PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOL READINESS: A ROLE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the early childhood years for school readiness highlights the primary role of parents in preparing their children for school entry. This article reports on a qualitative study that explored parental involvement in children's school readiness in a South African context, with special emphasis on the influence of the social environment on parental involvement. Through purposive and snowball sampling, a sample of 25 parents or caregivers, nine Foundation Phase teachers and four social workers were recruited from communities in Tshwane, Gauteng. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as theoretical framework was relevant for understanding contextual influences on parental involvement in school readiness. To account for the evidently inadequate school readiness of many South African children, the findings of the study indicate that parents' knowledge, perceptions and socio-economic contexts influence their ability to effectively prepare young children for school entry; this in turn suggests a role for social workers to empower parents for enhancing their children's school readiness.

Keywords: parental involvement; school readiness; school transitioning; social development approach; social work; South Africa

INTRODUCTION

School entry is a significant transition often associated with insecurity for children and their parents and families. For children, transition to school involves adjustment to an unfamiliar environment with new practices, rules, values and relationships; for parents and families, a child's school entry involves changes in their roles, relationships and involvement in a wider social context (Ackesjö, 2017). To develop to their fullest potential at school, young children must be ready for the demands of the more formal learning environment; a concept referred to

as school readiness (Davin & Horn, 2020). In South Africa, schooling is compulsory for all children in the year that they turn 7 (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Regardless of socio-economic context, successful school transitioning greatly benefits children's adjustment to and progress in primary school and tends to determine their later academic performance and ultimate educational outcomes (Cowan & Cowan, 2014). Consequently, educational transitions such as school entry have gained increasing attention worldwide (Dockett, Griebel & Perry, 2017).

Preschool teachers and parents are key role players in children's school readiness (Barnett *et al*., 2020). However, the primary role of parents as children's "first teachers" is increasingly emphasised in preparing children for school entry (Grimmer, 2018:157). Therefore, the goal of the study was to explore parental involvement in children's school readiness within a South African context, with objectives including exploring the participants' understanding of school readiness, their views on the role of parents in school readiness, and their views on factors affecting parental involvement. The authors adopted the inclusive definition of 'parent' set by the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 as amended (Republic of South Africa, 1996) as the biological or adoptive parent, legal guardian or person who has legal custody over the child and who takes responsibility for the child's education at school. Parents in the study thus included biological parents, adoptive parents, caregivers and legal guardians. Parents' ability to prepare children for school is strongly influenced by the social environment; Pitt *et al*. (2013) therefore regard a lack of school readiness as a symptom of problems in the wider environment and not necessarily related to the child and family.

SCHOOL READINESS AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS

Defining school readiness

Defining school readiness is challenging as educators and professional practitioners, amongst others, have different perceptions on the concept (Munnik & Smith, 2019). In a wider sense, school readiness refers to children's physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills that allow them to adjust to the formal education system (Sheridan *et al*., 2010). More specifically, school readiness entails sensory, perceptual and motor skills; cognitive skills that include reasoning, language and imagination; and social and emotional skills such as emotional regulation, empathy and positive interpersonal interactions with teachers and peers – hence, an array of interrelated skills in different developmental domains (Louw & Louw, 2014).

School readiness is significant for children's adjustment to school when entering Grade 1, their attitude towards learning, their self-concept, academic performance, school attendance and grade completion (Bruwer, Hartell & Steyn, 2014; Munnik & Smith, 2019; Wong *et al*., 2018). Children who lack appropriate cognitive and socio-emotional skills find it more difficult to deal with the demands of formal school and are at risk of lower school performance, lower self-confidence, behavioural problems and early school dropout. In addition, poor school readiness places extra demands on teachers who must implement the curriculum and create a learning environment that meets the needs of all learners (Bruwer *et al*., 2014; Wong *et al*., 2018).

Davin and Horn (2020) propose that the term "school readiness" might be discriminatory as it divides children into two groups: one that is "ready" and one that is "not ready" for school. The

authors suggest that "readiness to learn" rather than "readiness for school" provides a more holistic view of the child, as it focuses not only on children's intellectual abilities but also on their health, emotional maturity and the distinct characteristics of the environment in which they grow up. The phrase "readiness to learn" indicates that children are always ready to learn, but that preschools and the social environment play a critical role in providing opportunities for learning the skills needed for school readiness. Definitions of school readiness must therefore also take into account contextual factors such as the capabilities of families and professionals (Sheridan *et al*., 2010) and many definitions in fact emphasise the role of parents and other adults in children's school readiness (Davin & Horn, 2020). Some definitions identify three equally important dimensions of school readiness: the readiness of the child, the readiness of the school, and the readiness of the family (Ackesjö, 2017; UNICEF, 2012).

Parental involvement in school readiness

Considering the concept "ready to learn", we highlight the view of Bruwer *et al*. (2014) that, whereas school readiness is often seen as starting to develop one or two years before school entry, learning starts long before a child enters school. Therefore, parents who provide relevant learning opportunities in early childhood will greatly enhance children's school readiness (UNICEF, 2012). Parents are in an ideal position to promote children's school readiness through their everyday interactions in the home (Rahman, Chowdhury & Obaydullah, 2019). Parents' educational involvement has been found to yield cognitive, academic as well as psychosocial benefits for preschool children (Boyle & Benner, 2020); this means that the timing and processes related to children's school readiness are important and should not be overlooked.

Parental involvement in school readiness includes parents' attitudes, beliefs, expectations, behaviours and activities in support of their children's early learning and education (Boyle & Benner, 2020; Wong *et al*., 2018). The involvement of parents can be home-based, involving parent-child interactions in the home to enhance children's language, learning and socio-emotional development; or school-based, which includes parents attending school functions and meetings with teachers at early childhood education settings (Barnett *et al*., 2020; Puccioni, Baker & Froiland, 2019). In the preschool years, parents' daily interactions with their children in the home, for example, shared reading and conversation, offer many informal and natural opportunities for strengthening children's skills that are critical for school readiness (Barnett *et al*., 2020). Responsive parenting, characterised by parents who are attuned to and involved in meeting children's needs, is positively associated with children's school readiness (Munnik & Smith, 2019). However, parental over-involvement, thus overly controlling parenting, can suppress a child's autonomy, which is an important skill for their adjustment to school (Wong *et al*., 2018).

Environmental factors influencing parental involvement

Research studies increasingly emphasise the influence of the social environment on children's school readiness (Ackesjö, 2017), indicating that the influence and responsibilities of schools, professional persons, the wider community and government should be taken into account (Louw & Louw, 2014). In South Africa, Grade R was introduced as a reception year prior to

the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3) to promote all children's access to quality early education by 2010 (Department of Education, 2003). However, subsequent local studies found that many children struggle with poor school performance and high failure rates in the first school years (Bruwer *et al.*, 2014; Simweleba & Serpell, 2020). A study by Janse van Rensburg (2015) in public schools in Gauteng province found that 49% of learners entering school failed school readiness assessments, with equal numbers of these children in the highest- and lowest-income schools. Hall *et al.* (2019) note that many preschool children, especially those in rural areas, do not have access to early childhood education services such as safe structures where they can learn. These limitations confirm the important role of parents in developing children's school readiness.

While recognising that children's school readiness is influenced by the quality of learning experiences in the home, environmental risks that affect parents' ability to provide a home environment that allows early learning experiences must also be recognised. Environmental risks include limited parental knowledge about developmental milestones relevant to school readiness, parental beliefs on the value of education, and socio-economic factors such as unemployment, poverty and family problems; however, high-level socio-economic conditions do not guarantee children's school readiness or academic success, because other responsibilities might affect parents' involvement in children's early learning (De Witt, du Toit & Franzen, 2020; Munnik & Smith, 2019). Rochat and Redinger (2021/2022:56) emphasise that when children cannot achieve their full potential, the consequences "will play out over their lifetime, with implications for them as individuals, for the next generation of children, and for the broader South African society." Consequently, empowering parents for their role in children's school readiness becomes a priority for children to develop to their fullest potential. Developmental social work is primarily concerned with empowering people and enhancing the well-being of individuals, families and communities within their social context (Patel, 2015). Social workers could thus play a role in enhancing parents' capacity for preparing their children for school entry.

Developmental social work

South Africa's developmental approach to social welfare is grounded in the duty of the state to address social and economic discrimination and inequality, and to invest in human capacity to improve people's well-being (Patel & Hochfeld, 2012). Developmental social welfare services have shifted from a problem-focused perspective to adopting a strengths perspective that is proactive and preventive by recognising people's inherent strengths and focusing on empowerment and capacity building to achieve sustainable change (Gray, Agllias, Mupedziswa & Mugumbate, 2017; Midgley, 2010). Furthermore, a rights-based approach guides services towards respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people and support for their rights; this often involves advocacy for service users to have adequate living standards and to gain access to education, health care, social security and other services (Midgley, 2010).

Adopting an ecological approach, developmental social work focuses on the interconnections between people and their environment and on providing services (i) on a micro level to individuals, families and small groups, (ii) on a mezzo level to formal groups and organisations, and (iii) on a macro level to communities and society, including social policy and advocacy for

social justice. To perform their duties, social workers adopt various roles, for example, that of mobiliser, facilitator, educator, counsellor, conferee, broker, networker, mediator and advocate, amongst others (Patel, 2015). Social work services are provided on different levels – prevention, early intervention, statutory/residential/alternative care, and reunification and aftercare services – with each having a specific purpose (Department of Social Development, 2013; Patel, 2015). As described in the Children's Act 38 of 2005, Sections 143 and 144, prevention programmes are, for example, delivered to strengthen parenting skills for creating a home environment conducive to children's development and well-being, while early intervention services focus on families where children are vulnerable or at risk of harm (Republic of South Africa, 2006). Services are family-centred and community-based, with the family and community thus a focus for interventions. Emphasis is placed on participation to involve service users as partners in decision-making and assume responsibility for their environment, as well as on partnerships, which involve collaboration between role players such as government, social services, civil society and the business sector (Patel, 2015). Services are thus aligned with the specific needs and social contexts of service users.

The potential social work role of empowering parents to be involved in children's school readiness is evident in the principles, roles and services associated with developmental social work. Although the function of early childhood education has recently been moved from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Education (Du Plessis, 2021), the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa, 2006), Chapter 6, emphasises services to enhance early childhood development. Sims and Brettig (2018) explain that early childhood development has a more holistic focus than early childhood education as it focuses on promoting children's overall well-being and on establishing enabling environments for individuals, families and communities. The social work profession's ecological approach opens opportunities for social workers to address parental and environmental factors that may prevent optimal parental involvement in children's school readiness and to establish enabling environments to support children to successfully adjust to school and develop to their full potential.

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

The study stemmed from the fact that, while large numbers of South African children appear to lack school readiness skills when entering Grade 1, children's early education and parents' perspectives on readiness for school have not received wide attention and are often poorly understood (Harrison, 2020; UNICEF, 2012). As indicated, the goal of the study was to explore parental involvement in children's school readiness within a South African context.

Research methodology

Different role players interpret school readiness differently (Ackesjö, 2017; Davin & Horn, 2020; Grimmer, 2018), hence an interpretivist research paradigm was relevant to the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2020a). A qualitative research approach was followed to obtain in-depth information on the participants' perspectives on the research topic (Fouché, 2021). The study was aligned with applied research as the research findings might be used in social work practice (Fouché, 2021). A case study design enables researchers to "capture a slice of reality" within a

specific time frame and with a particular study sample to reflect the immediate contextual conditions influencing a phenomenon (Schurink, Schurink & Fouché, 2021:302-303). An instrumental case study was appropriate for gaining a better understanding of a specific issue – in this study, parental involvement in children's school readiness – rather than understanding a specific situation or context (Nieuwenhuis, 2020b).

The study population, namely persons who would be of interest to the research (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018), included parents who had children in the Foundation Phase in school (Grade R to Grade 3), Foundation Phase teachers, and social workers who had experience of working with children in Foundation Phase grades and with their parents. In addition to parents/caregivers, teachers and social workers were included in the sample as they would be familiar with and understand contextual influences on parental involvement in school readiness. Purposive sampling was appropriate for recruiting participants who complied with the relevant sampling criteria (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018; Strydom, 2021). The participants were from communities in Tshwane, Gauteng province, that represented different socio-economic groups: two communities in the western districts of Tshwane and two communities in the eastern parts of Pretoria. Because of the COVID-19 regulations at the time of the study, data collection could not be implemented at schools. Snowball sampling was thus used to identify participants (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018; Strydom, 2021). A social worker, staff members at a preschool and an afterschool centre, and a parent from a middle-income environment assisted to identify participants in each sample group, after which the first participants in each sample group assisted in accessing others who met the sampling criteria and were willing to participate in the study. Initially, a total sample size of 24 parents/caregivers, 12 teachers and four social workers was proposed for the study. In general, it was difficult to find participants, especially parents in the middle-income contexts despite the option of online interviews – an aspect possibly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 summarises information on the final study sample.

Table 1: **The study sample**

Participants	Lower-income communities	Middle-income communities	TOTAL
Parents/caregivers	18	7	25
Teachers	5	4	9
Social workers	2	2	4
TOTAL	25	13	38

Except for one father, 21 participants in the parent/caregiver group were mothers and three were grandmothers, with most being from the lower-income communities; an aspect that could affect the transferability of the research findings. Semi-structured interviews based on an interview schedule developed for each sample group were effective for collecting in-depth data up to the point of data saturation, the point at which repetition of information within and between the three sample groups occurred and no new information came to the fore (Makofane & Shirindi, 2018; Nieuwenhuis, 2020b). Most of the interviews were conducted in person, complying with COVID-19 regulations such as wearing protective masks and maintaining

personal distance, while some participants preferred online interviews. The interviews were audio recorded with permission of the participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2020b). Thematic analysis was used to identify themes in the data and measures to enhance trustworthiness, for example, reflexivity, thick description and peer debriefing, were implemented (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). The Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee, University of Pretoria, provided institutional ethical clearance (23186195HUMD12/0421) and the relevant research ethical principles were upheld to prevent or avoid any negative effects of participation on the participants (Strydom & Roestenburg, 2021).

Theoretical framework

An ecosystems perspective formed the theoretical framework for the study. This perspective is relevant to developmental social work (Patel, 2015) and forms the theoretical framework of various studies on the influence of the environment on children's school readiness (cf. Barnett *et al*., 2020; Munnik & Smith, 2019; Sheridan *et al*., 2010). Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory describes the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem as interrelated ecological levels in the environment, each affecting the developing child in a different way. The nature of the systems changes over time, as represented by an additional system, the chronosystem (Berk, 2013; Louw, Louw & Kail, 2014).

The microsystem – the child's immediate environment such as the home, family, school, early care settings, peer group and neighbourhood – directly involves the child and thus has the strongest influence on the developing child (Berk, 2013). More recently, authors such as Johnson and Puplampu (2008) added the concept of the techno-subsystem, referring to internet use that allows for direct social interactions between people. Because of its accessibility in the person's immediate environment, the techno-subsystem is regarded as a dimension of the microsystem. The school and home form the key microsystems for children's school readiness; however, the family is the most significant developmental context in early childhood, with parents or caregivers being the primary role players and resources for a rich learning environment in the home (Barnett *et al*., 2020; Brown, 2017; Grimmer, 2018). Importantly, parents can enhance children's school readiness even in difficult socio-economic circumstances (Rahman *et al*., 2019).

No family lives in isolation and Louw *et al*. (2014:29) explain that "what happens in one microsystem is likely to influence the other microsystems." The linkages between microsystems – known as the mesosystem – can create either risks or protective factors for children's development (Berk, 2013; Dwarika, 2019; Onwuegbuzie, Collins & Frels, 2013). Educational involvement of parents in the home as well as at school and positive collaboration between parents and preschool teachers create a stronger mesosystem in support of children's school readiness (Boyle & Benner, 2020; Puccioni *et al*., 2019). A positive mesosystem is an important asset for the development of children, especially for those living in poor neighbourhoods often characterised by fewer community resources to support families (Berk, 2013).

The exosystem does not directly involve the child. However, informal social networks such as parents' friends and family who provide support, advice and friendship, and formal settings such as parents' work and the health care, social welfare, religious and judicial systems have either positive or negative influences that have a profound impact on the child (Berk, 2013; Louw *et al*., 2014). Parents' employment or unemployment, their work hours and work schedules, mothers who work full-time, and families living in poverty are some of the exosystemic factors that can influence parents' ability to be involved in children's school readiness (Berk, 2013; UNICEF, 2012).

All the above systems are embedded in the macrosystem, which includes the culture, values, laws, customs, and economic and political systems of society. As the broadest system, the macrosystem has a significant, although indirect, effect on children's development (Berk, 2013; Louw *et al*., 2014). Educational policies and systems influence aspects such as the school curriculum and determine the conditions for school entry (Ackesjö, 2017; Wickett, 2017), for example, the Schools Act and the Draft Admissions Policy for Public Schools that guide children's schooling in South Africa (Proudlock *et al*., 2021/2022). Furthermore, cultural beliefs and values influence parents' views of school readiness and their expectations of children (Munnik & Smith, 2019; Simweleba & Serpell, 2020).

Finally, the chronosystem suggests changes that occur over time (Berk, 2013). Ackesjö (2017) views school transitioning as a time of change that can present challenges but also new opportunities for children and for families. The ecological systems theory provides an understanding of the influence of different ecological levels on parental involvement in children's school readiness and children's adjustment to school. The theory also highlights that contexts could change, for example, through social work interventions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

We present the research findings on parental involvement in children's school readings under the following themes: parents' views and understanding of the concept school readiness; views on who is responsible for enhancing school readiness; and factors that influence parents' involvement in their children's early learning.

Parents' views and understanding of school readiness

Parents in this study mostly viewed school readiness as related to academic skills, a finding also indicated by Brown (2017). Some parents understood that school readiness also includes social and emotional skills, while others openly stated that they lacked knowledge about school readiness.

> *School readiness means that the child must be able to write, read, know the sounds* [of letters] *and be able to master spelling.* (Parent 12 – lower-income community)

> *You must start in Grade R, you must be able to write, to listen, then you can progress to Grade 1.* (Parent 21 – lower-income community)

School readiness … is about how ready your child is to enter school. … So, there are [academic] *skills involved, but also emotional and physical readiness.* (Parent 6 – middle-income community)

I think what is also important before a child starts school, are those social skills, you know, because there will be 30 friends in the classroom with whom you must interact and with whom you need to learn to share. (Parent 5 – middle-income community)

Gee, I don't know. For me, this is a difficult question. … I do not really know what to answer. I actually do not know myself what they must be able to do to be school ready or which maths, letters and Afrikaans they must be able to do. (Parent 2 – middle-income community)

I do not know; I really do not know [laughs]. *… I suppose he must be able to talk and to communicate with everyone and understand that there is a person in charge* [laughs]*, for example the teacher. To learn, to share, and such things.* (Parent 8 – lower-income community)

Most parents lacked knowledge of the entire spectrum of school readiness skills in the different developmental domains, including the relevance of cognitive, socio-emotional and sensory-motor skills. Limited knowledge was especially evident where parents were from lower socio-economic communities; however, it was also prevalent among parents in middle-income settings.

While some parents were aware that preparing children for school entry should start from infancy, most indicated that this process must start around the ages of 4 to 6 years, when children have a sufficient level of cognitive development.

You can start preparing children for school from four years. … from [age] *4 one can do more practical stuff. You can build more advanced puzzles and gradually make it more difficult so that they can learn more stuff.* (Parent 3 – middle-income community)

I think from 5 years, because most of the kids they are 4 years, but they are … not even attending crèche or any day care. … So, I think from 5 years old, they must be ready for the next grade. (Parent 9 – lower-income community)

I think 6 years … I would say it takes a year to get a child ready for Grade 1 because I think that you [a child] *can learn much.* (Parent 12 – lower-income community)

UNICEF (2012) raised concerns about large numbers of families who lack sufficient knowledge about school readiness and the importance of the early childhood years for children's school readiness and academic success. Importantly, rapid cognitive development occurs during the first four to five years of a child's life and "all children at all ages, are 'ready to learn'" (Whitebread & Bingham, 2012:1). Parents who are aware of this fact may be more motivated to be involved in preparing their children for school entry. Furthermore, the benefits of children's school readiness for parents themselves could enhance their own motivation to support their children's early learning, as suggested by the participants.

If you know a child is ready for school, you won't have a lot to worry about. … but if not, then everything, it will also affect me at work … I am more relaxed if I know my child is fine. (Parent 13 – lower-income community)

Children who do well at school, one can see the parents are proud of them and it also gives them [parents] *self-confidence. … So, it motivates him to do more to help his child, also in the subsequent grades.* (Teacher 8 – lower-income community)

If they can go to the big [secondary] *school, I know that one day they will help me, and I will not suffer. Then I stay at home; Granny can rest, and they can help me.* (Grandparent 10 – lower-income community)

You equip your child for a better future. I believe that it is a great emotional advantage for parents if they know that they have done enough for a child to have a successful school career … and to one day have a successful job. (Teacher 9 – lower-income community)

The above benefits, including less stress and being a proud parent, could lead to greater parental involvement in children's early learning. Supportive parents and families contribute significantly to children's development into adults who can contribute to sustainable social and economic development in society (UNICEF, 2012). The notion of the benefits of children's school readiness for parents is confirmed by Pelletier and Brent (2002); they state that parents who believe that they have the capacity to support their children's education are more inspired to become involved in their children's learning. This belief is especially important for parents with poor literacy skills and low educational levels, who may perceive themselves as lacking the capacity to support their children's school readiness (Wolf & McCoy, 2019). It is interesting that this aspect was raised especially by participants who lived or worked in lower-income contexts, which may indicate a strong need for relevant knowledge and skills in these communities.

Who is responsible for children's school readiness?

Although teachers and parents are key role players in children's school readiness, parents or caregivers are regarded as those who must take primary responsibility for preparing children for successful school entry (Barnett *et al*., 2020; Grimmer, 2018; Winter & Kelley, 2008). The participants in the study held different views on this matter and many parents believed that crèches, early childhood centres or preschool teachers must assume the responsibility of preparing young children for school entry.

Before the child goes to a formal school, they [parents] *must take them to a preschool. … Okay, according to me, that is why they made the preschool. They start in preschool to teach them how to behave when they go to the big school so that it will be easy for them to then go to school, to socialise with the other kids, listening and talking.* (Parent 19 – lower-income community)

I think it is best to take your kids to preschool. They must not be like us. We did go to school, but we did not end up where we wanted to be. So, it is better to take the kids to preschool to learn more. (Parent 20 – lower-income community)

The parent must ensure that your child is in a good preschool. Teachers … gradually teach the child everything that they must learn. They must also be on the lookout for any problems. (Parent 3 – middle-income community)

The above views are also evident in a study by Ackesjö (2017), where most parents were of the opinion that schools should be the responsible institutions for meeting children's cognitive, social, relational and emotional skills required for school readiness. Unfortunately, the reality in the South African context is that educational services to many young children are not on an appropriate standard to undertake this task; reasons include poorly trained teachers, a lack of quality preschool programmes, and preschools being ill equipped to provide stimulating learning environments for children in the early childhood years (Bruwer *et al*., 2014; Winter & Kelley, 2008). These wider ecological realities impact on children's school readiness and, according to Sheridan *et al*. (2010), set the stage for children's educational outcomes in formal and informal educational settings and in different developmental domains.

At the same time, some participants raised concerns about parents who seem to be too dependent on teachers at a crèche or preschool to prepare their child for school entry, without taking ownership of their parental role.

Parents give the responsibility to the crèche because 'I have paid the crèche and then I do not engage with my child anymore'. (Social Worker 3 – lower-income community)

Parents expect too much of teachers, particularly from preschools. … It is like they expect us to help children to form relationships with other children, teaching manners, toilet routine. (Teacher 1 – middle-income community)

Although childcare centres and preschools have a role to support a child's early learning, there is general agreement that parents are primarily responsible for the provision of learning opportunities for young children (Grimmer, 2018). Teachers and social workers and some parent participants supported this view:

I believe that the parents play a primary role. Primarily, it is the parent and then the teacher. (Parent 5 – middle-income community)

The work of a child going to school is not only about the teacher. We as parents, we must take part … because the education starts at home with the child. (Parent 20 – lower-income community)

I think it is the duty of the parents … you teach at home. … it starts at home. You must take that responsibility … You can't try to shift everything onto other people … It must start with the parent. (Social Worker 4 – lower-income community)

Before the child meets the teacher, she needs the parent first. It's not the other way around. The parent must prepare the child, the readiness for school … So, the parent must build the foundation. … The teacher must add from what the parent has taught the child at home. (Social Worker 1 – lower-income community)

Some participants recognised the challenges this role poses to parents and expressed the need for preschool teachers and parents to cooperate in preparing children for school entry.

> *Believe me, as a parent you will never be able to do it alone … it is very difficult.* (Parent 19 – lower-income community)

> *I am struggling. Ja, to be honest, I am struggling … like to teach my kids this and this … I don't have the knowledge.* (Parent 14 – lower-income community)

> *We must work hand in hand. … Parents and* [preschool] *teachers must engage a lot so that you understand more what you must do and need to do.* (Parent 13 – lower-income community)

> *I think it is for us as parents and teachers to be together, like teach a child together. At home, the parents must help. … So, in that way the child, whenever they start school, it is very easy for them.* (Teacher 5 – lower-income community)

The concept "readiness to learn" (Davin & Horn, 2020) confirms the parental role in children's early learning. Because of the significant impact they can make on children's early development, parents must be empowered as partners in their child's education (Pitt *et al*., 2013). An interactionist approach characterised by positive collaboration between parents and preschool teachers contributes significantly to children's school readiness (Brown, 2017), and promotes a strong mesosystem that benefits children's development and their school readiness (Barnett *et al*., 2020). Again, the need for such teacher-parent collaboration was especially evident in the views of participants in the lower-income communities.

Environmental factors that influence parental involvement

The participants believed that the environmental challenges which parents experience daily can influence their ability to be involved in their children's school readiness. Firstly, many participants referred to the impact of overwhelming responsibilities and a lack of time on parents' educational involvement. These responsibilities seemed to be more challenging for single parent families. It is noteworthy that this specific family structure characterises many South African families (Republic of South Africa, 2021).

> *Time is a big issue in all these things for your child to develop. So, you being there for the child to receive everything that he needs in order for the child to develop, time is the most important thing.* (Parent 18 – lower-income community)

> *I think that parents who work full-time … get home at night and then they must help the children. … You know it is busy, busy, busy, and difficult for the parents who work.* (Parent 6 – middle-income community)

> *The parents are so busy that they do not focus on their children. Their work just requires more and more.* (Teacher 3 – middle-income community)

> *Ah, it is difficult because they* [the parents] *must work to pay their bills, put food on the table, and so forth. You don't work, then you don't have anything. The kids they*

will suffer. ... Imagine like maybe a single mom, you are doing everything alone. ... you are tired. (Teacher 6 – lower-income community)

Time, definitely, because mothers and fathers who work have less time to support their children. (Parent 4 – middle-income community)

Being a single parent is difficult. You need to put food on the table and buy clothes for her. Then we are really tired. It is difficult. (Parent 17 – lower-income community)

Ironically, parents' responsibilities for earning an income to provide good care for their children may also negatively affect their ability to attend to their children's educational needs. This challenge was evident in the experiences of participants from both middle- and lower-income communities. In this respect, Munnik and Smith (2019) note that high-level socio-economic conditions will not guarantee children's school readiness, because parental involvement in children's early learning might be compromised by other responsibilities that take up their time.

In addition to the above challenges, the participants identified their own lack of education, poverty, financial problems and unemployment as significant environmental factors that hamper parents' ability to be involved in a child's school readiness.

There are many parents [who] *do not necessarily have a high level of education or training. So, I do believe that* [these] *parents lack insight regarding how they should support a child's school readiness.* (Teacher 9 – lower-income community)

I think it is difficult for some parents [with limited education] *to understand that their child needs some support. ... I think parents are uninformed regarding where and what your child should be able to master for Grade 1 or even Grade R.* (Teacher 4 – middle-income community)

I think many parents have the problem, more especially maybe the money. They don't work, they always got the stress. (Parent 11 – lower-income community)

If you are constantly worried about your child's basic needs, clothes, food and if there are maybe relationship problems, then that parent would not even think about school readiness. Then it is almost like survival mode. (Teacher 2 – middle-income community)

[Financial problems may cause] *psychological* [problems] *where you get that in the parents, where they now lost hope. They give up and kids fend for themselves and take care of themselves.* (Parent 24 – lower-income community)

The above views are supported by findings in the literature that environmental challenges do have an influence on parents' involvement in children's school readiness. Parents from lower socio-economic circumstances tend to spend less time on home-based activities that can support children's early learning (Boyle & Benner, 2020; Puccioni *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, parental educational levels influence factors such as parents' teaching style and the learning environment in the home (Visser, Juan & Hannan, 2019). Factors such as unemployment, poverty and family problems lower parents' ability to provide a supportive home environment for children's early learning and school readiness (De Witt *et al.*, 2020; UNICEF, 2012). These

aspects often result in teachers experiencing challenges in forming effective and supportive partnerships with parents, because of factors such as parents' work pressure, illiteracy and fear of judgement (Dwarika, 2019).

Some participants, however, challenged the above views, indicating that parents' priorities rather than their socio-economic and educational status may determine the time they invest in their children's development and school readiness.

> *I think all of this goes back to the parents because they can't say they don't have knowledge. There are campaigns, there are websites. So, I think it is just the attitude of the parents. Negative.* (Parent 24 – lower-income community)

> *Some of the parents may not have finished school ... You have to make sure your child goes further and further and finishes school.* (Parent 9 – lower-income community)

> *A parent does not have to be educated ... It is about having an interest, especially an emotional interest.* (Teacher 1 – middle-income community)

> *They are too dedicated to their work, to the extent that they will just neglect the child. ... So, it's like, they* [the parents] *know they have this responsibility, but their work is too important.* (Teacher 7 – lower-income community)

> *It depends on whether your work or family is your priority. ... It is about a decision to make your child a priority and to support your child to be ready for school.* (Teacher 2 – middle-income community)

Teacher 9 saw another reason for parents who appear not to prioritise their children's learning, namely a factor that might indicate a possible gap in the educational system.

> *I do not know whether it* [the need for parental involvement] *has been communicated to parents, that they are aware of the high responsibility on them.* (Teacher 9 – lower-income community)

It is evident that a range of different factors affects parent's involvement in their children's school readiness. While poverty and unemployment affect the capacity of parents in low-income communities to attend to children's school readiness, parents' workload and related responsibilities can have similar effects, regardless of the socio-economic context. Parents' priorities were presented as a strong influencing factor on their involvement in children's school readiness. Whereas culture and parental education may influence their understanding of what to prioritise in terms of their children's development, some parents may prioritise their work responsibilities and finances over their children's learning (Munnik & Smith, 2019; Visser *et al.*, 2019).

In conclusion, the research findings show that parental involvement in children's school readiness can be influenced by factors on all ecological levels, with the home environment as the most important microsystem for children's early learning as well as the wider ecological settings because of their impact on the parental role. Environmental challenges show the strong influence of the exo- and macrosystem on children's school readiness even though the child is not directly involved in these systems (Berk, 2013; Wickett, 2017).

DISCUSSION

Transition to school is self-evidently a significant step for young children and their parents/caregivers, and is critical for children's school adjustment as well as their future academic and employment outcomes. The immediate and long-term impact of inadequate attention to learning during the early childhood years, such as poor school readiness, poor academic performance and lower levels of school completion, highlights the need for preparing children to be ready for the new and unfamiliar school environment long before they enter formal school. A common theme in school readiness literature is thus the central influence of the home environment and the role of parents in children's school readiness (*cf.* Brown, 2017; Grimmer, 2018; Simweleba & Serpell, 2020).

The findings of this study point to the importance of empowering parents to be involved in children's school readiness. Parents who only have partial understanding of the range of skills needed to ensure children's school readiness, who lack insight into school readiness as a developmental process that starts in early childhood, and who lack knowledge of parents' critical role in children's school readiness may not appreciate their role in this regard. Research findings have shown that parents who believe in their own capacity to support their children's learning tend to be more involved in their children's early learning (Pelletier & Brent, 2002). Importantly, parents' understanding that they themselves also benefit from their children's school readiness can motivate them towards educational involvement as the impact of their involvement becomes evident. Promoting parents' knowledge and beliefs about school readiness may thus enhance their involvement in their children's early learning and education.

Supportive connections between microsystems – thus a strong mesosystem – is a protective factor in children's development and highlights the proven benefits of collaboration between parents and preschool teachers for children's school readiness (Boyle & Benner, 2020; Puccioni *et al.*, 2019). However, this collaboration may be hampered by parental views that it is preschools' responsibility to prepare children for school entry. Understandably, their educational role would be challenging for parents with limited knowledge about school readiness and some participants suggested that parents would need to work hand in hand with preschool teachers to support children's school readiness. Parent-teacher collaboration and partnerships form an ideal platform for parents to gain a better understanding of what school entry involves and for changing parental beliefs so that they view themselves as competent and necessary role players; a change in perspective that may motivate them to adopt their educational role in their children's school readiness more actively.

Attention to parental knowledge and skills, however, may not be effective without consideration of factors within the wider ecological systems, such as parents' work situation and support systems, poverty, socio-cultural norms and the state of the educational system itself, which can have a substantial influence on parents' involvement in their children's school readiness. All the participants reflected on environmental challenges that prevent many parents from adopting an active role in children's transitioning to school, which aligns with the views of Pitt *et al.* (2013), who relate a lack of school readiness to a symptom of problems in the wider environment rather than related only to the child or family circumstances. On the other hand, some participants believed that parents might not appreciate the importance of education,

or simply do not prioritise their children's educational needs. Again, this aspect may indicate a need for educating and empowering parents for their role. It is worth noting the view of Rahman *et al*. (2019) that parental educational involvement can enhance the school readiness of children despite adverse socio-economic circumstances; supporting a perspective that focuses on parents' inherent strengths.

With South Africa being classified as "the most unequal country in the world" with one of the main drivers of inequality being the failure of the "dominant role of educational attainment" (World Bank, 2022:1-2), it is essential that the South African government and all role players in the field of early childhood development and education need to prioritise education, specifically early childhood education. Confirming this notion, Bhardjwa, Sambu and Jamieson (2017:29) note that although South Africa has met, and is continuing efforts to meet, the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals, "the quality of education remains a concern, and a high percentage of children in Grades 3 and 9 perform below the 50% mark in numeracy and literacy." Early learning programmes before children enter the Foundation Phase of schooling could reduce the high levels of inequality in the country (Hall, 2021/2022).

The concept of an enabling environment that supports children's optimal development (Kleintjes *et al*., 2021/2022) suggests an ecological approach to interventions to achieve developmental goals. Although families and parents/caregivers are central for creating enabling environments (Kleintjes *et al*., 2021/2022), the concept also indicates a wider environment "that delivers for the individual in the context of community, but one that goes further and tackles the social determinants of well-being, such as inequality" (Tomlinson, Lake & Kleintjes, 2021/2022:150). This perspective links with the priorities of developmental social work as described in the Framework for Social Welfare Services (Department of Social Development, 2013:32):

> *Prevention and promotion services move beyond a focus on individual behaviour towards a wide range of social and environmental interventions including creating supportive environments, strengthening community action and developing personal skills.*

With the objectives of empowerment and capacity building to attain the goals of sustainable change for all people, developmental social work avoids a problem-focused perspective in favour of a proactive and preventive stance that recognises people's inherent strengths (Gray *et al*., 2017; Midgley, 2010). This perspective links with the strengths perspective adopted in the field of school readiness, with authors such as Dockett *et al*. (2017) and Osofsky and Dewana Thompson (2000) recommending that interventions to enhance parental involvement should focus on inherent strengths and adaptive parenting approaches and steer away from a problem-focused approach that may overlook existing positive factors.

The social work profession is thus ideally placed to promote enabling environments that support and empower parents to be involved in children's school readiness. Adopting an ecological perspective in their work with client groups of different sizes and with diverse problems and populations, different social work roles can be implemented to address specific social issues (Patel, 2015). These roles could include enabler to empower individuals, families

and communities to enhance their inherent capacity; educator to enhance parental knowledge and skills related to school readiness; and networker to initiate partnerships between preschool teachers and parents, and link parents with formal and informal resources and support systems to enhance their capacity for educational involvement.

Following a rights-based approach, social workers can advocate for services, including those provided by the state, and create opportunities to promote the worth and dignity of all people (Midgley, 2010). Richter (2018) notes the overarching role of the state to invest in enabling environments that support families of young children to ensure their health, care, nutrition, safety and early learning. The state is in a unique position to provide a framework for the interconnections between family and societal sectors through family policy, creating social conditions to support families, and to provide a range of services that benefit families holistically and help them cope with stressful conditions (Republic of South Africa, 2021).

Foundational to developmental social work and school readiness is the perspective that interventions to enhance parental involvement in children's school readiness should be undertaken on all ecological levels. Accordingly, an ecological perspective guides interventions to promote parents' involvement in children's school readiness with consideration of the influence of the wider environment and the responsibilities of preschools, professional persons, the wider community and the government (Louw & Louw, 2014; Richter, 2018). Social workers can play a significant role to support parents and families within their wider contexts to make them aware of, and take ownership of, their role in children's school readiness. Family- and community-focused prevention and early intervention services can empower parents to become agents of change in terms of the early development of their children and contribute to a sustainable future for families and children. Services could include the early identification of problems, prioritising services to vulnerable families and communities, identifying existing strengths and capacities of parents and families, and implementing interventions to support knowledge building and practical strategies enabling parents to fulfil their role. Awareness and parenting skills programmes can be presented at preschools, churches and community centres as well as on online platforms that can be accessed at home or community centres. Services from a holistic perspective could address socio-economic factors that affect children and their parents, including social security, feeding programmes, access to health care, and connecting parents to opportunities to enhance their economic capacity. Resources and services must be inclusive of all role players: parents or caregivers, families, teachers and schools, social services, government, civil society and the business sector.

CONCLUSION

Educational success offers opportunities for children to overcome the extensive inequalities in South African society; it also highlights the view that support for children's early learning and school readiness must be prioritised. This study confirms the microsystem of the home as the most influential setting and the primary role of parents/caregivers in children's early learning and school readiness. However, pervasive socioeconomic problems in South Africa will continue to hamper parental involvement in their children's school readiness unless interventions to strengthen families and promote parental capacity are implemented on all ecological levels of society.

We conclude that social workers can fulfil a significant role in enhancing the social developmental goals of dignity, strengths and equity through interventions that will enhance children's school readiness. Through adopting a "ready to learn" rather than a "ready for school" perspective, preventive and early intervention services can focus on empowering parents and recognising them as partners in children's early learning. Social workers themselves will need in-depth knowledge of school readiness and parental involvement, specific environmental risks, as well as of relevant legal and policy directives for early childhood development and education. Shifting from a problem-focused approach that tends to blame parents, however, also needs to take into account the extensive levels of socio-economic inequality in South Africa. The South African government should therefore be committed to early childhood development and education, for example, through the provision of resources such as early education centres and the employment of sufficient and well-trained staff, including social workers.

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Liana le Roux was a senior lecturer at the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of the Pretoria, at the time of Ms Vorster's study and acted as research supervisor. Her field of specialisation includes play-based interventions with children, child well-being and the role of culture in social work. She is currently retired but is still involved in supervision of students who are busy completing their research. Together with Ms Vorster, she assisted with the draft article and the final editing of the article.