

## Strengthening School-Community Partnership for Quality Education in Seed Secondary Schools in West Nile Region, Uganda

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### Abstract

*The school and the community environment each offer a wealth of opportunities and support in order to achieve quality education. The mixed method study grounded on the theory of overlapping spheres of influence was meant to explore the strategies head teachers of seed secondary schools would employ to foster school-community partnership for quality education in West Nile, Uganda. Specific objective was to examine the strategies head teachers employ to foster school-community partnership for quality education in West Nile and the challenges head teachers face in fostering school-community partnership for quality education in West Nile region. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews of head teachers (n=3), chairpersons of Board of Governors (n=3) and chairpersons of Parents Teachers' Association (n=3). Focus group discussions were held with students from the three selected seed secondary schools (n=30) and 30 teachers from the three selected seed secondary schools responded to the questionnaires. Data was also collected through analyzing documents such as minutes of School Boards of Governors (BOGs) and Parents Teachers' Association (PTA), circulars, visitors' books and parents' visitation days' attendance books. The study revealed that the head teachers used meetings, school and home visits, community leaders and School Open Days as strategies to foster school-community partnership. However, poverty, parents' low level of education, negative attitudes of some parents towards education, lack of accountability and lack of parents' meeting were found to be challenges to fostering school-community partnership.*

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

### INTRODUCTION

Involving the parents and collaborating with members of the community are basis for efforts to improve education service delivery in schools and transmitting the cultural values of education. The study was conducted to explore strategies in strengthening school-community partnership for quality education in seed secondary schools in West Nile, Uganda. This section presents the background and context of the study, statement of the problem, and purpose of the study. The research objectives, research questions, scope and significance of the study are also presented.

School-community partnership is globally recognized to improve student's social and academic wellbeing (Sheldon, 2003; Julia, 2016; Bauch, 2017; Alvarez-Valdivia et al., 2013). School-community partnerships is the development of a set of social relationships within and between the school and its local community that promote action (Bauch, 2017).

Right from the time of Dewey's concept of community schools, community involvement has been a central theme in the field of education in the USA (Sanders, 2003b). Presently, importance is drawn for parents and the community to collaborate with the school for a more democratic and participatory approach to school operation to enhance students' academic achievement.

In Uganda, school-community partnership dates to when there were village schools founded by the missionaries referred to as "local community initiatives" (Niwagaba & Jaeger, 2010). When World Bank cut funding to these schools in the 1980s, the community supported these schools thus, denoting school-community partnership in educating children. Since then, Ugandan government has always tried to involve the community in the affairs of the school. Policies such as universal secondary education (USE) introduced in 2007, liberalization of establishment of educational institutions and establishment of seed secondary schools per sub-county are some policies aimed at bringing the communities closer to the schools and vice versa, to strengthen the school-community partnership.

Despite this efforts by the government, northern Uganda, for the last three decades have experienced continuous drop in students' academic performance at national summative examinations (Stephen & Ezati, 2017). Many factors have been attributed to this ugly scenario, ranging from inadequate resources such as human, material, financial and physical resources; teacher and student characteristics and parents' attitudes towards education. Therefore, this study investigated the level of parental and community involvement, strategies for strengthening school-community partnership and challenges to parental and community involvement for quality education in seed secondary schools in West Nile, Uganda.

### **The Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to examine strategies for strengthening school-community partnership for quality education in seed secondary schools in West Nile Region.

### **Specific Objective**

The objective of the study was to investigate the strategies head teachers used in fostering school-community partnership for quality education in seed secondary schools in West Nile region;

### **Scope of the study**

The research was carried out in three seed secondary schools in Arua district, West Nile region, Uganda because there were evident differences in the performances in UCE examinations as compared with other government aided and private secondary schools in the district and region. The study examined the strategies head teachers use to foster school-community partnership for quality education and the challenges head teachers faced in fostering school-community partnership for quality education in seed secondary schools in West Nile region, Uganda. The participants included head teachers, teachers, students, parents, chairpersons Board of Governors (BOGs) and Parents Teachers' Association (PTA).

### **Significance of the study**

The findings of this study might enhance head teachers' insights into the various strategies to strengthen school-community partnership. The findings might also inform

both local and national policies on strengthening school-community partnership. The findings and conclusion from this study might add value on the existing knowledge and inform future research.

## **Theoretical Framework**

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

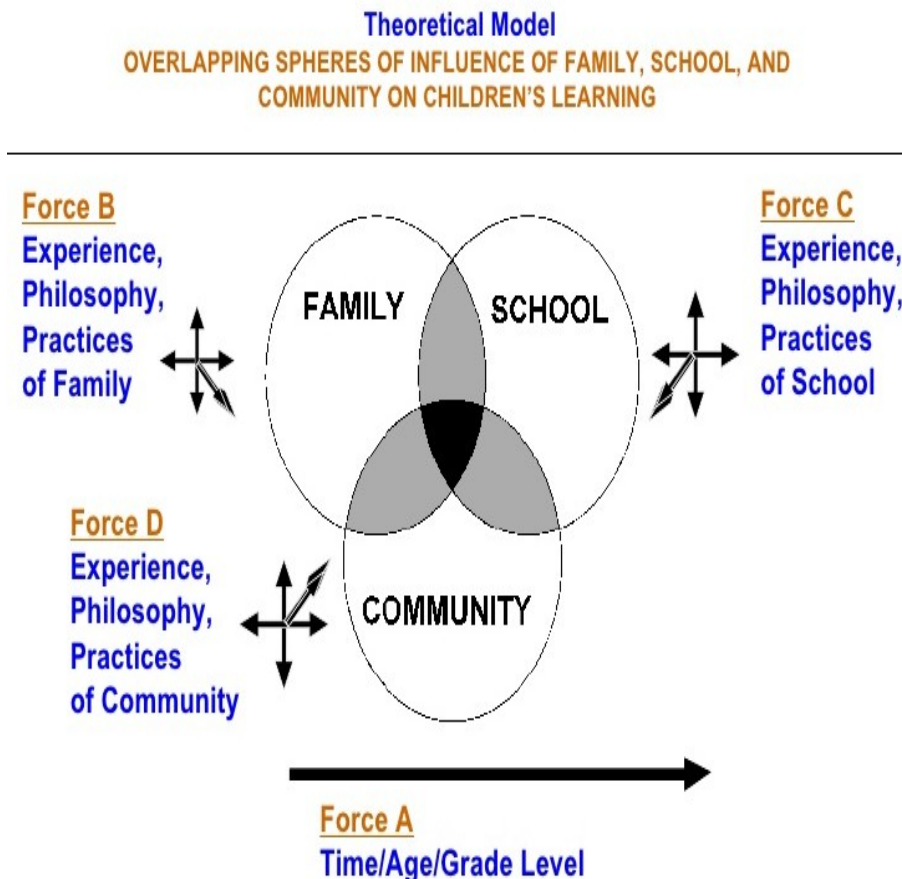
The theory of OSI contends that families, schools and communities are the main contexts for children's education and hence greater collaboration by the stakeholders in these settings positively influence students' learning and social well being (Sanders & Joyce, 2006; Joyce L. Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011). Thus, these contexts act as overlapping spheres of influence on students' academic achievement. However, as Epstein, (2002) noted, collaboration is significantly lacking 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 students' personal development.

On the other hand, with a strong partnership between the family, school and community, the talks and attitudes of teachers and parents would change positively. Thus, teachers would begin to say "I cannot do my job without the help of my students' families and the support of this community." While parents would say "I really need to know what is happening in school in order to help my child"(Epstein, 2002). This saying depicts the overlapping spheres of influence which is a predictor of students' achievement in school (Stephen & Ezati, 2017). This study therefore sought to apply the theory of OSI to examine the strategies head teachers employ to foster school-community partnership for quality education in seed secondary schools in West Nile region, Uganda.

Epstein and Sheldon (2006) as cited in Epstein et al (2011) add that, the theory of overlapping spheres of influence transforms family involvement from an "external" factor to an essential component of school and classroom organization. This means parents are not onlookers but engage in classroom activities as resourceful persons and volunteers in school activities. Therefore, for parents' effective involvement in the school and classroom activities, the head teacher should lay strategies that bring all the stake holders together thus, bridging the gap between the school and the community. This study thus, sought to explore the head teacher's role in fostering SCP in Uganda.

When a strong partnership is established, administrators and school staff create family-like schools; parents create school-like families and community creates family-like settings and services. According to Joyce et al., (2002), family-like schools welcome all families, without concentrating on those they can easily reach, making the child feel special, included and cared for. A school-like family recognizes that each child is also a student by reinforcing the importance of school, homework, and activities that enhances student's knowledge, skills and feelings of success. On the other hand, community-like settings, services and events help parents to develop ways of supporting their children succeed in their academic endeavours. This kind of connection results into a mutual support system tailored towards improving quality education. As the theory presupposes, there are some activities schools and families do separately as well as jointly. These may include but not restricted to 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); Sanders, 2003; Khalifa, 2012; Epstein et al., 2011). This demonstrates overlapping spheres of influence as illustrated in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Theoretical Model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence**  
 Source: (Epstein et al., 2002)

As illustrated above, the model of overlapping spheres of influence composed of external and internal structures. Externally, there are experiences, philosophies and other forces that influence children's learning and development. These forces may push or draw together the three contexts where a student lives and study, creating fewer or more connections of individuals in the three contexts.

The model also presupposes that the extent of overlap changes with time, age and grade level of learners. It assumes that when students graduate from primary to secondary level, and when they age, parents and other community members assume students are grown-ups and thus, slightly withdraw their support. With these assumptions, the head teacher, given his/her pivotal position plays vital role in strengthening partnerships between the family, school and community for quality education. Internally, the child is treated as an actor in strengthening the partnership and thus, all the three contexts should care about the student's academic and social well-being. Therefore, this study was intended to explore head teacher's role in

fostering School-Community Partnership for quality education in seed secondary schools in west Nile region, Uganda.

### **Head teacher's strategies in fostering school-community partnership**

As the administration of the secondary schools are becoming complex, head teachers are expected to involve key stakeholders to achieve quality education and lifelong learning. However, this come with numerous challenges as the head teacher ought to change his/her managerial styles to create a strong partnership between the school and the community. Several studies have revealed that meetings, home and school visits, open days and use of community leaders are key strategies the head teacher uses to strengthen school-community partnership for quality education.

A study by Ngaka (2008) on Community Involvement in Education for Performance Improvement in Primary Schools in Aroi Sub-County, Arua District, Uganda revealed that regular meetings facilitate learning in both the schools and in the homes where the children come from. Thus, when the parents and the community get involved in the education of their children, the concept of lifelong learning is facilitated. This can also pave way for building adaptive and flexible learning societies that can endure the challenges of the rapidly changing world.

In a related study, 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 regular meetings with parents. The study revealed that head teachers from central Uganda encouraged face to face interactions and openness with the parents through meetings. Common meetings were class meetings with subject teachers for advice on academic matters. The high performance demonstrated by students in central Uganda was also attributed to the house meetings and parents' meetings with administration and subject teachers for challenged students. During these meeting, parents were encouraged to express their views freely and their views were as well considered, resulting to high academic achievement of students. Therefore, this explored how head teachers of seed secondary schools could use meetings to strengthen school-community partnership for quality education in West Nile region.

Home and school visits are also powerful strategies for strengthening school community partnership. Many studies found out that when head teachers and teachers visit their children's homes, chances are high that these students' related challenges would be diagnosed and solutions to learning challenges sought. Khalifa (2012) found out that the principal and teachers' visibility in the community resulted to improved students' academic achievement. In his study, Ngaka (2008) advises that community involvement in education initiative empowers communities to make regular visits to their nearest school to observe lessons, check availability of toilet facilities, the availability of teaching-learning aids and the conduciveness of the learning environment. This encourages free interaction between school, families and community and opens avenues for communities to contribute towards addressing some of the factors responsible for falling standards and quality of education. However, there seems to be limited literature on how head teachers in seed secondary schools in Arua District use school and home visits to foster school-community partnership. Thus, this study aimed to fill the gap.

## METHODOLOGY

The study on strengthening school-community partnership for quality education in seed secondary schools in West Nile employed a mixed method approach. According to Martyn (1998) mixed methods applies to research that combines alternative approaches within a single research project. Thus, this strategy uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. The use of mixed method approach helped in the justification of findings in terms of their accuracy and checking for bias that could have arose from either qualitative or quantitative methods. Aware of the weaknesses and strengths that different methods have, the use of mixed methods compensated the weaknesses in either method. The study population comprised of head teachers, students, parents, chairpersons Board of Governors and Parents Teachers' Association of the three seed secondary schools in Arua District, West Nile.

Semi-structured interviews were administered to head teachers (n=03), chairperson Board of Governors (n=03), chairperson Parents Teachers' Association (n=03) and teachers (n=45). Students (n=30) and parents (n=30) were subjected to a focus group discussion to explore their perceptions of the strategies the authorities used in fostering 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 were discussed. Circulars to parents, parents' attendance books 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 a thorough explanation beforehand of the benefits, rights, risks, and dangers involved as a consequence of their participation in the research project.p50"

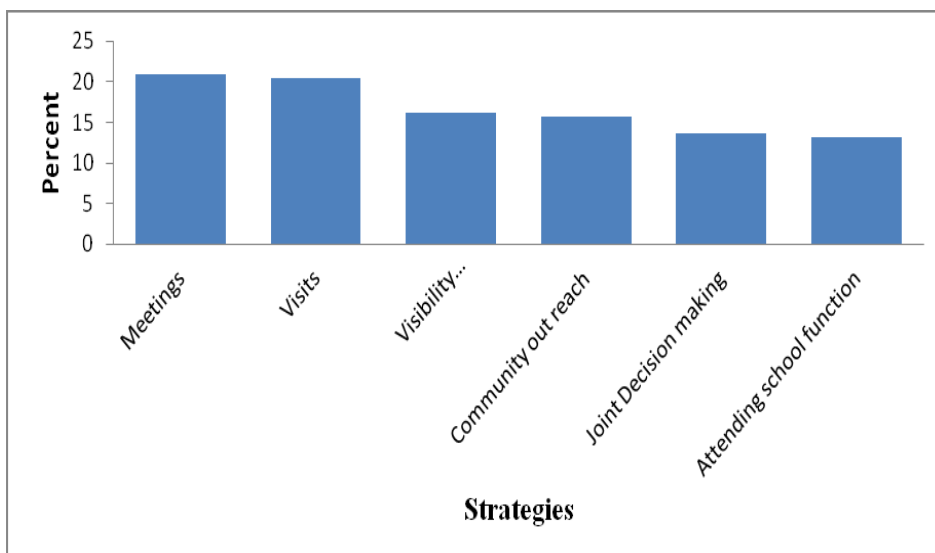
Quantitative data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) which involved descriptive and frequency counts represented on tables, graphs and pie charts. Qualitative data analysis on the other hand was continuous and involved transcription of recorded data, coding and getting key themes which were reported in form of narratives.

## RESULTS

The sought to examine the strategies school authorities use to strengthen school-community partnership in seed secondary schools in Arua District, West Nile. Data from interviews, focus group discussion, document analysis and survey revealed 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. Findings revealed that strategies such as meetings, visits, visibility, joint decision making and attending school functions by parents, foster SCP.

### Strategies for strengthening school-community partnership for quality education

Findings revealed that strategies such as meetings, visits, visibility, joint decision making and attending school functions by parents, foster school-community partnership for quality education in West Nile region of Uganda. Summary of findings from open ended questionnaires are represented in figure 2 below.



**Figure 2: Strategies for strengthening school-community partnership for quality education**

As seen from figure 2, respondents recommend that to strengthen school-community partnership, strategies such as meetings, school and home visits, visibility by the school authorities in the community through attending community functions and ceremonies and community outreach activities by the school should be encouraged.

Regarding strategies for school-community partnership as shown in the figure 2 above, most respondents acknowledged that meetings (20.9%) are key strategies in enhancing school-community partnership. Besides meetings, respondents to the open-ended questionnaire administered agreed that visits (20.4%) result to creation of a strong linkage between the school and community. The respondents also believed that teachers and other school authorities should be visible in the community through attending community ceremonies and other functions (16.2%). Other strategies school authorities could use to foster school-community partnerships per the respondents are encouraging community outreaches (15.7%), involving parents and community in joint decision making (13.6%) and inviting and encouraging parents to attend school functions (13.1%).

## DISCUSSIONS

### Strategies for strengthening school-community partnership for quality education

Findings from interviews, survey and focus group discussions revealed that meetings are very important strategy in strengthening school-community partnership. According to participants, important meetings are General parents' meeting, class meetings and

governance meetings. During such meetings, school and government policies are disseminated. Otherwise parents who may not attend such meeting miss a lot of vital information as relates the welfare and academic progress of their children. This is in line with (Lee & Bowen, 2006) assertion that parents who do not attend class meetings and school days may obtain information on how to help their children with homework and other information related to setting high achievement standards.

Regular meetings are correlated with students' academic achievement. When parents attend school meetings, they will, with the help of teachers diagnose their children's learning challenges and ways of mitigating these challenges. In a study conducted by Odama and Ezati (2017), they found out that 85.7% of the parents in central Uganda attended Class Days' and Academic Week meetings, against only 60% of parents in Northern Uganda. According to the authors, this variation in meeting attendance could be the major reason why children in Central Uganda perform quite above their counterparts in Northern Uganda.

The parents in their focus group discussions reported that head teachers of seed secondary schools do not encourage face to face interactions and openness with them and do not give them time to meet each subject teacher for advice. Odama and Ezati (2017) reported that students in central Uganda performed well because schools organized House Meetings and parents are encouraged to express their views freely during those meetings and their views were considered. Parents' meetings with administrators and teachers allow parents to consult teachers on how to help challenged students and to check their progress regularly. Therefore, to ensure quality education and lifelong learning, this study sought to explore how school authorities in West Nile would use meetings to foster school-community partnership.

The study found out that visits are strategies for strengthening school-community partnership. As per the survey findings, respondents rated visits (20.4%) as the second important strategy after meetings, in strengthening school-community partnership for students' academic achievement in seed secondary schools in West Nile region. Parents in their focus group discussion agreed that school and home visits enhance school-community partnership and improve students' academic achievement. One of the parents emphasized: "when these teachers allow us visit our children in school and even in class while teaching, we are able to see how they teach, how our children behave in class; how they talk in class. This is good thing and the relationship will be strong." (FGD, 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2018).

This was confirmed by one head teacher who asserts "when parents come freely to visit their children in school, they are able to see for themselves what teachers do with their children, learning challenges their children have. Here they can discuss the way forward together. I tell them during meetings that come to school, you come don't fear. (H/T Interview, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 2018).

Besides school visits, home visits by teachers also came up vividly as a strategy for fostering school-community partnership. During FGD with students, teachers and parents, most participants acknowledged the importance of home visits in bridging the gap between parents and the school. A parent was quoted saying: "yeah, I know when teachers visit my child, he knows where the child stay. He will know the parents. We shall discuss academic stuff. But my fear is what do I give the big man? We are poor. But it is good for them to come to our home" (FGD 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2018). A student

concluded: "I feel proud when my teacher come home and talk to me and my parents about my conduct at school and my results (FGD, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2018). Student discipline is one area of partnership as emphasized by scholars (McLaren, 2009)

From the above, it is evident that both school authorities and parents believed that school and home visits encourage working together and helping learners achieve high level of academic performance. Visibility in the community by school authorities and teachers help in motivating parents and the community to associate with the school. Analysis of questionnaire data revealed that respondents believed that teachers and other school authorities should be visible in the community through attending community ceremonies and other functions (16.2%). This was echoed by the chairperson PTA during an interview: "when the teachers join parents during functions such as funerals, weddings, the community members are happy about them. I encourage the head teacher to attend such functions because the school is part of us, the community." (PTA interview, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

Findings from survey, interviews and focus group discussion all agree that school-community partnership can be strengthened by encouraging community outreaches. 15.7% of the respondents to questionnaires believed that when teachers and students go out to educate the community, the community members will feel motivated to participate in school activities.

Parents also believed that involving them in decision making process strengthens their relationship with the school. From the findings, 13.6% of the respondents agreed to this assertion. The PTA chairpersons all agreed that when schools involve parents either directly or through their representatives in making decisions pertaining to issues of fees increment, construction of buildings among others, parents own the decisions without resistance.

Results from the survey, focus group discussion and interviews indicated that school-community partnership can be fostered through encouraging parents to attend school functions. Data revealed that 13.1% of those who responded to the survey agreed that inviting and encouraging parents to attend school functions strengthens school-community partnership. This finding corroborated the data collected through interviews and focus group discussion. The parents in their focus group discussion stressed that when the school authorities invite them to volunteer in school activities, they come willing. Previous literature also confirm this finding that school-community partnership is created and sustained when parents volunteer 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); M. G. Sanders, 2003; Khalifa, 2012; Joyce L. Epstein et al., 2011). Thus, creating a strong link between the school and the community.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Participants believed that school-community partnership enhanced students' academic achievement, improved discipline, encouraged retention and school ownership. Findings revealed that strategies such as meetings, visits, visibility, joint decision making and attending school functions by parents, foster school-community partnership for quality education in West Nile region of Uganda.

The following are recommendations to strengthen school-community partnership for quality education in seed secondary schools: -

- i. As a way forward, the ministry of education and sports could design resources on SCP and also empower various stake holders in education like DEOs, central and district Inspectors and school authorities on strategies of nurturing SCP to enhance students' social and academic wellbeing.
- ii. To bring all parents on board, village meetings could be fora to sensitize the community on involvement in school activities and the value of education. The head teacher could employ strategies such as workshops and seminars on approaches to SCP to lobby community inputs on the child's learning both at school and at home.

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