



Parent-teacher partnerships to enhance education for sustainable development: Early childhood development education learning centres in Zimbabwe

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(Received: 7 June 2023; accepted: 14 February 2024)

Abstract

Education is one of the fundamental tools necessary to achieve the global Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, Goal 4 advocates for quality education for all since it is important for all children to have a sound educational foundation. In this study, I focus on the second target of Sustainable Development Goal 4 that advocates for early childhood development and universal pre-primary education. The aim of this study was to explore how parent-teacher partnerships could be used to enhance education for sustainable development in early childhood development education learning centres in rural areas. The study was conducted in two primary schools in Bulilima district of Matabeleland, South province in Zimbabwe. The study called on Epstein's notion of parental engagement as the theoretical framework. A participatory action research methodological design was deemed suitable for this qualitative study because it allowed participants to have an opportunity to express their views in their natural settings. Data was generated by means of discussion meetings and reflections and Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis was employed in its analysis. The findings, from early childhood development centres, highlight the importance of teacher-parent partnerships in promoting sustainable learning outcomes and children's well-being. Furthermore, it was found that such partnerships promote alignment between the school culture and the needs of communities and enhance communication and decision making as well as providing a basis for change in the parents' perceptions regarding early childhood development education. The study concluded that teachers and parents should work together at this level of education.

Keywords: early childhood development education, education for sustainable development, parent-teacher partnerships, participatory action research, rural context

Introduction

In support of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2017) designated the period 2005 to 2014 as the decade of teaching for Sustainable Development. This SDG supports all-inclusive quality education that promotes sustainable learning for every learner. However, Bourn et al. (2016)

highlighted that only 50% of children around the world receive pre-primary education, with the figure dropping to 20% in developing countries. The condition is even worse in resource constrained settings such as rural communities. In Zimbabwe, young children (5–6 years of age) who live in rural settings have limited access to early childhood development education (ECDE) learning centres. These years are critical in that this is when different life skills are being taught both at home and at school. These young children need skills such as knowing how to tie their shoes, pack their stuff at the end of the day, and use and manage language, all of which translate into life skills. They need to be able to develop their fine and gross motor skills (Dhiu & Laksana, 2021). Learning these skills forms the foundation of basic education. Since the decade of teaching for sustainable development passed in 2014, we need to explore strategies to remedy this situation. It is against this background that the study on which this article is based explored teacher-parent partnerships as a possible tool to enhance equitable access to quality pre-primary programmes. A parent-teacher partnership is explained as a mutual commitment that exists between the parent and the teachers to provide services such as offering free, reliable, and unbiased information, guidance, and the educational support of children and young people (Halimah et al., 2020). This implies that parent-teacher partnership can play an integral part in the provision of quality education to young children. Although it is acknowledged in this study that what counts as quality education differs from person to person, Benavot (2012) defined quality education as an educational system that provides learning experiences that meet certain criteria, standards, and objectives aimed at providing students with the knowledge, skills, values, and capabilities they need to succeed in life. Rucinski (2022) explained that cultural differences lie behind some parents' hesitation to send their children to certain learning centres, but the focus of quality education is on the social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive development of each child regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or geographic location (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). Quality education helps the child to confront and solve life challenges and is not directed at better performance in assessments. Salac and Florida (2022) and Undiyaundeye (2015) agreed that if learners' parents and teachers can communicate, good relationships can be built and these may lead to the creation of favourable learning conditions, both at home and at school but good parent-teacher partnership may make teachers feel free enough to focus on the task of teaching children.

One of the effective ways of dealing with the challenges of poverty and crime is to make sure that every individual in the community has access to quality education since this can improve their societies (Barratt et al., 2014; Beckman & Gallo, 2015; The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). In Indonesia, parents are involved in curriculum development and in making decisions in schools (Halimah et al., 2020). However, in the Southern African region the situation is different. For example, Sibanda (2021) noted that in South Africa parents claim that they participate in their children's learning because they are involved in helping with homework, but the study concluded that there was no smooth collaboration between parents and teachers. The situation in the Zimbabwean context was similar to that of South Africa; Ngwenya and Pretorius (2014) and (2016) asserted that the lack of partnerships between parents and teachers inhibits the achievement of target 4.2 of SDG 4. My experience as a primary school teacher in a rural setting was that teachers could

hardly allow parents and other stakeholders to be part of their everyday activities. This presents a serious problem since the foundations for learning are built at an early age before a child enters primary school.

My study focused on exploring the significance of parent-teacher partnerships to support education for sustainable development (ESD) in ECDE centres in rural Zimbabwe. We have to bear in mind that most rural schools lack human resources because many qualified teachers are reluctant to work in these areas (Beckman & Gallo, 2015). Also, the SDG 4, Target 2 indicates that young children should be given one compulsory year of free education offered by trained practitioners, before they are enrolled in primary school (see Barratt et al. 2014). This is despite the fact that it is compulsory for Zimbabwean children to attend two years of pre-school. Furthermore, the political and economic unrest in Zimbabwe plays a pivotal role in discouraging teachers from working in rural communities. Additionally, rural communities require educational institutions, religious organisations, non-governmental organisations, and other stakeholders to work collectively to alleviate the problems being encountered by ECD centres. Since this study was carried out in an area where there are three different groups of people (amaShona, amaNdebele, and amaKalanga), an added complication was that participating learners were exposed to different cultural beliefs.

Epstein's theory of parental engagement

The study was framed by Epstein's theory of parental engagement, developed in the late 1980s. According to Epstein (2001, 2007), the emphasis should be on family and community partnerships. It was thus appropriate for this study since it focused on shared responsibilities among the school, parents, and communities. Parental engagement promotes cooperation and harmony between and among the school, the parents, and the communities (Nyatuka, 2015) that are key to enhancing ESD.

Parent-teacher partnerships for ESD in ECDE learning centres located in rural areas

Epstein (2001) stressed that parents' participation in school activities is of great importance to the development of young children because it improves parents' understanding of the ways in which young children learn and the assistance these children require at home to enhance education for sustainable development. In this study the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) made it possible to encourage parents and other stakeholders to work with ECDE centres located in rural context to enhance ESD. In the context of this study, I saw that parent-teacher partnerships could promote continuity in learning and thus enhance ESD in ECDE centres in rural areas. Collaboration between and among parents and other community members has been seen to be helpful in solving the challenges of poor learning environments for young children in India, for example (Mathegka, 2016). Improved interaction between teachers and parents can be a catalyst for effective learning. There is evidence in research of the benefits of parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in the community and learning institutions working collectively (Chowa et al., 2012; Mathegka, 2016; Nyrako & Vorgelegt,

2017). However, Berger (2017), Muchuchuti's (2014), and Ngwenya and Pretorius (2014) found that parents and community members in marginalised rural areas do not commit themselves to take part in learning activities and/or events that are arranged by the schools.

Benefits of parent-teacher partnerships ECDE centres in rural contexts

Parent-teacher partnerships in ECDE support diversity, promote community engagement, and foster productive interaction among all stakeholders—learners, teachers, parents, and religious and traditional leaders (Lunenburg, 2010; Mathews et al., 2014). Berger (2017) and Chowa et al. (2012) elucidated that for people to have real collaboration, they must have a common goal of working collectively in creating rapport, such as that needed in the area of teaching and learning. Parental engagement is essential to the inauguration of partnerships between parents and teachers towards the enhancement of ESD in ECDE learning centres. Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) reported that 71.8% of parents in urban settings give themselves time to work together with teachers but in rural contexts fewer than 15% of the parents are involved in school programmes. Therefore, I believed that the application of its principles could assist the participants (to a discussion of whom I will turn presently) in understanding the need to change their practices for the betterment of rural ECDE learning centres.

Downey (2014) and Hipp and Huffman (2010) noted that in educational settings, partnerships promote innovation and have a positive impact on learners' welfare and achievements. DuFour and Marzano (2011) and Mathews et al. (2014) suggested that education for sustainable development in rural communities can result in effective communication, viable collaboration, collective decision making, improved school culture, and good academic performance.

Parent-teacher partnerships play a pivotal role in fostering effective communication between and among the school personnel, parents, learners, and other community stakeholders, thus laying down the foundation for collaboration (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Mathegka, 2016). In this study, authentic conversations in which different stakeholders made use of one language to communicate was helpful in building a platform for parent-teacher partnerships. Lunenburg (2010) and Wood (2020) have agreed that using language that can be understood easily by all individuals is important in strengthening partnership in communities. There are six major characteristics of engagement namely: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 2019; Manzon et al., 2015), that can exist between schools and parents/communities to enhance ESD in ECDE learning centres (Nyatuka, 2015).

Early childhood development education centres are isolated entities but are vital parts of a community. Partnerships between parents and practitioners pose some benefits to all stakeholders in the school community because practitioners build relationships with parents and get a better understanding of their community (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Lunenburg, 2010; Mathews et al., 2014). Community collaboration, using PAR, allows for the creation of

relevant knowledge to address community issues to enhance ESD in rural ECDE learning centres in Zimbabwe.

Matshe (2014) and Michelsen and Fischer (2017) maintained that schools and communities should work together to assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills to offer family support and help parents to understand child development and, thus, help to create conditions at home that support learning at each stage, particularly at early childhood development ECD level. Parent-teacher partnerships are key to enhancing ESD since they help teachers to understand families' backgrounds, culture, and their goals for their children. There is a need for frequent discussions between parents and teachers on issues pertaining to young learners' welfare. According to Matshe (2014) and Nyatuka (2015), parents and teachers have equal responsibility to ensure children's health and safety.

ECDE learning centres located in rural areas could create welcoming environments for parents to support their children's learning. Schools are encouraged to recruit, train, and work with parents as volunteers to support learners and school activities (Kimu, 2012). Teachers could work with volunteers who support educational programmes. For example, parents could teach extra classes or assist the school by drawing on their professional expertise. Other forms of volunteering include attending school events, fund raising, patrolling the school grounds, and monitoring learners' attendance (Manzon et al., 2015; Nyatuka, 2015). Epstein et al. (2019) noted that schools should design flexible schedules that enable more parents to participate and link their interests and abilities to the needs of learners, teachers, and administrators.

Parents can improve their children's learning outcomes by playing games at home that advance reading and mathematics literacy and talking with them about their school activities and interests (Povey et al., 2016). Teachers should set young learners well designed homework that encourages them to discuss their work with their parents. Homework is an opportunity for parents to communicate with their children, and to monitor their progress and reinforce concepts learned at school. Moreover, parents could be responsible for establishing some routine for their children at home. Salac and Florida (2022) explained that if learners are doing some chores as part of the family routine, this helps them to develop a sense of responsibility and acquire life skills that help them become independent. Given the available technology, parents can also take part in monitoring their children's learning through online platforms. Online activity can be harmful to children so parents should supervise them as they navigate through the different learning platforms (Fulton, 2021). Durisic and Bunijevac (2017, p.141) avowed that, "activities to encourage learning at home provide parents with information on what children are doing in the classroom and how to help them with homework." If there is a partnership between parents and teachers, what learners learn at home can be used fruitfully and can lead to enhancing ESD in ECDE learning centres in rural areas.

When decisions about education are being made some participatory consultations with parents and other stakeholders can take place so that information based on research can be made available (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Mathews et al., 2014; Nyatuka, 2015). I agree that

having discussions with people in the community can help to reach informed decisions that may make a difference. Using PAR and Epstein's theory of parental engagement in the current study was useful because it allowed critical thinking skills to be cultivated among parents and teachers and this led to informed decisions being made regarding the enhancement of ESD in rural ECDE learning centres. Parent-teacher partnerships created a sense of ownership and the commitment to follow-up on decisions made in school.

The obligation to have a positive school culture is realised when there are relationships between and among the school, learners, parents, and the entire community (DuFour & Marzano 2011; Mathews et al., 2014). Thus, rural ECDE learning centres should encourage all interested stakeholders to engage with them. When people do not work together it can be hard to enhance ESD in these centres. School culture can offer a safe, supportive environment that encourages relationships between and among administrators, teachers, learners, and parents that allow them to work together, thereby enhancing learners' performance (Poulos et al., 2014; Setyawawan & Widodo, 2019; Widodo, 2019). In this study, parent-teacher partnerships enabled the ECDE learning centre to create its own culture. I argue that this is a central concept in transforming all stakeholders (parents, traditional and religious leaders, and learners) in a rural context that enhances ESD. Although Reed (2014) and Sutarman et al. (2017) validated that the institutional history has a great influence on the culture of the school, I noted in this study that the school culture provides social patterns, practices, and dynamics for positive transformation. Thus, I argue that school culture is crucial in promoting professional satisfaction, determination, and effectiveness, while it also enables learners to develop and promote their well-being. Setyawawan and Widodo (2019), Sugiyono (2018), and Widodo (2019) suggested that a positive school culture is described by good relationships that are created by collaboration between and among different stakeholders in making decisions that lead to openness, trust, respect, and appreciation for everyone in the community. Thus, school culture directly impacts the success of learners, and the wellbeing of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. It embodies relationships that encourage active participation. A school with a constructive atmosphere can lead to a commitment to enhance education for sustainable development (Sugiyono, 2018; Widodo, 2019). This entails that parent-teacher partnerships create a team that enhances ESD in ECDE centres, particularly those in rural areas.

Research design and methodology

I carried out this study following a qualitative approach to focus on people's experiences, behaviours, and opinions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with regard to the learning of young learners in ECD. The reason I considered PAR to be an appropriate design was that it emphasises the collective efforts of different individuals to participate in finding solutions to the problem under study (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Goodall & Barnard, 2015) and to foster social justice and democracy that results in social change in the community (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

This study was conducted following the principles of a critical emancipatory research (CER) paradigm. The design and paradigm were helpful in building relationships among participants that eased the process of partnership between parents and teachers in ECDE learning centres. The aim of CER, according to Luter et al. (2017), is to transform, empower, and emancipate members of society.

Context of the study

I generated data in two ECDE centres that are in two primary schools in Bulilima District in Matabeleland South Province in Zimbabwe. According to Wood (2020) to have a good research team, the researcher should select people who have some existing relationships to become participants in a community based qualitative study. For this reason, I selected eight participants based on the relationship I had with them. I used purposive selection to recruit participants who have knowledge of, and experience in, ECDE. The participants included four teachers of infants and four parents who have children in the infant department as shown in the table below.

Biographic information of the participants

Participant P=Parent	Home language	Level of education	
P1	Ndebele	O-Level	
P2	Ndebele	Form 2	
P3	Ndebele	O-Level	
P4	Kalanga	O-Level	
Participant T=teacher	Home language	Level of education	Teaching experience
T1	Kalanga	O-Level	2 years
T2	Ndebele	Diploma in Education	5 years
T3	Shona	B.Ed. (ECD)	4 years
T4	Kalanga	Cert. in ECD (Para-professional)	8 years

All these participants were invited to a 30-minute meeting to complete the recruitment process and to sign the consent forms. Thereafter, the data generation process began with my using research group discussion meetings and reflections.

Data-gathering techniques

Data was generated by means of transcribed research group meetings and reflections.

Transcribed research group meetings

Goodall and Barnards (2015) explained that transcribed research group meetings between co-researchers who have been recruited for a purpose serve as a method to generate in-depth data on a topic. Group meetings were important in allowing participants to express their opinions to uncover the source of problems and provide possible solutions to them. To ensure the success of the research group meetings, I planned carefully for the convenient organisation of the members. I was flexible in relation to timing the meetings and was accepting of their opinions. Since there were some relationships among the co-researchers, four meetings were carried out with all members of the research team (parents and teachers) as a single group (see Wood, 2020). Prior to the discussions, we agreed that they would be audio-recorded and that everyone was welcome to use isiNdebele during the discussions which were to be transcribed and translated into English. As the researcher, I led all the discussions that sought to answer the question:

How can parent-teacher partnerships be used to enhance education for sustainable development in early childhood development learning centres in Zimbabwe?

Notably, the main study had three cycles, but the current study was based on the second cycle. The reason for reporting only on the finding for the second cycle was that I wanted to make sure that there was an action taken in each cycle. Reporting these findings separately was useful in planning the following cycle. Cycle two was comprised of four sessions of approximately 45 minutes each to avoid placing pressure on participants' attention span and to allow profound dialogues among the co-researchers (see Luter et al., 2017).

Reflections

The greatest advantage of reflecting in research is that it accelerates logical as well as critical thinking (Ferrah, 2012). Each discussion was followed by reflections so as to authenticate the thoughts of all the participants regarding the issue of enhancing ESD in rural ECDE learning centres.

To make sure that I captured in-depth opinions about the issues that were discussed in the meetings by participants we kept booklets in which we noted anything that came into our minds after the meeting. This process helped us to find some confirmation about the implications of the discussed subjects (see Diemer et al., 2015). We used these reflections to come up with the credible findings of the study. Ferrah (2012) stressed that keeping a written account of one's experience helps in finding ways of encouraging human development. Therefore, in the current study using reflections was important in substantiating ideas that were raised during the discussions.

Ethical considerations

The University's Ethics Committee gave ethical approval to the study¹ and permission to conduct research in schools was granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Before the study commenced, I obtained consent from all the participants and explained clearly that participation was voluntary. Furthermore, the participants were allowed to withdraw at any stage of the study with no repercussions. Ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity, and adherence to non-maleficence principles were assured (see Gunawan, 2015). Methodological triangulation was used to ensure the credibility of the data generated in the study. In addition, dependability was addressed by using the services of an external person to review and examine the research process critically along with the data analysis to ensure that the research outcomes were reliable and could be repeated. Denzin and Lincoln (2015) illuminated that comparable results can be achieved when the work is repeated using the same methods in a similar setting. To make sure of the confirmability of this study I used member checking; we all took part in reviewing generated data as well as doing audit trails to ensure that there was a high degree of transparency. I also included participants' verbatim quotations and pseudonyms as I presented and discussed the findings. Lastly, I know that it is difficult to generalise qualitative data (see Noble & Smith, 2015). Therefore, I provided a detailed description of the study's context and adequate information to establish the applicability of the findings to other settings with which readers may be familiar as a way of ensuring transferability.

Data analysis

Analysis of data that was generated from discussion meetings with parents and teachers was done following Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis (CDA). The three steps I used during the process were (a) actual text, (b) discursive practice, and (c) social context. Since this study was conducted following a PAR design, all participants were involved in giving meaning to the data before I applied the principles of CDA. Textual analysis allowed me to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' spoken and written texts (see Wodak & Meyer, 2009). At this level, I interpreted what the participants said and gave meaning based on the context of the study. This led me to a clear understanding of how participants interacted. Fairclough (1992) noted that discursive practice involves interpretation of, and the connection between, the interaction and the text. According to Myende (2014) discursive analysis is concerned with how text is produced and interpreted by participants. The interpretation and analysis of data was done collaboratively in that all participants gathered to do a practical analysis (Wood, 2020). To apply the third level of CDA, issues that affect the participants at different levels (such as challenges faced by parents and teachers in ECDE) were explained, described, and discussed to see how they influenced ESD in rural ecologies. These were all helpful in comprehending the norms, rules, and beliefs followed in enhancing ESD in the context of rural ECDE learning centres.

1 Ethical Clearance number NWU-00330-22-A2

Presentation and discussion of findings

The findings are presented based on themes that emerged from the data, using verbatim quotations from the participants (teachers and parents) and existing literature to validate them. These verbatim accounts show how the participants understood parent-teacher partnerships and how they could be implemented in rural ECDE learning centres.

Theme 1: Misconceptions about parent-teacher partnerships in ECDE centres in the rural context

In responding to the question that sought to confirm whether parents and teachers work together in the centres, the participants responded with the following statements.

To my understanding as parents, we work together with the teachers because we provide all the request materials to the school, and we also come for general meetings if we are invited by the head. (P1)

T4 responded to P1 saying,

Honestly since I started teaching here as a teacher in ECDE it has never happened. I agree if you are saying you attend meetings but that is not working together. We are struggling alone as teachers and sometimes we get some insulting messages and comments from the parents which is so discouraging.

From the above responses, it was clear that parents visit the school only when there are concerns that directly affect their children or for consultations and the annual general meeting. This suggests that parents get involved only when there is a serious problem. Lunga (2020) reported that teachers have the sole responsibility of deciding on programmes and events in schools and this makes it very difficult for parents to participate. He noted that parents were not involved in the learning of their children in rural Zimbabwean primary schools and that this may result in failure to meet the requirements of the SDGs. This finding was further substantiated when one of the teachers said, “Teachers are the ones to make decisions” (T2). Although I argue that partnership between parents and teachers allows both to have an awareness of children’s educational needs, this statement suggests that the environment in the schools does not allow partnership between teachers and parents.

According to Chidakwa (2020) and Lunga (2020) there is need to involve parents in issues that affect their children in school regardless of their social background. One of the parents said,

I feel guilty because yesterday I saw a very young child who may be in ECDE or grade one class (5–7 years) hiding in the bush, but I did not give myself time to intervene in that situation to make sure that that child [got] to school. (P1)

This reflects the overall lack of partnership between parents and teachers. In her response P1 used the words, “I feel guilty...[and] I did not give myself time to intervene.” This shows that

participating in this study made this parent realise the importance of working together for their young children's education and wellbeing. On the same note, T3 added, "If parents can realise that they have a responsibility to every child in their community then we can achieve quality education for our children." These opinions from P1 and T3 point to the idea of having shared obligations to make sure that children receive proper education. In this study, I argue that parents and teachers can create opportunities that allow them to collaborate so as to promote education for sustainable development in rural ECDE centres.

A parent, P4, stated, "We (parents and teachers) normally agree on issues that have to do with the learning of our children." This infers that schools sometimes involve parents in issues relating to the teaching and learning of young learners. However, it was evident from parents' statements that they were not part of decision-making. Furthermore, T2 said "If challenges on learning of our children have been discovered, we should tell each other so that we all assist the learners and teacher as much as we can."

These opinions suggest that supporting children's education can be one of the ways in which to show concern about their future. This led me to emphasise the need for parents and teachers to work in partnership. Halimah et al. (2020) and Salac and Florida (2022) highlighted that setting specific times to allow teachers to discuss learners' needs with parents could be helpful in encouraging quality learning. One parent, P3, added,

. . . as parents in this community, I do not remember [our] trying to address the issues that affect our ECDE children as a team and some of the attempts made by teachers were always swept under the carpet.

One teacher, T1, lamented ". . . at our school we have tried to bring the parents on board, but we were confronted by resistance from them." The use of the phrases, ". . . always swept under the carpet" (P3) and "... confronted by resistance from them" (T1), shows that some parents are not willing to take part in their children's education. This resonates with the idea that some of the learners' educational needs are not met if parents visit school only when there are some misunderstandings with teachers (Chidakwa, 2020). However, the aim of parent-teacher partnerships is not only to address issues between learners and teachers, but also to support the whole process of teaching and learning. Such support might include ensuring that the learning environment is safe and user-friendly for both learners and teachers. This would facilitate the achievement of SDG 4 target 4.2 that emphasises the importance of building and upgrading education facilities that enable effective learning among children with diverse backgrounds. Parent-teacher partnerships do not necessarily refer only to the situation in which parents attend school functions such as consultation days but, rather, to parents and teachers working as a team to address the challenges facing the school. There were no collaborative efforts being made to address learners' concerns, with parents and it was evident that the latter involved themselves only partly in school activities.

Chidakwa (2020) and Lunga (2020) stated that parental involvement is the foundation of parent-teacher partnerships in primary schools and suggested ways to encourage such involvement. Participating teachers emphasised the need to encourage parents to involve

themselves in different school activities and to make sure that children whose parents are living in countries outside Zimbabwe, such as South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia, are taken care of by elders. Some activities that may be useful in bringing awareness of the importance of parental partnership may enhance ESD in ECDE. The responses show that parents in rural communities are worried about child-headed households and demonstrate their willingness to enhance ESD through partnerships with teachers. It was noted that the most important thing is for parents and teachers to be united. It was suggested that the heads of ECDE centres should occupy a leading role in encouraging parents to work with teachers particularly those in the ECD phase.

The findings indicate that parents and teachers have different understandings of the issue of partnership; they think that it means working in groups. Their perception does not resonate with those described in the literature. For Poulos et al. (2014) and Reed (2014) a parent-teacher partnership is a situation in which parents and teachers work in a collective way to achieve a common goal. In this case, the common goal is to advance ESD in ECDE learning centres in rural settings. Parent-teacher partnerships can create a platform that allows both groups to discuss ways in which they can improve the learning of young children in rural settings (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). The use of PAR in this study was helpful in making parents and teachers develop an understanding of the concept of partnership in ECDE learning centres. Luter et al. (2017) noted that if people participate fully in finding solutions to a problem, they can focus on transformation for the betterment of the society. The use of Epstein's theory of parental engagement promoted better understanding of the concept of partnerships.

Sutarman et al. (2017) have said that for education for sustainable development to be enhanced, the school and the local community cannot work as separate entities but there is evidence in the data that was presented in the previous section that in Zimbabwe's rural ECDE learning centres partnership between teachers and parents is minimal. Michelsen and Fischer (2017) noted that stakeholders should take collective responsibility for enhancing learning but I found that parents and teachers in rural settings do not have a common goal of developing their ECDE centres and enhancing ESD and this contradicts the values of Epstein's theory that I used as a theoretical framework for this study. In arguing for parent-teacher partnerships to be used to enhance ESD in ECDE learning centres, I integrated the theory of parental engagement that encourages the collaboration of individuals toward positive learning outcomes (Diemer et al., 2015; Luter et al., 2017); parental involvement is considered to be one of the ways of achieving partnership with the ECDE learning centres.

Theme 2: Obstacles to parent-teacher partnerships in rural ECDE centres

The participants identified the challenges that hinder parent-teacher partnerships in ECDE learning centres in rural areas during the research group meetings and in their reflective journals. They highlighted that many children in rural communities are part of child-headed families in which house maids take the responsibility of being parents (Chidakwa, 2020; Lunga, 2020). Of even greater concern, a parent participant, P3, said,

. . . but even those of us who stay at home don't care about the education of our children. I always see learners walking . . . but I have never seen a parent coming to school . . . Even myself I am here because of Mr Lunga (the researcher).

This suggests that parents have a negative attitude to education, particularly of young children. They visit the school only when it is necessary.

Teachers made the following comments in their reflective journals.²

What I think is that the major hindrance to partnership is that parents do not stay with their children because they work in the diaspora (South Africa and Botswana mostly), so most homes are being taken care of by helpers or grandparents who I guess do not care about education of the children they are employed for. (T3)

Some of us are not trained to teach these young learners and we do not know exactly how to deal with some issues that concern them so if we can allow parents to come to us, we may not have enough information to tell them hence the best way is not to involve them. Secondly, some parents still have an old school of thought that ECDE is only to make children play while they (parents) are working therefore there is no need for them to waste time coming to school. (T4).

Poverty is another cause of parents not to be involved in the learning of their children. If parents know that their children do not have uniforms and food to eat at school, then they avoid being embarrassed by not coming to school. (T1)

These statements suggest that parents' attitudes hinder parent-teacher partnerships. T3's use of the words, "hinders parents to partner with us", implies that teachers are willing to work with parents, but the parents seem not to be comfortable about meeting with teachers because of socio-economic challenges. However, one participant (T4) pointed to shortcomings on the part of some teachers; she used the expression "... we may not have enough information" and this suggests that if the teachers are not confident in themselves, partnerships in matters that concern teaching and learning of young children can be negatively affected.

During the discussions another parent participant, P4, commented with tears in her eyes,

What make some children not to attend school is not that they don't care, but some homes have no parents who can emphasise on the importance of education.

This participant lost both her parents when she was very young and that affected her learning. She said that her learners' parents were passionate about education, and it disturbed her that she had had no one to support her to learn.

The lack of parent-teacher partnerships can be attributed to parents not being part of their children's lives and having a negative attitude towards education.

2 These transcripts are presented verbatim and unedited.

Discussion

The findings revealed that parent-teacher partnerships are a prerequisite to meet the needs of young children in rural ECDE learning centres. This is in line with the view that human beings should interconnect and share responsibilities in the community (Mathews et al., 2014; Viriri, 2018). Furthermore, a collaboration between all the stakeholders in the education of young children in ECDE learning centres in rural areas should not be overlooked since this is foundational to ECD (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). ECD prepares children for their future learning so they should receive a proper and meaningful early education. Even though it is documented that there is limited understanding of the connection between education and people changing their lives (Luter et al., 2017), working collaboratively in this study using PAR was of great benefit to participants and other community members since they managed to generate knowledge specific to their context. DuFour and Marzano (2011) and Hipp and Huffman (2010) stated that partnerships between teachers and parents play a vital role in education since they enable both parties to take part in decision making which is crucial to solving problems encountered by teachers and learners in ECDE centres. Their idea suggests that the enhancement of ESD in ECDE learning centres in rural areas requires collective efforts.

Teacher-parent partnerships respond to the challenges of rural ECDE learning centres. Partnerships benefit not only certain individuals but all community members. The literature confirms that parent-teacher partnerships are a catalyst to effective communication among all education stakeholders (DuFour and Marzano, 2011; Luter et al., 2017), which is vital if we are to attend to the issues that affect ESD.

The PAR methodology used in this study emphasises the fact that every individual should be given an opportunity to express themselves in a social setting (Mencke, 2013). Parent-teacher partnerships enable collaboration with the community, promoting ESD for young children in rural contexts. Mathews et al. (2014) explained that learning does not take place only in the classroom; it is also influenced by external factors such as parental principles, prospects, and involvement. This suggests that parents should try to meet young children's needs to mitigate problems they encounter at home. It corresponds with PAR principles as well as Epstein's theory of parental involvement that enables people to interact with their environment to solve their problems collectively.

Literature endorses that collaboration between parents and teachers supports a school's endeavours (Mathekga, 2016; Mathews et al., 2014; Matshe, 2014; Nyatuka, 2015) that lead to the enhancement of ESD. One of Ubuntu's principles emphasises the importance of people sharing their skills and expertise through assisting others (Viriri, 2018). This suggests that partnerships encompass the bringing together of different skills and ideas that may assist in enhancing effective teaching and learning for rural ECDE learners. Manzon et al. (2015) and Mathews et al. (2014) noted that knowledge that can be useful in promoting learners' wellbeing can be harvested from any member in the local context.

Findings further suggest that decision-making should be the responsibility of all the stakeholders so that everyone has a say and is accountable. Mathegka (2016) stated that well-implemented partnerships avoid inequality and oppression since they allow every stakeholder to be part of the solutions that come through critical reflection. The research participants were given an opportunity to participate freely and contribute to decision-making regarding the teaching and learning of young learners throughout the duration of the study.

Further, it was found that teacher-parent partnerships can lead to the promotion of a conducive teaching and learning environment. This resonates with the literature that states that partnerships in education should nurture a culture of respecting and valuing everyone's contribution as a way of encouraging courteous relationships between and among the school, learners, parents, and the school community (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Mathews et al., 2014). Thus, another feature of parent-teacher partnerships is that they should be framed in accordance with school policy.

Conclusion

ECD education is the starting point for the enhancement of ESD. This study presents an overview of the importance of parent-teacher partnerships in early stages of learning drawing on the ideas of parents and teachers who participated in the study. The principles of Epstein's theory of parental engagement were used to explain how partnerships between parents and teachers could be promoted in the ECDE learning centres. Although it was acknowledged in this study that education for sustainable development can be encouraged if parents and teachers work together, I discovered that there are challenges that hinder good parent-teacher relationships. I found that involving the community in the school programmes can harness the relationships thus making it easy to create good partnerships. Furthermore, using PAR for this study was useful in creating mutual understanding between the participating parents and teachers because they got a chance to learn from each other's experience. This led to the conclusion that involving parents and other community members in research can bring about transformation in the teaching and learning process in ECD. This change in practice can have a positive influence in enhancing ESD in ECDE learning centres in rural areas.

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