

# Stakeholders' Perception of the Benefits and Barriers to School-Community Partnership in Seed Secondary Schools in West Nile Region, Uganda

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## Abstract

*The purpose of the study was to explore stakeholders' perception of the benefits and barriers to effective school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region, Uganda. Specific objectives were to explore the benefits of school-community partnership and the challenges head teachers face in fostering school-community partnership for quality education in West Nile region. The study used a concurrent mixed method design. Using Questionnaires and Interview guides, data was collected from head teachers, Chairpersons Board of Governors (BOGs) and PTA, students and teachers. Document analysis also provided rich data on the frequencies of meetings and parents' visits. Minutes of School Board of Governors (BOGs) and Parents Teachers' Association (PTA), circulars, visitors' books and parents' visitation days' attendance books were analyzed. It was found out that, school-community partnership results to student's academic achievement and promote community involvement in decision making processes. Nevertheless, numerous challenges such as negative attitudes towards education, parents' low socio-economic status, irregular parents' meetings, low level of parents' education and lack of accountability by some school authorities, hinder school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region.*

**Keywords:** School-community Partnership, seed secondary schools, overlapping spheres of influence

## INTRODUCTION

The development of strong bond between parents, communities and school creates an enabling environment that helps children to acquire desirable knowledge, skills and attitudes for life outside the formal school system. Internationally, school-community partnership is found to enhance students' academic achievement and social wellbeing (Valli, Stefanski & Jacobson, 2018; Bauch, 2017; Julia, 2016; Alvarez-Valdivia et al., 2013). Bauch (2017), notes that school-community partnership is the development of a set of social relationships within and between the schools and their local community that promotes a set of actions. Valli et al., (2018) add that school-community partnership is seen as intentional efforts to create strong relationships among schools or school districts and organizations in the local community. According to Nyatuka (2015), this relationship between families, community and the school requires the rethinking of the traditional collaboration and mutual aid between the school and the community.

Historically, the idea of school-community partnership is evident in many countries globally. In England, when universal elementary education was introduced in the 1870s, local communities were expected to have a voice in their neighbourhood schools. The climax of this effort was realized when England's chief education officer established 'Village Colleges' as both traditional schools and as 'hubs for the educational, cultural and social life of the community' (Valli et al., 2018, p. 32). The authors add that in the USA, school-community partnerships date back to the time of

John Dewey. During John Dewey and the Progressive Era (1896–1916), school was envisioned as a ‘social centre’ where citizens could gather for social activities, adults trained for jobs in a changing economy, and community members could learn more about one another.

In Uganda, school-community partnership dates to the period when missionaries introduced formal education in 1877. Since then, parents and the community supported educational institutions. Before 1937, partnerships were exhibited when parents, grandparents, and older siblings could teach the younger children simple reading, writing arithmetic and how to care for themselves and environment (Niwagaba & Jaeger, 2010). Furthermore, in 1937 when the meagre funding to these schools were withdrawn to be rechannelled to approved primary schools and Uganda Technical school, the community continued offering support to these village schools. In the 1980s, when World Bank cut funding to schools, the community continued to support schools thus, denoting school-community partnership in educating children. Since then, Ugandan government has always introduced policies that would bring the parents closer to secondary schools. In 2007, the government of Uganda having realized an influx of pupils for secondary education, introduced Universal Secondary Education (USE), liberalized the establishment of educational institutions and established seed secondary schools per sub-county. Uganda’s Universal Secondary Education policy, which started with choosing one secondary school per sub-county, is aimed at opening access and creating opportunities for poor students to attend secondary schools (Molyneaux, 2011). In addition to USE policy, the government of Uganda introduced Seed secondary schools. In the Ugandan context, Seed secondary schools are schools initiated by the community and grant-aided by the government. The main tenets of seed schools are to let each sub-county offer land and let the community provide what they are capable of contributing. On the other hand, the government provides infrastructure and pay teachers in seed secondary schools. These are some policies aimed at strengthening school-community partnership by bringing the communities closer to the schools and vice versa.

Despite the significant role played by school-community partnerships in supporting student learning, improving schools and assisting families, there seems to be little effort being done to foster them, especially at the family, community and school levels in seed secondary schools in West Nile region. Reports indicate that the teachers, parents and the community are rarely involve in making decisions regarding matters affecting their schools (Stephen & Ezati, 2017; Niwagaba & Jaeger, 2010). This scenario poses a major impediment to the provision of quality education in West Nile region. If nothing is done, the region will continue to experience constant drop in students’ academic performance at national summative examinations. This will lead to waste of state resources and realization of poor future labour force. Against this background, the study sought to examine stakeholders’ perception of the benefits and barriers to school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region, Uganda.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to examine stakeholders’ perception of the benefits and barriers to school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region.

### **Specific Objectives**

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Examine the benefits of school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region, Uganda.
2. Examine challenges in strengthening school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region, Uganda.

### **Scope of the Study**

The study was carried out in three seed secondary schools in Arua district, West Nile region, Uganda. This was because of the continuous drop in performance in UCE and UACE examinations as compared with their counterparts in central and western regions. The study explored and analysed the benefits of school-community partnership and the challenges head teachers faced in fostering school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in Arua district, Uganda. The participants were head teachers, chairpersons Board of Governors (BOGs) and Parents Teachers' Association (PTA), parents, teachers and students.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study might enhance stakeholders' insights into the various strategies to overcome barriers to effective school-community partnership. The findings might also inform policy development and both local and national levels. The findings and conclusion from this study might inform future research on parental and community involvement in education.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

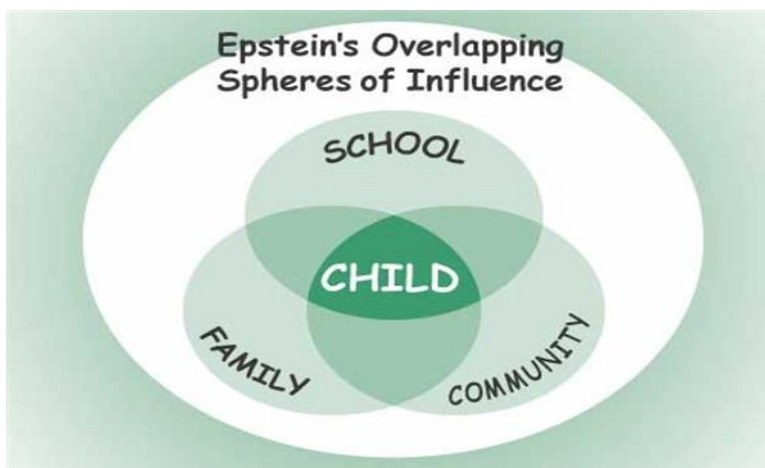
### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **The Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (OSI)**

The study was underpinned by Epstein's theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (OSI). The theory of OSI states that there are three main contexts that influence students' academic achievement (Magwa & Mugari, 2017). According to OSI model, families, schools and communities are the main contexts for children's education and hence greater partnership by the stakeholders in these settings positively influence students' learning and social wellbeing (Magwa & Mugari, 2017; Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011; Sanders & Joyce, 2006). Thus, these contexts act as overlapping spheres of influence on students' academic achievement. The model recognizes that there are certain activities that families, schools and communities conduct separately while there are some activities that they conduct jointly. These activities may include volunteering by parents to offer services related to guidance and counselling, co-curricular activities and charity work by students in the community for the growth and development of the student (Alvarez-Valdivia et al., 2013; Khalifa, 2012; Epstein et al., 2011; Sanders, 2003). The model also assumes that the extent of overlap changes with time, age and grade level of learners. As presupposes by the model, that when students graduate from primary to secondary level, and when they age, stakeholders assume that students are grown-ups and hence, withdraw their support slightly. The theory concludes that when the three spheres work jointly, they realize the greatest positive effects on the child who is at the centre of this interaction.

However, as Epstein (2002) noted, strong partnership is considerably lacking in seed secondary schools in West Nile region because some parents still say "I raised this child; now it is your job to educate her." On the other hand, some teachers still say "If the family would just do its job, we could do our job." These phrases signify separate spheres, in that teachers and parents work independently. This attitude hampers children's academic achievement and social wellbeing. The study thus, sought to

explore how the model can be used to explain how the stakeholders' perceived benefits and barriers to SCP in seed secondary schools in West Nile, Uganda.



**Figure 1: Theoretical Model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence**

*Source: Adapted from (Epstein, 2001)*

### **Benefits of School-community Partnership**

Strong partnerships are built on social interactions, mutual trust, and relationships that promote agency within a community for the development of the common good. Thus, where parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant (Hampden-thompson, Guzman, Lippman, & Hampden-thompson, 2013; Stephen & Ezati, 2017). Joyce et al., (2002) add that “partnerships can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents’ skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work” (p.20). This is because of the two ways relationship developed with parents grounded on mutual trust, respect and a concerted effort to improving students’ learning outcomes. Sanders (2003), argue that through school-community partnership, schools can increase students’ social capital through their networks with students’ communities. Thus, with a diversity of community volunteer and other services rendered, schools can become islands of hope for students with unfavorable social environments.

School-community partnerships often are referred to as collaborations (Taylor, 2007). When such a partnership is created, resources from one or more schools are blended together with resources in each neighbourhood or the larger community to sustain such partnerships over time. Thus, school-community partnership involves collaborative interactions and activities that involve school staff, parents and other community members where the school exists.

### **Barriers to school-community Partnership**

There is a wide belief that parental involvement in education of their children yields positive results, such as high enrolment, low dropout rate, high academic achievement and improved learners’ social wellbeing. However, several research literature show that the efforts to fully involve parents and the community in the education of children is hindered by factors such as low level of education, low socio-economic status of

parents, full-time working parents, low attitudes towards education by community members (Sheldon, 2003; Abdulhakim, 2013; Bauch, 2017; Odama & Ezati, 2017).

Most parents with low level of education view teachers as more knowledgeable and feel that it is their work to teach and provide all the education services to their children. This agrees with Lasibille (2007) who acknowledged that most parents do not see the need to get involved in the education of their children and thus, believed teachers could do it all alone. Kegan, (2007) also found that community low level of formal education as another factor that influences co-operation. According to him, most teachers feel that community members would not be able to assist as required because they lack knowledge. The community members themselves also have resigned to the thought that they are not able to provide assistance. This is in line with Laboke, (2000) who asserts that some parents in Uganda feel they are irrelevant to the schooling process given their low level of education. They believe all the educational activities should be left to the teachers whom they treat as specialists.

On the other hand, parents also blame the school authorities for not involving them in school activities because of their low level of education. There is acclaim by parents that teachers isolate themselves and are not receptive to parents' ideas. Bwana and Orodho (2014) in their study on the School–Community Partnership: What are the Nature, Type and Challenges of the Partnership on the Development of Education in Lamu East District, Kenya found out that parents felt that school management did not involve them probably because of their low level of formal schooling. This has made the schools appear as islands in the community without any strong linkage. Thus, this study aimed to explore what factors hinder the establishment of strong school-community partnership on seed secondary schools in Arua district, Uganda.

Some parents have got a very poor perception or attitude towards education which eventually culminates into school drop outs. Most parents in the villages are not aware of the importance of education and therefore see no use of taking their children to school, for they believe that it is just a waste of resources and time. Some parents do not care whether the child has gone to school or not and if that finds a child who is not self-motivate, that child will automatically drop out of school (UNICEF, 2014).

More so, parents' socio-economic status also hinders parental involvement in school affairs. Findings indicated a significant relationship between parents' income and literacy levels and the quality of support to their children's education (Drajea & Sullivan, 2014). Noort and Roos van den, (2011) in their study on parental involvement in Primary education in Uganda confirmed that obstacles that impeded parental involvement in the Ugandan context were illiteracy and poverty of parents.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a concurrent mixed method design. Mixed methods applies to research that combines alternative approaches within a single research project (Martyn, 1998). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. The use of mixed method approach helped in triangulation purpose. Therefore, the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods helped to cater for the weaknesses of either method. The head teachers, teacher, parents, students, chairpersons Board of Governors and Parents Teachers' Association of the three seed secondary schools in Arua District, West Nile formed the study population.

Data were collected using questionnaire, structured interviews, focused group discussion and document analysis. Both interview guides and Questionnaires were administered to head teachers (n=03), chairperson Board of Governors (n=03), chairperson Parents Teachers' Association (n=03) while teachers (n=45) responded to the questionnaires and FGD. Students (n=30) and parents (n=30) were subjected to a focus group discussion to explore their perceptions of the benefits and barriers to school community partnership. Documents such as Minutes of Board of Governors (BOG) and Parents Teachers Association (PTA) and Minutes of Class Meetings were analyzed to gauge their frequencies and what matters related to school-community partnership were discussed. Circulars to parents, parents' attendance registers during visitation days were also analyzed to find out how schools communicate to parents and their response to visitation days.

Research ethics was observed by requesting the research participants to sign informed consent forms and ensuring that their names and the information given were treated confidentially. This is in line with Ingleby, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2012) assertion that "Participants should know that their involvement is voluntary at all times, and they should receive although explanation beforehand of the benefits, rights, risks, and dangers involved as a consequence of their participation in the research project p50".

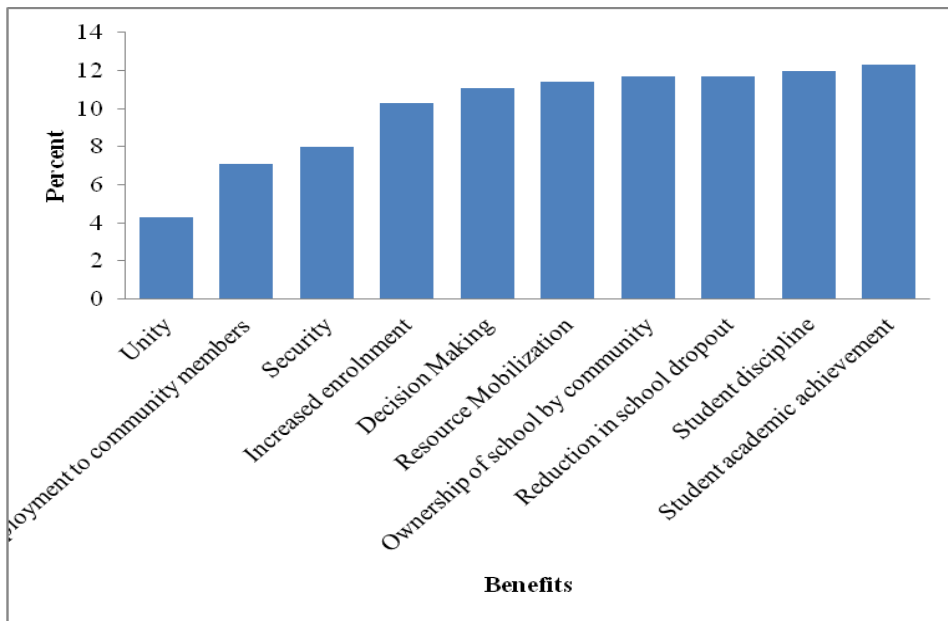
Quantitative data analysis was done using SPSS which involved descriptive and frequency counts represented on tables, graphs and pie charts. Qualitative data analysis on the other hand was continuous and involved transcription of recorded data, coding and getting key themes which were reported inform of narratives.

## RESULTS

The study sought to examine stakeholders' perception of the benefits and barriers to school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region. Data obtained from survey, interviews, focus group discussion and document analysis revealed that there were several benefits of SCP. They include enhancing students' academic achievement, improved discipline, encouraged retention and school ownership. It also encouraged resource mobilization, participation in decision-making, increased enrolment and security of school property. However, barriers to SCP included negative attitudes towards education, parents' low socio-economic status, irregular parents' meetings, and low level of parents' education and lack of accountability by some school authorities.

### **Benefits of school-community partnership**

The benefits of school-community partnership were investigated from head teachers, parents, chairpersons of BOG and PTA, teachers and students. Questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. Participants believed that school-community partnership enhanced students' academic achievement, improved discipline, encouraged retention and school ownership. It also encouraged resource mobilization, participation in decision-making, increased enrolment and security of school property among others. Responses from an open-ended questionnaire is represented in the graph below.



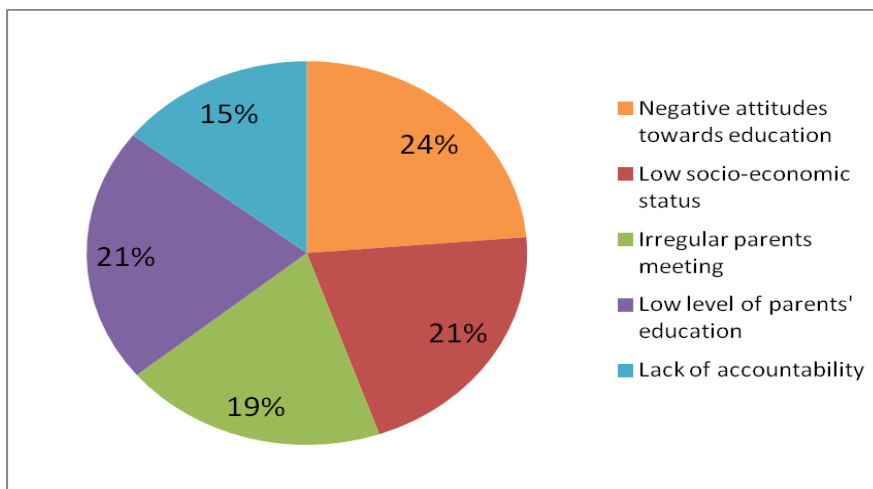
**Figure 2: Benefits of school-community partnership**

From the graph above, it is evident that all respondents believe that school community partnership was important for the social and academic well-being of the learners. 12.3% of the respondents perceived that school-community partnership improves student academic achievement. 12% agreed that when school-community partnership is strengthened, students' discipline would be improved. The respondents also agreed that school-community partnership reduces school dropout (11.7%), encourages ownership of the school by parents and community (11.7%) and encourages resource mobilization by members of the community for the development of the school. Other benefits of school-community partnership include involvement in decision making (11.1%), increased student enrolment (10.3%), provision of security of school property (8%), employment opportunities (7.1%) and strengthening unity between the parents, community and the school (4.3%).

### **Factors hindering school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile Region**

The study also sought to explore challenges hindering school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in Arua district, Uganda. These were given by head teachers, teachers, parents, chairpersons BOG and PTA. According to the findings, these challenges were several. They include but not limited to negative attitudes towards education, parents' low socio-economic status, irregular parents' meetings, low level of parents' education and lack of accountability by some school administrators.





**Figure 3: Barriers to school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region**

The findings revealed that numerous challenges hinder the creation and nurturing of strong school-community partnership in secondary schools in West Nile region. From the data collected and as reflected in the pie chart above, negative attitudes towards education (24%) hinder the achievement of an everlasting partnership between schools, families and the entire community. Low socio-economic status of parents and the entire community and low level of parents' education, both rating at 21%, hinder the parental and community involvement in the education of their children in West Nile region, Uganda. Other factors include irregular parents' meeting (19%) and lack of accountability of funds parents and community members raised to support school development (15%).

## DISCUSSION

### Benefits of school-community partnership

The study findings revealed positive effect of school-community partnership. These benefits are but not limited to improved students' academic performance, improved students' discipline, reduced students' dropout rate. Participants' also believed school-community results to ownership of the school by parents, resource mobilization, joint decision-making and increased students' enrolment.

During interviews and focus group discussion, all participants acknowledged the fact that when parents and the community are involved in the affairs of the school, their children's academic performance improves. A student during focus group discussion acknowledged that when their parents come to school, they discuss academic issues with their teachers and where they are challenged, a way forward is sought (FGD, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2019). This resonates with Ngaka (2008) assertion that community involvement in education initiative empowers communities to make regular visits to their nearest school to observe lessons, check availability of toilets facilities, the availability of teaching-learning aids and the conduciveness of the learning environment. Similarly, Odama and Ezati (2017), in their study on Parents' Contributions towards Education Process and Variations in School Performance Indices (SPI) in Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) Examinations in Central and Northern Uganda found out that students in central Uganda performed relatively above their counterparts in northern Uganda because of a strong linkage created between the



parents and the schools. Data from the survey indicated that 12.3% of the respondents perceived that school-community partnership improves student academic achievement. Thus, from the above findings one can conclude that school-community partnership if well nurtured enhances student academic achievement.

Most participants also agreed that students' discipline can be managed properly through involving parents and the entire community members. Out of the respondents to the open-ended questionnaire, 12% agreed that when school-community partnership is strengthened, students' discipline would be improved. Some parents also acknowledged being invited to school to settle issues of their children's indiscipline. A parent was quoted saying: "my boy was getting spoilt, he couldn't attend lessons, he liked going out of the school to watch football. But when sir called me and we talked of him, am seeing much improvement (FGD, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2018). Therefore, students' discipline is one of the avenues for school-community partnership (McLaren, 2009).

The respondents also agreed that school-community partnership reduces school dropout (11.7%). Most participants recognized that there is high dropout rate among students in West Nile secondary schools. "Unless we work together with these parents, we shall not on our own as school curb this vise of school dropout among students. Girls' number is decreasing drastically. So, I encourage parents to open their eyes and we fight this problem of dropout" (Head teacher interview, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2018). To complement the above, 10.3% of those who responded to the questionnaire agreed that strong school-community partnership leads to reduced dropout and increased student enrolment. Low level of the education could be partially caused by the laxity of parents to monitor students' attendance. Thus, when students attend regularly, the quality of education will be enhanced.

School-community partnership leads to ownership of the school by parents and community. Most participants during interviews, focused group discussion all agreed that school-community partnership increase parents' involvement in decision making and ownership of the school. A school is an open system that receives raw materials from the community, processes them and sends to the community as finished products. Thus, when parents have a say in whatever takes place in the school, then they feel the school is their property that should nurtured and protected. And in addition, they are encouraged resource mobilization by members of the community for the development of the school.

### **Factors hindering school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in West Nile region**

The study delved into the challenges of creating and nurturing school-community partnership for quality education in Arua district, Uganda. Data were collected from head teachers, teachers, students and parents. Parents, representatives to the school board of governors and PTA were also provided useful information on major hindrances to school-community partnership. Numerous factors that hinder school-community -partnership raised were negative attitudes towards education, parents' low socio-economic status, irregular parents' meetings, low level of parents' education and lack of accountability by some school authorities.

Negative attitudes towards education came out strongly as one major factor affecting the creation and nurturing of school-community partnership. Parents contribute a lot to the education of their children. However, from the data collected, it seems that some parents in West Nile region have negative attitudes towards education. Data revealed

that parents neither volunteer in school activities nor help their children learn at home. This has resulted to high dropout out and poor performance at Uganda National Examinations. The chairperson PTA acknowledged this during an interview: “Some parents have negative attitudes towards the school. When they are called for school work, they don’t come. When they are asked to come to school for meetings, they say am busy. It is not good. It makes our work difficult as committee” (PTA interview, 24<sup>th</sup>, September, 2018). Students in during their focus group discussion also confirmed that some of their parents do not take education seriously. “They believe education is for the government. They believe you can survive without education” (PGD 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2018). These parents believe they have raised the children and it is the job of the teachers to educate them. This denotes separate spheres as opposed to overlapping spheres of influence, where children benefit from all the three spheres. When schools and community act independent of each other, it results to lack of ownership of the school by the parents. Thus, there is need to bridge this gap for the region to improve the quality of education it offers to its children.

Coupled with the above is the challenge of parents’ low socio-economic status. Data from this study revealed that most parents in the region could not make the necessary contributions to the school because of their poverty level. In the following verbatim, the student said: “our parents cannot afford school fees and other financial contributions because they are not working. They rely on farming and sometimes with very poor yield. They cannot even come to school bare handed during visitation (FGD, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2018). A parent added “we are not ignoring the call by headmaster to pay development fund; we cannot afford to pay. Things are very hard here. Some children are even at home because of uniform” (FGD, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2018). A teacher also during their focus group discussion concurred that parents from poor backgrounds do not attend meetings frequently. And yet the Universal Secondary Education Policy (USE) specifies parents’ contributions in seed secondary schools. Data from respondents who took part in survey revealed that parent’s socio-economic status hinders their participation in school activities, hence affecting school-community partnership. From findings presented above, parents from low socio-economic status backgrounds may want to participate in school activities and contribute to the development of school but may be limited by their poverty status.

Participants also blamed weak partnership between the school and the community to parents’ irregular attendance of meetings. Meetings are important avenues where developmental issues are discussed. However, from this study, it is evident that parents do not take these meetings seriously. Data from visitors’ book and attendance lists for class meetings, parents’ annual general meetings and other occasional meetings indicate very low attendance by parents. A teacher said. “Sometimes we call class meetings but only 10 parents turn up. We even try to send their children with letters but they don’t come. They don’t take meetings seriously” (FGD 24<sup>th</sup> September 2018). However, parents also blamed some school authorities for not conducting meetings regularly. “Meeting is good but our head teacher does not call us for meetings. Three years now, no AGM. Only PTA and BOG are invited to decide for us. Parents are not happy!” (FGD, 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2018). From the above data, it is evident that some school authorities conducted some activities to involve the community but do not have sustainability strategies and goal-linked partnership programs.

Finally, low level of parents’ education could have contributed to weak school-community partnership in West Nile region. Data from focus group discussion, interviews and survey all confirmed that parents’ low level of education affected their full participation in school activities. Low level of parents’ education hindered their

involvement in helping children with academic activities at home. Some parents with low level of education did not see the importance of attending meetings and taking part in school activities. Teachers in their focused group discussions concurred that although some parents who are enlightened participate in school activities, including attending class meetings; parents with low level of education avoid such activities. Some parents claimed that they do not get the information about meetings and other school functions. From this, it is apparent that parents' level of education affects their communication with the school since most letters are written in English. Teachers and other school authorities could have also mistaken this act to be defiance and these parents could have been limited by the language of communication.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings, participants believed that school-community partnership enhanced students' academic achievement, improved discipline, encouraged retention and school ownership. It also encouraged resource mobilization, participation in decision-making, increased enrolment and security of school property. Several challenges impede SCP. They include but not limited to negative attitudes towards education, parents' low socio-economic status, irregular parents' meetings, low level of parents' education and lack of accountability by some school administrators.

As a recommendation, the ministry of education and sports ought to design materials on SCP and also empower various education stake holders in education such as ministry officials and school authorities on strategies of fostering SCP to improve students' social and academic wellbeing. Meetings with parents and stakeholders need to be conducted regularly. School authorities through the local leaders should encourage parents to fulfill their obligations as stipulated in the USE policy. In order to realize sustainability, all stakeholders ought to play their roles in ensuring quality education in secondary schools in West Nile region, Uganda.

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