

Home-School-Community Partnerships: An Imperative in Teacher Education Programmes in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing recognition of the need to train teachers in home-school-community partnership. This is because knowledge of such collaboration has a powerful influence on a learner's development, both academically and behaviourally. Furthermore, the families and communities benefit as well. Research indicates that only a small percentage of training institutions offer comprehensive programmes in home-school-community collaboration to enable teachers have a sound grounding in the theory and practice in this field. Since home, school and community partnerships were claimed to be weak, especially at primary school level in Kakamega County, Kenya, this study was designed to determine whether teachers in primary schools in the county had undergone the relevant training. A survey involving a sample of 368 primary school teachers in 34 schools were selected from a population of 8 964 teachers in 848 primary schools, distributed across the 12 sub-counties in the county, using stratified random sampling. A self-designed questionnaire was used to collect data. The data were then analysed and presented by means of such descriptive statistics as frequencies, percentages and the mean. It was established that up to one third of the teachers who participated in the study had never studied a course related to home-school-community partnerships in their professional life. This finding could be used to improve practice involving these partnerships, teacher training content and implementing relevant policies as well as programmes so as to attain meaningful learning among the pupils.

Key words: Home-school-community partnerships, policy recommendations, Teacher education programmes, Theory of overlapping spheres of influence.

1 INTRODUCTION

According to UNICEF (2003), Republic of Kenya (ROK, 2012) and Florez (2011), the development of strong bonds between the family, school and community ensure that children acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills they require for life, both within as well as outside of the school. It emphasizes the need for children to interact with their classmates, teachers, families, the school and the community in order to enhance the achievement of learning outcomes. Florez (2011) and Chrispeels and Gonzalez (2006) assert that the relationship between the parents and the school requires the rethinking of the traditional collaboration and mutual aid between the school and the community. Accordingly, the involvement of the parents should be expanded to include their making decisions about their children's education, administration, evaluation, supervision and monitoring.

But engaging everyone requires that the concepts of family, community, interaction and respect for each individual and for different opinions, cultures, beliefs and plans are honoured and made operational. Such a democratic climate is said to enable especially the rural communities to cultivate new hope about their children's school and their education (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Florez, 2011). Accordingly, the importance of parent participation in the educational process implies developing new social and political meanings that will contribute to the poor, rural schools increasingly becoming places for dialogue and an opportunity for a meeting of the minds and experiences among children and adults. It also implies them becoming institutions for their appreciation of their worth as a group with all that a community thinks, knows and aspires to, in an effort to meet their needs within a new meaning of rurality (Florez, 2011).

The active participation of the parents in the school tends to reduce the traditional blaming of the teacher for the learners' failures, or consolation that their children do not learn because it is, say, a rural school (Florez, 2011; Sirvani, 2007). Accordingly, parental involvement and participation increase the parents' capacity to learn with their children, whereby attracting them to school to learn and help the teachers as well. It is also known to develop parent-teacher partnerships as the parents help the teachers to successfully use curriculum guides and to change their perceptions of the children, hence giving their children more time to study rather than to shoulder, say, household and farm chores.

Indeed, strong home-school-community partnerships help learners develop more positive attitudes towards learning at school, attain higher achievements and test scores, improved behaviour, increased completion of their homework, greater participation in academic activities and improved school attendance with fewer referrals to special education. On the other hand, the parents realize enhanced self-efficacy, better understanding and more positive experiences with the educators and the schools, improved communication with their children and better appreciation for their role in their children's education. On their part, the teachers experience greater job satisfaction, higher evaluation ratings from the parents and administrators and more positive associations with their families.

Epstein (2013) argues that since teachers handle learners from highly diverse families that differ in size and structure as well as academic, racial, linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, they must learn how to implement research-based practices so as enhance student learning and

development. Indeed, the author notes that the challenge for schools, colleges and education departments is to prepare future teachers on both the nature and results of school, family and community partnerships. However, teacher education programmes have been criticized for their weak curricula and limited contact with schools, learners, families as well as communities. Thus, such weaknesses would best be addressed if teachers underwent a course on building strong partnerships.

According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011) and Flanigan (2007), a recent survey of the staff members who teach courses to do with parental involvement has concluded that they do not include sufficient relevant practical experiences to ensure that teachers are adequately grounded to discharge their roles effectively. These findings are supported by Epstein (2013) who observes that there are few required courses on developing partnerships for future teachers and administrators. For instance, while some colleges of education offer an elective course, mainly to graduate students, others do little or nothing at all, with the exception for teachers who will teach early childhood or special needs.

It is worth noting that there are ongoing debates on whether colleges and universities should offer the required courses in home-school-community partnerships or infuse the content in the entire curriculum, or both. For example, the content of teacher education programmes in New Zealand and the UK has in the recent years been to a large extent formulated by the relevant agencies. Unfortunately, because the government policies do not require it, they are simply not included. However, in the United States of America, accreditation standards require the topic of parental involvement to be a compulsory course in teacher education programmes (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), 2002).

The roles of the teachers in Kenya, according to the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2011), include, encouraging the parents to take all their children, regardless whether they are boys, girls or children with special needs to school; make the school a gender-responsive and child-friendly learning environment; serve as role models to the pupils, and ensure discipline during school hours. Other roles of the teachers are to counsel and guide the pupils; advise parents where necessary on their children's welfare, and work with the head teacher to facilitate linkages to rehabilitation, as well as counseling, especially for street children transitioning into the school system.

Going by the preceding literature, it could be concluded that teachers are expected to cooperate with and support the parents and other partners in their efforts towards improving the learning environment, as well as the academic achievement of the children. To play these roles effectively therefore, they need to be equipped adequately with the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Getswicki (2010) observes that creating home-school-community partnerships is no longer an option but an integral role and responsibility of the teacher. Indeed, an increasing number of surveys show that more institutions are incorporating home-school-community partnership courses into teacher preparation programmes. However, only a minority of them offer comprehensive ones to give teachers a thorough grounding in the related theory as well as practice. According to Kafu (2011), a big fraction of teachers in Kenya have little capacity to effectively play their roles, especially those that are not instructional in nature like strengthening home-school-community partnerships. And, prompted by claims of weak home-school-community collaborations in primary

schools in Kakamega county (ROK, 2010), this study sought to establish whether teachers had undertaken any relevant course with a view to formulating appropriate policy recommendations.

1.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The theory of overlapping spheres of influence, as advanced by Joyce Epstein and her colleagues at the Centre on Family, School and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, USA, informed this study. The theory holds that children learn better when parents, teachers and others in the community work together in order to guide and support their learning and development (Epstein, Sanders, Sheldon, Simon, Salinas, Jansom & Williams; 2009; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Epstein, 2001, 1995, 1987). In this theory, three contexts, that is, the home, school as well as community combine and uniquely influence children through their interactions. Accordingly, each context 'moves' closer or farther from the others due to both external and internal actions (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006).

The overlapping spheres of influence are presented in the figure below.

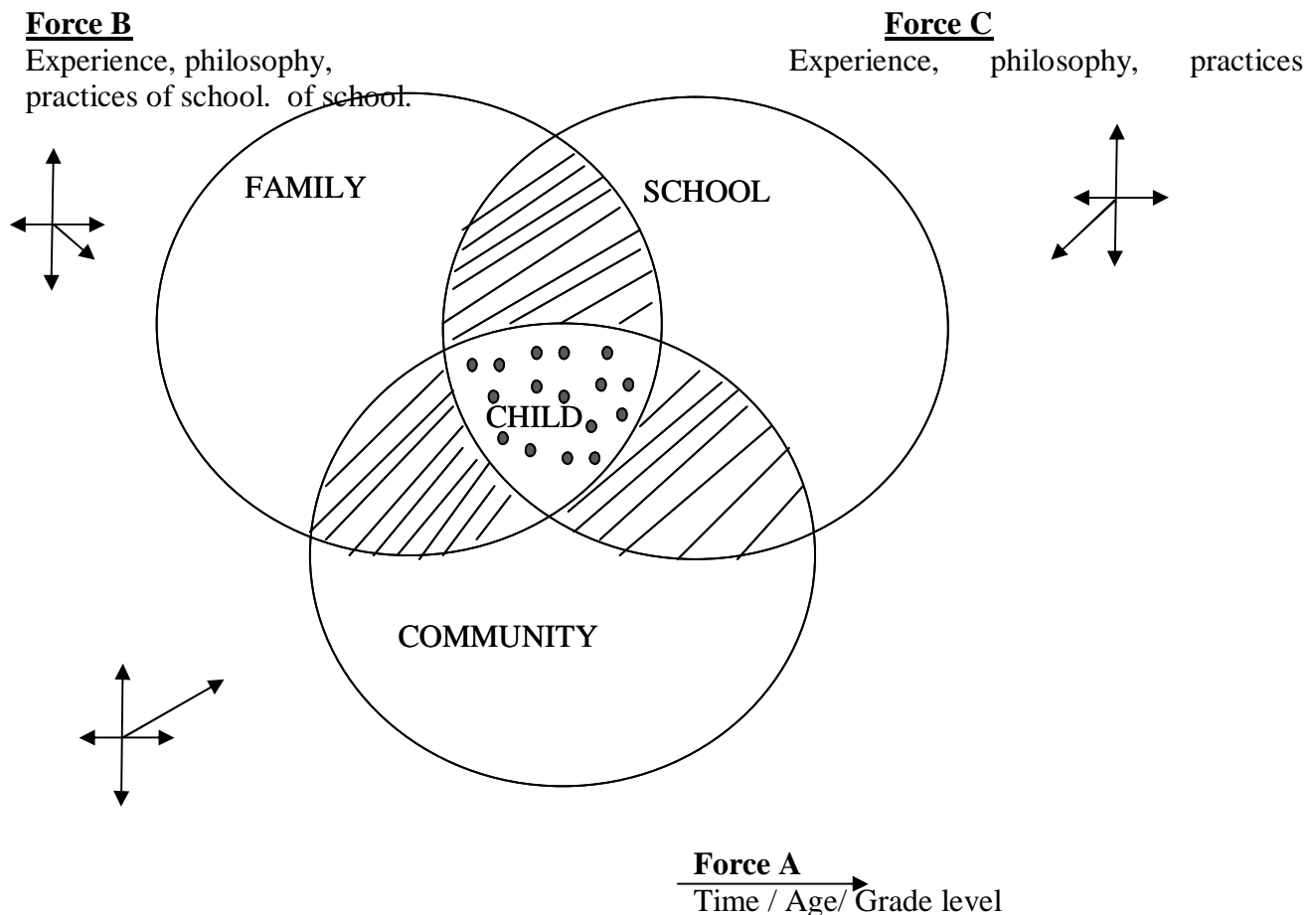


Figure 1: Overlapping Spheres of Influence (Epstein et al., 2009).

Since children are considered to be the main actors in education, development and success at school, the figure locates them at the centre (Neperville Community Unit School District -NCUSD, 2013; Epstein et al., 2009; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Epstein, 2001, 1995, 1987). It is asserted that if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard, they stand a higher chance to do their best in their studies, learn other competencies and remain at school for longer (NCUSD, 2013).

The external model of the theory illustrates that by design, the three contexts can be pulled together or pushed apart by important intersecting forces such as the family, school and community backgrounds or experiences, philosophies, opportunities and actions (Epstein et al., 2009; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Epstein, 2001, 1995). Other forces are the learners' age and grade level, historical and policy contexts, as well as time (Epstein, 2000; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Simon, 2000). It is worth noting that in this model, there are some practices that the schools, families and communities carry out separately while others are conducted jointly in order to influence the children's learning and development.

According to Epstein and Sanders (2006) and Epstein (2001), a major strength of the theory of overlapping spheres of influence is that it serves as a lens through which an examination on how future teachers and administrators are prepared to understand shared leadership in schools, including the educators' shared responsibilities with families and communities to maximize the students' learning can be done. Thus this theory was considered appropriate as far as the preparation of teachers, especially in the relevant training institutions and programmes are concerned.

2 METHODOLOGY

Using a researcher- designed questionnaire, the data for this study was drawn from teachers in primary schools in Kakamega County, Kenya. Stratified random sampling was employed to select a total of 368 (N=368) of them from 34 primary schools out of a population of 8 964 teachers distributed across the 848 primary schools in the 12 sub-counties in the county. Stratified random sampling ensures that the desired representation from various subgroups in a population (Mertens, 2005; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003) is achieved. Further, a sample size of 368 is recommended for a randomly chosen sample from a population of 9,000 cases ((International Program for Development Evaluation Training Handbook, IPDET, 2007).

The quantitative data were appropriately coded, scored then keyed in the computer to be analyzed by means of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including arithmetic means, frequencies, percentages, tables and graphs, were used to present the data.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to provide an elaborate analysis of the extent of professional training in home-school-community partnership among teachers, data on gender, highest level of formal education and length of teaching experience was also presented.

3.1 Gender

Table 1 presents data on gender.

Table 1: Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	184	51.0	51.0	51.0
	Female	177	49.0	49.0	100.0
	Total	361	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 1, a total of 361 out of the expected 368 teachers took part in the study. While 184 of those who were involved in the actual study were male, 177 were female, representing 51 % and 49%, respectively. Thus there was fair representation as far as the variable of gender was concerned.

3.2 Designation

Information on the designation of the participants in the study is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Designation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	HeadTeacher	31	8.6	8.6	8.6
	Deputy Headteacher	33	9.1	9.1	17.7
	Senior Teacher	32	8.9	8.9	26.6
	Teacher	265	73.4	73.4	100.0
	Total	361	100.0	100.0	

As far as the variable of designation was concerned, 31 headteachers, 33 deputy headteachers and 32 senior teachers participated in the study. This represented 8.6%, 9.1% and 8.9 %, in that order. The rest, that is, 265 or 73.4% constituted those who were ordinary teachers.

3.3 Highest academic qualification

Table 3 provides data on the highest level of formal education that the respondents in the study had attained.

Table 3: Highest academic qualification

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Certificate	200	55.4	55.4	55.4
	Diploma	109	30.2	30.2	85.6
	Bachelor's Degree	43	11.9	11.9	97.5
	Master's Degree	9	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	361	100.0	100.0	

Majority (200 or 55.4%) of those who were involved in this phase of the study held certificates as their highest academic qualification. Another 109 had diploma, translating to 30.2%. The table also indicates that only 14.4% held a university degree, that is, 11.9% and 2.5% held Bachelor's and Master's degrees, respectively. Thus, most of the respondents (85.6%) did not possess a university degree. This suggests that the teachers are not well-qualified and this may limit their grasp of their professional role, particularly when it extends beyond their instructional responsibilities, such as home-school-community collaborations (Kafu, 2011). It is important therefore, that deliberate efforts are made to improve on the teachers' academic as well as professional qualifications. By equipping teachers with more and relevant pedagogical knowledge, skills and even attitudes, particularly with regard to home-school-community partnerships, pupils in stand to learn meaningfully.

3.4 Length of teaching experience

The participants' teaching experience is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Teaching experience

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 3 Years	32	8.9	8.9	8.9
	4-6 Years	44	12.2	12.2	21.1
	7-10 Years	40	11.1	11.1	32.1
	Over 10 Years	245	67.9	67.9	100.0
	Total	361	100.0	100.0	

Most of the teachers (245 or 67.9%) in this study had a teaching experience of over a decade while 40 (11.1%), 44 (12.2%) and 32 (8.9%) of them fell in the 7-10, 4-6 and below three years brackets, in that order. Since most of the teachers had a teaching experience of at least 10 years, it could be expected that they had developed the pre-requisite knowledge and skills required to build strong home-school-community partnerships.

3.5 Professional training in home-school-community partnership

Asked to show the level (s) of professional training where the teachers took a course on home-school-community partnership, the teachers responded as captured in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Professional training in home-school-community collaboration

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Teachers Training College	85	23.5	23.5	23.5
	In-service Education and Training	144	39.9	39.9	63.4
	University	21	5.8	5.8	69.3
	None of the Above	111	30.7	30.7	100.0
	Total	361	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 5, most of the respondents (69.3%) had undertaken a course on family-school-community partnerships: in-service training (39.9%); teachers' training college (23.5%) or at university level (5.8%). This data is summarized in Figure 2 as well.

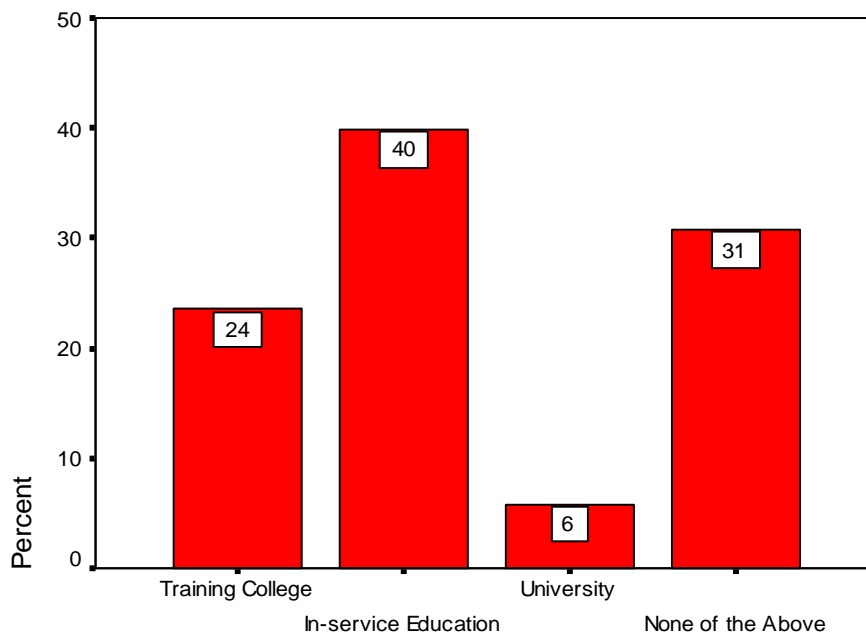


Figure 2: Training in home-school-community partnerships

Both Table 5 and Figure 2 show that about a third (30.7%) of the teachers had never studied any course involving family-school-community partnerships in their professional life. They could not, therefore, effectively play the leadership role expected of them in this venture. This finding concurs with Epstein (2013) and Hornby and Lafaele (2011) who assert that colleges and education departments experience formidable challenges as far as the preparation of teachers is concerned. These include failure to have strong curricula, robust contact with schools, learners, families and communities as well as sufficient practical experience to adequately prepare teachers in home-school-community partnerships. Thus there is need to ensure that all teachers undergo relevant

training to help them in developing strong home-school-community partnerships so that children may learn meaningfully.

4 CONCLUSION

So far, the literature reviewed in this study underscore the significance of developing strong family-school-community partnerships. This is particularly vital if meaningful learning among the learners is to be realized. On the other hand, the empirical investigation revealed that the educational standards of most of the teachers involved in this study were found to be low. Thus they could not effectively execute their respective duties and responsibilities, including fostering home-school-community partnerships. Most important, the revelation that up to 30.7% of the teachers had not undertaken a course involving home-school-community partnerships could imply that family-school-community partnership courses are not explicitly offered in the teacher preparation programmes. Suggested areas for improvement are proposed in the following section.

5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings that emanated from this study, the following policy recommendations are made with a view to strengthening home-school-community partnerships in primary schools in Kakamega County.

5.1 Improving the academic and professional qualifications of the teachers: Most of the teachers who participated in this study had low academic qualifications. Given the numerous roles and expectations, including improving family-school-community collaboration, as well as the global trends in the field of education today, it is important that these key education stakeholders acquire higher academic as well as professional qualifications in order to perform their duties effectively and efficiently, particularly in Kakamega county, Kenya. It is worthwhile to observe that the Teachers Service Commission, charged with hiring and management of teachers in the country, has a policy in place on study leave. This policy allows teachers in its payroll to advance their educational levels in accredited higher learning institutions for specified periods of time. Thus, the affected teachers can take advantage of this opportunity. Alternatively, teachers who wish to further their education can do so through the institution-based mode which involves studying at the higher learning institutions during vacations or holidays.

5.2 Preparing teachers for home-school-community partnerships: As this study ascertained, up to 30.7% of the teachers indicated that they had never studied a course to do with family-school-community partnerships at either the teachers' training colleges, or during in-service education and training or at university level. Based on this finding, it could imply that family-school-community partnership courses are not explicitly offered in the teacher preparation programmes. This fact points to a mismatch between rhetoric and reality in so far as teacher training and school practice is concerned. Hence, since it was expected from all the teachers, whether trained or not, to implement the policies involving family-school-community partnerships, the teacher preparation institutions, and in-service programmes should offer the relevant content as well as training in this crucial area.

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