

TEACHER PRACTICES TO INVOLVE PARENTS IN HOMEWORK IN NAMIBIAN SCHOOLS

by

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that *Teacher practices to involve parents in homework in Namibian schools* represents my own work and that all the sources that I have used, or quoted, have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

SIGNATURE
(Ms P EITA)

DATE

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to
my son, Shali, and
my parents, Michael and Kornelia Eita,
for their support throughout my studies.

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SUMMARY

The aim of the study was to investigate teacher practices to involve parents in homework in Namibian schools, particularly in the Ombuumbuu cluster in the Onesi circuit. The problem was conducted by a literature study and empirical investigation. The literature review explored the views of teachers regarding the involvement of parents in their children's homework, the need for parent involvement in homework and an exploration of models of effective practices to ensure parent involvement in homework. The empirical study investigated the nature and effectiveness of teacher practices to involve parents in homework in schools in the Ombuumbuu cluster. The findings indicated that although most teachers in the study agreed that parent involvement in homework is important for learners' success, the literature review and the empirical investigation showed little parent involvement in homework in many schools. Based on the literature and the empirical investigation, recommendations were made for teachers with regard to the improvement of parent involvement in homework.

KEY TERMS

Teachers

Learners

Parents

Homework

Homework policy

Parent involvement

LIST OF MOST FREQUENTLY CITED ABBREVIATIONS

SPLASH Student-parent Laboratories Achieving Science at Home

TIPS Teachers Involve Parents in School work

VCR Video Cassette Recorder

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

According to The Parent Institute (1995:1), from the day children are born until they graduate from high school, they spend just 15% of their working hours in school. The other 85% is spent outside school and most of that time is spent at home. That means that parents are their children's most influential teachers. In addition, children are naturally curious, love to learn and are learning all the time whether learning is planned or not. Thus, since they spend more time at home than they do in school, home time can be important learning time. Moreover, homework is an everyday part of school life. Most children do not come home from school without one or more assignment to be completed at home and returned to school the next day. However, until now there has been very little systematic investigation into homework and homework difficulties. In part this is due to the difficulty of observing learners doing homework and the general belief that mothers have very little to offer as primary educators. Even books on liaison between families and schools often have little to say about homework (Macbeth 2003:3).

However, the importance of homework is increasingly becoming recognised. Properly designed homework can play a valuable part in learners' education as "it offers opportunities for work which is independent of the teacher, it can exploit materials and sources of information which are not accessible in the classroom, it allows learners to complete work started in the classroom or to practice skills learned in class and it can help to strengthen the liaison between the home and the school" (Macbeth 2003:1). Moreover, as Villas-Baas (1998:367) reported, learning does not take place only in classrooms. Many learners also need an after school period of independent work. Homework may help address learner's individual problems and varied amount of time

needed for comprehension, allowing a learner to learn at his or her own pace. Thus, the home environment can be an especially effective learning environment and is, in some cases, superior to the school especially in the early years. The range of activities is sometimes greater than in school and these activities have direct significance for the child. Moreover, a parent can give more individual attention than a teacher and the mother, in particular, has a close, often intense, relationship with the child (Macbeth 2003:3). In addition, parents are their children's first and most influential teachers and their involvement in the children's schooling helps them learn more effectively (Janice & Janice 2002:1).

In addition, the need for successful inclusion and involvement of parents in school activities in a variety of roles and areas is due in part to the compelling evidence that family involvement has a positive effect on learner's academic achievement and the many advantages of having parents as partners in the education of children. According to recent research (Pena 2000:42), the primary factor for children's success is parent interest and support. Thus, well-implemented school community practices yield positive results for the learners (Epstein 1987:110). Lemmer and Van Wyk (1998:1) report that where families learn together, grades improve and children enjoy learning. Thus, supportive parent involvement can boost children's homework efforts and effectiveness (Forgotch & Ramsey 1994:474). Therefore, according to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) and Balli (1998:142), when parents help children with homework they model their belief that educational pursuits are worthy of their time and efforts. Furthermore, when parents praise children for correctly completing homework, they reinforce the goals of education. When parents provide direct instruction by drilling their children on homework problems and asking open-ended questions, they promote factual learning and cognitive learning.

The literature stresses the importance of school and family partnership for increasing learner success in school and for strengthening school programmes. Epstein's (1987:130, 214) theory of overlapping spheres of influence of families and schools proposes that the work of the family and the school overlaps and they share goals and missions. Epstein's model of overlapping spheres includes both external and internal structures. The external

model recognises that the three major contexts in which children learn and grow - the family, school and the 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 1996:3).

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 1995:703). The model of overlapping spheres assumes that the mutual interests of families and schools can be successfully promoted by the policies and programmes of schools and the actions of teachers (Epstein 1987:130). Where teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children in primary grades and rate teachers as better teachers while learners improve their attitudes and achievements (Epstein 2001:134).

Middle and high school learners are likely to achieve better grades and achievement scores when they spend extra time on homework and homework completion (Van Voorhuis 2003:323). Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, De Jong and Jones (2001:195) have also reported that parent involvement, including involvement in learner homework, is related to learner achievement and personal attributes conducive to achievement such as self-regulation and perceptions of academic competence. Thus, a need exists for improved communication between school and home regarding parent help with homework (Van Voorhuis 2003:325).

Bennett, Finn and Cribb (1999:10) also argue that parents remain the child's first teachers and can make an incalculable contribution to formal and informal learning in the home. The most obvious area where parents can be involved on a daily basis is with ensuring a homework routine and supervision. St. John, Griffith and Allen-Haynes (1997:87) also maintain that parents often find it difficult to visit the school but are still involved in their children's schooling through the ordinary, everyday activities of home such as supervising

homework, monitoring school activities, assisting with learning or other problems with or without the school's help and providing an enriched learning environment and learning experiences for their children.

However, most parents still need help to know how to be productively involved in their children's education at each grade level. School programmes and teacher practices to organise family and school relations are needed to encourage already active parents and to assist those families who would not become involved on their own. This is because "parent involvement does not happen by itself, principals and teachers are responsible for bringing it about" (Kruger 2002:44). For this reason, improving parent involvement is one of the most challenging tasks facing educators today (Van De Grift & Green 1992:57). It calls for imagination and commitment, initiative and direction; it also needs management, understanding and support (Middlewood 1999:112). This research therefore examines teacher practices to involve parents in homework in Namibian rural schools.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Teachers and parents have been frequently described as "natural allies" (Macdonald 1998:88) because they share the common goal of wanting to assist children to develop their full potential. Moreover, the benefits of teacher-parent cooperation are strongly supported by research. In view of the above, most policy makers and educators endorse the need for school-family-community partnerships to improve education (Van Wyk 2001:116). However, in spite of these well-documented benefits, it is usually not equally matched with effective site-based implementation. Schools frequently fail to establish strong links between school and home and parent participation is not significant in many schools even where parents are invited (Lemmer 2002: 2). Hence, the direct input of parents as partners into the actual education process in the schools is highly questionable and it is difficult to understand why there is not more parent involvement in homework in schools. Thus, with regard to this problem the following question is posed: What practices can teachers use to ensure effective parent involvement in homework?

The main research problem suggests several sub problems formulated as follows:

- How do teachers and parents view parent involvement in homework?
- Why do parents need to be involved in their children's homework?
- Which models of effective practice to ensure parent involvement in homework exist?
- What is the nature and effectiveness of practices to involve parents in homework in the Ombuumbuu cluster schools in Namibia?
- What can teachers do to improve parent involvement in homework?

1.3 AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The research aims to address the following objectives:

- To investigate the view of teachers and parents regarding the involvement of parents in their children's homework.
- To describe the need for parent involvement in children's homework.
- To explore models of effective teacher practices to ensure parent involvement in homework.
- To examine the nature and effectiveness of teacher practices regarding parent involvement in homework in the Ombuumbuu cluster schools in Namibia.
- To develop guidelines how parent involvement in homework can be improved.

1.4 MOTIVATION FOR THE RESEARCH

Recent legislation as stipulated in the Namibian Education Act 16 of 2001 (Namibia 2001:33) which states that "the parent of each child should be provided with regular reports in writing on the academic progress, general behaviour and conduct of the learner" and the Code of Conduct for the Teaching Service (Namibia 2004:5) which states that "a teacher in relation to parents and a community, must: recognise parents and the community at large as partners in education and promote good relationships with them, create effective communication channels between the school, parents and the community and keep parents adequately and timeously informed about the well being

and progress of their children" has focused attention on the rights and responsibilities of parents as empowered stakeholders. In order for these government policies to be implemented successfully, research on parents as supporters of learning, needs to be carried out to help teachers develop effective programmes.

In the same vein, research in recent years has also revealed that parent involvement has a significant effect on the quality of the teaching and learning experience and without co-operation between parents and teachers the child cannot be adequately educated (Kruger 2002:45). Hamby (1992:76) also reports that parent involvement in children's education has a major impact on children's achievement at school and that benefits of parent involvement are "better grades, more consistent attendance at school, more positive attitude and behaviour and greater participation in effective academic programme". Squelch and Lemmer (1994:93) mention that the benefits of parent involvement include improved school performance, reduced dropout rates, an increase in diligence and more positive attitudes towards the school.

However, regardless of this positive trend in legislation and research findings, in practice parent involvement in homework is generally poor and in some cases, non-existent. This indicates that "schools don't always understand what parent involvement means" (Van De Grift & Green 1992:57). It is usually confined to parents who attend meetings, serve on school boards or committees and who meet teachers when the child is problematic. This implies that there are still many barriers to overcome before parents can be regarded as equal partners (Squelch & Lemmer 1994:93).

In addition, according to Lemmer (2002:9), only 58% of schools who participated in a survey among South African primary schools had a written homework policy, which was distributed to parents. This suggests that schools rely on the common wisdom concerning the role of parent involvement and this is seldom formalised in policy documents, which are widely distributed. In view of the above, Van Voorhuis (2003:324) maintains that during the middle school years, teachers provide too little information to parents on how to work on homework with their children. According to the research conducted by Lemmer (2002:14), most parents were unaware of a homework policy for the school.

They expressed uncertainty about whether homework was assigned on weekends or on weekdays and did not know what criteria were used to assess homework projects. Thus, parents seemed uninformed about the key role that they could play in assisting their children's formal learning at home.

However, as Squelch and Lemmer (1994:95) state, professionalism in dealing with parents requires a plan for working with parents all year long. The school needs to know exactly when, why and how it will contact parents from the first day to the last. A parent plan is needed, which is a plan of action for dealing with parents throughout the year. It is therefore against this background that a school's programmes and educator practices of parent involvement in homework need to be continuously evaluated and revised so that schools can move towards even more effective practices.

Thus, despite knowledge of the link between homework completion and learner achievement, teachers and parents voice legitimate concerns over current homework practices. For example, many learners complain that they are assigned too much homework (Corno 2000; Van Voorhuis 2003:323). Teachers report that they want more communication with parents, but they need more instruction and encouragement to develop high quality homework assignments (Epstein & Becker 1982; Van Voorhuis 2003:323). Many parents report that they want to help their children with homework, but they often feel unprepared and need more guidance from the school (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Burrow 1995:145; Van Voorhuis 2003:323). Thus, research needs to be carried out to pinpoint the sources of homework tension noted by learners, teachers and parents and to identify and test possible age-appropriate solutions.

Furthermore, teachers should be equipped with the skills to develop two-way communication between the home and school. This is because policies to implement more effective parent involvement should be done with input from parents who should be given the opportunity to bring their unique perspectives to the policy planning process (Lemmer 2002:18). This is consistent with the findings of Epstein and Dauber (1993:290) that most parents need help to become involved in their children's education at each

level. Squelch and Lemmer (1992:98) point out that parents who are invited to participate in school activities are more likely to respond positively, especially if they see that their needs and circumstances have been considered.

Finally, this research may also help teachers to establish involvement activities to meet the individual circumstances of each family (Van Wyk 2001:129). Thus, it can assist schools to build on home routines already in place by assisting parents to become more effectively involved in everyday activities of the school, providing more meaningful ways for parents to become involved in homework and the child's mastery of basic skills and by giving parents information and resources to further enrich the curriculum of the home during weekends and vacations.

1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out by means of literature study and an empirical investigation.

1.5.1 Literature study

The researcher used both primary and secondary sources to provide a background to the empirical investigation. Primary sources are regarded as original written material of the authors' own observations and experiences (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont 2005:315). In this study, the researcher used journal articles and research reports as primary sources.

Secondary sources comprise material that is derived from someone else as the original source (De Vos *et al*/2005:315). The secondary sources which will be used in the study are review papers and textbooks. However, Baily (in De Vos *et al*/2005:315) remarks that although there may be some grey areas in the primary-secondary distinction, the difference is generally clear.

1.5.2 Empirical investigation

Johnson and Christensen (2000:17-18) distinguish between qualitative research and quantitative research designs. Quantitative research relies primarily on the collection of numerical data, while qualitative research relies on the collection of non-numerical data such as facts presented as words or pictures. In this research, a qualitative as well as a quantitative design were used to investigate the teacher practices to involve parents in homework. The research was concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. Thus, the inquiry aimed to investigate teacher behaviours as they occurred naturally in situations without manipulation of conditions or experience.

1.5.2.1 Pilot study

A pilot study is a prerequisite for the successful execution and completion of a research project. It allows a researcher to acquire thorough background knowledge about a specific problem that the researcher intends to investigate. The purpose of the pilot study is to improve the success and effectiveness of the investigation (De Vos *et al*/2005:205-206). In this study, the researcher used a preliminary pilot study to identify possible unforeseen problems, which might emerge during the main investigation. The pilot study was a valuable means to gain practical knowledge of and insight into the problem. A pilot study assisted the researcher in making necessary modifications of the data gathering instruments (the focus group interview and the questionnaire) before the main investigation proceeded (De Vos *et al*/2005:209).

1.5.2.2 Sampling and selection of participants

McMillan and Schumacher (1997:167) define sampling as a process of selecting a sample from a larger group of persons, identified as the population. In this investigation, the researcher used purposeful sampling, which is sometimes called judgment sampling. Purposive sampling means that the researcher selects particular elements from the

population that will be representative or informative about the topic of interest. Thus, the researcher selects information rich individuals, that is, those who are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena under investigation (Johnson & Christensen 2000:180). The size of the sample depends on logistical constraints, such as the availability of appropriate participants, the accessibility of participants and the costs of locating and enlisting participation (Lemmer 1992:10). Thus, due to the search for in depth data in qualitative research, the sample is relatively small. This is because what is important in qualitative research is the richness of the information that the sample will render.

In this study, the researcher selected five primary schools in the Ombuumbuu cluster in the Onesi circuit, Namibia. All five schools are day schools in which learners commute to school from home every day and are thus, considered to be information rich.

1.5.2.3 Data collection methods

Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire with mainly open ended items and a focus group interview. The use of multiple methods gave the researcher an opportunity to compare the responses and data collected, hence, producing reliable, valid and accurate data.

A questionnaire is a set of questions on a form, which is to be completed by the respondent in respect of a research project. The basic objective of such a questionnaire is to obtain facts and opinions about a phenomenon from people who are informed on the particular issue. In case of this study, the researcher gathered data with a questionnaire which was administered to 15 teachers at the five participating schools. The questionnaire consisted of three closed items and seven open items. The latter enabled participants to respond in any way that they pleased (Johnson & Christensen 2000:131).

In a qualitative investigation, a focus group interview is considered a suitable method for data collection. A focus group may be defined as "using a semi-structured group session,

moderated by a group leader, held in a informal setting, with the purpose of collecting information on a designated topic (Johnson & Christensen 2000:134). In this study, the aim of the focus group interview was to evaluate the survey process after the survey had taken place as well as to stimulate new ideas and to learn more about teachers' ranges of experience. Thus, the researcher conducted a focus group interview with five teachers selected from the survey respondents in order to complement the questionnaire data.

The researcher obtained permission from the circuit inspector as well as school principals to conduct the research because the study included visiting teachers during school hours to distribute and collect questionnaires and to conduct the interview.

1.5.2.4 Data analysis

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data (De Vos *et al* 2005:333). Qualitative data analysis was adopted in this study and in this regard Patton (in De Vos *et al*/2005:333) states that qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. Data in qualitative research is usually in the form of textual narratives (i.e., transcribed interviews), written descriptions of observations (field notes) and the reflection of ideas and conjectures recorded daily in the researcher's record book (De Vos *et al*/2005:333). The researcher proposed to analyse data on a daily basis as she gathered and transcribed the recorded data. The researcher read through all the questionnaires one by one, studied them question by question and made a summary. The raw data of questionnaires were coded and percentages listed in each response category for each item. The researcher transcribed the interview and analysed the text derived from it by reading and rereading the transcripts and the responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and searched for the relationships.

1.5.2.5 Reliability and validity

Johnson and Christensen (2000:100-122) state that reliability refers to consistency or stability of the responses obtained from data gathering procedures. Validity inquires

whether the researcher has determined what she intended to determine. Techniques to ensure reliability and validity of the research are described in detail in chapter 3.

1.6 EXPLANATION OF CONCEPTS

The following concepts are central to the study and require further explanation.

1.6.1 Teacher

A teacher, in relation to state schools, means a staff member who is professionally qualified to teach others in formal education and whose occupation is teaching. It includes a professionally unqualified person whose occupation is teaching (Namibia 2001:7).

1.6.2 Parent

The term parent means a natural or an adoptive parent or guardian of any learner, and includes any person taking care of, or who assumes responsibility for any learner's education (Namibia 2001:6). Thus, this term now also includes 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 caregiving function (Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004:2).

1.6.3 Parent involvement

Squelch and Lemmer (1994:93) define parent involvement as follows: "it is the active and willing participation of parents in a wide range of school-based and home based activities which may be educational or non-educational. It extends from supporting and upholding the school ethos to supervising children's homework at home. Parent involvement implies mutual cooperation, sharing and support".

In addition, the UNISA Metropolitan Life Project for the training of teachers in parent involvement (Kruger 2002:46) whose definition is also adopted in this research defines parent involvement as follows: "parent involvement is the active and supportive participation of parents as partners and allies of the teacher in the primary aspects of formal and informal education of their own child and/ or school and/or broad education of their community in an individual and/or collective way and in a structured, orderly manner in order to achieve the objectives of education as fully as possible".

1.6.4 Learner

The term learner, which is also used interchangeably with the term student in this research, is defined according to the Namibian Education Act (Namibia 2001:5) to mean any person who is registered and receiving basic education or a course of study in terms of the Namibian Education Act.

1.6.5 Homework

Homework may be defined as: work, related to the formal school curriculum, set by teachers to be completed by learners out of class (normally in the home) within a specified time (Macbeth 2003:2). Homework is related to the curriculum and is set by teachers. Thus, work undertaken voluntarily by learners or initiated by parents to improve their children's performance would not be homework according to this definition, nor would learning acquired more informally in the home.

1.6.6 Homework policy

The homework policy means a plan of action for dealing with parent involvement in homework throughout the year. It also includes clear objectives for learning, instruction for completion and explicit instructions to the learner for involving family members in certain portions of the assignment (Van Voorhuis 2003:326).

1.7 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 provides the introduction and motivation to the study, the problem formulation and the aims of the study. It outlines the research design and methodology used and clarifies certain concepts used in this study.

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical background on the teacher practices to involve parents in homework, in which the concept homework is defined and its purposes outlined and the parents and teachers' views are described. The need for parent involvement in homework and models of teachers' practices to involve parents in homework are also described.

Chapter 3 gives a description of the research design. The method of data collection and analysis are explained.

Chapter 4 contains the presentation, discussion and interpretation of the findings.

Chapter 5 provides a summary, conclusions and recommendations. This chapter also highlights the limitations of the study.

1.8 SUMMARY

In chapter one, the orientation, background and concerns about teacher practices to involve parents in homework were outlined. The problem statement and the aims of the research have also been described. Motivation for the value of undertaking this research was also outlined. In the following chapter, a literature review on parent involvement in homework will be given.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Homework is a regular part of children's education. A synthesis of research reports that learners are likely to achieve better grades and achievement scores when they spend extra time on homework and children who complete homework with their parents tend to be better learners (Forgotch & Ramsey 1994; Van Voorhuis 2003; Hoover-Dempsey *et al*, 2001; Epstein, Simon & Salinas 1997). Thus, the importance of homework and its relevance to learners' achievement raise questions about the type of homework that is most conducive to learners' learning and the role parents should play in their children's homework activities. This chapter will thus, integrate a broad range of literature to examine teacher practices to involve parents in homework.

Homework may be defined as "work, related to the formal school curriculum, set by teachers to be completed by learners out of class (normally in the home) within a specified time" (Macbeth 2003:2). Based on the definition above, the words 'out of class' as well as 'normally in the home' reflect that homework may be done at home or elsewhere. Macbeth (2003:2) reported that primary school level written tasks, comparable to homework, can be carried out in school under the direction of teachers, although learning and other work may be done at home. In some instances, some schools run homework classes in the school, sometimes supervised by parents, while many other schools make provision for learners to have study or homework facilities for a few hours each afternoon/evening after school. Homework can also be done in public libraries.

However, because homework is completed primarily at home, parents or other family members may be involved in various aspects of the process. Hoover-Dempsey *et al*

(2001) and Van Voorhuis (2003:325) outline specific ways in which parents might participate in the homework process: (a) monitor homework completion or motivate learners to complete homework assignments (b) praise or reward learners' homework efforts (c) tutor or help learners with homework completion (d) break homework tasks into smaller units to help understanding (e) model, demonstrate or help learners to solve homework problems and (f) help learners to cope with distractions.

Lemmer and Van Wyk (1998:1) also report that regular homework is a necessary part of learning and when children get the "homework habit", they are learning more than just math, science or literature, but they are also learning study skills, self-discipline and independence. These are lessons that will last a life-time. However, the quality and amount of parent involvement rely heavily on the skills of the teacher to plan appropriate activities to involve parents in homework. Teachers can make homework more productive and enjoyable for all by having a clear, consistent and well understood homework policy.

Furthermore, the fact that homework is related to the curriculum and is set by teachers implies that work undertaken voluntarily by learners or initiated by parents to improve their children's performance as well as learning acquired more informally in the home would not be homework by this definition (Macbeth 2003:2).

2.2 PURPOSES OF HOMEWORK

Homework is an important component in academic achievement. At its best, homework is intended to help learners practice and reinforce concepts they have studied in school (Balli 1998:142) and research indicates that homework does have a positive effect on learning (Walberg, Paschal & Weinstein 1985:34; Lemmer 2002:1; Lemmer & Van Wyk 1998:1; Epstein *et al*/1995:1).

Macbeth (2003:4) identifies a variety of reasons for setting homework. Some of which are listed as follows:

- Consolidation of, or practice of, work already done in class.
- Preparation for the next class work.
- Introducing tasks that extend beyond work already done in class, but build upon it.
- Assisting slower children to catch up with quicker children.
- Testing learners' understanding of work covered or competence in skills.
- Working independently and development of self-discipline.
- Making use of materials and source of information (including parents) which are not accessible in the classroom.
- Enabling class work to concentrate on activities that require the teacher's presence.
- Strengthening educational partnership between parents and teachers.
- Providing a means by which teachers can encourage parents to become more actively involved in their child's formal education.
- Providing a means by which parents can see the sort of work which the child is doing in school, and by which they can assess progress.

Lemmer and Van Wyk (1998:1) also suggest the following reasons for giving homework:

- Homework helps learners learn more because by reviewing at home, they remember work longer and understand better.
- Homework teaches learners that learning takes place everywhere such as in the home and in the community as well as in the classroom.
- Homework teaches self-discipline.
- Homework teaches learners to use their time wisely.

However, Villas-Baas (1998:367) points out that the fact that homework expands the time spent on a learning activity is not enough to make it useful. In order for homework to make a difference in learners' learning, it should include activities such as feedback, individualised enrichment assignments, the use of human and physical resources not available at school and parent involvement.

2.3 FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE HOMEWORK

The most useful homework of all has little to do with textbooks and exercises, but it can be guaranteed to help children become better learners and happier human beings (Lemmer & Van Wyk 1998:2). A homework activity must be challenging and engaging, including higher level thinking skills and interactions with family members (Epstein *et al* 1995:3).

Macbeth (2003:5-7) suggests the following features of effective homework.

- Homework must be part of a carefully devised learning programme. Homework should be related to the curriculum, though it may go beyond it, confronting the present limits of the learner's knowledge.
- Homework should have purpose. Homework should not be set randomly. Teachers must reflect upon the place and function of homework, in order not to put the learner under heavy stress.
- The school should have a system to check that homework is set regularly. Schools which set homework frequently, and where there is a check on whether staff set it, tend to achieve better than schools which make little use of homework.
- Homework should be suited to the capabilities of learners. Teachers need to differentiate and take into consideration learners, individual differences and domestic circumstances of different families.
- Homework should be properly explained to learners in advance. Learners should know how to work, where to look for information and material, how to ensure and use sources of information, how to take notes and how to present the findings. Failure to do so can cause confusion and anxiety to learners and parents.
- Homework should be checked by teachers. Checking should happen soon after completion of homework regardless of whether it is written, learning or investigation work, although it should not waste valuable class time unnecessarily.
- Comments and other feedback should be given to learners about their homework. It is important to give both praise for good work and help where there are difficulties. Where common misunderstandings emerge, teachers should adopt lessons to rectify them.

- Homework should enhance independence and the use of non-school resources. Homework should be used to develop independent study techniques and make use of the home, the neighbourhood and environment to obtain information relevant to learning.
- Parents should be kept informed about the nature of homework. This may include general information about homework policy, what facilities should be available in the home and how parents can assist. It may also include detailed information about particular homework tasks set. It is appropriate that this should be done in advance of the homework but parents should know the school's assessment of the homework. Parents should provide appropriate conditions for homework. Some general preconditions which might form the basis of discussion with parents include access to a suitable working surface, basic equipment such as books and reference books, a time set aside for homework which is recognised and respected by all members of the family, an interest in and support for the child's homework as well as firmness about its being done.
- Homework must enhance a sense of educational partnership with parents.

Epstein *et al* (1995:3) have pointed out that just any homework will not do. Some homework is boring and requires learners' time but not much thinking. Thus, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995:128) caution that the enabling and enhancing influence of parent involvement in homework is tempered by two variables: developmentally appropriate involvement strategies and the match between parent involvement strategies and teacher expectations. If the strategies used by parents, for example, are developmentally appropriate for a given child, the involvement is likely to be positive and useful. In addition, if there is a good match between the expectations and requests of teachers and parents, children can focus on homework without the added demand of translating or negotiating the strategies of teachers and parents.

2.4 TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' VIEWS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN HOMEWORK

Despite the numerous advantages of parent involvement in homework completion as well as knowledge of the link between homework completion and achievement in school, concerns of parents and teachers continue to exist. Both parents and teachers voice legitimate concerns over current homework practices. At times, the relationship between teachers and parents is an uneasy one (Feuerstein 2000:58). Parents often complain that teachers are uncooperative when asked for help and the information teachers provide is non-specific and insufficient (Forgotch & Ramsey 1994:473). In the same vein, although teachers agree that parent involvement contributes to more effective teaching and a positive school climate, few believe that they could realistically change parents' behaviour (Epstein & Becker 1982:58). Thus, parent involvement is impeded by both teacher and parent obstacles.

2.4.1 Parents' views of parent involvement in homework

Research has shown that parents, whether explicitly instructed or not, are often involved in some aspects of the homework process (Van Voorhuis 2003:324). However, while some parents want to be actively involved in the schoolwork including homework, others believe that the responsibility for educating children rests solely on the teachers (Kaperu 2001:4).

Thus, some parents, especially those from linguistically and culturally diverse communities and from working-class neighbourhoods have a hard time with forms of parent involvement expected by schools, especially if parents receive little specific assistance from teachers to enable them to comply with expectations or if parents cannot read the communication sent home by the school (Kaperu 2001:4). Other parents may retain discomfort with schools as a result of their own negative experiences of school, if for instance, parents own histories are marked by alienation, anger and difficulty. They were possibly not good learners themselves and fear that they cannot support their children adequately (Lemmer 2002:4). Similarly, parents who are poorly educated are often

intimidated by the school situation and avoid school activities while teachers are viewed as authority figures and experts in teaching and learning by parents who are uncertain about their own expertise in parenting (Lemmer 2002:4). Moreover, some parents also feel they should not talk with their young adolescents if they do not know much about the school subject (Epstein *et al*/1995:3) while some parents who do not read or write very well are usually worried that they will not measure up to the expectations of the teacher or their young adolescents (Epstein *et al*/1995:8).

However, some parents, on the other hand, may regard themselves as the child's advocate and enthusiastically seek contact with the teacher and the school, especially when it affects their child. Surveys of parents have also shown that most families want to be able to talk with, monitor, encourage and guide their children as learners, but they said that they need more information from the school about how to help their children at home (Epstein *et al* 1995:1). Hoover-Dempsey *et al* (1995:437) also report that many parents expressed that they want to help their children with homework, but they often feel unprepared and need more guidance from the school.

In addition, Hoover-Dempsey *et al* (2001:201) reported that parents decide to become involved in learners' homework because:

- They believe that involvement in children's schooling is a normal requirement and responsibility of parenting. As a result, parents often continue their involvement in children's homework despite concerns about personal limitations and children's learning difficulties.
- They believe that their involvement will make a positive difference for the child.

In general, parents who help children with homework are likely to believe that their help positively influence study outcomes. They perceive invitations from their child or the child's teacher as suggesting that their homework involvement is wanted and expected. The invitation may come because of age (younger children appear to elicit more involvement than older ones), performance level (poor performance may invite more parental help) or characteristic patterns of parent-child interaction (generally positive or frequently antagonistic).

All parents really want their children to succeed in school, but they often feel uncertain about how to go about supporting learning at home. Parents need guidance and ideas in order to know how to help their children at home (Lemmer & Van Wyk 1998:1). As children move from one grade to the next, families need information and assistance to understand the schools and to know how to talk with, monitor, encourage and guide their children.

2.4.2 Teachers' views of parent involvement in homework

There are also mixed feelings among teachers towards parent involvement in homework. Some teachers do not make frequent or systematic use of parent involvement in homework (Feuerstein 2000:43). Teachers often regard themselves as somewhat superior to parents due to their expertise (Lemmer 2002:5). Some teachers do not believe that parents will understand or follow through with activities and therefore rarely initiate further parent involvement (Feuerstein 2000:43). Some teachers believe that all homework should be completed in a quiet place at home, away from the family or other people to allow learners to practise what was taught in class, to study for a quiz or to complete their work on their own (Epstein *et al*/1995:3).

In the same vein, the results of the research conducted by Van Wyk (2001) indicates that teachers have a limited understanding of parent involvement in homework, and of the benefits and strategies which may be used to involve parents (Van Wyk 2001:137). Thus, involving parents in homework activities does not seem to be common practice, particularly in secondary schools. One teacher defended the view of secondary school teachers as follows: "In high school, homework is for learners to do on their own" (Van Wyk 2001:122). In addition, in low socio-economic school communities, teachers argue that parents are uncooperative when it comes to homework activities. One teacher explained: "The literate parents are the ones that look at a book, but the illiterate ones don't care" (Van Wyk 2001:122).

The research results mentioned above has also shown that the lack of willingness of teachers to involve parents is due to the fact that they had not been adequately trained and taught the benefits of parent involvement. As one teacher explained: "We are only taught how to manage a class and controlling the books. The part of where the parent comes in, is not there ... so the parents are not part of the package of management, I think we basically need workshops "(Van Wyk 2001:127). Epstein and Becker (1982) and Van Voorhuis (2003:323) also found that teachers report that they want more communication with parents, but they need more instruction and encouragement to develop high quality homework assignments.

Assumptions made by some teachers and the lack of importance they place on parent involvement create problems for effective parent involvement in homework. However, nowadays teachers generally agree about the importance of parent involvement with regard to the child's success and efforts to involve parents more fully in their children's education is well documented (Pape 1999; Brooker 1997).

2.5 THE NEED FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN HOMEWORK

Epstein's theory of parent involvement has identified learning at home as one of the types of parent involvement. It emphasises that schools should involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework, and other curricular-linked activities and decisions (Lemmer 2002:7). Thus, when parents are involved, there are benefits to the learners: more homework completed and more skills mastered. When teachers frequently use practices to involve families in reading, learners gain more skills in reading than similar learners whose teachers do not involve families (Epstein *et al*/1997:4). More learners see a link between school and home, obtain a greater understanding that their parents support their work and become more aware that they can talk to someone at home about school work.

Moreover, Lemmer and Van Wyk (1998:4) state that children need to know that someone is supporting them. They can be successful if they feel that someone cares deeply about whether they succeed or fail and if someone is proud of their successes and

their efforts. Teachers' frequent use of parent involvement in homework also increases learners' self-confidence by showing and telling parents what they are learning in class and by gathering information and reactions from parents about their work. In this way, learners' independence and control over their learning are increased (Epstein *et al* 1995:22). Research has also shown that the best and most independent learners regularly receive advice and assistance at home on homework and other kinds of learning activities (Epstein *et al* 1995:22; Villas-Baas 1998:368).

Epstein *et al* (1995:22) further found that parent involvement in learning activities at home may reduce teachers' fear of parents and parents' fear of teachers. When teachers and parents work together to help children achieve important goals, they develop respect and appreciation for each other. Similarly, when parents are assisted by the schools, they become more knowledgeable about their children's education and they interact with their children more often.

Another important way in which parents can help their children to do better in school is by helping them develop language skills. Experts agree that language is the key to learning and a child who can express his/her ideas is well on the road to success (Lemmer & Van Wyk 1998:2). Therefore, the language arts: reading, writing, speaking and listening are the keys to learner success in school and in life. Thus, clearly designed language and arts homework that enables learners to interact with their families helps learners to communicate better (Epstein *et al* 1995:8). Studies also show that reading activities increase vocabulary and improve thinking skills while listening to books also helps children develop a positive attitude towards reading (Lemmer & Van Wyk 1998:2).

When parents are involved, children do better in school. Thus, when teachers guide involvement and interaction, more parents become involved in ways that benefit their children. Furthermore, when parents are provided with useful information and skills, they become more aware of their children's school programme, interact with their children more and reinforce the teachers' goals for better school work.

2.6 MODELS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN HOMEWORK

Teachers play an important role in helping families become involved in school work at home. Thus, various models of parent involvements have been developed to enable teachers to do this easily. The models which will be discussed in this study are, among others, Teachers Involve Parents in School Work (TIPS), Student-Parent Laboratories Achieving Science at Home (SPLASH) and a self-administered video tape.

2.6.1 Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS)

Based on the findings from studies of homework and parent involvement, Epstein *et al* (1995) developed a homework approach called Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) to promote learner's learning, parent-child interactions and parent-teacher communication (Van Voorhuis 2003:325). This interactive homework can be applied to any subject and any grade (Epstein *et al*/1995:7). TIPS requires every teacher at every grade level to communicate with families about how to work and interact with their children on learning at home. The assignments include clear objectives for learning instructions for completion and explicit instructions to the learner for involving family members in certain portions of the assignment.

TIPS interactive homework assignments differ from traditional homework in the following ways as described by Van Voorhuis (2003:326):

- They are assigned once a week or twice a month. Learners are given several days to complete the activity to permit family involvement.
- Certain sections of the activity include instructions that prompt learners to involve family members with specific conversation or other interactions.
- Parents provide feedback concerning how effective the activity was for them and their children.

As with conventional homework, TIPS activities are linked to the curriculum, graded and designed to extend learners' learning. Examples of TIPS assignment topics from over 500 activities available are as follows (Van Voorhuis 2003:326):

- The learner conducts a simple home experiment by using liquids of different thickness, and then discusses the results with a family partner (middle grades science).
- The learner asks family members for their shoe sizes or height, and computes the averages (middle grades mathematics).
- The learner interviews a family member about hairstyles that were popular when he or she was the learner's age, writes a paragraph about those hairstyles, and reads a paragraph aloud to a family member (middle grades languages).

Van Voorhuis (2003:326) further reports that the TIPS interactive homework approach helps schools address many of the shortcomings in current homework practices in the following ways:

- By using the research-based TIPS, teachers can promote better learner comprehension by identifying topics in the curriculum that benefit from interaction.
- Teachers provide instructions to learners concerning how to involve family members in certain sections of the assignments.
- To protect family members from embarrassment for not knowing specific concepts, teachers design interactive questions that parents can answer without formal education or detailed knowledge of the subject.
- Each assignment includes a section that asks parents to communicate with the teacher about their reactions and about the effectiveness of the assignment.

Thus, with TIPS, any teacher can help all families regularly and with relative ease to stay informed and involved in their children's learning activities at home and to help all learners to complete homework which will promote greater success in schools.

2.6.1.1 TIPS activities

TIPS activities are examples that teachers can use to design homework that match the learning objectives they set for their learners. Some of which can be used as they are,

while some can be used to help teachers design their own TIPS activities (Epstein *et al* 1995:4).

2.6.1.2 Informing parents

Parents receive information about TIPS in seven ways as described by Epstein *et al* (1995:5):

- The principal and/or teachers send letters to parents, for example, at the start of the school year informing them about the programme.
- Teachers orient parents at grade level meetings that are held at the beginning of the year.
- Teachers provide other written communications and telephone conversations to inform and remind parents about the project.
- Learners are reminded of the importance of involving their families on each TIPS assignment and the importance of completing their homework.
- On-going contacts are made by teachers, principals and project leaders to keep families informed about the project and the importance of their participation.

TIPS activities are homework assignments that include interactions and communications with families. They are regularly scheduled activities (e.g. weekly or every two weeks) so that learners and parents become familiar with the TIPS process and information about schoolwork continues to flow throughout the school year.

2.6.1.3 Developing a TIPS homework project

Epstein *et al* (1995:6) state that one way to develop TIPS is for teachers to use or adapt existing prototypes, or work together to design or develop TIPS interactive homework assignments. Prototypes are examples developed with teachers who have been using TIPS in their schools with their learners. Teachers can then choose among these prototypes and add their own TIPS assignments which match their own curricula, learning objectives and the needs of their own learners. A school or a district may pay a few teachers at each grade level to work together during holidays. In this time they could take two weeks to

plan and write the first draft of TIPS activities for one school year and another two weeks to edit and produce the activities for use by the learners and parents. If this is not possible, staff members serving on school improvement committees may develop TIPS over a school year.

Every TIPS activity should build learner family interaction which means "asking learners and families to interview each other, play a game, collect data, record reactions or suggestions, apply a skill to real life, or work together in some other way" (Epstein *et al* 1995:7). The length of a TIPS activity covers the front and back of one piece of paper, including a home-to-school communication section. The TIPS activity should be printed on coloured paper in order to help learners and parents to find them easily in the learner's notebook.

The team of homework designers must include teachers as well as project coordinators, district curriculum leaders, administrators, parents, learners, members of the community, cooperative researches or others (Epstein *et al*/1995:7). Parents and learners reactions to assignments should be used to help teachers revise the activities for use again or for use by other teachers. However, it is worth noting that there are few costs involved in developing TIPS activities, such as the payments of teachers to work during the holiday, printing the activities for learners' use as well as for letters, surveys and other follow-up activities and to document and study the success of the project (Epstein *et al*/1995:7).

Creating TIPS homework activities is more than cutting and pasting ideas from other homework. Thus, the foundation of all TIPS homework activities should be learners and families sharing an enjoyable and challenging learning experience.

► **TIPS language arts homework**

TIPS language arts provide a format for learners to share what they are learning in language arts. The activities include "mastering forms of writing including descriptive, narrative, explanatory, and creative paragraphs, short stories, tall tales, elaborating ideas and details, responding to prompts for writing and other forms, improving understanding

of grammar, word and meanings including similes, homonyms, analogies, context clues, multiple meanings, facts and opinions, chronological order, and others; writing to follow up reading including story problems, story plans, reacting to stories, and others" (Epstein *et al* 1995:8). These activities require learners to communicate: speak, read, write, interview and listen with parents or other family members.

► **TIPS science/health homework**

TIPS science/health provides a format for learners to conduct and discuss hand-on "lab" or data collection activities related to the science topics study in class. These science activities help learners and their families see that science is enjoyable, enriching and part of everyday life.

TIPS science/health activities include: "classifying, collecting data, communicating, comparing, decision making, defining problems, designing models, drawing conclusions, experimenting, formulating questions, hypothesizing, identifying patterns and relationships, inferring, interpreting data, measuring, observing, predicting, problem solving, recording data, using the scientific method, summarizing and other high level thinking skills" (Epstein *et al*/1995:10).

► **TIPS mathematics homework**

TIPS maths interactive homework is designed to build and reinforce maths skills that are taught in class, and create interest, enjoyment and positive attitudes in maths. The activities include "number concepts, whole number operations, mixed number/fraction operations, decimal operations, measurement, using data, and integers" (Epstein *et al* 1995:12). For each of these TIPS activity learners share their skills and progress with a parent or other family member. Thus, TIPS math homework should be sent home every week or every two weeks to ensure regular flow of information and interaction between school and home.

Epstein *et al* (1995:12) further state that TIPS math's activities should be introduced in class in the following ways:

In all classes teachers should:

- inform learners about the sections they will share at home and ask if they have any questions about vocabulary or assignment procedure.
- tell learners to attach extra paper to the TIPS assignment in case they need more work space.

In classes with slow learners, teachers should:

- decide if learners need more days to complete an assignment.
- complete part of the assignment as a class lesson and assign the rest for homework.

► **Components of TIPS language arts/ science/ health/math homework**

According to Epstein *et al* (1995:9), each TIPS assignment includes:

- **A letter to the parent or guardian** stating the topic and specific skill of the activity. Learners write in the date due and sign the letter.
- **Objectives** are presented clearly and concisely so that the learners can read them to the parents or the parents can read them with the learners.
- **Materials** required are listed. They are mainly common, inexpensive, or readily available items in the home. If learners cannot get them, the materials should be provided by the school.
- **Procedures** such as spaces and forms are provided to guide learners' work so that learners can do most of the work on the TIPS homework paper.
- **Discussion questions** should lead to enjoyable parent-learner interactions, including learners' interviews of parents, writing and other reactions to what learners read or write.
- **Home-to-school communication** invites parents to provide comments and observations to teachers, indicating whether their child understood the

homework, whether they enjoyed doing the activity with their child, and whether they gained information about their child's work.

- **Parent signature** is requested on each activity.
- **Follow-up activities**

Teachers should treat TIPS assignments the same way they treat all other homework in terms of collecting and marking the work. Thus, after completion of each TIPS homework activity, the teacher should conduct a short follow-up activity in class to give learners a chance to share their work and their families' responses and reactions (Epstein *et al* 1995:8). TIPS homework should also be reviewed from time to time, to assess and improve the activities and the implementation process.

2.6.1.4 Implementing a TIPS homework project

Epstein *et al* (1995:14-15) describe the roles of the teacher, learner and parents as follows:

► What the teacher does

- Attends an orientation session for an overview and discussion of TIPS provided by the leader teacher who is helping others to implement TIPS.
- Conducts an orientation meeting for parents.
- Plans and selects which TIPS homework will be used each week (or every two weeks) to fit in with the learners' class work or needed skills.
- Distributes the assignment to learners and, each time:
 - Addresses and clarifies learners' questions about procedures or vocabulary before the assignments are sent home.
 - Emphasises the importance of learners involving family members in schoolwork.
 - Notes the sections that require interactions with a parent or other member of the family.
 - Tells learners when the homework is due.
- Follows up the homework in class on the due date.

- Considers incentives or recognitions for learners who not only do their homework, but also involve their families as directed in TIPS activities.
- Maintains records of learners' homework, including TIPS activities.
- Communicates with families about TIPS and other matters concerning class work, homework and learners progress, in meetings, conferences, newsletters, notes, or telephone conversations.
- Notes ideas for improving the TIPS activities and design new TIPS assignment to fit the curriculum as needed. Shares ideas or suggestions about the homework assignments, family participation, project implementation, or other issues with other teachers.

► **What the learner does**

- Looks over the TIPS homework assignment. Asks the teacher any question about procedures or directions that are not clear.
- Takes the TIPS assignment home, shows it to a parent, gathers needed materials, and finds a location in which to work.
- Follows the direction, talks with a parent or family member as directed in the assignment, and completes the homework.
- Asks a parent or family member to respond to the home-to-school communication and to sign the activity.
- Returns the assignment to class on the due date. Shares responses and questions about the activity.

► **What the family does**

- Learns how the TIPS process works and how to interact with their early adolescent on activities in language arts, in science/health, and in math. Assists learner, when necessary, to gather materials for the activities.
- Participates and interacts with the learner as described in each TIPS homework activity.

- Checks each week to see if there is a TIPS homework activity and encourages the learner to think about and discuss the homework assignment.
- Monitors TIPS and all homework so that the learner knows that the family cares about what he or she is learning in school.
- Completes the home-to-school communication, adds a comment if desired, and signs each TIPS activity.

Expressing enjoyment and interest in the child's work in each subject; motivating the learner to do his or her best each day in school and on each homework assignment and conveying family beliefs that school and learning are important are the foundation of these activities.

2.6.1.5 Evaluating a TIPS homework project

Teachers must evaluate whether and how the process helps them reach their goals for school and family connections. First, teachers must grade, return, and discuss TIPS assignments just as they do in other homework. Second, teachers must monitor parents' reactions and responses provided in the home-to-school communication section and respond to questions with phone calls, notes or individual meetings (Epstein *et al*/1995:17).

Teachers should also conduct a special evaluation of a sample activity at the beginning of the year to see if learners and families understand the TIPS process. Some questions to be asked are (Epstein *et al*/1995:17):

- How many learners understand how to complete the TIPS activity by interacting with a parent or other family member?
- How many learners complete the homework?
- How many parents complete the home-to-school section and sign the activity?
- What do parents write as comments or questions?
- How do the teachers respond to parents questions or concerns?

Teachers should discuss with learners to find out whether the activity was enjoyable and call families of learners who did not complete the homework to help them understand the process so that they can be ready to participate in the TIPS activities. Further follow-up activities are also needed to find out whether parents need more information, explanations, or guidance on how to use the TIPS at home and in their interactions with their children. This can be done in the form of informal interviews, phone calls, or class or grade level meetings with parents (Epstein *et al*1995:17).

2.6.2 Student-Parent Laboratories: Achieving Science at Home (SPLASH) programme

The goals of the SPLASH programme are to increase intermediate-grade learners' experiences and to increase parent involvement in education (Rillero, Gonzalez-Jensen & Moy 2000:11). SPLASH has teachers send hands-on science activities home as homework to involve parents in what their children are learning. To be effective, these at-home activities must relate to the science curriculum the learners are learning in the classroom. The SPLASH program can be applied to every school environment.

2.6.2.1 The activity bags

The activity bags serve as a connection between the home and classrooms. Activity bags are designed to promote substantive involvement of parents (including relatives and caregivers) in their children's hands-on science education by using take-home literature based inquiry, problem solving and design activities that connect the school and the home (Shymnasky, Hand & Yore 2000:48). Teachers develop a special activity bag for each science unit. Each activity bag contains a science-related children's book, interview directions, suggested inquiries and simple equipment to explore ideas embedded in the children's literature that relates to the science unit. The activity bags provides a natural, safe problem context by using science-related literature to establish a challenge from which parents can obtain worthwhile pre-assessment information to help the teacher gain insights into how their children think and demonstrate their honest interest in their children's learning (Shymnasky *et al*/2000:53).

► **The use of literature in activity bags**

According to Shymnasky *et al* (2000:49), the rationale for using literature is to provide a comfortable, natural starting place for teachers and parents to discuss science ideas with learners. Fictional pieces are used with hands-on science activities to challenge, scaffold and enhance science understanding, while trade books offer a wide range of topics, alternative conceptions and view points that excite and motivate learners. This is because when the ideas come from a story they have just read, these ideas become personally relevant. This provides a common starting point and a surrogate prior experience, which makes learning more meaningful.

► **Launching the activity bags in school**

A parent orientation is held as part of the fall back-to-school and meet-the-teacher meetings at school. The science teacher explains the programme and uses of activity bags. Parents and children will then read the story collaboratively together and explore various science challenges in the story as they occur, using the activity guide and equipment provided in the activity bag. The children's responses and experiences are recorded. Interview data collected by parents are then returned to the teacher and are used to confirm and assist the teacher's instructional planning.

► **Examples of activity bags**

Shymnasky *et al* (2000:50) report that the activity bag which can be used during early years of schooling is *The Bear's Shadow*. It is designed to assess children's ideas about light and shadows. The activity bag contains a copy of the story, a small flashlight, a gummy bear on a toothpick, an index card and interview questions and inquiries for the parent co-investigator. Parents are requested to ask and record their child's responses to questions as they read the book. The parents then ask their child to use the flashlight, gummy bear and index card to show how shadows are formed and change position. Other situations described in the story could also be investigated:

- How did the bear's shadow scare the fish?
- How was the shadow formed?
- Will running away cause a shadow to disappear?
- Why did the bear not have a shadow when the bear was behind the tree?
- Why can you not nail down a shadow?
- Why did the bear's shadow not scare the fish later that day?

Other activity bags were developed for other science units: balls and lamps - *The Ball Bounced*; living things - *My River*; pebbles, sand and silt - *Roxaboxen*; balance and motion - *Sheep in a Jeep*; growing things - *Miss Rumphics* and life cycles of butterflies - *The Lamb and the Butterfly*.

In conclusion, the use of activity bags demonstrates that family involvement can be achieved by designing meaningful, time-efficient and worthwhile take-home science activities. Children do not see these activities with their parents as 'work' but they rather enjoy the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. To the parents, their involvement through activity bags represents quality science learning and provides effective, efficient and enjoyable time with their children. Teachers also use this parent involvement as a chance to establish positive working relationships and two-way line of communication with the parents.

2.6.2.2 The moon-watch activity

The moon's movement is taught in many intermediate grade classrooms. However, it was noted that most learners and many adults do not understand the phases of the moon or the changing position of the moon in the sky (Rillero *et al* 2000:11). Therefore, moon observation provides an opportunity for children and parents to learn science together make first-hand observations of nature, record and analyse data. No special understanding about the moon is needed to do this activity and there are no special materials required. The activity teaches learners and parents about the patterns in the moon's phases and position in the sky which will lead them to wonder and ask questions (Rillero *et al* 2000:11). To see how the moon's sky position changes over the period of

several weeks, it is necessary to observe it at the same time every day. For this reason, all the observations in the moon-watch activity are made at sunset.

► **Launching the activity**

According to Rillero *et al* (2000:12) teachers should assign the activity just prior to the appearance of a new moon. The first observation should be made one or two days after the new moon has appeared in the sky. A good time to do this activity is during a season with the least amount of evening cloud cover and moderate evening temperature. The teacher must tell learners that they will be observing and drawing the moon's phase and the location of the moon in the sky. During the two-week observation period, the adult should stand in front of the learner and become the frame of reference for drawing the position of the moon in the sky. Learners need to draw the silhouette of the lit position of the moon at the correct position in the sky. If learners need a better understanding of this activity, then teachers can practise a series of moon observations with the class during the waning moon phase. During this phase, the moon is visible in the daytime sky, and the class can go outside to draw the moon's phase and position. This practice ensures greater accuracy during the homework assignment.

► **Control of activity**

Teachers are required to do a periodic progress check to ensure that the learners and their parents are recording data correctly. Another way to keep learners on track is a bulletin board that charts the learners' varying sky positions on the bulletin board to show learners examples of how to draw the lit portion of the moon.

► **Discussions in the class**

Once learners hand in their assignments, they must discuss their experiences in class. Learners must describe how they did the activity, who they worked with, what kinds of problems they encountered 'if any', and how they solved these problems. To stimulate discussion teachers can ask the class questions, such as, "How did the phase of the moon

change over the two weeks? How did the moon's phase relate to its position in the sky?" (Rillero *et al*/2000:15). The teacher will then have to mark the assignments.

► **Adaptations and extensions**

Some parents may not be proficient in English, so the teacher may need to provide a translation of the activity for them. This homework activity may also be difficult to some learners due to its double focus. Thus, the teacher can break up the activity into two: the observation of the moon's phases and the observation of the moon's position in the sky. Learners may study the position of the moon during a two-week period without focusing on its phase.

In conclusion, the moon-watch activity is aimed to generate excitement among learners and parents. Doing the activity shows both learners and their parents how recording observations in systematic ways can lead to interesting discoveries. The activity also shows that science does not take place only between the walls of the classroom. Finally, the moon-watch activity helps parents feel more involved in their children's schooling (Rillero & Hilgenson 1995:28).

2.6.3 A video-tape link between families and schools

Self-administered videotapes represent yet another way to educate parents and transmit information without parent-teacher conferences and more costly strategies, such as telephone hotlines or home visits (Forgotch & Ramsey 1994:473). A self-administered videotape is designed to improve learners' homework quality, promote parent involvement and support for children's homework efforts and enhance communication between families and schools.

► **Launching the activity**

Videotape-based intervention is designed to provide information to families with learners having academic problems. The intervention materials advise learners to engage in

specific daily home study routines; parents to monitor homework activities each day and reinforce these efforts. In addition, teachers have to provide daily report cards describing homework and school performance (Forgotch & Ramsey 1994:473-474). In addition, Forgotch and Ramsey (1994:480) report that adding two hours of professional consultation significantly improved outcomes for self-administered videotapes. Teachers or school counsellors can also enhance the self-administered video with face-to-face meetings or by telephone calls. Another way to strengthen the intervention would be to employ the materials as stimulus for discussion in a parent education group. Such steps can enable professionals to add to and adapt ideas in the programme to the special needs of children in varying grade levels and specific populations.

One problem with self-administered video tape intervention is that families require a VCR to view the materials at home. However, families most in need of intervention may be the ones least likely to own a VCR. To address this problem, families can be invited to the school to view the materials although this would defeat the goal of reaching parents at home (Forgotch & Ramsey 1994:488).

In conclusion, a self-administered videotape is a cost effective resource that schools can use to inform parents and coordinate the efforts of parents and teachers for learners who need help with study routines. The results of research conducted by Forgotch and Ramsey (1994:472) showed that parents reported increased knowledge of their children's homework activities and learners reported significant improvement in homework quality, an indicator that the programme would serve as a good first step for children with academic problems.

2.7 SUMMARY

This chapter presented a literature review on teacher practices to involve parents in homework in which the concept homework was defined, its purposes outlined and views of parents and teachers were also described. Moreover, the need for parent involvement in homework as well as selected models of parent involvement in homework such as the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS), the Student-Parent Laboratories

Achieving Science at Home (SPLASH) and a self-administered video-tape were described.

In the next chapter, the research design and methodology will be described.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the research design used in the empirical investigation. It includes the sampling of participants and procedures for data collection by means of a questionnaire and a focus-group interview. It also describes how data was analysed. The research followed qualitative as well as a quantitative approach to describe the teacher practices to involve parents in homework. The aim was to explore in detail teachers' experiences and practices of involving parents in homework and the impact thereof from their own points of view. Understanding was acquired by analysing and narrating participants' meaning of the practices. Participants' meanings include their feelings, beliefs, ideas, thoughts and actions. This aim is in congruent with qualitative research, which is concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:392).

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

This section explains the planning of a pilot study, how permission was sought to conduct the research and the selection of participants.

3.2.1 The pilot study

The researcher conducted a pilot study to acquire thorough background knowledge about the specific problem that she intended to investigate. A pilot study is an investigation of the feasibility or practicality of the planned project, bringing possible deficiencies in the data collection and analysis to the fore. It helps the researcher to

identify issues, which need to be clarified before implementing the process of investigation.

The researcher identified a school with characteristics similar to the schools of her target group. The questionnaire was pretested with a sample of ten teachers. The administration of questionnaires was the same as that used in the study and pretest respondents were given space to write comments about individual items and the questionnaire as a whole. It was found that the participants had difficulties in understanding certain items and thus, it took too long to complete. It was decided that the researcher should make items clear by using easily understandable terms and giving clear directions. Furthermore, the results of the pilot study enabled the researcher to eliminate and alter some items on the questionnaire so that the respondents could complete it within a targeted time of 30 minutes.

The interview questions were also pretested with a sample of three teachers. Thereafter, the researcher transcribed the recorded interview. It was found that participants experienced difficulties in understanding certain questions. It was decided that the researcher should briefly explain what is required from the participants. The researcher implemented these suggestions during the investigation.

3.2.2 Permission

For research conducted at an institution, such as a university or school, approval for conducting the research should be obtained before any data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:195). Thus, before the researcher visited schools, permission was sought from the relevant administrators to carry out the research and gain entry into the various schools. The researcher drafted a letter (Appendix A) to the Onesi circuit Inspector to ask for permission to conduct the research. The letter to the Circuit Inspector, a copy of a questionnaire (Appendix B) and a copy of the interview schedule (Appendix C) were personally submitted to the Onesi Circuit Inspector. Permission was granted on the condition that official programmes and classes were not disrupted.

The researcher then visited the school principals of the selected schools with the letter of approval from the Circuit Inspector (Appendix D). The letters addressed to the principals (Appendix E) were also personally delivered. The principals agreed verbally to the researcher's request.

3.2.3 Selection of participants

The qualitative researcher seeks to understand a phenomenon as it occurs in its broader context. Therefore, a clear statement should be provided of how the site and persons studied are defined (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:393). In case of this study, five primary schools were purposefully selected from the list of primary schools in the Onesi circuit on the grounds that they are all day schools and none offers hostel accommodation, which implies that all learners are living with their parents and guardians and were, thus, regarded as appropriate for the study. They were also conveniently located.

All five schools seek to cater for children from all backgrounds. Two schools are located at the centre of the township and half of the learners come from the surrounding neighbourhood and the rest commute from the homesteads just outside the township. Three schools are located in the villages surrounding the Ruacana township and the catchment areas are comprised of the surrounding neighbourhoods. Although schools use English as a language of learning and all learners are English second language speakers. Moreover, all five primary schools are dual medium. The lower primary phase (Grade 1-3) offers a local language as a medium of instruction; the upper primary phase (Grade 4-7) offers English as a medium of instruction according to the Ministry of Education's language policy. All five schools have suitably qualified teachers, but classrooms are overcrowded, teaching and learning resources are insufficient and school furniture and other equipment are inadequate.

The researcher carefully handpicked eight females and seven males from the school principals' staff lists who would be most able to give information about the phenomenon under investigation. In the view of this, the researcher used a relatively small sample of only 15 teachers to take part in the study. This was considered an adequate sample for

reliable data analysis in qualitative research. However, it was envisaged that data collection would continue until the data were saturated.

Table 3.1: Characteristics of participating schools

School	Learners	Location	Feeder area	Economic status	Home language
1	235	Village	Neighbourhood	Lower income	Oshiwambo
2	147	Village	Neighbourhood	Lower income	Dhemba
3	622	Village	Neighbourhood	Lower income	Dhemba, Oshiwambo
4	618	Suburb	Neighbourhood, commuting from surrounding villages	Lower income	Oshiwambo, Dhemba, Herero
5	320	Suburb	Neighbourhood, commuting from surrounding villages	Lower income	Oshiwambo, Herero, Dhemba

3.2.4 Researcher's role

The researcher recognised the possible influence that she could have on the responses of the participants. The researcher is familiar with the schools visited in the Onesi circuit as she was once a teacher at the senior secondary school in the cluster. The researcher's familiarity with the participants and her own experience allowed her to establish a relationship of trust with the participants.

3.2.5 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was assured from the beginning of the research program. The aim of the research was explained to the participants and they were assured that data would only be used for research purposes with the view to improve education. The participants were requested to be open and honest at all times. Anonymity of the participants and their schools was guaranteed to all participants.

3.3 THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The research methodology and data collection methods were also explained in paragraph 1.5. Data collection methods refer to the tools of research. In this research, a questionnaire and a focus-group interview were used.

3.3.1 The questionnaire

The questionnaire is the most widely used technique for obtaining information from subjects (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:252). Questionnaires are relatively economical, have the same question for all subject, can ensure anonymity and contain questions (statements) written for specific purposes. According to De Vos *et al* (2002:147), the following are characteristics of a good questionnaire:

- The questionnaire has to deal with a significant topic that the respondent will
- It must be attractive in appearance, neatly arranged and clearly duplicated or printed;
- Directions are clear and complete and important terms are clearly defined;
- It must be as short as possible, but long enough to get the essential data;
- Each question deals with a single concept and should be worded as simply as possible;
- Different categories should provide an opportunity for easy, accurate and unambiguous responses; and
- Objectively formulated question with no leading suggestion should render the desired responses.

In this study, a questionnaire was planned according to the above characteristics. Fifteen teachers were provided with a questionnaire (see Appendix B).

3.3.1.1 Construction of the questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire was to obtain information regarding teacher practices to involve parents in homework. Although the researcher adopted a quantitative approach, most questions were open-ended in order to elicit teachers' views, beliefs and attitudes and ultimately their parent involvement practices. The researcher ensured that adequate time was allocated for the construction of the questionnaire. The design of an appropriate questionnaire took time and effort and the questionnaire was drafted a number of times before it was finalised.

3.3.1.2 Administration of the questionnaire

Questionnaires were personally distributed by the researcher to the five participating schools so that respondents could complete them in their own time. They were collected later. This method of administration simplified the process and response rate. Administering the questionnaires was possible for the researcher because the sample size was manageable.

3.3.2 The focus group interview

Interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through gaining an understanding of the experience of individuals involved in education. The researcher conducted a focus group interview with five teachers selected from the lower primary school who had participated in answering the questionnaire, shortly after it was administered in order to complement the survey data. An interview schedule was used during the focus group interview to obtain more in-depth responses from the teachers. This was done to enhance and add to the written answers to the open ended items in the questionnaire. The schedule constitutes a guideline for the interviewer and contains

questions and themes important to the research (De Vos *et al*/2005:308). The researcher contacted the five teachers personally and invited them to participate in the interview.

The researcher established a relationship of trust and rapport to make it easy for the participants to provide information. According to Johnson and Christensen (2000:144), the interviewer should listen carefully and be the repository of detailed information. The interviewer should also be armed with probes or prompts to use when greater clarity or depth is needed from the participant.

According to De Vos *et al* (2005:308-309) the researcher should consider the following basic principles during the interview process:

- Respect and courtesy
- Acceptance and understanding
- Confidentiality
- Integrity
- Individualisation

The researcher applied these principles during the interview process and this enabled her to accomplish the interview task without difficulty.

3.3.2.1 Advantages of a focus group interview

The advantages of a focus group interview include the following (De Vos *et al*/2005:312):

- Time-wise it is more economical than conducting numerous individual interviews.
- The group dynamic is a synergistic factor in bringing out information.
- Participants express their honest feelings more confidentially within a support group of peers than during individual interviews.

3.3.2.2 Conducting the interview

Participants agreed that a tape recorder could be used during the interview. A recording ensures that accurate data are collected and stored for later transcription. The

interview questions were used to probe further into the most effective practices of parent involvement in homework used by teachers. The responses were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview lasted for about 60 minutes.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was briefly explained in paragraph 1.5.2.4. In quantitative research responses are counted and percentages listed. In this research the raw data of the questionnaire, with mainly open-ended questions, were coded and percentages listed in each response category for each item. In qualitative research, data analysis is the process during which the researcher formally identifies themes as they are suggested by the data and an endeavour is made to demonstrate support for themes (Delamont 2002:171). Qualitative data analysis in this research involved segmenting, coding, compiling a master list and enumerations (Johnson & Christensen 2000:222):

- **Segmenting**

This involves dividing the data into meaningful analytical units. This was done by reading the responses in the questionnaires line by line and asking: Do I see a segment of the text that is important for research? Is it different from the text coming before and after it? Where does the segment start and end? Such segments (words, sentences) were bracketed to indicate where they started and ended.

- **Coding**

Coding refers to the process of dividing data according to a classification system (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:607). The identified segments of data were coded by means of category names and symbols.

- **Compiling a master list**

All the category names that were developed were put on a master list followed by the symbolic codes. The master list was expanded as the need arose.

- Enumeration

The frequency with which observations were made was noted to help identify important ideas and prominent themes in the research group.

As mentioned earlier, the interview was audiotaped, transcribed and became the primary data source for analysis. The aim was to understand experiences from the participants' points of views. The data were analysed manually by repeated examinations of the interview transcript, identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data (Lemmer 2002:8). Extracts from the raw data were selected and paraphrased or quoted to illustrate patterns. When analysing the data, the researcher employed inductive reasoning to discover relationships or patterns through close scrutiny of the data.

3.5 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

When qualitative researchers consider research validity, it generally refers to research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy, replicable and transferable (De Vos *et al* 2005:345). The validity of information is primarily determined by the participants' willingness to communicate their experiences to the researcher freely in an atmosphere of trust. In this inquiry, all participants voluntarily shared information and the researcher experienced a high level of rapport.

According to Johnson and Christensen (2000:208), reliability in qualitative research is viewed as the fit between what is recorded as data and what has actually occurred in the setting under study. To ensure such a fit, the researcher cross-checked the information and conclusions with actual participants and members of the participants' community for verification and insight. Several informal discussions about parent involvement in homework and the research design were held with the principals and teachers of participating schools prior to data gathering. Furthermore, participants' feedback was sought by contacting participants telephonically to obtain additional information or clarification. After the research was completed, the researcher again spent time with the teachers who participated in the research to discuss the findings.

These lengthy and rigorous procedures of feedback enabled the researcher to check the interpretation of data with the actual practice and experiences of the teachers to corroborate the data.

3.6 TRIANGULATION OF FINDINGS

Triangulation is described as cross-checking of information and conclusions with multiple producers or sources (Johnson & Christensen 2000:208). Triangulation is used to designate a conscious combination of more than one method (De Vos *et al* 2005:35). When the different procedures are in agreement, a researcher has corroboration. In this study, the researcher used two methods of data collection (a questionnaire and a focus-group interview) as well as a literature review. The main aim was to increase the reliability of the data collection.

3.7 RESEARCH ETHICS

Research ethics refer to a set of principles to guide and assist researchers in deciding which goals are most important and in reconciling conflicting values (Johnson & Christensen 2000:63). Ethics deals with the conduct of research with humans, which has the potential of creating a great deal of physical and psychological harm (Johnson & Christensen 2000:66). Researches need to be sensitive to ethical principles because of their research topic and face-to-face interactive data collection.

The following guidelines were followed to assure the ethical acceptability of this study (Johnson & Christensen 2000:69):

- The researcher obtained the informed consent of the participants;
- No deception was justified by the study's scientific, educational or applied values;
- The participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time;
- The participants were protected from physical and mental discomfort, harm and danger that may have arisen from the research procedures,
- The participants remained anonymous and the confidentiality of the participants was protected.

By adhering to the above, the researcher received co-operation, trust, openness and acceptance from the participants. In addition the participants selected the time and place convenient to them for the interview. The researcher also negotiated the use of a tape recorder during the interview and assured privacy at all times. The aim of these procedures was to avoid manipulation of participants (McMillan & Schumacher 1997:420).

3.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The limitations of the research were acknowledged. The researcher used a small sample approach. This inquiry was limited to five schools and a relatively small sample of 15 teachers. Therefore, the data collection is of limited predictive value and is not generalisable in any way. This is in line with McMillan and Schumacher's (1997:394) view that in qualitative research, researchers do not aim at generalisation of results but the extension of understandings. Descriptions enable others to understand similar situations and extend these understandings in subsequent research. However, the findings do suggest patterns that emerged and alert one to both the teacher practices of parental involvement in homework and the difficulties encountered in a small sample of five Namibian schools.

3.9 SUMMARY

This chapter gives a description of the research design. The permission to conduct the research in the Onesi circuit was sought. The selection of the participants, the sample size, research role, data gathering instruments, the data analysis, issues of validity and reliability, triangulation of findings, the research ethics and limitations of the study were discussed.

In the next chapter, the presentation, discussions and interpretation of the findings will be done.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the empirical investigation into teacher practices to involve parents in homework in selected Namibian schools.

4.2 FINDINGS

The data collected through a questionnaire and a focus group interview were analysed and the findings are presented in the following paragraphs.

4.2.1 The questionnaire

This section describes teacher practices to involve parents in homework based on the findings of the survey. The majority of respondents indicated that parent involvement in homework is very important for learners' success. However, school practices of parental involvement in homework as emerging from the subsequent items in the survey showed some discrepancy between the viewpoints expressed regarding learner success and the actual school practice. This gap between rhetoric and practice with regard to parent involvement in homework is common to similar studies conducted in a range of countries and communities (Epstein 2001:3).

Five major themes emerged from the analysis of the teachers' responses:

- learner success through parent involvement
- written homework policy
- parent involvement in homework activities
- support of parents' role in homework
- teacher training regarding parent involvement

4.2.1.1 Learner success through parent involvement

It is clear from the survey that many teachers believe that parent involvement in homework is important for learners' success. When asked for a reason in an open item, one teacher explained, "The parent is the first teacher of the child, so without his/her involvement the learner will not succeed". Another teacher commented, "Parents can help to explain further to the learner because sometimes learners do not understand well in the class since some learners are scared or shy to ask in the class. Here the learner is at an advantage because he/she has got the parents' undivided attention". Another teacher further emphasised the importance of parent involvement, stating "Parental involvement in homework can be an encouragement booster for learners and it helps learners to view education in the positive way".

In addition, all participating teachers also indicated that both educated and poorly educated parents need to be involved in homework. This is consistent with Villas-Baas' (1998:368) research results, which suggest that all learners, regardless of background can benefit from well designed homework. When asked for a reason in an open item, one teacher explained, "Basically, education starts at home. Thus, both educated and uneducated parents have a great knowledge in helping and assisting their children".

Villas-Baas (1998:368) also reported that homework could provide an appropriate support for children and improve parents' own education. This was well supported by teachers' responses as one teacher stated, "Learning is a two way process. Therefore, uneducated parents will be able to learn something from their children while learners will be motivated to try harder". This is also in consistent with Keith, Troutman, Bickley, Trivette and Sigh (1993:490) who found that parent involvement affected achievement

more strongly than did socio-economic status. This means that parent involvement affects achievement independently of family background measures.

The importance that teachers place on parent involvement in homework was further emphasised in the last open item in which teachers were asked to give any comment on parent involvement in homework. The respondents felt that parent involvement would have a positive effect on learner achievement. This was reflected in teachers' responses as follows: "Parents should seriously render assistance to their children because sometimes they could be better educators than teachers"; "Parents are co-partners in education and they must work closely with teachers. It must therefore, be made compulsory for every parent to be held responsible if their children do not do their homework". Other comments include: "Learners need parents' assistance and encouragement in order to succeed. Thus, parents should have positive attitudes towards their children's homework and help learners in completing their homework despite personal problems with the teachers".

4.2.1.2 Written homework policy

Good homework habits of learners and the support of parents in these activities prove beneficial to learners (Van Wyk 2001:121). However, involving parents in homework does not seem to be a common practice. This was revealed by the survey results in which 80% of the respondents indicated that their schools did not have a written school policy. Very few respondents indicated that their schools had a written homework policy. Moreover, as it was reflected in subsequent survey items, these policies are not disseminated and distributed to parents. This is in contrast with research results of Lemmer and Van Wyk (2002:9) in which 58% of South African primary schools had a written homework policy, which was distributed to parents. Similarly, Van Wyk (2001:121) found that 74% of primary schools teachers stated that they had a policy of involving parents in learning activities at home, in contrast with 24% of educators in secondary schools. This suggests that schools rely mainly on the common wisdom concerning the role of parent involvement and this is seldom formalised in policy documents, which are widely distributed.

However, Alexander, Bastiani, and Beresford (1995:38) emphasise that to implement effective parent involvement, schools and families should jointly produce written policies and these should be regularly revised and distributed to all families. A written homework policy legitimizes the importance of parent involvement and helps frame the context of homework activities. These policies help teachers and parents to grasp how the latter could take part in homework.

4.2.1.3. Parent involvement in homework activities

Epstein and Van Voorhuis (2001:183) found that teachers assign 70% of homework at all levels of schooling so that learners can finish their homework in the class, while the majority of middle school teachers do not regularly assign homework for parent-child interaction or parent-teacher communication. This viewpoint was further corroborated by teachers' responses in the survey in response to the item dealing with the frequency of giving homework, which requires parent involvement. The majority of respondents indicated that they never give homework which requires parent involvement. One teacher defended this practice, stating, "Homework is given to see whether the learners have understood the work they have done in class. It is not for parents". Another teacher commented, "Only some work require parents' assistance, but most of the work requires learners' own understanding and ideas".

A relatively small number of respondents indicated that they give homework which requires parental involvement once a month. The reason given for this practice is "...because many learners do not stay with their real parents and they usually only go over the weekend once a month. Thus, this is the only time parents can assist them with their homework". The remainder of respondents indicated that they give homework which requires parent involvement once a week. One teacher responded to an open item as follows: "Homework which requires parental involvement is usually given once or twice a week depending on the difficulties that learners experience so that parents can assist them at home". One lower primary teacher commented, "There are too many learners in our classes which makes it difficult or impossible to attend to each learner individually. Parents are therefore helping us to teach children alphabet, counting,

reading and writing at home". An upper primary teacher explained, "Due to a lack of libraries and Internet facilities, parents are the only source of information which can help learners to acquire additional information to complete an assignment or a project".

Likewise, Lemmer and Van Wyk (1998:1) state that helping children learn at home is not only limited to supervising homework, but also includes encouraging, listening, reacting, praising, guiding, monitoring and discussing. These are things that every parent can do. Van Wyk (2001:122) also reported that schools, which encourage, instruct and expect developmentally appropriate interactions among learners, parents and teachers, demonstrate promising strategies to increase effective parent involvement in homework.

4.2.1.4 Support of parents' role in homework

The extent to which the school communicates with parents, determines their involvement in the activities of the school (Stein & Thorkildsen 1999:40). To promote effective communication with families, schools should design a variety of school-to-home as well as home-to-school communications strategies with all families each year about school programmes and learners' progress (Hanhan 1998:107). However, many schools do a poor job of communicating with parents, especially to inform and enlighten them about their role in homework completion.

This was revealed by the teachers' responses in the survey to the item dealing with the means of communication teachers use to inform parents about their role in assisting learners with homework. The majority of respondents indicated that they communicate with parents about homework by organising a parents' day. These days also allow parents to raise issues or even share their problems. However, the effectiveness of large parents' meetings as a means of communicating with parents is dubious because the attendance is usually poor. This is in line with research results (Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004:1) which reported that while most schools (95%) in a study held regular general meetings, attendance was poor. Only a third of the schools in the research (35,9%) estimated attendance of half or more of the parent body at general meetings. The remainder estimated the attendance that fell under 20% of the parent body.

Written communication conveys a sense of permanence and authority when issued by the school (Hanhan 1998:45). It is also an accepted way of bridging the information gap and sense of distance felt by teachers and parents who may be strangers to one another but who share common interests in the same children (Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004:9). However, only a relative small number of respondents indicated that they write a letter or a note to parents informing them about homework. This may be because as Keyle, McIntre, Miller and Moore (2002:23) reported, parents often experience official written communication from the school as relatively boring while its effective distribution depends on the learner as a reliable messenger.

Parent-teacher conference is a standard practice of verbal communication in schools worldwide. However, parents and teachers often experience these meetings negatively. They are often too short, too infrequent and occur after a problem had arisen or too late in the school year (Hendersen & Berla 1994:44). This was corroborated by teachers responses in the survey in which only few respondents indicated that they initiate verbal interaction with individual parents, when the learners regularly failed to do homework. However, Jonson (1999) and Hanhan (1998) advocate ways of maximising parent-teacher conferences by using learning contracts, preparation sheets, extending time allowed and including a positive focus instead of an exclusive problem orientation.

Moreover, Epstein (1995:15) suggests that schools should provide information and ideas to families about how to help learners at home with homework and other curriculum related activities, decisions and planning. By providing useful information and skills on how to help at home, teachers can encourage parents to talk with and work with their children.

Parents become more aware of their children's school programme, interact with their children more and reinforce the teachers' goals for better school work if parents are supported in their role to become involved in children's homework (Epstein *et al*/1995:1).

4.2.1.5 Teacher training regarding parent involvement in homework

The majority of the respondents to the questionnaire mentioned that they had not been adequately equipped to involve parents in homework. A similar survey conducted in the state of Maryland in the United States of America (Epstein, Saunders & Clark 1999:1) revealed that few teachers attributed their practices of parent involvement to knowledge gained in their formal training. Epstein (2001:5) also stated that many teachers reported that there is no formal structure to assist them with homework procedures and very little information on the topic of homework is provided in teacher education programmes. Epstein (1987:53) also stated that the training that teachers receive results in attitudes and practices designed to keep parents out of the learning process. Consequently, less attention is devoted to homework design that encourages family interaction. However, Hamby (1992:61) stated that this lack of training for teachers is serious as parents are unlikely to become involved without intervention from the school.

In response to the item asking whether teachers need training or assistance on how to involve parents in homework, the majority of the respondents indicated that they needed help. This is in line with the research results of Van Wyk (2001:124) in which teachers indicated that they needed training to conduct parent-teacher conferences. This implies that higher education institutions involved in pre-service training of teachers need to re-examine the skills, knowledge and attitudes that teachers will need to work effectively in schools in the future (Van Wyk 2001:128).

Teacher education can assist teachers in changing the traditional image of parent involvement which limits it to fund raising or participation in school governance. In addition, Van Wyk (2001:129) states that preparation can equip teachers with the skills to develop a two-way learning process between the home and school. Teachers can promote parent involvement in homework by acting as facilitators rather than experts. They can then recommend activities that help parents promote their children's learning. Teachers can also equally learn from parents about child rearing practices and family skills and resources and ultimately initiate involvement activities that meet the individual

circumstances of each family. Thus, schools should provide training for teachers and teacher education programmes should make parent involvement a core module.

The importance of schools to have homework policies cannot be over emphasised. These policies help both the teacher and parents better understand how parents could take part in homework. However, most teachers in the study indicated the absence of school policies in their schools. In addition, many teachers assign homework for learners to complete on their own, while few (lower primary teachers) give homework whereby parents teach learners to read, write and count. The home-school communication methods used by teachers to inform parents about homework include general parents' meetings and written communication. Very few initiate parent-teacher conferences for parents whose children continuously fail to do homework. The majority of teachers in the study also indicated that they did not receive formal training on parent involvement in homework and therefore need help or assistance in this regard.

The findings of the focus group interview held with five lower primary school teachers are presented in the next section.

4.2.2 THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

This section describes the teacher practices to involve parents in homework based on the findings of the focus group interview. Four major themes emerged from the analysis of the teachers' responses:

- practices to involve parents in basic reading, mathematics and environment/social studies homework
- practices to inform parents about homework
- problems in dealing with parents
- teachers' knowledge parent involvement in homework

4.2.2.1 Practices to involve parents in basic reading, mathematics and environmental/social studies homework

► Reading

According to Keyle *et al* (2002:3, the earlier parents become involved in their children's school practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effect. Additionally, of all school subjects, reading has been found to be most sensitive to parent influences (Villas-Baas 1998:368). In turn, success in reading is a gateway to success in other academic areas as well (Villas-Baas 1998:369).

These views were overwhelmingly corroborated by the teacher responses in the focus group interview in this research in which they indicated that the best practice they use to involve parents in homework is to teach learners how to read. In grade one, for example, the teacher write words on a piece of paper and give it to the learner to take it home for the parents to teach him/her. In grade four, where learners have already acquired the basic reading skills, the teachers take old books which are not used anymore and give them to the learners to take home in order to practise reading with the assistance of the parents. Teachers also encourage learners to read newspapers and magazines as well as other books available at home with the assistance of the parents. In addition to reading, teachers also involve parents in sentence construction (e.g., grammar) by giving learners different words and telling them to ask their parents to assist them in constructing a sentence with each of the words. Sometimes teachers may give a sentence in the present tense and the learner is expected to change it into the past and future tenses with the assistance of the parent.

This is in line consistent with the findings of Epstein *et al* (1995:8) that parents and teachers are more comfortable with involvement in reading and language arts than other subjects, but in the middle grades this involvement decreases dramatically. Some teachers worry that interaction means the parent will do the work for their children.

► **Mathematics**

Mathematics is also one of the subjects where parent involvement can be very effective to enhance learner success. In grade 1 and 2 for example, parents are involved in helping learners acquire basic counting skills. Teachers usually write the numbers on a piece of paper and request the learner to do either the addition or subtraction at home with the help of the parent, e.g. $1+2 = \square$; $4-2 = \square$. In this case, parents are expected to use materials available at home, such as stones, cups, etc. to assist the child find the correct answer. “The parent can for example, take four cups from the kitchen and take two away and let the learner count how many cups remained or the parent may say bring me two cups and from there the learner knows the value of two” one teacher explained.

In grades 3 and 4, teachers give a mathematics book to the learner to take home and instruct him/her to complete a page or a section. Learners are then informed to collect materials at home to use as counters, e.g. stones and with the help of the parent to do the calculations.

In addition, Epstein *et al* (1995:2) report that teachers avoid involving parents in their children’s maths activities. After simple counting and addition, parents also become fearful of teaching maths skills to their children. Teachers are concerned that parents will confuse the learners. Children tell their parents that they are doing maths “the wrong way” (e.g. not the way the teacher does it). Moreover, maths is the subject that often is responsible for learners’ distress and failure in school. Across the grades, learners become increasingly diverse in their maths skills and attitudes. Some move quickly ahead, while others need extra help to make progress in maths. Thus, well-designed homework that enables learners to interact with their families in maths should help more learners maintain and advance their maths abilities and interests (Epstein *et al*/1995:2).

► **Environmental/social studies**

Learners are also given questionnaires to take home in order to ask their parents about how they use resources in the environment, for example, water, land and timber or

about any other general information. In social studies, “When you discuss the history part, learners are given a questionnaire to go and ask parents how life was long ago” one teacher explained. Learners are requested to interview their parents and then complete a questionnaire. This is in line with the findings of Epstein *et al* (1995:8) that parents like to discuss ideas and memories of their own childhood with their children. Children too enjoy these exchanges and interactive homework helps them learn something from and about their parents that they would not have otherwise known.

► **Follow-up activities**

The teachers check the next morning whether the parents were involved in the homework or not. Firstly, in mathematics and environmental studies, they mark the learners’ work and if answers are wrong, it is an indication that the learner did the work alone. If answers are correct, it indicates that the parents assisted the learner. Sometimes teachers ask learners who helped them. In case of reading, the teacher requests the learner to read the same words which were written on the list or in the book she/he took home the previous day. Once again, if the learner cannot read these words fluently, it indicates that parents failed to assist the learner. If the learner can read those words or at least some of them, it is an indication that parents have played their part.

However, teachers indicated that in many cases, parents do not assist learners. As one teacher explained, “Most learners do not do the homework at all, which means that parents don’t even bother to ask if learners have homework”. The parents of learners who frequently neglect homework are called to school for the teacher to advise them how to help their children.

4.2.2.2 Practices to inform parents about homework

Teachers seem satisfied with a one-way flow of information. Participants in the study indicated that they communicate with parents by means of general parents’ meetings, written communication (letters and notes) (Appendix F) and by messages carried by learners. Teachers also use the local radio to invite parents to meetings. Teachers

communicate with parents when they meet casually in the town or village. Teachers use the local vernacular in all types of communication to ensure that parents understand the message clearly and correctly. During parents' meetings, parents are asked to make sure that children complete homework and where possible to assist their children. One teacher explained, "Even at the beginning of this year we had a parents' meeting whereby we tried to advise parents to assist their children with homework or even just to ask if they have homework because in most cases learners forget, they need to be reminded by parents". Teachers also mentioned that they advise parents to pay someone to assist their children with homework if they cannot do it themselves. Written communication (letters and notes) is mainly used to invite parents to meetings or to visit school to address individual problems.

However, it seems like teachers do not inform parents specifically about what they must do to help learners with homework, when homework is given and what materials are needed for the completion of homework. One teacher emphasised this viewpoint as follows, "We inform parents that they should check their children's books every day and ask them what they have learnt in school and whether they are given a homework or not". Another teacher added, "Parents should make sure that their children complete homework by giving them time to do their homework, work with them where possible or check the completed homework".

It also seems that parents are not given opportunities to contact the school on their own initiative. Although teachers interviewed pointed out that they invited parents to contact the school at any time, no specific dates, times or strategies are suggested whereby which parents can contact the schools. One teacher explained, "We always encourage parents to come to school if they find homework difficult or if they want to ask something or even to come and look at their children's books or to discuss a certain project. But in most cases they are not responding. They only sometimes comment or complain on the next parents meeting or if you meet them on the streets".

This practice implies that little effort is made nor are channels created by the teachers to listen to important information parents have about their children, their ideals for their children, the family's cultural practices and their views on education (Hanhan 1998:107).

Thus, if schools truly want parents to be partners in education, they must allow parents ample opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns and views in a coequal relationship with teachers. As Villas-Baas (1998:366) states, “The parents cry out to the school for help and co-operation, but unless the teachers make an effort to hear it, this cry will not be heard”.

Moreover, teachers also felt that the curriculum is the professional territory of teachers and parent involvement should be limited in this regard. Teachers showed a need to control parents and maintain a balance of power with regard to parents who might interfere. Thus, as the research results shows, a common tendency among teachers is to communicate with the home only when a behavioural or learning problem arises and neglect to communicate good news about learners’ achievements. One teacher mirrored this viewpoint, saying, “If a learner fails to do homework or perform very weak in a homework activity, parents are called in to discuss the matter”. Another teacher added, “If it happens that the learner is always not doing his/her homework or does not show any improvement, parents are called to the office and informed about the situation and also to be asked what might be the problem that prevent the learner from doing homework as well as to be advised to make sure that the learner does his/her homework every day”.

Similarly, Epstein (1996:123) linked involving parents only in cases dealing with the learners’ academic problems, bad behaviour and high rates of absence from school with negative parental attitudes and low ratings of the school by parents. Villas-Baas (1998:371) also reports that when the school neglects to contact parents to compliment or praise a child, parents have difficulty in understanding their role in encouraging their children’s schoolwork. They may also lack confidence in their capacity to help their children.

4.2.2.3 Problems in dealing with parents

Although teachers agree that parent involvement contributes to more effective teaching and learning, few believe that they could realistically change parents’ behaviours. Most

schools pay only lip service to a meaningful school-family partnership. Likewise, teachers in the study list a number of barriers to effective parent involvement in homework relating to the role of parents. These include:

► **Uncooperative parents**

Teachers mentioned the general apathy of parents towards the learners' homework. One teacher stated, "Most parents are not playing their part. They tend to throw these children at teachers, thinking teachers are going to make miracles without their involvement. That's totally wrong as teachers are not 'gods', but they are human beings in dire need of support from parents". Another teacher added, "Some parents do not understand what education is. They think that children learn and do school work at school only. They believe that only teachers who can educate children". Another teacher commented, "Sometimes if you call a parent she comes angry and complain that why do you call me, I am having many things to do and you always disturb me. I gave that child to you and you must beat him if he doesn't do what you are telling him. That's why you are there". Nevertheless, although the above-mentioned barriers are valid, parents should be encouraged so that they can meet the challenge of providing the support needed by their children to succeed in life (Corrosquillo & London 1993:109). They need guidance from the teachers.

► **Parents' lack of education**

Epstein (1996:86) reports that teachers who do not involve parents tend to give stereotypical responses in discussions about single or poorly educated parents, rating them as less helpful and lacking follow through. Epstein and Becker (1982:112) also determined that teachers who do not actively involve parents and who teach children with poorly educated parents are more likely to report that parents are not able or willing to help the children with homework. The responses of teachers in the study also reflected this viewpoint. Many parents in the rural areas are unable to read and write. This, according to the teachers, seriously affects their involvement in school activities including homework. One teacher explained, "Not all parents are literate and are able to

help their children with homework. The illiterate parents find it very difficult to understand the content of the homework". Another teacher commented, "Parents never show interest in assisting their children because sometimes they do not understand the language in which the homework is written and sometimes things which are asked are not national but international". Nevertheless, teachers should explore ways to support more parents as they make an effort to understand homework concepts and select developmentally appropriate strategies for helping children with homework (Balli 1998:146).

► **Problematic domestic situations**

One teacher expressed her concern in this regard as follows, "Some parents are abusing alcohol and therefore are unable to help their children with homework". This corroborates the research of Van Wyk (2001:126) who found that, as teacher in her study commented, "Many parents are in extremely traumatic life situations and are struggling to survive. In the township the situation is even worse as many parents are unemployed and are grappling with urgent problems of survival, leaving little time or energy for school involvement".

Nevertheless, Epstein (1996:104) states that when teachers and parents emphasise their shared responsibilities, even under difficult domestic circumstances, they can support the development of skills required to produce successful learners. Their combined endeavour pushes the spheres of family and school together, increases interaction between parents and school and creates school-like families and family-like schools.

4.2.2.4 Teachers' knowledge of parent involvement in homework

Teachers interviewed indicated that parents' training is a prerequisite for successful parent involvement in homework. One teacher expressed this viewpoint: "I think that it is important for parents to be trained on how to assist children with their homework, by organising special classes for them". In these classes or workshops, parent roles in homework and their importance are explained. This is in line with the findings of Epstein

and Dauber (1993:290) that most parents need help on how to become involved in their children's education at each grade level. However, when questioned, all participants admitted that they had never showed parents how to play an active role regarding their children's homework. They also admitted that they do not know how to do this with the exception of teachers from one school, who indicated that parents of Grade 1 learners are attending Family literacy programmes organised and conducted by the Regional Literacy Officer from the Department of Adult Education. The departmental officer is assisted by the Grade 1 teacher. These classes are conducted from March to April every year. In these classes, parents are taught how to help their children with homework and to acquire the basic literacy skills (reading, writing and speaking). However, although they report that children whose parents regularly attended classes have shown an improvement, only a few parents participated and the contribution to parent involvement in homework has been very limited.

Villas-Baas (1998:366) states that teachers should note that parents are a more heterogeneous group than teachers. Some related more closely to the school than others; others require more effort to overcome their difficulties and get involved. Some will respond to a certain type of parent involvement activity; others will not. It is, thus, the school's responsibility to offer a variety of programmes to address the needs and concerns of all parents by arranging activities that are more in line with parents' interests, priorities and time limitations. For this to realise, teachers need to be knowledgeable of how to develop programmes and arrange the activities. Thus, teachers must be trained how to promote parent involvement.

4.3 SUMMARY

This chapter dealt with the findings and discussion concerning teacher practices to involve parents in homework. The data were collected at five selected primary schools by means of a questionnaire with mostly open-ended questions administered to 15 respondents and a focus group interview conducted with five teachers selected from the survey respondents. The significant findings of the survey included the following: teachers seem convinced that parent involvement in homework is important for learners' success; schools

do not have written homework policy; teachers do not inform parents about their role in homework; teachers do not give homework which requires parent involvement and teachers are not trained to initiate parent involvement in homework. The significant findings of the focus group interview included a discussion of the following: teacher practices to involve parents in basic reading, mathematics and environmental/social studies homework; teacher practices to inform parents about homework; problems that teachers experience in dealing with parents and teachers' limited knowledge about involving parents in homework.

In the next chapter, the summary, conclusions and recommendations are presented.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study dealt with an investigation into teacher practices to involve parents in homework in Namibian schools with a view to developing guidelines for teachers. Such guidelines, which have suggested themselves on the basis of this exploratory study, are aimed at improving future educational practice.

Although the majority of teachers in the study agreed that parent involvement in homework is important for learners' success, both the empirical investigation and the literature study have indicated that there is no actual parent involvement in homework in many schools. In practice, parents and teachers do not always work comfortably with each other to achieve the aims of schools (Epstein 1996:128).

In this chapter, therefore, a summary of the research and conclusions with regard to teacher practices to involve parents in homework will be made from the analysis and interpretation of the research results as obtained from the literature study, questionnaires and the focus group interview. The researcher also makes recommendations with regard to the nature, frequency and effectiveness of teacher practices to involve parents in homework as well as for further research in the field of parent involvement in homework. The limitations of the research will also be acknowledged.

5.2 SUMMARY

In this section an overview of the study is presented in the light of the research problem set forth in paragraph 1.2. The researcher set out to investigate “What practices can teachers use to ensure effective parent involvement in homework?” The purpose of this study was to examine teacher practices to involve parents in homework in Namibian schools. The study included a literature review and empirical investigation. The literature review provided a conceptual framework within to work (cf. chapter 2). Thereafter, teacher practices to involve parents in homework in Namibian schools were explored by means of an empirical investigation using a small sample of participants in five primary schools. A questionnaire and a focus group interview were used to gather data.

The findings of this study lead to certain conclusions which are given in the next section.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS

Children learn everywhere, every day. Since they spend more time at home than they do in school, home time is an important learning time. Hence, home is the child’s first classroom and the parent is the child’s most important teacher. Homework is given to help learners practise and reinforce what they have studied in school, to work independently, to develop self-discipline and to make use of materials and sources of information (including parents) which are not accessible in the classroom. It also provides a means whereby parents can see the sort of work which the child is doing in school, and by which they can assess progress. Thus, an effective homework activity should be challenging and engaging, including higher level thinking skills and interactions with family members (Epstein *et al*/1995:3).

The evidence about the benefits of parent involvement in their children’s education in general, and their children’s homework in particular, is overwhelming. Research shows that parent involvement in children’s learning positively affects the child’s academic performance, in both primary and secondary schools, leading to higher academic achievement, greater school enjoyment, better school attendance and fewer behavioural

problems at school (Epstein 1987:280). Parent involvement in homework is also a more powerful force than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education (Walberg *et al* 1985:76). However, despite these well-documented benefits of parent involvement in homework, study after study (including this one) finds that learners today do not do enough homework and that parents exercise very little supervision of homework time (The Parent Institute 1995:1).

Teachers play an important role in helping parents become involved in school work at home. They should provide guidelines and ideas on how parents can help children at home. Various models of teacher practices to involve parents in homework have been designed to help teachers. Some of these models were discussed in paragraph 2.6. However, despite the existence of the models of parent involvement in homework, teachers frequently fail to establish strong communication between the school and home and parent participation is not significant in many schools.

Research also found that the home, not the school, is the most powerful factor in determining a learner's ability to learn (The Parent Institute 1998:1). However, once children start school, parents sometimes feel left out of the learning process. They want to help their children to do well in school, but they are not always sure what they can do to help. It is also suggested that parents' uncertainty, anxiety and fear increase as the child progresses in school, since they feel unable to respond to their child's linguistic and social capital needs (Clark 1988:95). To help parents, teachers should provide information that empowers parents to function as effective mentors in the family.

Furthermore, the quality and the amount of parent involvement in homework rely heavily on the skills of the teacher to plan appropriate activities to involve parents in their children's education. Hence, Alexander *et al* (1995:56) recommend that each school should draw up a simple, clear homework policy if possible with parents and learners' input and communicate this to parents regularly. However, most teachers who participated in this study indicated that their schools do not have homework policies. The absence of a homework policy and thus, a lack of understanding of ways in which parents may be involved, inhibit effective parent involvement in homework.

The findings also suggest that many teachers give homework, which allows learners to practise what has been taught in class, to study for a quiz or to complete other work on their own. The lower primary teachers, on the other hand, give homework which requires parents to teach reading, counting and the alphabet. However, this practice is not recommended since interactive homework does not require parents to teach school skills. The homework activities should be designed to keep learners and their families talking about schoolwork at home (Epstein *et al*/1995:88).

Home-school communication plays a vital role in determining parent involvement in homework. However, the study suggests that teachers do a poor job in communicating with parents. This means that teachers provide too little information to the parents with regard to their role in assisting learners with homework. In most cases, teachers communicate with parents through general parents' meetings. In these meetings, parents are requested to ask their children if they have homework in order to remind them (as in many cases learners forget their homework), to give them time to complete the homework and where possible to assist them. These meetings are not only poorly attended but also infrequent and thus, limit effective information dissemination to parents. In addition, teachers also use letters and notes as well as messages passed on by learners to invite individual parents to come to school in cases where a learner continuously fails to do homework or does not show any improvement in performance.

Both the empirical investigation and the literature indicate that typical home-school communication relies on the teachers 'telling' parents about activities, school policies and procedures in which the teacher plays the role of initiator and controller of communication. In other words, teachers tend to talk rather than listen to parents. However, to optimise parent involvement in homework, parents must also speak and be heard. Thus, communication must flow in two directions and schools must encourage and create channels whereby parents can easily and with comfort speak to teachers (Lemmer 2002:17).

Moreover, teachers tend to blame parents for the lack of successful parent involvement in homework. Teachers cite problems such as the general apathy among parents. One participant described to them as "careless and not showing any interest in their children's

education". They also cited parents' own lack of education (the majority of parents in the study were illiterate and unable to help learners with homework) and problematic domestic situations such as alcohol abuse among parents.

The results of the focus group interview and the questionnaires included in the empirical investigation also indicate that teachers have a limited understanding of the strategies which may be used to involve parents in homework. This is to be expected as teachers get little help in developing their skills and knowledge of collaborating with parents. Likewise, few receive initial training in this field during their pre-service training. Thus, most teachers rely on their accumulated experiences in dealing with parents (Van Wyk 2001:125). Therefore, teachers indicated their dire need for assistance to improve parent involvement in homework.

To summarise, Bennet (1986:3) states that the single best way to improve elementary education is to strengthen parents' role in the education of their children. Furthermore, research contends that parents are their children's first and most influential teachers and that their involvement in the children's school helps their children learn more effectively (Janice & Janice 2002:1). Teachers in this research generally agree about the importance of parent involvement in homework. However, even though there is general agreement about the importance of parent involvement in homework and its impact on learner achievement and success, there are no effective teacher practices to involve parents in homework in schools. Schools and families do not always share the same perspectives on what is wanted or needed in the child's best interest. This may be attributed to the unavailability of homework policies in schools and ultimately, to the lack of understanding of parent and teacher strategies whereby parents can be involved in homework.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the empirical investigation as well as relevant literature, the study concludes with recommendations for improving teacher practices to involve parents in homework. It is noted that the extent to which the school communicates with parents hugely

determines their involvement in the activities of the school (Stein & Thorkildsen 1999:40).

Steps to maximize improved home-school communication are as follows (Stein & Thorkildsen 1999:40):

▶ **Assess current school practice**

Each school should assess the effectiveness of its current communication strategies: written and verbal. This can be done by focus groups, questionnaires or phone surveys of both teacher and parent experiences of current practices. Indicators to measure effectiveness, such as attendance of general and individual meetings, the reliability of delivering written communication using learners, the effectiveness of frontline staff such as the school secretary and telephone answering should be identified and used.

▶ **Identify goals for improvement**

Both partners in education, teachers and parents, should assist in formulating goals for improved home-school communication over a short term (e.g., six months to a year) and a long term period (e.g., three years).

▶ **Identify a team to drive improvements**

An organisational structure, comprised of parents, teachers, support staff and learners, must be charged with the responsibility of driving the process. Representation of all stakeholders ensures that the needs of both family and school are met in an effort to establish a co-equal partnership and two-way communication.

▶ **Evaluate implementation and results**

The improvement in a school's programmes and teacher practices of home-school communication should be continuously evaluated and revised so that the school can move towards even more effective practices.

► **Sustain practice**

Improved home-school communication must be sustained over time through continuous attention and support. This is best done through the functioning of a team rather than an individual.

In addition, school and family connections are not exactly the same in the middle grades as in the lower grades. As learners become more independent and self-directed, relationships and patterns of interaction change. Epstein *et al* (1995:3) suggest the following hints to help strengthen partnerships between middle grade schools and families:

- Homework should not always be done alone

Some teachers believe that all homework should be completed in a quiet place, away from the family or other people. While some homework serves that purpose, a TIPS homework at least once a week or twice a month should be designed specifically to keep learners and their families talking about school work at home.

- Just any homework will not do

Some homework requires a lot of learners' time but not much thinking. TIPS homework should include higher level thinking skills and interactions with family members that make learners think, write, gather information, collect suggestions, explain, demonstrate, draw, sketch or construct things and conduct other interactive activities with parents and other family members at home.

- Teachers want learners to talk about schoolwork at home

Some learners believe that their teachers do not want them to talk with families about what they are learning in school. Teachers should then, make it very clear to learners that they are expected to talk about school and school work including homework with their parents. Learners must hear that teachers understand that:

- Parents want to know what their children are learning.
- Communicating, showing and sharing with parents what is learned in class, improves learners' own understanding.
- Teachers want parents to know how learners are increasing their skills and understanding and preparing for the future.

- Parents are not expected to 'teach' school skills

Some parents feel they should not talk with their children if they do not know much about the school subject. However, it must be made clear that learners are expected to complete their own homework and to guide the interaction with members of their families in discussions, interviews and other communications.

- Homework should not be completed over night

Epstein *et al* (1995:19) state that interactive homework should be assigned to give learners at least two or three nights to complete the work so that most parents will have time to interact with their children. Some assignments could be made over a weekend when parents say they have time to work with their children. These arrangements take into account that some parents work at night, attend other meetings, have other children at home or have other obligations that may reduce the time on a given night. Assignments over a few days also recognise that some activities require learners to gather specific materials that may not have immediately at home. Some assignments, particularly in science, require observations over several days.

Moreover, although many parents may not know exactly how they can be involved in their children' education, most would appreciate guidance from the teacher concerning ways to help them work with their children on homework and other school-related tasks. To this end, Janice and Janice (2002:14) offer the following strategies for teachers who want to achieve maximum parental involvement in learning at home:

▶ **Assist with homework**

Parents should be encouraged to monitor homework every day by making certain that

homework is completed and checked for accuracy. If possible, parents should establish a regular place and a regular time for the child to work on the homework. Teachers should provide information about how to help children at home as well as to establish a general homework schedule (e.g., Tuesday night, maths and spelling; Wednesday night, science and social studies).

► **Provide a list of activities that parents can do when there are no formal homework assignments**

Suggestions could include having children write letters to friends or relatives, read aloud to each other, play educational games and discuss special projects.

► **Help children start their own library**

Teachers can provide parents with reading lists and encourage them to purchase books for the children to use at home. Discount bookstores and used bookstores are excellent sources for purchasing inexpensive books for children (The Parent Institute 1996:8).

► **Take children to new and different places**

Teachers can provide parents with a list of museums, historical sites, and nature centres that would enhance learning. Teachers can also prepare a set of guidelines that would assist parents in knowing what specific things to look for and questions to ask while visiting the site (Jones 1991:32).

► **Establish a reading-buddy programme using parents or grandparents as the reading buddies**

Encourage nonworking parents and grandparents to come to the classroom and read with a child. Establish a weekly schedule for reading buddies to come to the classroom, and assist the parents in choosing appropriate books to read with the children.

► **Plan special workshops for parents**

Using input from parents, the teachers can plan workshops that include topics that parents and adults want to know more about. Some topics might include parenting tips, health and nutrition, communication, art and music. Workshops should be planned at times which are convenient to parents, and more than one session of the workshop should be planned if possible.

► **Parent visits**

Parents of each child are extended an invitation to visit the classroom during a specific time in which the child is involved in a learning activity such as maths or reading. During the visit, the child can explain to the parents what he or she is learning and/or the child and the parent can experience the lesson together.

In conclusion, it may take time for teachers to enlist parents' cooperation, to give them confidence and even to help them supplement and strengthen teachers' classroom efforts. Nevertheless, it is well worth the try. Parents can help produce significant results that benefit learners.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

5.5.1 Further research on teacher practices to involve parents in homework

The importance of parents to children's school accomplishments and the successes of notable homework intervention programs underscore the importance of continued inquiry into parents' roles and influence in their children's homework performance. Thus, future studies need to engage in a more detailed investigation of the use of TIPS assignments and other interactive homework assignments.

5.5.2 Expansion of research to other contexts

The present study involved only teachers' views and experiences, which only represent one side of the coin. Future studies of family interactions on homework assignments should therefore, extend the findings from the studies that have addressed teacher practices to involve parents in homework to how learners and parents relate to homework and how homework relates to achievement and other measures of school success. Moreover, examining the home circumstances for learners and parents with interactive homework would be useful for teachers to improve current homework practices.

5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Clearly, qualitative investigations such as the one reported here which derived from a small sample of 15 teachers cannot be generalised, but it does suggest the usefulness of gauging the teacher practices and experiences as a basis for improved parent involvement in homework. In the same vein, the experiences described by teachers in this research only represent one side of the coin. The views and experiences of parents and learners are also needed to formulate effective homework policies and improve practice. However, it is important to listen to parents who frequently experience themselves as unequal and disempowered partners in education.

5.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study employed qualitative methodology to examine teacher practices to involve parents in homework in a small sample of Namibian schools. After defining the term homework, the study determined the features of effective homework, the reasons for giving homework as well as the need for parent involvement in homework. The study further explored teachers' practices, views and experiences in involving parents in homework using both an open-ended questionnaire and a focus group interview. Although the majority of teachers in the sample agreed that parent involvement in homework is important for learners' success, school practices of parent involvement in

homework as emerged from the teachers' responses showed a definite discrepancy between the viewpoint expressed that parent involvement in homework is important for learner success and the actual teacher practices to involve parents in homework to achieve learner success. The following was found to influence teacher practices: an absence of a written homework policy; teachers do not inform parents about their role in homework; parent involvement is not required in homework and teachers are not trained on how to involve parents in homework. Thus, the following statement by Lemmer and Van Wyk (1998:1) succinctly concludes this study: "Trying to educate the young without help and support from home is akin to trying to rake leaves in a high wind".

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