

Harnessing Parental Involvement and Educational Equity for Sustainable Development in South African Schools

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Abstract: The importance of parental involvement in schools cannot be overemphasised. Government and donor agencies have recognised the significant role of parents in the educational development of their children. This conceptual paper, therefore, explores how parental involvement can be harnessed to uplift and promote educational equity in South African schools amidst the urgent need for collaborative efforts between parents, schools, and policymakers to mitigate challenges and advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used to anchor the study. A typology methodological design was employed to identify and categorise four themes discussed in the paper. Through exploring effective parental involvement strategies, this paper provides actionable insights for enhancing academic outcomes and advancing SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) within the South African context. Therefore, recognising educational disparities, this paper advocates for a holistic approach to parental involvement that empowers families, strengthens communities, and promotes sustainable development. The paper concludes that parental involvement is a powerful catalyst for educational equity and sustainable development in South African schools. Through collaborative

efforts and a commitment to social justice, the transformative potential of parental involvement can be harnessed to build a more equitable and inclusive education system that advances the SDGs and ensures a brighter future for all children in South Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Parental involvement, academic performance, educational equity, SDGs, South African schools.

1. Introduction

The importance of parental involvement in schools cannot be overemphasised; hence, the government and donor agencies have recognised the vital role of parents in the education of their children (Gustafsson-Wright, Smith & Gardiner, 2017). It is widely accepted that education is a fundamental human right and a powerful tool for achieving sustainable development and social justice. Therefore, parents should be actively involved in their children's education (Sinyolo, 2021; Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2019). Education for sustainable development provides a systemic framework for connecting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to educational outcomes (Kioupi, Voulvoulis, 2019; Rajabifard et al., 2021). However, despite progress in recent decades, millions of children worldwide, particularly those in low-income and marginalised communities, continue to face barriers to quality education (Caarls et al., 2021). In South Africa, where historical inequalities persist, these challenges are particularly acute. Factors such as poverty, limited access to resources, and systemic barriers have hindered educational progress and perpetuated disparities in academic achievement (Scott, 2018).

Amidst these challenges, parental involvement emerges as a crucial determinant of educational equity and learner success. Research consistently demonstrates that when parents are actively engaged in their children's learning, students are more likely to perform better academically, exhibit positive attitudes toward school, and demonstrate higher levels of social and emotional well-being

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(Epstein, 2018). Moreover, parental involvement has been identified as a key driver of sustainable development, contributing to poverty reduction, gender equality, and inclusive economic growth. As South Africa strives to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and build a more equitable society, harnessing parental involvement in education becomes imperative.

Many existing studies on parental involvement in education focus on its impact at the local or national level, without necessarily linking it to broader global challenges or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Yoshikawa et al., 2018). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how parental involvement can contribute to achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education) within the specific context of South African schools. Furthermore, there is a growing body of research on parental involvement, yet limited attention has been given to its role in promoting educational equity, particularly in the South African context where historical inequalities persist (Sayed et al., 2020). This conceptual paper emphasises the importance of parental involvement as a means of addressing disparities in educational access, quality, and outcomes and proposes strategies for fostering more equitable educational systems.

To foster equitable educational systems is essential; for example, in township schools in Cape Town, there is a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in subjects like Mathematics and Science. As a result, learners receive less instruction and support in these critical areas, affecting their performance and future opportunities (Taylor, 2021; Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). There are also issues of resource inequality; for instance, it has been widely reported in the media that some rural schools in Limpopo lack access to basic educational resources such as textbooks, computers, and laboratory equipment (Mncube et al., 2023). These schools struggle to provide quality education due to the scarcity of these essential materials (Mncube et al., 2023; Zenda, 2024). The researchers of this paper observed that, on the one hand, in a well-resourced urban school, learners have access to modern classrooms, sports facilities, and extracurricular programmes, while on the other hand, nearby underfunded schools have dilapidated classrooms and limited extracurricular options (Akombelwa, 2018). The picture painted above highlights the need for active parental involvement to close the gap in educational inequalities and contribute towards achieving SDG 4, which aims for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

2. Theoretical Framework

This conceptual paper adopts Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises the importance of understanding individuals within the context of their environments. The theory highlights the multiple layers of influence that shape human development (Perron, 2017) and provides a framework for examining the dynamic interactions between parents, schools, communities, and broader societal contexts.

At the microsystem level, parents play a central role in their children's educational experiences, providing support, guidance, and resources that can significantly impact academic achievement and socio-emotional development (Şengönül, 2022; Perron, 2017). By fostering positive parent-child relationships and creating supportive home environments, parents can enhance their children's readiness to learn and engage in school.

Moving beyond the microsystem, the mesosystem encompasses the interactions between different microsystems, such as the relationship between parents and teachers or the collaboration between families and community organisations (Iruka et al., 2020; Stanley & Kuo, 2022). Effective partnerships between parents, schools, and communities are essential for promoting educational equity and addressing the diverse needs of learners in contexts characterised by socioeconomic disparities and historical inequalities (Iruka et al., 2020; Stanley & Kuo, 2022).

As discussed earlier regarding scenarios of inequality in South African schools, partnerships can help mobilise resources and support to address disparities in educational resources and facilities. When

parents, schools, and communities work together, they can pool resources, share expertise, and enhance the educational environment (Ngobeni, 2022; Volmink & van der Elst, 2017; Ziduli, 2019). In rural areas where schools often lack basic resources, parents might collaborate with local businesses and community organisations to secure donations of textbooks, computers, or building materials. Schools can influence these partnerships to improve infrastructure and provide better learning materials (Ngobeni, 2022; Volmink & van der Elst, 2017; Ziduli, 2019).

Effective partnerships enable collective advocacy for educational improvements and equitable policies. When parents, schools, and communities unite, they have a stronger voice in influencing education policies and resource allocation (Volmink & van der Elst, 2017). A coalition of parents and school leaders in a disadvantaged area could advocate for increased government funding or policy changes to address educational inequities (Ziduli, 2019). They can work together to present data, share experiences, and push for reforms that ensure all learners have access to quality education (Ngobeni, 2022). This collaboration can help create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, addressing the diverse needs of learners and contributing to the achievement of SDG4.

Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's theory highlights the significance of the exosystem and macrosystem in shaping parental involvement and educational outcomes (Iruka et al., 2020; Stanley & Kuo, 2022). Factors such as government policies, cultural norms, and socioeconomic conditions can influence the opportunities and resources available to parents, as well as the quality and accessibility of education in South African schools. For example, regarding government policies and educational resources, there was a policy shift aimed at decentralising education funding, which led to increased financial independence for individual schools (Karlsson et al., 2020). However, schools in wealthier areas receive more support due to better-established local tax bases, while schools in impoverished regions struggle with inadequate resources (Mazwi, 2023). This discrepancy affects the quality of education and access to essential materials across different schools. The researchers for this paper have also observed that, in some South African communities, cultural norms place a higher value on educating boys over girls, which can limit educational opportunities for girl children (Mokoena & Jegede, 2017). This disparity is reflected in lower female enrolment rates and higher dropout rates among girls (Mokoena & Jegede, 2017). Efforts to challenge these norms and promote gender equality in education are crucial for improving access and quality for all students.

It is also common in South Africa for schools in affluent areas to benefit from modern facilities, such as well-equipped science laboratories and sports centres, due to higher local contributions and private funding (Mncube et al., 2023; Zenda, 2024). In contrast, schools in low-income areas may lack basic infrastructure, such as adequate classrooms or functioning restrooms (Akombelwa, 2018). These socioeconomic conditions create significant disparities in the educational environment and opportunities available to students. Considering these broader systemic factors, educators, policymakers, and stakeholders can develop more holistic approaches to harnessing parental involvement for educational equity and advancing sustainable development goals (Iruka et al., 2020; Stanley & Kuo, 2022). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interactions between individuals, environments, and systems that influence parental involvement in education. The researchers for this current study used the theory to gain insights into the multi-layered dynamics of parental involvement and to identify strategies for promoting educational equity and sustainable development in South African schools. The theory was applied to discuss the findings that emerged from the literature consulted.

3. Methodology

A typology methodology was used for this conceptual paper. The researchers considered several reasons why this methodology was best suited for the study. The typology methodology allows for the systematic classification and categorisation (Fiss, 2011; Cornelissen, 2017; Jaakkola, 2020) of different types of parental involvement in education. This method enabled us to identify and

distinguish between various forms of parental engagement, such as involvement in school governance, participation in educational activities at home, communication with teachers, and collaboration with community organisations (Fiss, 2011; Cornelissen, 2017; Jaakkola, 2020). Therefore, categorising parental involvement into distinct types, the researchers gained a better understanding of the diverse ways in which parents contribute to educational equity and sustainable development goals in South African schools. This assisted the researchers in focusing on the themes (Fiss, 2011; Cornelissen, 2017; Jaakkola, 2020) that emerged from the literature, as discussed in the sections below. The typology methodology facilitates the analysis of patterns and trends within the data (Fiss, 2011; Cornelissen, 2017), helping researchers identify common themes, variations, and relationships between different types of parental involvement and educational outcomes. This approach allows for an examination of the complex interactions (Jaakkola, 2020) between parental engagement practices, learner achievement, and school performance, shedding light on the factors that contribute to effective parental involvement and its impact on educational equity.

This methodology provides insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of policies and programmes related to parental involvement in education. Identifying key dimensions of parental engagement and their implications for educational equity and sustainable development, researchers can inform evidence-based decision-making and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting effective parental involvement practices and fostering partnerships between schools, families, and communities. The methodology further assisted researchers in developing strategies and interventions aimed at harnessing parental involvement to advance sustainable development goals in South African schools. The typology methodology offered the researchers a systematic and structured approach for examining the complexities (Jaakkola, 2020) of parental involvement in education and its role in advancing educational equity and sustainable development goals in South African schools.

4. Presentation of Themes and Major Arguments

4.1. Theme 1: Understanding the role of parental involvement in education

Parental involvement encompasses a wide range of activities and behaviours that parents undertake to support their children's learning and development. These may include providing a conducive home environment for learning, establishing routines and expectations, monitoring academic progress, communicating with teachers, and participating in school activities and decision-making processes, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory adopted in this study. Research indicates that parental involvement has a significant impact on students' academic achievement, regardless of socioeconomic background (Şengönül, 2022; Perron, 2017). The aforementioned authors consistently demonstrate that when parents are actively involved in their children's education, those children are more likely to perform better academically. Furthermore, active engagement from parents in their children's education motivates children to attend school regularly, complete homework assignments, and exhibit higher levels of motivation and self-regulation (Epstein, 2018). Understanding the mechanisms through which parental involvement influences learner achievement can help educators and policymakers design interventions and initiatives that promote parental engagement, thereby improving educational outcomes for all learners and contributing to educational equity, in line with SDG Goal 4. This understanding aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which advocates for a strong and active relationship between parents and children.

The current researchers further argue that parental involvement plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive educational environments where all learners, regardless of background or ability, have equitable access to learning opportunities (Herrera et al., 2020; Guliya et al., 2023; Cerna et al., 2021). Understanding how parental engagement can support the diverse needs of learners, schools can develop strategies to promote inclusion, accommodate diverse learning styles, and address barriers

to learning, thus advancing the goal of educational equity (Herrera et al., 2020; Guliya et al., 2023; Cerna et al., 2021). Harnessing parental involvement fosters partnerships between schools, families, and communities, empowering parents to actively participate in decision-making processes and initiatives aimed at improving education (Hsu & Chen, 2023; Myende & Nhlumayo, 2022). When parents are engaged as partners in education, schools can tap into the collective knowledge, resources, and support networks within communities to address challenges, promote innovation, and drive positive change, contributing to the advancement of sustainable development goals.

The researchers of this paper argue that understanding the multifaceted role of parental involvement in education is essential for harnessing parental engagement as a catalyst for educational equity, crisis response, and sustainable development in South African schools. Therefore, ensuring the involvement of parents, schools can create more inclusive, resilient, and equitable learning environments that empower all learners to thrive and contribute to a brighter future for themselves and their communities.

4.2. Theme 2: Challenges to parental involvement in South African schools

Despite the recognised benefits of parental involvement, many barriers limit meaningful engagement, particularly in South African schools, in harnessing parental engagement for educational equity and advancing sustainable development goals. Economic constraints, including poverty, unemployment, and inadequate access to educational resources, often prevent parents from providing adequate support for their children's learning (Epstein, 2018). The lack of textbooks in South African schools forces learners to share outdated and worn copies (Mashiyane et al., 2024). This scarcity hampers learners' ability to complete assignments and study effectively at home, making it difficult for parents to support their children's learning (Ziduli, 2019). For instance, in the Eastern Cape Province, many schools face severe shortages of essential educational resources such as textbooks, teaching aids, and computer equipment (Ziduli, 2019). These shortages are often worsened by inadequate funding and logistical challenges. When schools lack the necessary materials to support comprehensive learning, it leads to outdated teaching methods and limited learner engagement (Mashiyane et al., 2024).

Additionally, some learners in rural areas and in low-income urban and township areas experience insufficient technology, lacking computers and internet access, which limits their ability to engage in digital learning (Aruleba & Jere, 2022; Maphalala et al., 2022). Parents who may not afford home computers or reliable internet struggle to provide additional educational support, affecting their children's performance. Consequently, learners in these schools experience lower academic achievement and reduced educational outcomes. Parents, unable to close the gap created by inadequate resources, face increased frustration and helplessness, which further impacts their ability to support their children's education effectively (Aruleba & Jere, 2022; Maphalala et al., 2022). Moreover, the historical legacies of apartheid and systemic inequalities have eroded trust between marginalised communities and educational institutions (Jackson, 2023), further intensifying disparities in parental involvement. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the digital divide and deepened existing inequities in education (Woldegiorgis, 2022; Van De Werfhorst et al., 2022), posing new challenges for parental engagement in remote and hybrid learning environments.

Cultural norms, beliefs, and practices can influence parental attitudes toward education and involvement in schools (Breton-Carbonneau et al., 2012). In some communities, traditional gender roles and cultural expectations may impact parental perceptions of their role in their children's education, leading to variations in engagement levels across different cultural groups (Breton-Carbonneau et al., 2012). For example, in certain Zulu and Xhosa communities, it is culturally expected that fathers focus on providing financially for the family, while mothers are responsible for the household and child-rearing (Moore & Samukimba, 2022). This division can influence how each

parent views their role in their children's education. In some cases, fathers may perceive their responsibility as limited to financing school fees and uniforms without participating in school meetings or providing academic support (Ndwandwe, 2024). Mothers, on the other hand, may feel that attending parent-teacher meetings or assisting with homework is their sole duty, but they might lack the confidence or formal education to fully engage in these tasks (Ndwandwe, 2024). This can result in mothers being more present at schools but less involved in academic discussions or decision-making processes.

In contrast, in South African urban areas or communities where more progressive gender norms are embraced, both parents might share responsibilities more equally, leading to greater involvement from both mothers and fathers (Van den Berg & Makusha, 2018). This variation in cultural expectations often results in different levels of parental engagement in children's education across cultural groups. Therefore, efforts to address these variations require schools to actively challenge traditional perceptions by encouraging both mothers and fathers to take part in all aspects of their children's education, emphasising the shared responsibility of raising and educating a child.

Many parents in South Africa may have limited access to information, educational materials, or support networks that could facilitate their involvement in their children's education (Breton-Carbonneau et al., 2012; Magocha et al., 2019). A case in point is that schools in rural areas of Limpopo and the Eastern Cape often provide limited access to information and educational materials for parents (Aruleba & Jere, 2022; Maphalala et al., 2022). Although the schools are committed to providing quality education, they struggle with insufficient resources and lack effective communication channels with parents. Many parents in these areas do not have access to regular updates about their children's academic progress or school events due to poor infrastructure and a lack of internet connectivity (Aruleba & Jere, 2022; Maphalala et al., 2022). Furthermore, many parents often cannot afford supplementary educational materials or resources, such as books and study guides, which could aid their children's learning at home. This gap in communication and resources leads to low parental involvement in school activities and insufficient support for students' homework and learning needs (Mashiyane et al., 2024). As a result, learners lag academically, and their overall performance suffers.

In some urban townships in Johannesburg, parents face challenges due to limited access to support networks and information about educational opportunities (Chisango & Marongwe, 2021). Despite living in a city with many resources, these parents often encounter barriers to accessing and utilising available support. There is often a lack of information about accessible educational programmes, extracurricular activities, or school resources that could benefit learners (Maringe et al., 2015). Learners in these townships may miss out on extracurricular opportunities and specialised programmes that could enhance their educational experience. If parents are unaware of how to access the educational system or available resources, they may be less able to support their children's educational needs effectively.

Furthermore, a lack of access to technology, internet connectivity, or transportation may further compound these challenges, particularly in rural or underserved areas (Breton-Carbonneau et al., 2012). South Africa's history of apartheid has left a legacy of socioeconomic disparities, with many families facing poverty, unemployment, and limited access to resources. Socioeconomic inequalities can create barriers to parental involvement, as parents may struggle to meet basic needs and may have limited time, resources, or knowledge to actively participate in their children's education (Magocha et al., 2019; Breton-Carbonneau et al., 2012).

It is well-documented that structural barriers within the educational system, such as rigid school policies, bureaucratic processes, and a lack of opportunities for meaningful parent-school partnerships, can impede parental involvement (Herrera et al., 2020; Alhumam, 2021). In rural and urban areas, some schools have rigid policies that clash with parents' schedules (Wolhuter & Van

der Walt, 2020; Maringe et al., 2015). For example, some schools require parents to attend formal meetings during working hours, which is often impractical for working-class families. This policy results in low parent attendance and limited communication between parents and teachers. Additionally, some schools have complicated processes that often discourage parents from participating in school activities when asked (Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2020). This translates to limited parental involvement, reducing the support learners receive at home and hindering the development of effective parent-school partnerships. Consequently, learners may lack the support needed for academic success and face challenges that could be addressed through more active parental involvement. Schools may also struggle to effectively engage parents from marginalised or disadvantaged communities, exacerbating inequalities in educational outcomes (Magocha et al., 2019; Breton-Carbonneau et al., 2012).

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that acknowledges the diverse needs and contexts of families in South Africa. Strategies to overcome barriers to parental involvement may include providing targeted support and resources to marginalised communities, promoting culturally responsive communication and outreach efforts, fostering collaborative relationships between schools and communities, and advocating for policies and practices that prioritise inclusive and equitable parental engagement in education (Allen, 2022). Addressing these challenges, South African schools can harness parental involvement as a powerful force for promoting educational equity, resilience, and sustainable development.

4.3. Theme 3: Strategies for enhancing parental involvement

Several strategies can be employed to enhance parental involvement in South African schools, thereby harnessing parental engagement for educational equity and advancing sustainable development goals. Schools, in partnership with community organisations and government agencies, can implement a range of strategies to promote parental involvement and strengthen family-school partnerships (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Epstein, 2018). These strategies may include providing training and resources for parents to support their children's learning at home, establishing open lines of communication between parents and teachers, and creating opportunities for parents to participate in decision-making processes and school governance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Epstein, 2018). For instance, some schools in Cape Town have partnered with local community organisations and a government agency to improve parental involvement (Maringe et al., 2015). The initiative aimed to strengthen family-school partnerships through collaborative strategies. The school, in collaboration with a local NGO and the Department of Basic Education, implemented a series of community workshops and family engagement events. Workshops on supporting learning at home can be held in local community centres to teach parents effective strategies for assisting with their children's education, including homework help and reading practices. This initiative aims to increase parental involvement by making engagement more accessible and relevant. Parents can become more active in supporting their children's learning and participating in school activities, leading to improved learner performance and a more supportive educational environment. Moreover, efforts to address structural inequalities and promote social inclusion are essential for ensuring that all families have equitable access to educational opportunities and resources (Ainscow, 2020; Killen & Rutland, 2022).

Furthermore, establishing trusting and collaborative relationships between schools and parents is essential for fostering meaningful parental involvement. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which addresses the mesosystem that encompasses the interactions between different microsystems, such as the relationships between parents and teachers or the collaborations between families and community organisations (Iruka et al., 2020; Stanley & Kuo, 2022). The researchers believe that trusting and collaborative relationships can be successful when partners recognise and respect the cultural diversity of South African families in promoting parental

involvement. Schools should adopt culturally responsive practices that acknowledge and honour the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of parents and actively involve them in shaping educational initiatives that reflect their cultural heritage and experiences (Ainscow, 2020; Killen & Rutland, 2022).

One of the strategies for fostering parental involvement is to establish clear and effective communication at all levels, including school, government, and global levels. For example, at a particular school in KwaZulu-Natal, school performance and learner engagement were declining, and the school identified low parental involvement as a significant contributing factor (Lawrence, 2022). The school embarked on an initiative to enhance parental involvement by strengthening communication channels between the school, parents, and the Department of Education (Lawrence, 2022).

To facilitate this, the school introduced a weekly communication system, employing a combination of SMS, WhatsApp groups, and printed newsletters to keep parents informed about their children's progress, upcoming events, and important announcements. The content was provided in both English and isiZulu to cater to the local community. Regular parent-teacher meetings were scheduled at convenient times to accommodate working parents, and home visits were offered for those unable to attend, ensuring no family was left out. As a result, parental involvement increased significantly, evidenced by higher attendance at school events and a rise in parent-initiated meetings with teachers. Academic performance improved, with students displaying better engagement in class. The Department of Education recognised the success of this programme as a model to encourage other schools in the province to adopt similar strategies (Maarman & Lamont-Mbawuli, 2017).

Schools should employ diverse communication channels, such as newsletters, websites, social media, and mobile apps, to inform parents about school activities, events, and academic progress (James, 2023). Additionally, providing information in multiple languages and formats can help overcome language barriers and ensure that all parents feel included and engaged (Andrés-Bolado, 2023). We argue that providing information in multiple languages empowers parents to play an active role in their children's education, which is essential for promoting meaningful parental involvement. Furthermore, schools can offer workshops, training sessions, and resources to help parents develop the skills and knowledge necessary to support their children's learning at home, advocate for their educational needs, and engage constructively with school staff and administrators (Tran, 2014).

Schools should create diverse opportunities for parental participation in school activities, committees, and decision-making processes, recognising that parents are key stakeholders. Parents can be involved in curriculum development, school governance structures, parent-teacher associations, and volunteer programmes, allowing them to contribute their perspectives, expertise, and resources to the educational community (Epstein, 2018).

4.4. Theme 4: Linking parental involvement to SDGs

Linking parental involvement to SDGs is essential for harnessing parental engagement to promote educational equity and advance sustainable development goals in South African schools. Engaging parents in education aligns with the broader goals of sustainable development, as outlined in the United Nations' SDGs. It is closely linked to SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and recognises the importance of parental involvement in achieving this objective (Webb & Rodriguez, 2022; Borojević et al., 2023; Omodan, 2024). Empowering parents as partners in education, countries can improve learning outcomes, reduce disparities, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

When parents actively engage in their children's education, learners are more likely to perform better academically; thus, schools can contribute to achieving SDG 4 by promoting inclusive education, supporting student learning, and enhancing educational outcomes for all learners. Literature attests that parental involvement has positive impacts on children's health and well-being, thereby assisting

in realising SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, as envisioned by the United Nations (Montiel et al., 2021; Mweri, 2020). Furthermore, research shows that when parents are actively involved in their children's education, learners experience better mental health, higher levels of self-esteem, and reduced risk behaviours (Lawrence & Adebowale, 2023; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Therefore, promoting parental involvement will enable schools to contribute to achieving SDG 3 by supporting the holistic development and well-being of students, thereby fostering healthier and happier communities.

Moreover, parental involvement contributes to SDG 10 by addressing inequalities within and among countries, promoting social cohesion, and empowering marginalised communities to participate fully in the development process (Walker et al., 2019). For example, to reduce educational inequalities in a disadvantaged community, a certain secondary school in the Eastern Cape implemented a parental involvement programme that directly contributed to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10: Reduced Inequalities (Ndayi, 2020). The school serves a largely underprivileged population, where many parents have limited formal education and face economic hardships. As a result, learners struggled with low academic performance and high dropout rates. The school initiated community meetings to educate parents about the importance of their role in their children's education and how parental involvement can help reduce inequalities.

The above scenario was designed to empower parents with knowledge about how they could support their children's learning, even with limited resources or formal education. To close the gap between the school and the economically marginalised community, the school organised parent-learner workshops focused on academic support, career guidance, and mental well-being. Parents were encouraged to participate in school governance through the school governing body (SGB), giving them a voice in decisions that affected their children's education. The school worked with parents to establish communal access to computers and the internet to bridge the digital divide. With government and corporate sponsorship, a computer lab was set up, allowing parents and students to access online learning materials and communicate with teachers through digital platforms. The Department of Education partnered with local NGOs to provide additional resources, such as after-school tutoring programmes, transportation for learners in remote areas, and nutritional support. This collaboration also ensured that parents received training on how to access government grants and other resources that would help alleviate financial pressures. The programme led to improved academic performance and reduced dropout rates. Parental engagement in school governance fostered a sense of ownership and community solidarity. When parents from marginalised backgrounds are directly involved, the school can help reduce educational inequalities, empowering both learners and families to overcome socioeconomic barriers. The secondary school's initiative successfully contributed to SDG 10 by reducing inequalities through active parental involvement. By fostering collaboration between parents, the school, and external stakeholders, the programme addressed disparities in education, ensuring that even the most disadvantaged learners had access to equal opportunities. Parental involvement can help reduce inequalities in education by empowering parents to advocate for their children's educational rights and opportunities, in line with SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities (Basnett et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2019). When schools actively involve parents from marginalised or disadvantaged communities, they can address barriers to participation, promote inclusive practices, and ensure that all families have equal access to educational resources and support. By promoting parental involvement, schools can contribute to achieving SDG 10 by advancing equity and social justice in education.

It is without doubt that partnership is a 'buzz' word in today's world; hence SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals. It is believed that people can achieve more by partnering or coming together, and together, they can make a difference (Barack Obama, Former US President). Parental involvement fosters partnerships between schools, families, and communities, which are essential for achieving the SDGs (Abera, 2023; Kubisch et al., 2020). When schools collaborate with parents, they can tap into

the collective knowledge, resources, and support networks within communities to address complex challenges, promote innovation, and drive positive change (Abera, 2023; Kubisch et al., 2020). By harnessing parental involvement, schools can contribute to achieving SDG 17 by fostering collaborative partnerships that support the implementation of sustainable development initiatives and goals.

Linking parental involvement to the Sustainable Development Goals is crucial for harnessing parental engagement as a catalyst for educational equity and advancing sustainable development in South African schools (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2022). Also, by promoting meaningful partnerships between schools, families, and communities, schools can create inclusive, resilient, and equitable learning environments that empower all learners to thrive and contribute to a brighter future for themselves and their communities.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, parental involvement is a powerful catalyst for educational equity and sustainable development in South African schools. Therefore, by fostering meaningful partnerships between parents and schools, communities can overcome the barriers to educational access and opportunity that persist in our society. Through collaborative efforts and a commitment to social justice, schools can harness the transformative potential of parental involvement to build a more equitable and inclusive education system that advances the Sustainable Development Goals and ensures a brighter future for all children in South Africa and beyond.

5.1 Limitations and future studies

There is a pressing need for empirical research that specifically investigates the effectiveness of parental involvement initiatives in South African schools, particularly within the context of achieving educational equity and advancing the SDGs. While the current paper presents a conceptual framework and underscores the significance of parental involvement, empirical evidence regarding the implementation and impacts of such initiatives in the South African context may be limited.

Undertaking empirical studies that examine the experiences, perceptions, and outcomes associated with parental involvement programmes in South African schools could significantly contribute to addressing this gap. Researchers could investigate factors influencing parental engagement, identify barriers to participation, and develop effective strategies for involving parents from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, the impact of parental involvement on student achievement, school climate, and community partnerships warrants exploration. Additionally, comparative analyses of various parental involvement initiatives and their alignment with SDG objectives could yield valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to promote educational equity and sustainable development in South Africa.

5.2 Contribution of the study

This study offers significant insights for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders through identifying effective strategies for promoting parental involvement and aligning it with broader educational goals and priorities. Emphasising best practices, evidence-based interventions, and recommendations for future action, this conceptual paper informs the development and implementation of policies and programmes to enhance parental engagement in South African schools. Consequently, this conceptual paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge through presenting a novel perspective on the role of parental involvement in advancing sustainable development goals and promoting educational equity within South African academic institutions. It provides both a theoretical foundation and practical guidance for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to leverage parental involvement as a catalyst for positive change in education.

5.3 Recommendations

The paper advocates for the development and implementation of policies that prioritise parental involvement in education. This includes strategies to support and incentivise schools to actively engage parents in decision-making processes, curriculum development, and school governance structures. The South African Government should provide training and professional development opportunities for educators, school administrators, and community stakeholders to enhance their capacity to effectively collaborate with parents, communicate with diverse families, and promote inclusive practices that foster parental involvement.

Various stakeholders should develop outreach programmes and initiatives to engage parents from marginalised or disadvantaged communities. This should encompass strategies that address language barriers, cultural differences, and socioeconomic inequalities that may impede parental engagement. Parents ought to be empowered to advocate for their children's educational rights and opportunities by providing resources, information, and support networks that enable them to actively participate in decision-making processes, voice their concerns, and contribute to positive change within their schools and communities.

The government should leverage technology to enhance parental involvement by offering online platforms, mobile applications, and virtual communication tools that facilitate interaction between schools and parents, disseminate educational resources, and engage families in remote learning opportunities. There should be partnerships and collaboration between schools, families, and community organisations to create comprehensive support networks that empower parents to play an active role in their children's education, address community needs, and promote sustainable development initiatives. Schools should integrate parental involvement initiatives into broader sustainable development efforts, aligning strategies with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote inclusive and equitable education, support community resilience, and advance social justice and environmental sustainability. When these recommendations are implemented, researchers, policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders can collaboratively harness parental involvement for educational equity, address global crises, and advance sustainable development goals in South African schools.

6. Declarations

Authors contributions: Conceptualisation (N.M. & G.M.); Literature review (N.M. & G.M.); methodology (N.M. & G.M.); software (N/A); validation (N.M.); formal analysis (N/A); investigation (N.M. & G.M.); data curation (N/A) drafting and preparation (N.M. & G.M.); review and editing (N.M. & G.M.); supervision (N.M.); project administration (N.M. & G.M.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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