain parent involvement and identifies three perspectives:

·   separate responsibilities of families and schools
·   shared responsibilities of families and schools
·   sequential responsibilities of families and schools

Some schools stress the separate responsibilities of families and schools, that is, the inherent incompatibility, competition and conflict between them. School bureaucracies and family organisations are directed by educators and parents respectively. They are thought to best fulfil their different roles independently (Epstein 1987:121). The district goal of parents and teachers is considered to best be achieved when teachers keep a professional distance from and equal standards for children in their classrooms, in contrast with parents who develop personal relationships with and individual expectations for their children at home. In contrast, the shared responsibility of the school and home emphasise the coordination, cooperation and complementary nature of schools and families and encourage collaboration between the two (Epstein 1987:121). Schools and families share responsibilities for the socialisation of the child. These common goals for children are achieved most effectively when teachers and parents work together. According to this perspective, an overlap of responsibilities between parents and teachers is expected. Finally, the sequential perspective stresses the critical states of parents and teachers' contribution to child development (Epstein 1987:121). Parents teach needed skills to children until the time of their formal education around the ages of five or six. Then, teachers assume the primary responsibility for children's education.

These major theoretical perspectives on home-school relations have a profound effect on and either encourage or discourage parent involvement in the school. They explain the differences in philosophies and approaches of teachers and parents and produce more or fewer, family-school connections.

2.5.3   The theory of overlapping spheres of influence

Epstein's (1996:214) perspective of overlapping spheres of influence posits that the work of the most effective families and schools overlap and they share goals and missions. The model of overlapping spheres of influence includes both external and internal structures. The external model recognises that the three contexts in which children learn and grow - the family, school and community - can be drawn together or pushed apart. Some practices are conducted separately by schools, families and communities and some are conducted jointly in order to strengthen children's learning (Epstein et al 1997:3).

The internal model of interaction of schools, families and communities shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school and in the community. These social relationships can take place at an institutional level or at an individual level (Epstein et al 1997:3). The model of overlapping spheres assumes that the mutual interests of families and schools can be successfully promoted by the policies and programmes of organisations and actions of individuals in the organisations. (Epstein 1987:130). In short then the model recognises that, although some practices of families and schools are conducted independently, others reflect the shared responsibilities of parents and educators for children's learning.

When teachers adhere to the perspective of separate responsibilities, they emphasise the specialised skills required by teachers for school training and by parents for home training. With specialisation comes a division of labour that pulls the spheres of school and family influences apart (Epstein 1996:104). When teachers and parents emphasise their shared responsibilities, they support the generalisation of skills required by teachers and by parents to produce successful students. Their combined endeavour pushes the spheres of family and school influence together, increases interaction between parents and school and creates *school-like families* and *family-like schools.*

A *family-like school* recognises each child's individuality and makes each child feel special and included. Such schools welcome all families and not just those that are easy to reach (Epstein 1995:702). A *school-like family* recognises that each child is also a learner and it reinforces the importance of school, homework and the activities that build academic skills and feelings of success (Epstein 1995:702). In later publications, Epstein added the community as a third sphere of influence. This means that communities with groups of parents, create *school-like*

opportunities, events and programmes that reinforce, recognise and reward learners for good progress, creativity and excellence (Epstein 1995:702).

Communities also create family-like settings, services and events to enable families to better support their children. *Community-minded families* and learners help their neighbourhoods and other families. Schools and communities talk about programmes and services that are family-friendly.

Since it is assumed that the child is the reason for the connection between home and school, the model focuses on the key role, the child as student in interactions between families and schools, parents and teachers. Students are the key to the success of school and family partnerships. Epstein (1995:702) explains that "The unarguable fact is that students are the main actors in their education and success in school". Partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide and motivate students to produce their own successes. According to Epstein (1995:702) if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard in the role of student, they are more likely to do their best academically and to remain in school.

2.5.4 Epstein's typology of parent involvement

Epstein's framework of six major types of involvement that fall within the areas of overlapping spheres evolved from many studies and the work of educators in schools (cf Chapter 1). Epstein et al (1997) briefly describe the six types of parent involvement as follows:

·   Type 1 - parenting: schools should assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development and setting home conditions to support learning at each stage and grade level.

·   Type 2 - communication: schools should communicate with families about school programmes and students' progress with school-to-home and home-to-school communication.

·   Type 3 - volunteering: schools should improve recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at school or in other locations to support students and school programmes.

- Type 4 - learning at home: schools should involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curricular-linked activities and decisions.
- Type 5 - decision-making: schools should include parents as participants in school decisions, governance and advocacy activities through PTA's committees, councils and other parent organisations.
- Type 6 - collaborating with the community: schools should coordinate the work and resources of the community, business, colleges or universities, and such like.

2.6   PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Prior to the 1994 democratic elections the South African education system was organised along racial lines. The system then   changed from a racially-differentiated to a geographically-differentiated system. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa introduced the democratisation of the education system and the concept of partnership among stakeholders in education through co-operative governance. The SASA Act no. 84 of 1996 (RSA 1996) went further by defining the concept of parent, describing basic parental duties and providing for parent and community representation in mandatory school governing bodies (SGB's). Parents or guardians have the primary responsibility for the education of their children, the parents rights to choose includes choice of language, cultural or religious basis of the child's education (Education White Paper 1:21). The SASA Act no. 84, 1996 indicates that 'parent' means the parent or guardian of a learner, the person legally entitled to custody of a learner or the person who undertakes to fulfil the obligations of a child. The Act also sets out the rights of learners and teachers and includes the prohibition of corporal punishment in all schools.

SASA (RSA 1996) indicates that the governing body of a public school comprises elected members, the principal, co-opted members, educators and non-teaching staff as well as learners, in the case of secondary schools and a parent to act as a chairperson. Every three years the parent body of a school has the right to elect parent representatives on the SGB. Their responsibilities are to determine the school policy, admissions, a code of conduct, language and maintain physical facilities. They are to be involved in whole school development and to recommend the appointment and dismissal of teachers and non-teaching staff.

SASA (RSA 1996) allows the school governing body to determine school fees in consultation with the parent body but prohibits any child being denied the right to education on the ground that his/her parents are unable to pay. Such parents can be exempted from paying. Subject to this act parents must ensure the school attendance of every child for whom he/she is responsible, from age seven to fifteen or the ninth grade. All schools are able, at least in theory, to raise funds to improve facilities and employ additional teachers (RSA 1996).

2.7   CONCLUSION

This chapter explains several different models for adult collaboration and for home-school relationships as the first step in evaluating one's own system and developing a vision of change. For purposes of this research, frameworks and approaches to parent involvement models of home-school relationships, Coleman's theory of parental involvement and Epstein's model of family-school partnerships, have been discussed as well as their implications for parent involvement programmes in school. In South Africa, research shows a complete lack of parental involvement in certain communities while in others parents have always been involved. The situation has improved compared to imbalances prior to 1994 with regard to the involvement of parents in the education of the learners, mainly due to the provisions made by the SASA. Chapter 3 discusses the parent-teacher communication with special reference to parent-teacher interviews.

CHAPTER 3

PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter a literature review concerning parent involvement was discussed. This chapter focuses on parent-teacher communication with special reference to parent-teacher interview in the foundation phase of a primary school. Parent-teacher conferences should be models of good communication benefiting children's learning. For communication to be effective it must be two-way. Newman (1998:100) stresses, "Don't wait for a problem to arise before visiting the school and getting to know the teacher." Welch (1986:5) indicates that communication should be established as soon as possible at the beginning of the school year.

Moreover, the benefits of teacher-parent cooperation are strongly supported by research (Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004). Schools should be warm and welcoming places for parents and their children, providing the opportunity to share information and to engage in planning for the future of children (Stevens & Tollafield 2003:52).

3.2 COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

When tracing the history of home-school relationships, it becomes apparent that the earliest areas of conflict involved communication. Parents and teachers each complained that the other refused to understand their point of view and to acknowledge their efforts concerning education. Problems of communication remain the most serious aspect interfering with the establishment of viable home-school relationships. Both parents and educators acknowledge that they have not been successful in communicating with each other, which they do not send clear messages or accept those that they receive. They acknowledge that communication, mis-communication or lack of communication is involved in every aspect of the home-school relationships and that breakdowns in the communication process exist at every turn (Lombana 1983:42).

3.2.1   Barriers to effective communication

Because the process of communication is so complex and involves so many different variables, it is inevitable that problems will arise. Educators need to be aware of the various barriers to communication in order to counteract them.

Barriers to communication can be grouped into three broad categories:

- difficulties arising because of human nature
- difficulties arising because of the process of communication and
- difficulties arising because of environmental conditions

3.2.2.1   Barriers caused by human nature

The ways in which individuals are alike and the ways in which they differ both contribute to communication problems. According to Lombana (1983:43) the basic motive of all human behaviour concerns an instinct to preserve the self-concept and any threats to the self-concept are seen as major communication barriers. Because people differ in their background, experiences and viewpoints, they will attack different meanings to words and other forms of communication. During a conference with a parent, an educator may selectively attend those statements made by the parent that appear most consistent with the educators previously developed stereotype of the parent.

3.2.2.2   Barriers caused by the communication process

Distortions of meaning often occur because of the imperfect paths involved in the transmittal of information. Unfortunately, most communication is not clear. The sender's words are influenced by his or her experiences, feelings and beliefs. These are accompanied by certain nonverbal expressions that may or may not validate the spoken word.

3.2.2.3   *External barriers to communication*

Although the primary barriers to effective communication usually involve the sender, the receiver or the various processes they use to communicate, there are external conditions that can contribute to breakdown distractions such as noise, lack of time and privacy. Within a school setting, educators are sometimes hampered in their communication with parents by rigid rules of hierarchy, which mandate that several different individuals be informed, give permission or participate in conversations with parents. If the atmosphere is such that individuals are distrustful of each other, work primarily alone, then viable communication efforts will be hampered regardless of the efforts of the individuals involved (Lombana 1983:44).

Bastiani (1995:12) also indicates that strengthening parents rights as consumers is individualistic and divisive. Parents help "police" the system, as vigilantes, involving parents in their children's schools. This is considered a key strategy for compensating for an underfunded and inadequate public education service. There is a risk that home-school relations create advantages for those parents and families who need it least and further widens the gap between them and the school as well as other families. Families and schools are very different kinds of institutions.

Rotter (1982:5-6) states that teacher-parent cooperation has been demonstrated to be an effective means of maximising learning as well as parent-teacher conferences. The continuing demand for these is the legitimate right of parents to have a voice in the education of their child. From both legal and social perspectives, parents have become more interested in the day-to-day activities of the school. For the most, this is a welcome development. But unless parents and teachers are open with each other, problems may arise. When parents and teachers view the educational process as a collaborative effort, the parent-teacher conference becomes a key instructional strategy that will enhance the child's growth and promote more effective learning. Roadblocks to effective parent-teacher conferences are made up of the anxieties of the teacher, the parent or both. As a result of these anxieties, whatever source, needed contacts between home and school are often avoided and unfortunately, many unanswered school-related problems become compounded by neglect. So it is with an unresolved problem. Out of fear or reprisals, many teachers avoid the parent contacts necessary to deal with a problem before it becomes serious. The irony is that one-third of these

problems can be eliminated through face-to-face discussion by the parties involved (Rotter 1982:5).

One caution, however, is that interactions between parents and teachers can be for better or for worse. Inappropriate procedures and inadequate skills and knowledge can create problems that may not have existed before the meeting. This critical point alone should convince teachers of the importance of a set of appropriate skills for parent-teacher conferences. Teachers who acquire these skills can improve their interactions with parents (Welch 1986:5).

3.3   PARENT- TEACHER CONFERENCES

A strong home-school connection is crucial for children's learning environment. Parents must share the teacher's open and sharing approach to conferences. Honest sharing in a confidential setting will bring better understanding of the child as an individual. Parent- teacher conferences can help parents realise that many factors affect a child's education in the classroom and that measurement of school success is more than a number or letter grade.

Parent- teacher conferences allow time to discuss the importance of the child following a routine, having respect for both adults and children, and so on. An interview should be a time to talk about those areas that are not specifically noted on a report card, but still affect the child's learning (Newman 1998:101). Well planned and well conducted parent-teacher conferences can encourage significant parent-involvement (Newman 1998:101). She reminds us that while parents have to adjust to one teacher, teachers must adjust to twenty children and their parents.

Ten-point parent conference checklists with questions, practical ideas and common sense tips that can be used to create a positive climate that enhances the conference process for parents and teachers. A checklist is a helpful to gauge whether your school setting has the key ingredients needed for optimal communication (Stevens 2003:522-524). The checklist below is derived from Stevens (2003).

3.3.1 Invitation techniques

Teachers can invite parents to school in a number of ways. For routine conferences, public announcements on radio, having students create and take home individual invitations. Updating programme delivery formats to meet changing community and parent needs is important today Stevens (2003:525).

3.3.2 Pleasant encounters

As soon as people enter a school building, they get a sense of how inviting that environment is. Father should feel as welcome as mothers. They sometimes feel alienated because of traditional stereotypes that view fathers as uninvolved in the education of their children. At conferences, do teachers barricade themselves behind their desks, while parents are forced to sit in child-sized chairs or desks? Providing coffee or other refreshments for both parents and teachers can also create an atmosphere that is conducive to open communication (Stevens 2003:526).

3.3.3 Pertinent information

When planning a parent meeting or conference, does your school leadership consider what parents want and need? The more parents involved in planning and decision making, especially parents from culturally different backgrounds, the more likely they are to attend school programmes. To reach parents it is vital that the school's staff ask what parents want and provide them with that (Stevens 2003:522).

3.3.4 Positive information

How do your school's teachers view parents and children? Some teachers may have a tendency to blame parents rather than attempt to help them. Children's parents can be seen as colleagues. Their cultures, perspectives, and such like, may be different from those of their child's teacher, but it is important for teachers to learn as much as possible about them (Stevens 2003: 524).

3.3.5 Preparation activities

What are the objectives of the conference? What specific information do teachers wish to obtain from parents or convey to them? When getting ready for a conference, teachers need to determine the purpose, focus or plan for the conference. They should be prepared with the main questions or points they wish to discuss, as well as the examples of student work or behaviour. Every child has a strength that a teacher can point out. Simply preparing can help keep a conference focussed on the specific goals a teacher wishes to accomplish (Stevens 2003: 524).

3.3.6   Good communication

Do you and your colleagues practice good communication skills? During the meeting it may be important to stop, look and listen to what is actually going on. Are you making eye contact with the parents? Is there actual communication and interaction? It pays to monitor your use of communication skills, reflection, paraphrasing and summarising. Is your language easily understandable or is it educational jargon? One goal of the conference is the formation of an alliance between the teacher and the parent (Stevens 2003: 527).

3.3.7   Participation and involvement

Are parents really involved in the conference or are they left out of the process? Asking parents for ideas and suggestions is important. Getting everyone to participate actively and collaboratively is the most difficult part of a parent-conference. Treating each person with warmth and respect will help encourage him or her to participate (Stevens 2003: 527).

3.3.8   Planning for the future

After a consensus has been reached, it is necessary to develop a plan and determine whether there are any problems with it. Do any parties need support to ensure that the plan is implemented? At the close of the conference teachers should offer a brief summary statement that mentions their availability for future assistance to parents and any special provisions made for monitoring student progress (Stevens 2003: 528).

3.3.9   Paper record

Don't let plans made at your meetings be forgotten. Giving a copy of this summary to parents provides official documentation of the meeting and allows them to easily recall what was said (Stevens 2003:524).

3.3.10 Partnership for progress

Does your school create comfortable and productive parent-teacher conferences? The suggestions listed above should help one to work effectively with parents, as well as helping school staff members to create increased respect and comfortable environment for communication. Positive, dynamic conferences between teachers and parents can pave the way to maximising home-school cooperation and providing vital skills for the student's future education (Stevens 2003: 524).

3.4   WISE'S TIPS FOR PARENT-TEACHER INTERVIEWS

According to Wise (2000), parent-teacher conferences are opportunities to share a child's extra-curricular or academic progress. Teachers should be in control of the situation as much as possible, but at the same time realise that there is no one best way to handle the variety of circumstances they will encounter. A few simple suggestions before, during and after each conference will heighten the probability of success (Wise 2000:51). Wise (2000:48) gives suggestions for successful parent-teacher conference.

3.4.1 Tips for educators

Although some educators prefer to place their desks between themselves and parents, holding the conference in an open area where one is seated face-to-face creates a less threatening environment. Individual classrooms work best, as they provide privacy and confidentiality.

Prepare a conference itinerary. Be flexible about what is discussed and when. A copy of the progress report should be available to each student's parents at the conference <u>and past student files</u>. Educators should not take notes while speaking with parents. Keeping good notes help one

to monitor student development and is a reminder to follow up. Parents usually feel as if they are entering the educators domain and will likely follow their lead.

Convey a positive attitude. Never allow comments about other students to enter into the conversation. It is unprofessional to compare one child's abilities to another's. If a parent inquires about the musical aptitude of another student state that this type of information about a student is confidential.

Some parents may view this meeting as an open invitation to speak unfavourably about the educator's policies. During these times one should be aware of personal emotional reaction to criticism. Disguise any hostility you may feel and remain congenial. Regardless of the circumstances, approach these parents as individuals with issues to be resolved rather than as enemies to be defeated.

Listening is an art that involves hearing both facts and feelings. Listening tactfully will enable one to gain insight into both parents and students. Observe non-verbal signals as well, such as hesitation, rolling eyes. Don't rush the conference. Most structured appointments comprise fifteen-to-twenty minute sessions. If the conference needs additional time, be proactive by scheduling a follow-up meeting. Use statements such as "I feel it would be in the best interest of [child's name] if we could meet again to discuss this matter further. When would it be a good time for you?

Wise (2000:50) points that a communication technique known by the abbreviation P.N.P. (positive, negative, positive), has been used with great success for many years. The premise is simple, begin and end each conference with a positive, encouraging comment about the child. For example, if a student has an occasional discipline problem, but has otherwise performed well in your music class, begin the conference by stating a positive fact about the student.

Begin with the positive and clearly state, in a caring and concerned manner, the discipline problem encountered, one's concern about the continuation of this behaviour, suggestions for resolution and one or more parental action-steps.

An "action-step" is a specified request to the parents to assist their child in accomplishing one or more structured goals. Parents are willing to help their child if they know what to do and how to do it, so try to provide every parent with at least one action-step. Formulates these requests in advance of the conference and list them on the progress report. In a likelihood of a learning problem, teachers can request parents to encourage consistent practice habits. Other action-steps might include parental monitoring, scheduling study time, establishing parent-teacher-student contracts, and such like. Action-steps promote positive educational encounter in that parents and teachers work together toward a common goal on behalf of the child.

On rare occasions, parents enter the conference ready for battle (Wise 2000:51). If one is confronted, remain calm and address the charge with conviction and rationality. If the meeting continues in an argumentative mode despite one's best efforts, state understanding for the parent's concern and suggest a meeting with the principal to discuss the matter further. Under no circumstances should verbal abuse be allowed. If it happens, be direct and forbid be spoken to in such a manner and immediately conclude the conversation until a meeting with the principal can be arranged. Leave the room and immediately record the encounter, including the dialogue that may have ensued. At the earliest convenience, report the incident to the supervisor and submit a written copy of the transcription, keeping a copy for your files. One has the right to expect the administrator co-operate and be supportive in resolving the issue. Subsequent meetings with the parents concerned should be held only in the presence of the principal or supervisor.

3.4.2   Tips for parents

The parent is the child's first teacher and his or her attitude toward school and education will continue to affect the child's attitude. Wise (2000) gives the following advice to parents to ensure good parent-teacher conferences:

· 	get to know your child's teacher when school begins
· 	plan for conferences by talking to your child and jotting down questions
· 	become familiar with the books and homework
· 	decide with the teacher how you can be an effective home-partner

·   request another conference if you feel additional help is needed to speak with other school staff

·   be confident

3.5   WELCH'S SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

One way to create time for communication is to use the time spent complaining about a problem to try and solve it. The parents should view and treat the teacher as a professional who is competent to do his/her job. In treating him/her as a professional, parents should arrange mutually suitable times for conferences and give the teacher the freedom to conduct educational activities as she/he deems appropriate. Parents and teachers should try to avoid "passing the buck" and say the problem is the fault of the last teacher, his/her mother et cetera. They must be open, frank and trust each other, refrain from talking in generalities, discuss the relevant behaviour , so that they can begin making plans for an appropriate intervention. Whenever teachers and parents meet, all parties should try to remain calm, patient and objective. Often in these situations, parents and teachers will make statements that are hurtful and create anger for the other. Remember that the best decisions are made with the intellect rather than the emotions and that there are two sides to every story. The parents and teachers should let the child know that they support each other and have mutually acceptable information and plans. This type of teamwork can assist the child in overcoming problems. Use of the word "we" can convey

mutual support and agreement to the child, that is "we have agreed to have a home school-contract in an effort to help you" (Welch 1986:10).

3.6   TYPES OF CONFERENCES

3.6.1   The intake conference

Hoerr (1997:44), explains how a Missouri school reversed the parent-teacher conference format by asking themselves how they should change their communication with parents at conferences. Instead of using conferences as occasions for teachers to tell parents about their children, they dedicated their first parent-teacher conference as an occasion to listen to parents.

In the past as in most schools, they scheduled their first parent-teacher conferences in November (early in US school year) after issuing the first report card. Instead they moved the first conference to the last week in September, knowing well that their teachers would not have had time to be knowledgeable about their students. They called it an "Intake Conference" and told the participants that they expected the parents to do the talking and the teachers the listening 75 to 80 percent of the time.

A letter was sent home to parents stating, " You've known your children for years and we've only had them for a few weeks." In addition, a list of discussion questions for parents to consider were sent home. Parents loved telling teachers about their children, their strengths and weaknesses, and so on. Teachers learned a lot about family dynamics and gained an understanding of how to work with parents. Intake conferences are now a tradition at their school and they have developed a second list of discussion questions related to parents attitudes regarding relevant racial and ethnic issues as an integral part of school policy. Intake conferences do more to help them learn parents' perceptions of their children's abilities. They also help to equalise the power relationship between parents and teachers by showing that parents have valuable insights and that teachers can learn by listening to them.

3.6.2   The group conference

According to Garfield (2000), the group conference deals with the question: How do I introduce parents to my program? "Tutoring is a waste when individuals can learn just as well in a group", applies not only to classroom teaching but to parent conferencing as well. Consequently, at the beginning of the school year, a group-parent meeting serves as a general get-acquainted, information giving conference. Much time can be saved in subsequent individual conferences, because:

·   parents have had a chance to become acquainted with the child's teacher and know what he/she is like
·   they have seen the classroom, materials and books and have heard what their child will study and be expected to accomplish in school and through homework

·　　they have learned some ways they can assist in the accomplishment and what to do if there is a problem

·　　they have been informed about how and when they will receive more specific information about their child

·　　they have had general first-of-the-year concerns and questions answered (Garfield 2000)

Here is a sample agenda for a group parent meeting (Garfield 2000).

(a)　　Getting acquainted,

parent name tags, with child's name should also be available.

(b)　　Objectives for the year: the presentation phase of the meeting begins with a statement of general objectives for the year.

(c)　　How parents can contribute to student's achievement: examples are "provided a half hour of reading time each evening when television is turned off. Make up rhyming words, synonyms, and such like when riding in a car.

(e)　　Response on parent questions: we respond to the queries of parents that were obtained through the invitation questionnaire and not covered in the presentation.

(f)　　Expression of appreciation for parents.

(g)　　Attendance and prompt dismissal.

Parents are tired. Teachers are also tired and don't let the meeting drag on past the specified time. A successful group conference sets the tone for the year and builds anticipation of satisfying future home-school conferences.

3.6.3　The reporting conference

The reporting conference deals with the question: How is the student doing? Parents have the right to and responsibility for periodically securing information about their child's functioning in school. The teachers' responsibility is to report to parents about what and how well their youngster has learned during a specified time period. The reporting conference accommodates those rights and fulfils those responsibilities.

Successful reporting depends to a large extent on:

- adequate preparation on the part of the teacher, thinking through what is significant about the particular student and how best to convey that information
- use of clear, concise, enabling language with enough information so the parent gets the picture without being overwhelmed by unnecessary words or too many examples
- selection together with the parent of which aspects of student performance to highlight in the conference
- parents who regularly see their child's work or who often check informally with the teacher

Parents who have not seen their child's work or have not talked with the teacher, need a more comprehensive progress report which includes the description of what the student has accomplished in academic performance, social, emotional and physical development as well as classroom behaviour (Garfield 2000).

3.6.4   The information getting conference

The information-getting conference deals with the question: Can you tell me about....? A great deal that affects student's learning happens outside the teacher's span of control. Some of these events have already happened and others will happen at home and in the community. Supports and stresses outside the school influence how a student feels whether physically, emotionally and socially, when he/she arrives at school each day. These feelings are reflected in learning success and "making it" in the school world (Garfield 2000).

3.6.4.1   Educationally useful information

For designing the school programme information is useful only when that information helps a teachers work with a particular student at a particular time. Whether information is solicited or unsolicited, the guideline is "Does what I am hearing help me (a) work more productively because I have a clear understanding of the student? or (b) evaluate better the effectiveness of my teaching?" If the answer to either question is "no", precious conference time should not be wasted on that information. To assess the effectiveness of our educational work, it is useful to learn from

parents the child's responses to what happened at school. For example: "Bill doesn't sleep well and complains of feeling ill since he was changed to a different group."

3.6.4.2 *Educationally useless information*

Information which does not lead to productive planning not only is useless, it wastes conference time. If a student has not learned to make friends with other children only suggests that mother may be accepting or excusing this behaviour. The teacher still needs to develop ways to help the child learn necessary social skills. Parents often give explanations of why their child does what he/she does in the same way that we find "reasons" for our own or other's behaviour. Same behaviour is explained as being caused by the student being the firstborn or his/her gender, and so on. Some explanations may be relevant, others may not be. The only time an "explanation" is useful is when it suggests what might be done to solve the problem.

3.6.4.3 *Information getting techniques*

When seeking information, it must be conveyed to the parent that we are searching for greater understanding of a student or situation in order to work with the youngster in the best possible way. Most parents will give information if:

(a) they are convinced that it will be used in a way which helps the child

It is important that the teacher establishes a thoroughly professional "set" which assures the parent that the teacher is not prying or trying to find excuses for not having done well with the student or "entrapping" anyone, but is looking for helpful information.

(b) they understand why the teacher is seeking information

A brief and frank statement about the area of concern will suffice. "Paula is such a bright girl and seemed turned on at school but since vacation it is as if nothing interests her and she couldn't care less. I am at a loss to understand why."

(c)   teachers avoid "who is to blame" attitude

Sometimes parents react in a "I'm not to blame" way because they bring to the conference the "set of 'we are going to be blamed for our child's lack of ...,'" or because of the way the teacher formulates the request for information. At the first hint that the conference might become focussed on "who's to blame or not to blame", it is best to say: "Let us not waste time looking for where to put the blame. That won't help figure out what is best for your child now. Let us spend our time understanding him/her and the situation as best we can so that we can plan effectively".

(d)   requests are for specific information

Sometimes the teacher has a specific concern such as "Could you help me to know any special interests Susan has? I would like to give her more opportunities to work on things that she cares or knows a lot about. I've asked her but she hasn't come up with anything."

(e)   requests are for general information

At times it is difficult to formulate precise questions. We are puzzled. Something just isn't making sense. In these cases teachers can suggest brainstorming the problem together for a while to see if some information will emerge that triggers an idea. The term "fishing expedition" describes the non-specific search for potentially helpful information. For example one teacher was puzzled by a kindergarten child who alternated between being withdrawn, morose, sad and being quite active and "with it". In the conference information from the mother alerted the leader to the possibility of an intermittent hearing loss due to allergies. This possibility was investigated, found to exist and treated with excellent results. Fishing expeditions have given clues which have resulted in teacher's programming rest periods for students, changing or instituting reinforcers for fulfilling responsibilities and devising more effective ways of informing parents of student improvement. It's to be expected that not all fishing expeditions will result in a useful "catch" of information or hints as to how to proceed. When despite all efforts, both parent and teacher remain baffled, the parent deserves to be told that the quandary is mutual and that they both keep watching and thinking about it and hopefully one or the other will come up with something that will work.

(f)   *requests are not pseudo*

Teachers need to be careful not to use the deceptive practice of pseudo or non-questions which in the guise of asking information, inform parents of problems (sometimes with a hidden message of accusation). For example:

"Rob has not turned in homework for weeks. He says he has no time to do it either in the afternoon or at night. I thought I'd ask you about this."

In the above example, the teacher had information for the parent. To disguise it as a question, at best confuses the issue and the parent, at worst the negative inference may cause the parent to feel undermined.

(g)   *there is adequate feedback*

The best feedback for parents is to know that their information is developed into concrete plans to help their child. Consequently, when parents supply useful information, they need to be told so, the more specifically the better. "Telling me about Bill's paper route helped me to make Maths more meaningful to him" (Garfield 2000).

3.6.5   The problem solving conference

The problem solving conference deals with the question: What shall we do about a particular issue or problem? Many learning and behaviour problems respond best to interventions jointly designed and acted upon by teachers and parents. The wish "If only I could get those parents to work with me," reflects many teachers' awareness of the desirability of parental collaboration to increase student learning. Teachers also are often painfully aware of the fact that some parents lack knowledge and skills in child-rearing or managing home routines. As a result, their children may not have learned what other children are taught at home. Sometimes teachers can help parents acquire some of those skills. It is not an easy task but it is possible to accomplish because techniques of teaching apply to adults and children and many parents want to become more skilled in helping their child.

It is essential to emphasise that, regardless of the home and what is done there, the school cannot relinquish responsibility for doing a quality educational job with each child or the school. The school cannot "pass the buck" and say "You straighten your kids and then we can teach them". Schools must accept responsibility for developing the best educational programme for each child regardless of his home life. The problem-solving conference can help parents to do something that will increase the probability of the student becoming more productive.

Situations which benefit from home-school collaboration fall into three categories:

1.   The student is not physically and/or emotionally available for learning. For example Betty is frequently late for school. The parents need to do something so that she is on time and ready for learning when school begins.

2.   The student needs additional practice or exposure to certain experiences.
       For example, Mary needs reading practice. It would be helpful if she read to her parents daily from books suggested by her teacher.

3.   The student needs acknowledgement of and recognition of improvement in behaviour.

Parents are powerful "significant others" for their children. At times parent's approval and disapproval are more influential than any recognition the school can give and given appropriately, will greatly enhance their child's achievement both in and out of school. Teachers and parents need to ensure that students get desirable reinforcement for productive behaviour, and strong reasons for discontinuing unproductive behaviour. This necessitates that parents are informed about how their youngster is doing through regular communication like periodic phone calls, notes or check lists. For example: Bill may get his work done if he has to take a brief note home each day about how "good a worker he is." Teachers and parents agree that four good notes per week mean that he can stay up later on Friday night to watch a favourite TV programme.

In teaching a parent a new skill to address the child's problems, teachers need to:

·   prepare parents for the probability of initial frustrations

· plan to support parents (parents need reassurance that the school will continue to work with and support them)

· select only one area on which to focus parent's effort at any one time

· help parents increase their child -rearing skills by reading relevant books or consulting more experienced teachers, parents or other professionals

Here is an outline of the steps necessary for a parent to become a collaborator in helping a child to learn or behave better (Garfield 2000):

1. Identify the student's school behaviour which needs changing.

2. Determine what the teacher will do at school.

3. Identify student behaviour at home which is the same or contributes to the problem.

4. Identify parent behaviour which may accentuate the problem.

5. Agree with the parent to do something which is both productive and within the student's capability.

6. Identify alternative actions by the parents and select those which are both feasible and promising in altering the student's behaviour.

7. Select reinforcers which are likely to promote improvements in the student's behaviour.

8. Clearly instruct how to put the plan into effect.

9. The parents must act in the home.

10. Follow-up by the teacher for feedback, support, evaluation and helping with snags.

3.7   CONFERENCES REGARDING REPORTS OF PROGRESS

Parents are eager to know how they can promote the child's learning and are disturbed if they think he is making insufficient progress. Parents respond in many ways to the report card or whatever form of progress report the child brings home. At one extreme, some parents punish the child severely for a poor record. This punishment is often undeserved as the child is doing the best he/she can. More effective practice is to scold the child or deprive him of privileges such as no TV or parties until the marks are improved. Children complain that their parents are never satisfied, that even when the report is good they say, "You could have done better." The most understanding

parents try to help the child in specific ways. They refer to the teacher if they do not know how to help (Bailard & Strang 1964:94).

The usual report card gives parents very little basis for helping the child do better. Even a letter is likely to be too general or too non-committal to be of much help. In a conference with the parent, however, the teacher can discuss dated samples of the child's work and uncover sources of difficulty. Together, parent and teacher can assume definite responsibilities (Bailard & Strang 1964:94).

3.7.1   Teacher initiated conferences

When the teacher calls the conference, the burden of responsibility for its structure resides with the teacher. In these contacts, openness and straightforwardness are essential, but in a facilitative manner Rotter 1982:24). Teachers should avoid the use of the word "you" which implies that the parent has the problem and which places the burden on him. Rather seek a collaborative effort with the parent, at the same time pointing out the source of the difficulty. In addition, the teacher implies through the statement that there is hope - the difficulty can be overcome. If the initial contact is verbal, attempt to resolve the concern during the session, if possible. If the nature of the concern requires the parent to have some lead time before the discussion, then arrange for a conference. In any case, avoid the surprise attack as it may arouse anxiety and anger (Rotter 1982:25). Table 3.1 provides helpful responses to parents' queries.

Table 3.1: Helpful responses to parent queries

SAMPLE QUESTIONS	SOME TIPS

· how can I help my child at home? · what group is my child in for subjects such as reading and Maths? · how does my child get along with other children or adults? · my I see some samples of my child's work? · what progress has been made from the beginning of the year until now?	· let your child know you are going to a conference · write down your questions and ideas before the conference. · information parents can give to teachers: discuss what your child does well. · describe changes in behaviour, trouble sleeping or eating, sadness or withdrawal.

Source: Rotter (1982:25)

3.7.1.1 *Advance preparation*

Plan for the meeting by listing the specific points to be made and the questions to be raised. Take time to plan ahead so that follow-up time is reduced. As part of the advanced planning it is helpful to prepare a written progress report to share with the parent that includes:

· a survey of student progress

· areas of concern

· areas of strength

· a proposed plan of action, where appropriate

When the parent arrives, explain the why, what, how and when. It is helpful for both teacher and parent to have an agenda clearly outlining the purpose and procedure of the conference. Include time at the beginning for the parent to review and discuss the written progress report. Although they both regularly scheduled conferences together, especially in the early grades, it is important to deal with concerns as they arise. The teacher must by all means avoid embarrassment by matching child with parent (Rotter 1982:26).

3.7.2 Parent-initiated conferences

Many times, more likely in the elementary grades, parents will request a conference. Parents may contact the school about academic or behavioural issues. The question is how to address them.

Teachers should keep in mind the common elements of parent-teacher conferences discussed earlier. In addition, these elements will contribute to a smooth and successful conference:

· as with teacher-initiated conferences, make certain to *positively identify* the parent requesting the meeting (Rotter 1982:26)

· in the case of the parent who is concerned about a child's progress in a specific learning area, be prepared to *share* with him/her the records of the student's classroom performance and any observations you have made that may help the parent and yourself to better understand the situation

· if the parent shares the topic of concern in advance, *collect the necessary background information* to expedite a fruitful encounter

· in addition to academic data, it may be advisable to *consult* the school counsellor or nurse to help the child

Probably the most significant trend today in reporting pupils progress is the increasing emphasis on parent-teacher conferences (Rotter 1982:27). However conferences with parents may make a teacher very nervous. This is true of the new and inexperienced teacher, but even many experienced teachers view parent conferences with some trepidation. This is natural for a teacher always feels just a little on the spot with parents of her pupils. She feels that she is being judged by them and that her reputation depends considerably on their opinion of her. Even though the teacher may be apprehensive about an interview, however, there are many things she can do to alleviate her fears:

(a)   Have a positive attitude

First of all, the teacher needs to realise that she has it in her power to help each child by talking to his parents. She/he needs to feel that the responsibility of helping the child to his best is a shared thing, that the parent is eager to learn from her and also eager to work out whatever is best for the child. When she/he invites the parent for an interview, she/he should not feel that the parent will come with a critical attitude and that she/he herself/himself should never enter into a conference with a negative or critical attitude.

She/he must remember that the main purpose of the conference is to share thinking, information and planning which will benefit the youngster. A positive attitude is therefore essential. The conference should be looked upon as a friendly meeting - an opportunity for two or more adults interested in the same person to sit down and have an informative but constructive l talk (Bailard & Strang 1964:95).

(b)   Pre-interview preparation

In order to feel more secure about conducting the interview, the teacher should prepare for it. She needs to have several things in mind and certain specific materials at hand before entering the conference. Planning such details as the following is particularly important:

·   clarity as to the main purpose of the interview
·   having the classroom in an acceptable condition with meaningful materials in evidence. The appearance of a classroom tells a story to the most casual observer
·   having several examples of the child's work at hand so that the teacher can use them as concrete examples as she gives her appraisals of the child to the parent
·   having the child's cumulative record
·   knowledge of the child's ability and his achievement in relation to it
·   possess a pretty good estimate of the child's strengths and weaknesses in regard to his social adjustment, ability to get along with other children, attitudes towards adults and the like
·   arrange fairly comfortable physical setup for the interview (Bailard & Strang 1964:95)

(c)   Guidelines for a successful conference

With such preparation for the interview, the teacher should feel more adequate to carry on a successful conference. All suggestions are easy enough to work out, but what to do when the parent arrives requires planning of a different kind, since the teacher cannot know what will be

said or what direction the conference might take. However, a few guidelines and some concrete examples of recorded interviews may be of help.

(i)   The note home, inviting the parent to come to school, should be friendly and informal and should never contain anything which could conceivably put parents on the defensive or bring them to the conference in a hostile mood. It must bring the parent to the school as a friend of the teacher who is a friend of theirs and of their child.

(ii)   When the parents arrive, the teacher should greet them in a friendly gracious manner, putting them at ease as quick as possible. An expression of appreciation for their coming is quite in order and it's essential that a good feeling be established before the interview gets under way.

(iii)   When starting the conference, the teacher should make positive remarks about the child concerned relating specific incidents to illustrate them. An expression, on the part of the teacher of her interest in the child helps to establish a good rapport.

(iv)   In addition to making positive remarks about the child, as a person, it is important for the teacher to begin her remarks about his work from a positive angle, pointing out his strengths before indicating where he needs most to improve. In this way she keeps the parents with her and can move into the more doubtful areas with a little more assurance of their cooperation and good feeling. Some discussions will be about children who have achieved nothing. To talk with their parents is a difficult thing for the teacher but even so, these children must have something of merit whether in subject matter or human relationships. The teacher must have something good to say about them with specific examples to back up.

(v)   As the teacher talks about academic achievements of the child, she shows the parents some of his/her paper work and indicates how he/she arrived at this rating on the report card. The teacher should also indicate the methods used in teaching and interpreting the programme. Since parents are sceptical of modern methods of teaching, teacher should explain why we use them, how they actually work. In this way she can help the parents to be satisfied and become better friends of the school.

(vi)   The teacher must not be afraid to indicate the areas in which the child needs support. If it is a subject-matter area in which he is weak, he/she should show how he/she is attempting to help the child improve and what the parents might do to help him at home. If it is a behaviour problem which needs attention, the teacher should explain the problem without any fear but in a kindly, positive way, being careful not to put blame of any kind on the parents. The teacher should make them know that she/he is seeking their help on the matter and so help them feel the problem is a shared responsibility in which she is happy to do her part. The child should never be made out to be a little monster but as an immature person needing guidance and help to work out the specific problem he presents.

(vii)   The teacher must make an effort throughout the interview to listen. Parents have good ideas and are likely to be more willing to carry them out than those a teacher imposes on them. The teacher should encourage them to express their ideas including suggestions he/she might follow to improve the child's school report. She/he should also be willing to listen if the parents wish to voice their criticism. Progress is rarely made through arguments or defensive statements. The teacher must never forget how important the child and his/her achievement are parents. He/she is also interested in the child, but that interest cannot compare with the interest the parents have.

(viii)   In concluding the interview, the teacher should briefly summarise the conference , again indicating the child's strengths and where he/she needs to improve in all phases of his/her growth. These should be specifically stated and within the bounds of possibility.

(ix)   The teacher should again indicate his/her appreciation of the parent's visit and invite them to drop in whenever they can find a convenient time. The educator should also let them know that she/he is willing to send home a note from time to time if necessary to indicate lack of progress or outstanding progress (Bailard & Strang 1964:96-99).

(x)   During an interview the teacher should keep in mind a few rather important don'ts (Bailard & Strang 1964:99).

- ·   don't put the parent on the defensive about anything
- ·   don't argue with the parent
- ·   don't talk about other children or compare this child with other children
- ·   don't talk about other teachers to the parents unless the remarks are of a complimentary nature
- ·   don't try to out talk a parent

3.8   COMMON TOPICS IN PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

Issues affecting a child's progress often coming up in the parent-teacher conferences are identified in the following paragraphs.

3.8.1   Clarification of parents' role

Both teachers and parents need a clearer conception of the parents' role during the elementary school years. This is a prerequisite for successful parent-teacher conferences. Some parents are too eager to teach. They want to take over the teacher's responsibility as they are ambitious for their children. They ask if instruction in school is so desirable, why not have more of it at home? Perhaps they have been reading a book that described a magic method of learning (Bailard & Strang 1964:100).

An overzealous attitude on the part of parents has a number of possible disadvantages including"All work and no play makes Jack/Jill a dull boy/girl." The child resents not being allowed to play with the other children. If he/she does not learn as quickly as his/her parents expect, they become impatient. Moreover, if parents are too concerned about school success, the child may feel that his/her parents care only that he/she be a credit to them. If the teacher uses one method and the parent the other, the child may become confused or may side with the teacher.

Efforts to teach a child at home are complicated by many social and emotional factors. Fortunately, it is seldom necessary for the teacher to say "Don't" in parent conferences, as there are many positive ways in which parents can contribute to a child's success in elementary school (Bailard & Strang 1964:100).

3.8.2 Attitude toward education

The parents' attitude toward education affects the child's interest and effort. Most middle- and upperclass families give the education of their children top priority. One first-grade teacher made it a practice to discuss with her pupils at the end of each day what they had learned. One day the teacher neglected to do this. When one parent asked, "What did you learn in school today?" the child replied, "The teacher did not tell us." By showing interest in the child's education, parents increase his sense of the importance of his school tasks. Children whose parents shows indifference toward their efforts, often have the feeling that nobody cares whether they learn or not. Some are distracted by people coming and going, by the blare of TV or radio. They do no serious reading and show little interest in any cultural activities. In parent-teacher conferences, parents often reveal their individual attitudes toward education. Although it may not be possible to change their habits and attitudes, the teacher may persuade them to take pride in the child's school achievement or to provide him with home conditions that are conducive to learning (Bailard & Strang 1964:100).

3.8.3 Parent-child relationship

The importance of parent-child relationships is repeatedly emphasised and is equally important to the child's learning during the elementary school years as is the school's. A parent can keep a child's love even though he is firm and strict as long as the child senses that the parent loves him/her and supports him/her. Strictness is conducive to achievement.

3.8.4 Acquaintance with school programme

When parents understand what the school is trying to do, they can co-operate more effectively. When a parent complains about the "progressive methods" a teacher uses, he/she may have little understanding of what the teacher is attempting. Teachers should share their philosophy of education with parents by explaining why Janie has not yet begun to read from a book in the first grade. They help the parent to provide the home experiences that will supplement and reinforce school instruction. Parents may be invited to the child's class, to open school night or to meetings in which the school programme is described (Bailard & Strang 1964:103).

3.8.5 Appreciation of the teacher

Teachers are human, they appreciate approval. With them as with children praise is more effective than blame. A word of commendation stimulates them to make greater efforts on behalf of the child. The parents' attitude towards the teacher is likely to be caught by the child, the more the child respects the teacher, the more he will profit by her instruction. If the child is having difficulty in a learning area for example it is helpful if the parent knows that the teacher is using the best modern methods. This reinforces the child's feeling that with the teachers help it can be done. The parent-teacher conferences should promote mutual appreciation. Their good relationship increases the child's confidence in both home and school (Bailard & Strang 1964:104).

3.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter summarises suggestions that will help parents establish a good relationship with their child's teacher and the school. Regardless of the approach chosen by sharing information, parents and teachers should unite with a common goal, children's progress. This chapter also indicates that parent-teacher conferences are the teachers best means of communication and that teacher-parent co-operation is an effective means of maximising learning and also parent-conferencing. As such the success of parent-teacher conferences depends on proper planning.

Chapter 4 presents the research design, the findings and interpretation of the research.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN, PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1   INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters 1, 2 and 3 form an important background to the investigation contained in this study. A literature review on parent-involvement and parent-teacher conferences was presented. This served to identify some of the crucial issues pertaining to the topic as well as indicating gaps in the existing knowledge concerning parent-teacher conferences.

In this chapter, the qualitative research approach and the research design are briefly described. The researcher justifies the choice of a data gathering method and the procedures for conducting the research. This includes the criteria for selecting the site and the participants. Subsequently the data analysis and issues of validity and reliability are outlined. Finally, the findings are presented and discussed.

4.2   QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

According to Schumacher and McMillan (1997:39), qualitative research is a naturalistic inquiry, the use of non-interfering data-collection strategies to discover the natural flow of events and processes and how participants interpret them. Most qualitative research describes and analyses people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts and perceptions. In qualitative research, the researcher will collect data by interacting with selected individuals in their settings and by obtaining relevant documents.

The term "qualitative research" can mean different things and to different people (cf Strauss & Corbin 1990:17). It's difficult to describe qualitative research in a way that will satisfy everybody. For our purposes, qualitative research is defined as a multi-perspective approach to social interaction aimed at describing, making sense of interpreting or reconstructing this interaction in terms of the meanings that the subjects attach to it (Denzin & Lincoln 1994:2 in Van Wyk 1996).

Qualitative research is as Lofland and Lofland (1984) note a "many labelled tradition". Mouton and Marais (1990:155-156 in De Vos 1998) point out that the terms "qualitative and quantitative research are commonly used, there's confusion about their exact meaning". For this reason, the researcher discusses the characteristics of qualitative research designs and indicates reasons for the choice of this method.

4.3   CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE DESIGNS

In this study, the researcher aims to explore the implementation of parent-teacher conferences in the foundation phase of the primary school from the viewpoint of the participants. To have clarity on the study, there is a need for an exploratory research design which will enable the problems explored and questions asked, to become more specific as the study progresses.

Characteristics of qualitative research which make it an appropriate approach for this study are presented here.

4.3.1   The researcher as an instrument

The qualitative researcher becomes immersed in the phenomenon studied and the researcher is the main data collection instrument. Lemmer (1992:294) states that the major research instrument is the researcher him/herself, he/she both collects and analyses data. Also personal characteristics, the value system of and the stance assumed by the researcher are crucial in obtaining valid data. Hammersly et al (1994:59) go on to say that the researcher will have to develop an understanding of skills needed to work with people to trust him/her in their everyday business in the researcher's presence to hold nothing back in interviews. The researcher will not be an objective bystander as in the case of quantitative research.

4.3.2   Qualitative research has a natural setting

Here the researcher studies phenomena as they occur in natural settings rather than under the manipulation or control of an investigator (Goetz & Le Compte 1984 in Lemmer 1992). The aim of the researcher is not to eliminate contextual factors but to focus upon the holistic

interrelationship among such factors. The researcher attends to all features of behaviour since they constitute a pattern in a given setting. Hammersly et al (1994:50-52) contend that qualitative researchers seek an understanding of lived experiences in real situations but do not to disturb the scene and seek to be unobtrusive in their methods. The assumption is that human behaviour is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs. In this inquiry, the researcher observes the participants' actions and takes cognisance of their experiences since they affect behaviour. This is to ensure that data and analysis will reflect what is happening.

4.3.3 Meaning is an essential concern to qualitative research

Qualitative research aims at understanding the life-world of the individuals or groups studied (Firestone 1987:16 in Lemmer 1992). Meaning is of essential concern to qualitative researchers who are interested in finding out ways in which people make sense of their situations through the interpretational understanding of their language, art, gestures and politics. Thus, qualitative researchers are concerned with the process whereby certain behaviour is realised rather than merely with outcomes of behaviour (Lemmer 1992:292).

In this research the researcher endeavours to understand the experience of a Foundation Phase teacher and parents during parent-teacher conferences in a primary school in Mamelodi in Gauteng Province.

4.3.4 Qualitative research is descriptive

The data collected is in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. Data includes interviews, transcripts, field notes, and so on. Researchers try to analyse data with all its richness to the form in which it is recorded and transcribed. Qualitative research approach demands that the world be approached with the assumption that nothing is trivial, everything has the potential of being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied. Nothing is taken as given and no statement escapes scrutiny (Bogdan & Biklen (1992:31). Thus, everything observed by the researcher during the parent-teacher conferences is considered to be important.

4.3.5 Small samples are used

Lemmer (1992:294) is of the opinion that most qualitative studies use small samples since such research focuses on the detail and quality of an individual or small group's experience. Validity depends not so much upon the number of cases studied as upon the degree to which an informant faithfully represents a certain cultural experience. The researcher in this study used a small sample. She observed ten parent-teacher conferences in a single school. Ary et al (1990:178) assert that "the size of the sample depends upon the precision the researcher desires in estimating the population parameter at a particular confidence level".

4.4   CHOICE OF QUALITATIVE DESIGN

The research design refers to a plan for selecting subjects, research sites and data collection procedures to answer the research questions. The design shows which individuals will be studied, when and where and under which circumstances they will be studied (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:163). De Vos (1998:253) maintains that qualitative researchers employ a wide range of strategies in their effort to understand the phenomenon being studied. These strategies vary, depending on the purpose and nature of research questions as well as skills available for the researcher. Each strategy has its own perspective and method of data collection.

Case studies are appropriate for exploratory and discovery-oriented research. Exploratory studies, which examine a topic in which there has been little previous research are designed to lead to further inquiry. The focus may be on persons, specific events or processes. The purpose is to elaborate a concept or develop a model with its related sub-components and empirical meanings (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:395).

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to explore in detail how teachers and parents experience parent-teacher conferences and the role played by the participants in two-way communication for the benefit of the learners. In this study, it was judged that this understanding could best be achieved by using participant observation to obtain rich, descriptive data (Patton 1990:10).

4.4.1   Selecting of a site

The flexibility and adaptability of selection and sampling decisions as well as their continued implementation throughout the research process are hallmarks of the ethnographic research (Le Compte & Preissle 1993:56). In this research, the research site was a primary school located in the township of Mamelodi, situated to the east of Pretoria. The school was selected by purposeful sampling on the ground of its accessibility to the researcher. The school is a feeder area school that provides learners for the three secondary schools in the area and it was judged that it could provide information-rich cases of parent-teacher conferences.

The school was founded in 1993 and caters for 950 learners from Grade R-7. The school is situated in a low-income community in which the average income is approximately R3000 per month. However, most learners do not come from this immediate neighbourhood but come from the nearby informal settlement. Thus, it can be regarded as predominantly a school which serves children from the informal settlement. The learner body is multilingual. Home languages are predominantly North Sotho and Zulu but the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) is English. The majority of the learners are disadvantaged because they are from poor, largely unemployed families, some of whom are single parents. Some learners are orphans whose parents were victims of HIV/AIDS. These impoverished and needy learners often show learning and behavioural problems.

The school is well resourced and has suitably qualified professional staff. It comprises 24 classrooms. It has an attractive inviting administration area with a reception, a well-furnished staffroom, offices for the principal, deputy principal and Heads of Departments, sickrooms, printing rooms and a secretary's office with all the necessary office equipment. The school is electrified with flush toilets in each block.

The school is under the governance of a dedicated School Governing Body which looks after its welfare. In this inquiry, the school management granted the researcher free access to the school to conduct the research and permission to disseminate the findings to the broader school community in an effort to improve home-school communication at school.

4.4.2 Selection of participants

In this research participants were chosen by purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling always aims at locating information-rich individuals or cases, that is, those who are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon under investigation (Johnson & Christensen 2000:180; Lemmer 2002:10). The size of the sample depends on logistical constraints, such as the availability of appropriate participants and the accessibility of participants. Due to the search for in-depth data, qualitative samples are relatively small (Bogdan & Biklen 1982:2). In this study one teacher and ten parents participated. The criteria for selection was that all parent participants had learners in the Foundation Phase and that the teacher teaches in the same phase. The parents in this research were seen as key-informants, individuals who have special knowledge, status or communication skills and who were willing to allow the interviews with the teacher to be observed (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:448).

4.4.2.1 Description of participants

The study was limited to a small group which is acceptable and typical of qualitative research where the aim is to generate in depth knowledge and understanding.

(a) Characteristics of the teacher

This section summarises the characteristics of the teacher who conducted the parent-teacher conferences. These characteristics are summarised in Table 4.1 and are included so that participant may be known to the reader without her identity being compromised. The educator is a married woman, whose home language is N. Sotho. She has a lengthy teaching experience and is currently in the position of Special Needs Educator in the school for grades 1-7.

Table 4.1: The teacher

Characteristics	
Gender	Female
Marital status	Married
Home languages	N. Sotho
Teaching experience	20 Years
Highest qualification	*HED

*HED = Higher Diploma in Education

(b)   Parent participants

As set out in 4.4.2, all parents had learners in the Foundation Phase. Nine were females and one was male. Nine participants were biological parents and one was a grandmother. Four participants were single parents. The parents speak N. Sotho and Zulu as home languages. Most are unemployed and fall in a very low income group. All the parents interviewed are literate and their previous schooling ranges from Standard 6 to Standard 10. Their characteristics are summarised in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Parent participants

Parent	Relation to learner	Gender	Marital status	Currently employed
1. Lindiwe	Mother	Female	Married	Yes
2. Tebogo	Mother	Female	Married	No
3. Phina	Mother	Female	Married	No
4. Sheila	Mother	Female	Married	Yes
5. Kate	Mother	Female	Single	No
6. Dikeledi	Mother	Female	Single	No
7. Lebo	Mother	Female	Single	Yes
8. Koketso	Mother	Female	Single	Student
9. Jabu	Father	Male	Married	No
10. Lesego	Grandmother	Female	Separated	Volunteer

4.5   DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

4.5.1 Observation

According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992 in MEDEM2-R/2/2003-2005) in everyday life you observe people interactions and events. Participant observation in a research setting differs in that the researcher carefully and systematically experiences and records in detail many aspects of a situation. According to Schurink (in De Vos et al 1988:279) participant observation is generally regarded as the principal data-gathering strategy of qualitative research. Participant observation ranges across a continuum from mostly observation to mostly participation. In observer as participant the researcher remains primarily an observer but has some interactions with study participants. In this study, the researcher's aim was to obtain an account of the process of the parent-teacher conferences in the Foundation Phase.

4.5.1.1 General observation in school

In this study, the researcher spent some time observing everyday life in the participating school. She spent time in observing the entire school, how the SGB functioned during parent meetings and how parents were involved specifically in the Foundation Phase. The researcher observed interactions of the teachers and learners in the classroom and learning programmes, how the parents and the teachers participated in the group parent-teacher meetings where how report cards were issued, how general parent meetings for the Foundation Phase were held and how the principal, HOD and teachers communicated with parents in the Foundation Phase.

4.5.1.2 Observation of parent-teacher conferences

In their seminal work on ethnographic research techniques Pelto and Pelto (1978) distinguish two categories of research methods; interactive and non-interactive. Interactive are methods for collecting data involving interactions between the researcher and participants such as participant-observation interviews. Non-interactive strategies require little or no interaction between a researcher such as written (for example essays, journals, letters, and such like), non-participant-observation and so on. In this study, non-interactive methods were used. The researcher obtained data from participants by participant-observation. McMillan and Schumacher (1997:420) define

participant observation as an active process which includes observation of muted cues-facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice and other factors which suggest the subtle meanings of language. Data was gathered by observing the interviews held by the teacher with the parents without intrusion. All interviews were recorded on audio tape and field notes were also made. The interviews took place during the last semester of 2004 during school hours and the interviews lasted for 20 minutes respectively. During the interview the researcher sat in the classroom with the participants, made field notes and recorded the interview on audio tape. Each participant expressed willingness to be involved and co-operate in the study. Ten interviews were observed and recorded. The parents were closely observed as they communicated with the teacher during parent-teacher conferences as experienced by them within the boundaries of their own life-world experiences (McMillan & Schumacher 2002:228). Everything observed was fully noted and formed part of the data. N. Sotho, Zulu and English were used as the medium of communication in these interviews. This did not pose a problem as the researcher is proficient in all three languages. The interviews were later translated where necessary by the researcher into English and became the primary data source for analysis conducted by the researcher.

4.6   ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

Qualitative researchers choose research role-relationships appropriate for the purpose of the study. Le Compte and Preissle (1984:21) point that the personal characteristic most affecting conduct of qualitative research is the researcher's identity as the essential research instrument (Wolcott 1975:115). The roles the researcher assumes within the culture and the researcher's identity and experience are critical to the scientific merit of a study. Researcher's subjectivities are also essential to establishing and building the intimate relationships with participants that permit trust and confidence. Fieldworkers customarily participate in the lives, experiences and communities of those they study. In this study the researcher is also a Foundation Phase teacher with many years of teaching experience. She has resided and taught in the Mamelodi township for many years and is well acquainted with the community. She is proficient in N. Sotho, Tswana and Zulu as well as English.

4.7   DATA ANALYSIS

According to McMillan and Schumacher (1997:502) data analysis is an ongoing cyclical process integrated into all phases of qualitative research. Inductive analysis means categories and patterns emerge from the data rather than being imposed on data prior to data collection. Qualitative analysis, is a systematic process of selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting, to provide explanations of the single phenomenon of interest. Qualitative data analysis varies because of the different research foci, purposes and data collection strategies.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992:153) state that data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview scripts, field-notes and other material that the researcher accumulates to increase his/her understanding of them and to enable him/her to present what he/she has discovered to others. Analysis involves working with data, organising it, breaking it down into manageable units, synthesising it and searching for patterns to discover what is important, what is to be learned and deciding what the researcher will tell others.

In a qualitative approach, analysis is concurrent with data collection and is more or less completed by the time the data is gathered. Data is segmented, that is divided into relevant parts and chunks of meaning within a holistic perspective. However, the intensive analysis usually begins with reading all the data to gain a sense of the whole, which facilitates the interpretation of smaller units of data (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:500). Data segments are categorised according to an organising system of topics, predominantly derived from the data themselves. The categories are preliminary and tentative in the beginning and they remain flexible, not rigid schemes. Analysing data is an eclectic activity, there is no "right" way.

Segmenting involves dividing data into meaningful analytical units, reading the transcribed data line by line. Le Compte and Preissle (1993:287) contend that segmenting means dividing data into analysis units. An analysis is a text passage understandable in itself, that is, it's large enough to make sense, is defined by the researcher as relevant to reach the objective. They also point out that coding means that the identified segments of data are coded by means of category names and symbols (1993:292).

4.7.1 Coding

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001:467), coding is a process of dividing data into parts of a classification system by using one of two strategies.

- segmenting the data into units of content called topics (less than 25-30) and grouping the topics into larger clusters to form categories or
- starting with predetermined categories of no more than four to six and breaking each category into smaller subcategories or combining the strategies, using more predetermined categories and adding discovered new categories
- Le Compte and Preissle (1993:294) also state that coding varies depending on whether or not a classification system exists when the analysis begins. If the researcher has developed such a system, a priori, derived from theories or from the conceptual tool used in other studies or from research questions at hand, coding is easy. The code is an abbreviation of the category.

4.7.2 Collating coded text segments

The reasons for attaching codes to text segments is to make possible the sorting of the segments into categories. Comparing and contrasting is used in descriptive studies to discover when the category makes sense once the classificatory scheme is established. The content of each category is examined for major themes, unique manifestations of the phenomenon under study or grouping of the content that become precursors to a typology (Glaser & Strauss 1967) in Le Compte and Preissle 1993:298.

4.7.3 The process of inductive analysis

Data analysis entails several cyclical phases:

- continuous discovery
- categorising and ordering of data
- qualitatively assessing the trustworthiness of data
- writing a synthesis of themes and concepts (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:502)

In this study, directly after the interviews, the recording was transcribed and translated into English where necessary and a coding system used to identify the different recurring themes. Each participant's personal document was analysed on what McMillan and Schumacher (1997:533) described as "the specific and distinctive recurring qualities, characteristics and concerns expressed." Thereafter all themes were clustered into categories and compared with the relevant literature (Chapters 2 and 3) on parent-teacher conferences. Finally suitable quotations were selected as rich data to illustrate the categories.

The emerging themes were integrated, compared and cross validated with the data selected during the interviews, synthesised in a descriptive analysis as "the analysis often identifies the themes by individual cases and then synthesises the themes across cases". McMillan and Schumacher (1997:533) described as "the specific and distinctive recurring qualities, characteristics and concerns expressed". Thereafter all themes were clustered into categories and compared with the relevant literature (Le Compte & Preissle 1993:267 in Lemmer 2002:11) on parent-teacher conferences. Finally suitable quotations were selected as rich data to illustrate the categories.

The emerging themes were integrated, compared and cross validated with the data selected during the interviews, synthesised in a descriptive analysis as "the analysis often identifies the themes by individual cases and then synthesises the themes across cases" (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:533). Finally suitable quotations were selected as rich data to illustrate the categories.

4.8   TRUSTWORTHINESS OF DATA

When qualitative researchers consider research validity, it generally refers to research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy and therefore defensible (Beach & Finders 1999:89 in Lemmer 2002:11). Johnson and Christenson (2000:208) identify strategies of triangulation to maximise validity when using qualitative approaches.

This inquiry of data is by means of research triangulation and participant feedback, that is, cross-checking information with actual participants for verification and insight. McMillan and Schumacher (1993:394) state that in qualitative research, researchers do not aim at generalisation of results but the extension of understanding.

Furthermore, the limitations of the research are acknowledged. This inquiry was limited to a single school and a relatively small sample and it is not generalisable in any way. However, the findings do suggest patterns that are useful, particularly where they are corroborated by the large corpus of literature on parent-teacher conferences which has been carried out in a variety of contexts (Lemmer 2002:12).

4.8.1   Anonymity of participants

McMillan and Schumacher (1997:195) state that information on subjects should be regarded as confidential unless otherwise agreed on through informed consent. Only the researcher has access to names and identifying data. In the study, the researcher created a relationship of trust with the parents and the teacher. She explained to them what her observation of the parent-teacher conferences entailed, promised not to disclose the information obtained except for academic purposes and that the participants' names would not be used but false names.

4.9   SUMMARY

This section described the qualitative research and research design. The use of qualitative methodology has a considerable contribution to make to this study. An attempt was made in this chapter to describe the rationale for the choice of a qualitative approach for the study of parent-teacher conferences. This chapter also described the methods used to obtain data, namely observation and participant-observation and the data analysis procedures were also given.

In the next section the data gathered and analysed is presented and discussed.

4.10   PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents and describes data generated during semi-structured in-depth interviews. Seven major categories emerged from the analysis of the parents' and teacher's responses. These were context of conferences, teacher talk dominates through prevalence of questions, blaming

parents and pleas for participation and use of jargon, nature of communication/mutual trust; listening to parents' important information, guiding parents as important partners, difficulties/ barriers to communication due to level of education.

4.10.1 Context of conferences

The ten teacher-parent conferences were held in an office in the administration block during school hours. Thus, parents had to make arrangements to be away from home or work to attend the meetings. No childcare was provided for younger siblings who might have needed care. In all cases the teachers had requested the interviews due to her concerns about the child's progress. In several cases a child was having to repeat a grade and that was the reason for the meeting. The parent was notified by a note but no pre-conference schedule was drawn up to facilitate the meetings. The parent and teacher were seated on regular chairs and the teacher sat next to the parent and not behind a desk. No notes were taken during the interviews and future action planned by parents and teacher was not written down for the parents. The importance of pre and post conference planning, which was lacking in these conferences, has been well-documented by (Wise 2000; Stevens 2003 and Welch 1981).

4.10.2 Teacher talk: prevalence of questions

In general, the teacher dominated the communication during the conference. Several questions arise like, Why does the teacher dominate the parent-teacher conference? Does she feel superior to the lesser educated parents, who are, in addition, poor and unemployed. Is it because she is mainly dealing with women who are traditionally less powerful members of the community? In the interview the teacher asked parents several questions one after the other, frequently not waiting for a full answer. She said: *"What do you think as a parent is your child's problem? What can you tell me about your child? What can be the child's barrier when it comes to school work?"* All these 'double-barrelled' questions tended to confuse the participant who only ended up answering the last question.

Over use of questioning indicates that the teacher lacks listening skills. Moreover, too much teacher talk limits the parent's participation and may confuse them. This confirms the work of

Hoerr (1992-2003/09:41) who said that in an ideal parent-teacher conference parents should be allowed to do most of the talking and the teachers should be listening 75 to 80 percent of the time.

4.10.3 Teacher talk: unproductive blaming

In an effective conference parents should be seen and treated as peers to the teacher and co-operation should be sought on all levels as there is power in working together. During the conferences it appeared that the teacher felt that the parents were neglecting their responsibility to help their children with school work. The teacher noted: "*The child has got low-self esteem, Why? The child is not motivated well at home. Here at school we are trying to motivate her*". Sometimes the educator became so impatient with parents that her voice took on an unfriendly tone. She said: "*Are you expecting too much from the child?" Over expectations also can cause the child to be miserable*". To another mother she commented: "*Yes, you spoil the child. It means you are overprotective.*",To another parent, she remarked: "*This shows parental negligence as well for your child to be like this*". This kind of blaming parents intimidates the parents.

This confirms cautions made by Wise and (cf) who pointed out that teachers should explain the child's problem to a parent without causing them any fear. If the teacher wishes to suggest helpful ways of parenting to the parent this should be done in a kind and positive way and the teacher should be careful not to put blame of any kind on the parents.

4.10.4 Teacher talk: pleas for participation

However in spite of the dominance of questions and the tendency to blame parents, the teacher did ask the parents to share their ideas and concerns. In general she treated them with respect and encouraged them to become more involved in their children's learning. Stevens (2003:524) indicates that by treating each person with warmth and respect will help encourage him/her to participate. She pleaded with them to keep in contact with the school saying, "*Please understand that here at school we do want to call you now and then to tell you about your child's progress and behaviour.*"

The way she pleaded for greater participation showed that she wanted them to be involved so that together they can diagnose barriers to learning and to intervene with corrective methods. She said: "*We are trying to show you some means of how to go about, give support and assistance to the child at school as well as at home.*" She also described that the parent-teacher conference is part and parcel of a remedial diagnosis, "*We need to talk to you as we are trying to investigate the child's problem as we also don't know what is going on with the child.*" This confirms the work of Stevens (2003:524) who pointed out that teachers do desire greater parent participation especially during learning and home.

4.10.5 Teacher talk: use of jargon

It should be noted that all the parent -teacher interviews took place in the context of a special needs (or barrier to learning) which had been identified by the teacher and had been the rationale behind the meeting. In all cases the teacher used several discipline specific terms to describe the child's problem. However, she took great pains to explain the terminology to the parent. A number of examples follow:

Barriers to learning

> Remember if we say the learner experiences barriers to learning. We don't say the learner has barriers. The moment you say the learner has barriers it means it is one of her characteristics. So we can't take it away, we don't have any way of removing it. You understand my point so we say a learner is experiencing a barrier. Not something that he or she owns.

Defence mechanism

> Using cheek is a behavioural problem. When a child sees or notices that she is not the same like other learners, then a behavioural problem is going to develop. It develops... as a defence mechanism. A defence mechanism is the way she defends herself to hide what she is.

Self-esteem

> She has got a low self-esteem. Why/ she has developed a thing of saying I can't do it. She is not motivated.... She must understand that she is unique, everybody is unique on this whole earth. Try and build her self-esteem at home. Try to compliment her in whatever little things she does.

Motor skills

> If I talk about a child's motor skills, I mean her body, what kind of a child was she? Was she well-developed? Is her body strong enough or is it a child that is weak?

Developmental milestones

> I am going to ask you about the milestones of the learner. His milestone means how did he grow from the pregnancy until today. What have you observed?

Inclusion

> All learners are able to learn, the need to be educable. If a learner is educable within inclusion all learners need to be treated the same for them to be given the best capability to perform to their best capability.

4.10.6 Importance of mutual trust

The conferences showed that the teacher was aware of the importance of mutual trust and did seek to establish this kind of caring and facilitative relationship with parents. She tried to encourage parents to talk freely and willingly. She said: "*I am asking you to obtain information.*" Most of the time she explained :"*We are discussing the problem. It's a dialogue*"thereby showing her intent to share ideas or develop a conversation during the parent-teacher conference.

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She encouraged to one mother to talk saying: "*There is no right or wrong answers. You are the mother. You brought up the learner, so be open, be free to talk and ask questions, so that we can reach some ideas about how to go about to helping this learner.*" She also joked about something with the parents to set them at ease and to encourage the parents to trust her. She pointed out that the child's progress depended on regular home-school contacts. The educator commented to one parent: "*I am glad that you could come to spare me those minutes to talk to you.*" Parents also acknowledged the teacher's efforts and one mother thanked the teacher because she had motivated her child. She mentioned that the teacher had observed and identified her child's barrier to learning at a very early stage, something of which the mother had not been aware. The mother described the teacher's assistance and guidance saying, "*I took the advice you [the teacher] gave me. I walked behind you.*" Another parent whose child was experiencing difficulties confessed to the teacher: "*I want us to try her again [to retain her in the grade] to give her a chance because we feel she hasn't developed fully.*" These exchanges confirm the work of Leung (2001:29) who stressed the importance of mutual trust between teacher and parent in order to find solutions to learners' problems.

4.10.7 Listening to parents' important information

Mendoza and Cegelka (1987:12) tabulated fundamental differences between teaching and parenting, useful when understanding differing perceptions held by parents and teachers. The teacher is focussed on a group of children, while parents are concerned with the individual child. The teacher is concerned with the mastery of specific skills, while the parent is concerned with the child's general development. Moreover, the parent has intimate knowledge of the child's entire history, that is, the physical, emotional and social development and domestic circumstances, which the teacher lacks. The parent is clearly deeply attached to the child. The teacher feels a warm concern for the child but lacks the elemental bond enjoyed by parent and child. From their perspective teachers can consider the child's problems more objectively; parental involvement with the child is marked by subjectivity. However, these different stances of teacher and parent to the child are not contradictory. When combined, the strengths of the teacher-child relationship and the parent-child relationship create optimal conditions for the child to develop (Jonson 1999:126).

The findings in this inquiry indicate that the parent participants were willing to share intimate and detailed information about their children in the interview as they wanted their children to be assisted with the barriers they experience. They frequently described their children's birth experiences to the teacher which assisted in determining if learning problems could be related to birth. This kind of information helped both the teachers and parents define the problem of the child and develop an appropriate intervention based on the information shared in the interview (Leung 2001:28; Stevens 2003:26).

Even though the teacher dominated and controlled the conversation, parents had some opportunity to talk and offer their own concerns and opinions. They were able to describe how learners had reached certain developmental milestones during infancy and childhood. The teacher used questions such as: *"During pregnancy were you or the learner him/herself ill? Did you undergo an operation during the birth of your child? Was it a bridge? A Caesarean Section or forceps used? Was the child's weight normal?"*. Stevens (2003: 26) confirms that nobody knows the child like the parent. Wise teachers will understand this and seek to tap the wealth of information parents have about the child.

One mother explained that the child in question is a twin. The mother described the birth of her twins as premature and by Caesarian Section. The one child does not experience any learning problems at school but the second twin (the learner under discussion) is experiencing learning barriers. She said, *"She was very small, small in her birth and weighed 1,09 kg"*. the teacher found this information most helpful saying, *"She lacks in her speech and her handwriting as well has not developed."*

Another mother also explained that her child's birth was a Caesarian Section and that forceps were used. She said, *"The child's muscles are not fully developed, he also had problems from crawling and now his right leg and hand are crippled. He also experienced speech problems to an extent that they could not understand him. He only spoke when he was four years old."*

One parent had no problems in her pregnancy and the child was never ill after birth. But now the child experiences learning barriers. She has not reached the stated outcomes with regard to spelling and reading skills. The parent commented: *"She doesn't grasp things, she doesn't grasp.*

It seems, I don't know if she plays too much and she doesn't want to be helped." Another parent was able to point out that at home her child enjoyed drawing, working with his hands and cars. She explained, " *He likes working with his hands most of the time but he dislikes books because he feels 'I just can't do it, I just can't cope'* ".

Another mother commented: "*My child was a bridge-birth and was born in eleven months. Because of poverty and unemployment, I took my child home to my folks. Every time I visited her, she would complain to me that my sisters shout at her to clean the house and wash the dishes after school.*" Now the child has developed a hearing problem and is partially deaf.

The other parent had a normal pregnancy and birth. She explained, "*After the birth the child used to faint. When she was two years, it stopped. Now, when the child is nine years old, it's starting again.*" The child experiences problems with maths calculations. Another parent added: "*I gave birth to my child with a Caesarian Section but she suffers from her tonsils, is average but with problems in maths, language and spelling.*"

Another parent explained that she had no problems during pregnancy and birth. But the child got ill when he was three weeks old. She commented, "*Once he started to cough he was a patient, we would go to hospital and be admitted.*" The child now does not finish his work in the classroom and refuses to write. As a retained learner in Grade I, the parent thinks that her son has taken after her younger brother (his uncle) who attends a special school. However, Bailard and Strang (1964:99) state that parents should not compare a child to others as he is unique.

The father also referred to childhood illness, "*The mother had no problems in her pregnancy and birth but the child developed asthma when he was two years as there was a carpet at his grandma's. It became so severe that he was spending days in the hospital as he was suffocating.*" This child is frequently absent from school during winter and on rainy days.

Steven (1995:26) points out that when parents share this kind of information, teachers are able to make adjustments to a child's programme to reduce stress for him or her. Also the classroom can become a haven for a child during times of stress. But only parents can provide the insight into

the child's previous development and circumstances at home which is needed to allow teachers to teach the whole child in a holistic say.

The parent-teacher conferences also gave parents an opportunity to explain other home circumstances which could affect the child. The teacher listened with empathy to a description of a parent's unpleasant experience during the interview thus demonstrating an attitude of acceptance and letting the parent to express her emotions. In this regard, Pearl-James (1995:30) advises teachers to "*encourage the parents to express their concerns and to make suggestions. Give them an opportunity to 'blow off steam' if they are upset or angry. After they have vented their feelings, it will be easier to discuss the problem more calmly*". In this case the mother referred to stressful experiences during her pregnancy and between her husband and herself.

These kind of exchanges confirms the work of Stevens (1995:26) who points out that the parent-teacher conference is a wonderful opportunity for both the parent and the teacher to gain important information about the child. Teachers have an understanding about the child in the classroom context. They know how children perform academically and can compare this performance objectively to the average performance of the class. However, parents have intimate knowledge about the child's whole history (including birth and childhood), they know how the child relates to siblings and other family members and they know how the child is affected by current circumstances in the home.

4.10.8 Guiding parents as partners

During the conferences it became clear that the teacher expected the parents to assist their children at home with learning. She commented: "*Please assist us at home too as then we will hold together.*" To one parent she commented: "*Since the child has weak muscles and experiences writing problems, make sure that she practices at home. Why? To build her motor skills*". She also advised the parent to compliment the learner on whatever little things the child accomplishes in the home. she suggested ways of rewarding the child to the parents saying, "*You can give her a sweet, treat her special for the day as the school is also trying to do so*".

She explained to a grandmother that small household tasks teach the child responsibility and develop new skills. She said: "*Give the child a longer message to do things and say, give me some*

water and when you come back close the door and then fix your shoes. You will be training his memory span at home."

To the father whose child was sometimes absent for as long as two weeks due to asthma (cf 4.10.5) she explained the importance of obtaining schoolwork for the child to do at home during periods of illness. The teacher instructed: "*Come to school now and then especially at the beginning of those absences. Report that to the teacher and say: 'What can I do within the curriculum until he comes to school, with what will you assist? What will you be busy with this time? Or this week? Let me do it at home so that when he returns to school there is no loss and the child has more self-confidence.' "*

These comments show that the teacher understood her task in the parent-school partnership as the one who should assist parents to stimulate learning at home. Educators should request and assist parents in becoming successful educational partners (Stevens 1995:26).

To some parents the teacher explained that they should look for special therapists such as occupational therapists and psychologists to help the children. The teacher said," *Please look for speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists to help you and let those reports come here at school. Let's file them.*" These specialists should test the child and the reports should come to school so that all the teachers teaching a particular child has access to the information. Specialists can assist educators to help learners. However, parents need considerable assistance in finding specialists to assist children. In this study the parents were poorly educated and without the sophisticated resources (such as information about different professionals, a network of friends/acquaintances in the community who might know of professionals) which are necessary to locate appropriate professionals. Moreover, most parents in this study lacked the English proficiency to contact a professional and explain a child's needs. Parents lacked transport to reach professionals who might have offices at hospitals or clinics outside the township and also the medical insurance to pay professional fees. It is insufficient , therefore for a teacher to merely admonish parents to find professional help. She should supply relevant information and even be prepared to help facilitate initial contact with professionals. This confirms the work of Lawrence (1978:6) who points out the steps necessary for a parent to become a collaborator in helping a child to learn or behave better.

4.10.9 Barriers to communication due to parents' level of education

An important barrier to communication during the conference was the parents' level of education and poor language proficiency. In the interviews the teacher used English as medium of communication although she switched to Zulu and N. Sotho when necessary. To some participants she tried to rephrase her questions in the relevant languages. In the literature, barriers to communication due to level of education are clear. Many poorly educated parents are sensitive about visiting their children's school, through fear, ignorance or lack of education. They do not feel welcome at school to talk to educators about whatever happens, goes wrong or right with the child or about his strengths or weaknesses.

This is true with one father in the interview who said: "*My son has allergies and at home we cut him from eating some of the things and here at school he buys food.*" He commented: "*It is not part of the things he eats, you'll find that it reacts to his allergies.*" From this point I could understand that the class teacher had no knowledge about monitoring what the child eats during breaks. A mother also appeared so anxious showing a hopeless face when she was interviewed. She felt inferior, embarrassed, depressed and a bit shaky and was clearly submissive to the teacher. The teacher asked: "*Is the child cheeky?*" The parent said: "*Mmm... she is cheeky*". However, she appeared to merely feel that she had to agree with whatever the teacher intimated about the child. Later the researcher discussed this incident with the teacher, only to find that the parent and teacher knew each other from primary school. The parent felt inferior to be interviewed by someone whom she felt knew more than her about education.

4.11   SUMMARY

The findings indicate that educators lack training in communication and interviewing skills, since the educator in the interview was too talkative, sometimes blaming parents and asked too many questions. What is important is that in conferences educators must ask parents for their ideas and must take efforts to encourage them to participate willingly. Teachers must show warmth and respect in conferences for parents to feel empowered to help their children with their school work.

In chapter five a summary of the research, recommendations improved practice, recommendations for future research and limitations will be presented.

CHAPTER 5

FINAL CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

5.1   INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the implementation of parent-teacher conferences in the primary school as a component of home-school communication, one of the types of parent involvement. This chapter gives an overview of the study and summarises the main findings of the literature review and the empirical investigation. On the basis of these findings, recommendations for improving the implementation of parents-teacher conferences in schools are set out. Finally, the chapter is concluded by identifying areas for future research and the limitations of the investigation.

5.2   OVERVIEW OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In Chapter1 four objectives were formulated for the study. This overview indicates how each of the objectives was reached in the various chapters.

The first objective of the study (1.3) was to define parent involvement, discuss models of parent involvement and describe how parent involvement is understood in South African context. This aim was achieved by the literature study in Chapter 2. The chapter begins with a discussion of parent involvement for the learner, the school and the community. Thereafter several barriers to parent involvement are identified. Key approaches to and models of home-school relationships are described with particular reference to Epstein's comprehensive model of family-school partnerships. Among the six types identified by Epstein is home-school communication which includes as one of its strategies, the parent-teacher conference which is the main focus of the study. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of parent involvement in South African since 1994. In the South African education system reform has centred on the South African Schools Act no 84 of 1996 that mandates the establishment of school governing bodies with parent representatives. Another key aspect of the legislation is the wide definition of the term, parent.

The second objective of the study (1.3) was to describe the contribution of parent-teacher conferences to effective home-school communication and to outline strategies used to improve parent-teacher conferences as well as to identify advantages of certain types of parent-teacher conferences. This aim was achieved by the literature study in Chapter 3. The chapter commences with a discussion of the barriers to effective communication which provides a framework for the discussion of parent teacher conferences. Firstly general guidelines are given for effective communication between parents and teachers. Communication should be pleasant, invitational, positive and pertinent. Adequate preparation should be done before a parent-teacher encounter. In particular, the tips given by two writers, Wise (3.4) and Welch (3.5) are presented in detail. Different types of conferences are identified and the main features are described. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the common topics dealt with during a conference.

The third objective of the study (1.3) was to investigate the experience of parents and teachers of parent-teacher conferences in a selected school in Mamelodi by means of a qualitative investigation. Chapter 4 presented the research design used for the qualitative investigation and presented the findings of the inquiry. The characteristics of qualitative research are given and the rationale for using a qualitative design in this study is outlined. The actual research design is then given. Firstly the site is described and the criteria for selection of the eleven participants is given (the teacher and the ten parents). The data collection strategy is described. In this study the researcher used observation as the key technique of data collection. She carried out general observation of the school and then observation of ten individual parent-teacher conferences conducted with the special needs teacher in the Foundation Phase with ten parents. She recorded the interviews on audio tape and transcribed them for analysis. Data analysis was done by coding segments and identifying partners. The second half of the chapter (4.10) presents the nine themes which emerged after data analysis. The first five themes deal with aspects of teacher talk. Additional themes are the importance of mutual trust, listening to parents important information, guiding parents as partners and barriers to communication.

The final objective was to provide guidelines for the improvement of parent-teacher conferences. Based on the findings of the literature study contained in chapters 2 and 3 and the findings of the empirical investigation, this chapter makes five recommendations for the improvement of parent-teacher conferences and they are presented in the ensuing section.

5.3   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

5.3.1   Teacher training to improve communication skills

This investigation suggests that teachers lack training in communication skills. In conferences with the parents, teachers may become nervous especially inexperienced teachers, but many experienced teachers also view parent conferences with some trepidation. Moreover, teachers are less likely to welcome parental involvement in the areas of the curriculum and instruction. Both pre-service and in-service training will equip teachers to deal with different types of parents, different situations and different types of school conferences. In terms of in-service training, the school management team should train, observe and coach teachers in this critical communication opportunity. If they expect parents to be educational partners, then educators must be skilled, confident and effective communicators during parent-teacher conferences. Chapter 3 provides many useful guidelines for parent-teacher conferences which could be incorporated into in-service training programmes for teachers.

5.3.2   Preparation for conferences

Effective parent-teacher conferences require thorough preparation by the teacher and the parents. It is recommended that teachers identifying the concerns to be covered in the conference and communicate this clearly to parents in writing at least a week before the conference takes place. A pre-conference schedule or questionnaire in which the teacher requires certain information from parents will provide the teacher with basic information before the conference. Before the conference teachers should identify examples of the child's work to illustrate particular problems or shortcomings to parents, have learning materials or examples of the report card ready to explain the curriculum and classroom instruction and worksheets or exercises which will form part of at home instruction after the conference. Thus, when the conference takes place all necessary materials will be available and the parent will have had time to consider the child's problem from their point of view and in the light of the child's development at home.

5.3.3   Compilation of an action plan

The teacher should prepare a standard action plan including goals for improvement, strategies including specific tasks that parents should fulfill at home and dates for a follow-up visit. Both parents and teachers should agree about the action plan and it could be signed by both as a concrete agreement on the strategy to follow. It is also possible to call in the child to discuss the action plan with parents and teacher and obtain their agreement and contribution toward home activities. Teachers must be prepared to train parents at subsequent meetings on specific instructional tasks, supply worksheets and assist parents in collecting appropriate books and materials. If professional help is needed, teachers should have a list of possible contacts available, and be ready to assist parents in making appointments for therapy. Teachers should be acquainted with professional fees for therapy and medical insurance benefits. In the case of impoverished parents, teachers should assist parents in contacting state clinics and other state-provided resources. This kind of information should form part of the action plan.

5.3.4   Venue and scheduling of conferences

The school management team should give attention to the scheduling of conferences at times that are convenient for working parents or mothers with other children in their care. Conferences are typically 5-10 minutes in duration and this is usually insufficient for constructive discussion and the compilation of the action plan. Teachers should be able to schedule longer conferences over a longer period of time to allow for meaningful discussion.

The venue should be parent-friendly. Parents should be assured of privacy and chairs should be arranged that parent and teacher side by side at a table so that a relationship of equals is created. Where necessary schools should provide childcare for younger siblings. When parents are unable to travel to the school, home visits are recommended.

5.3.5   Follow-up conferences

A conference dealing with a learning or behavioural problem should always be followed up by the teacher. Short term follow ups can be conducted by phone but a date should be set for another

personal meeting where the child's progress can be evaluated, parents encouraged and further actions planned. Follow-up reports should be in writing and further conferences scheduled if necessary.

5.4   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this research on the implementation of parent-teacher conferences in the Foundation Phase suggest three priority areas in research for future knowledge.

1.   The extension of this research to include an investigation into parent-teacher conferences in the secondary school.
2.   Research into home visits as a means of conducting parent-teacher conferences.
3.   Research into the content of suitable pre-service and in-service programmes to equip teachers with communication skills.

5.5   LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Limitations of the study are acknowledged. The inquiry, typical of qualitative research, was limited to participation observation carried out in one school and the use of a relatively small sample using parents with children in the Foundation Phase (10 parent-teacher conferences). Thus, the findings cannot be generalised, but they alert one to the possibilities and challenges of parent-teacher conferences in similar contexts. Purposeful sampling strategy was used to select parents and a teacher for the observations. The primary aim was to understand the implementation of parent-teacher conferences from the participants' perspectives and not to generate hypotheses.

5.6   CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that teachers lack specific skills needed for effective parent-teacher conferences. Too often teachers are not prepared in their training to conduct parent conferences and must learn on the job. Moreover, in-service and pre-service training programmes

seldom empower teachers to be confident communicators. Communication between parents and teachers in schools tends to be one-way and teachers act as experts who seldom listen to parents. Teacher training programmes could assist teachers to conduct meaningful conferences with parents. In some communities, parents feel intimidated by schools and may at first respond to a call for a conference with sensitive or hostile emotions (Jonson 1999:124). South African schools do not have an established tradition of welcoming parents as partners and the current direction taken by schools is that parent representation on governing body suffices. However, it is important to listen to parents who frequently experience themselves as unequal and disempowered partners in the home-school relationship (Lemmer 2002:18).

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