



# Parental involvement in the case of primary school children with autism during COVID-19

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**Background:** Parental involvement is crucial for the holistic development of a child with autism, with parents forming an integral part of educational planning and interventions.

**Aim:** This qualitative study aims to understand teachers' perceptions of parental involvement during the COVID-19 pandemic in the case of primary school children with autism.

**Setting:** This study was conducted with 12 teacher participants from four primary schools that accommodate learners with autism in the Western Cape, South Africa.

**Methods:** We conducted individual semi-structured online interviews that were recorded, supplemented by field notes and policy documents related to parental involvement. Data collection and data analysis were informed by Epstein's model of parental involvement.

**Results:** Teachers encountered barriers when attempting to build positive partnerships with parents of children with autism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers excluded parents from decision making and their reliance on technology created additional barriers. Teachers failed to recognise that parental involvement was largely determined by their access to devices and data.

**Conclusion:** Teachers and parents should work collaboratively to build trusting relationships characterised by effective communication and a shared commitment to overcoming barriers to parental involvement. Schools that participated relied on alternative innovative ways to involve and communicate with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, it can be concluded that schools can take the lead to facilitate parental involvement even when parents seem unwilling and hesitant to take responsibility.

**Contribution:** Epstein's model of parental involvement can be used by schools to create enabling environments that will promote involvement at primary school level.

**Keywords:** autism spectrum disorder; barriers; COVID-19; education; parental involvement; partnerships; primary school teachers.

## Introduction

Existing literature highlights the importance of parental involvement in children's academic success (Epstein 2018; Schneider 2018). Even though limited research has been undertaken in this field in South Africa, the local studies that have been undertaken indicate a lack of sufficient parental involvement in schools in this country, especially in rural areas (McKenzie, Loebenstein & Taylor 2018; Munje & Mncube 2018; Okeke 2014; Stephinah 2014). In the case of children with disabilities such as autism, research is even more limited, yet parental involvement is more crucial for effective educational planning to be possible (Barton & Harn 2014).

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2014) introduced the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) to guide educational planning for learners who experience barriers to learning. This is a complex process that requires parents to collaborate with their children's teachers to develop individual educational plans (IEPs) (Cioè-Peña 2020), which include long-term post-school transition planning during the schooling years (Hirano et al. 2018). Frequent communication to reach consensus on educational goals necessitates a relationship of trust between teachers and parents (Lehrl, Evangelou & Sammons 2020). Without active parental involvement, educational planning and achievement would be limited (Barton & Harn 2014).

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Against this background, we undertook research that focused on the perceptions of teachers about the involvement of parents of primary school children with autism. Insight into the perceptions of teachers may enhance parental involvement in children's learning. It can furthermore be practically applied by teachers to strengthen parental involvement in educational planning for children with autism.

### Parents of children with autism

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD or autism) is categorised as a neurodevelopmental condition accompanied by sensory processing challenges, language or speech delay and difficulties related to social interaction, as well as rigid and repetitive behaviours in the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V) (APA 2013). Common characteristics of the condition include passionate interests, atypical movement, focused thinking, non-standard ways of learning, and a strong need for routine and order (Pratt, Hopf & Larriba-Quest 2017).

Parents' acceptance of an autism diagnosis is important for their sense of fulfilment as parents and their child's long-term outcomes (Azeem, Imran & Khawaja 2016). As many parents, however, struggle to adjust to such a diagnosis (Lappé et al. 2018), they may benefit from support and guidance on how to adapt their parenting behaviours to their child's traits, behaviour and experienced challenges (Van Esch et al. 2018).

Parents of children with autism will typically experience higher levels of stress than either parents of typically developing children or parents of children with other disabilities (Keenan et al. 2016). As a result, they may experience increased levels of anxiety and health problems (Karst & Van Hecke 2012). Lower family functioning and reduced marital happiness are often attributed to financial demands, with the associated challenge of a parent not being able to work or only in the position to work for restricted hours because of the demands of caring for a child with special needs (Kuhlthau et al. 2014).

In South Africa, public services for children with autism are very limited (Van Biljon, Kritzinger & Geertsema 2015). This compels parents of children with autism to search for additional support (De Vries 2016) which may be stressful (Russa, Matthews & Owen-DeSchryver 2014) and costly (Kuhlthau et al. 2014). Consequently, parents of children with autism tend to be personally involved in their children's educational and therapeutic interventions (Clasquin-Johnson & Clasquin-Johnson 2018). At the core of coping, resilience has been identified as central (Purkis & Goodall 2018). Furthermore, when parents are involved in their children's education, their children's mental health, confidence and quality of life can be enhanced (Kuhaneck et al. 2015).

### The importance of parental involvement

Despite a lack of consensus on what parental involvement in school entails (Thornton 2015), it can be regarded as a key

success factor in every child's life and education efforts, as parents are their children's primary and most significant educators (Ilik & Er 2019). Effective parental involvement requires of parents to fulfil an active role in their children's learning, and for teachers and parents to collaborate and work in partnership in the best interest of the child (Watt 2016). Parental involvement can therefore be fostered through parental involvement in school activities, ongoing interaction and communication between parents and teachers, parent participation in school events, parents attending parent-teacher meetings, and schools encouraging parents to support their children's learning at home, guide their children to complete homework tasks and monitor their progress (Schneider 2018). Parents who are involved in the education and lives of their children will generally understand their children better than when they are not involved, resulting in them being able to support their children's development and learning, strengthen social communication skills and reduce restricted and repetitive behaviours (Pineda et al. 2018).

Parental participation is essential during every phase of the development of a child with autism (Azeem et al. 2016). As a result, it is important that teachers actively involve parents in the development, implementation and monitoring of their child's IEP and intervention programme (Zhang & Spencer 2015). This will ensure that learning can be transferred across the home, school and community contexts (Barton & Harn 2014). In the case of children with autism, it has been found that intervention services that promote parental involvement will better support the children and positively influence their learning (Mautone et al. 2015). Some of the specific benefits of parental involvement include enhanced academic performance by children (Epstein 2018), improved behaviour, reduced absenteeism and positive attitudes towards school (Sapungan & Sapungan 2014).

Involving families as volunteers further has the potential of strengthening the support provision to learners and the school's programmes and events (Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison 2015), with parents playing an active role in their children's teaching when they volunteer at the school or in the classroom (Erdener 2016). In addition to being involved in teaching and learning activities, parents may also volunteer to participate in fundraising activities, allowing them to become active role players and build positive relationships with schools, teachers and other parents (Azad, Wolk & Mandell 2018; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Schools therefore need to intentionally foster stronger and more dynamic partnerships with parents by involving them in activities that allow them to contribute according to their strengths (McKenzie et al. 2018).

Despite these advantages of parental involvement, many parents do not fulfil this responsibility. Some of the reasons and challenges associated with low parental involvement relate to transportation challenges, the scheduling of meetings at inconvenient times, parents feeling intimidated by teachers or unwelcomed at school, teachers showing little

interest or concern for parents, or parents feeling as if they are unable to pose the right questions to the teachers about their children's progress (Hornby & Blackwell 2018). Parent-teacher relationships, children's characteristics and levels of parental education may also affect the level of parental involvement (Garbacz, McIntyre & Santiago 2016). As parental involvement follows a narrow 'unidirectional process', schools fail to recognise parents' agency or to involve them in decision making and collaboration with the community (McKenzie et al. 2018:230, 237).

Within the context of autism, parents who are in denial about their child's diagnosis and those who face barriers to effective communication (e.g. parents who speak a different language to the teacher) are less likely to become involved (Marais 2020). This trend is even more evident in disadvantaged communities, where lower levels of parental involvement can be observed than in higher socioeconomic contexts (McDowall & Schaughency 2017) as a result of, for example, parents' levels of education, challenging work schedules and limited available time (Munje & Mncube 2018). Another factor that may negatively affect parental involvement relates to teachers not knowing how to engage parents or not realising the value of parental involvement (Todd, Beamer & Goodreau 2014).

On the other hand, when parents feel welcome because of schools and teachers intentionally creating a friendly, warm, relaxed and encouraging environment (Heinrichs 2018), they will tend to become more actively involved. More specifically, positive school-parent partnerships can create opportunities for parents and teachers to collaborate and work together to address the challenges that children face from different perspectives, in the process contributing different strengths (Thompson et al. 2017). The value of parental involvement lies in the fact that parents spend the most time with their children and have the greatest influence on their holistic development (Otani 2019).

The active involvement of parents can, as a result, foster appreciation by parents for their children and those who teach them (Pineda et al. 2018), increase parents' communication with their children and strengthen their awareness of their children's social, emotional and academical support needs at home and at school (Mata, Pedro & Peixotoa 2018). Finally, parental involvement may assist teachers in building rapport with the parents and better understanding the family's circumstances and culture (Owen 2016). This necessitates continuous communication between teachers and parents, especially in the case of children with disabilities such as autism (Okeke 2014).

## Theoretical framework

In undertaking the study, we were guided by Epstein's Parental Involvement Model (2002) which foregrounds the teacher's role in parental involvement at school level. The model captures six ways of parental involvement, namely, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home,

decision making and collaborating with the community (Epstein 2002). Parenting refers to schools supporting parents of children with autism to strengthen their parenting skills while communicating, as part of parental involvement entails regular two-way communication (Erdener 2016). Next, effective communication is foregrounded as central, with the establishment of trusting relationships being regarded as the basis of collaboration and cooperation between teachers and parents (Lehrl et al. 2020). Volunteering refers to the process of recruiting and organising parents' help and support (Epstein, Jung & Sheldon 2019), while learning at home encourages parents to help their children with their learning activities at home (Michael, Wolhuter & Van Wyk 2012). Decision making as part of parental involvement implies involvement in the school's governance and advocacy, for example, by participating in the school governing body and advocating for strengthening inclusion for persons with autism in society (Epstein 2002), and finally, collaborating with the community to strengthen the school's programmes, family practices and learners' learning and development (Epstein et al. 2019). According to this model, teachers are required to assist families in creating home settings that will support learners and their families through, for example, parenting workshops.

Epstein's Parental Involvement Model (2002) proposes that schools should involve parents as volunteers who can support learner and school programmes (Murray et al. 2015). At home, parents can reinforce the learning of their children (Benner, Boyle & Sadler 2016; Sapungan & Sapungan 2014), and at school, they may fulfil an active role in decision making processes as part of organisations or school committees (Azad et al. 2018). In addition, parents can be involved in collaborations with the community by promoting the school's role in the community and the community's role in the school (Epstein et al. 2019).

## Research methods and design

The research we report on formed part of a postgraduate study in inclusive education. A qualitative research approach was followed to illuminate primary school teachers' insights and experiences of parental involvement within the context of children with autism (Grima-Farrell 2017). In following a qualitative approach, we were able to understand teachers' opinions and experiences related to parental involvement (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2018) framed in an interpretivist paradigm (Kelly, Dowling & Miller 2018).

## Participants and setting

Four schools from different districts in the Western Cape that accommodate learners with ASD were involved in the study. Two of the schools are rural full-service public primary schools, one is an urban special needs public primary school and the other one is a rural independent non-profit primary school. The schools were identified from a list of schools in the Western Cape that accommodate learners with autism as they had relevant experience

(Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout 2014). Purposive sampling was employed to select 12 female primary school teachers who at the time (2021) taught learners with autism. Consequently, the participants were diverse and had between 2 and 11 years of experience of parental involvement in school by parents of children with autism. All 12 participants were qualified female teachers.

## Data collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 12 participants using an online platform because of COVID-19 restrictions preventing the interviews from being done in person. An interview schedule guided the interviews, with the questions focusing on primary school teachers' opinions, experiences and perceptions of the involvement at school of parents of children with autism (Hammett, Twyman & Graham 2015:139). The interview guide included the following questions:

1. How do you understand parental involvement of parents with children with autism?
2. What are the forms of parental involvement at your school for parents of children with autism?

During the interviews, teachers were prompted to discuss specific forms of parental involvement, and extensive field notes were taken and combined with the interview data that were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim (Leedy & Omrod 2010). In a few cases, telephonic follow-up discussions were included to clarify certain contributions. In addition to the individual interviews, the participating schools' websites and Facebook pages were reviewed. This enabled us to obtain an overview of the messages expressed by the respective schools on social media platforms. It was not possible to observe parent-teacher meetings in the context of the pandemic because of social distancing regulations.

## Data analysis

In addition to analysing the interview data, document analysis was conducted of the four primary schools' year plans and the participants' incident reports, observation reports, records of communication with parents, feedback

from parents and forms of participation of parents of learners with autism. We also obtained permission to access examples of IEPs, workbooks, observation books, class registers and progress reports of the learners of the parents who participated in the study.

We relied on thematic analysis to analyse the written data, for example, focusing on recognising the participants' understandings of parental involvement, evaluating how teachers communicated with parents, and identifying patterns, for example, how teachers promoted learning at home, within the data according to the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). To familiarise ourselves with the data, we repeatedly read each teacher participant's transcribed interview and assigned initial codes. We then searched for possible themes, keeping Epstein's (2002) six types of parental involvement in mind. Thereafter, we carefully reviewed and refined the emerging themes, and then defined and named them. Finally, we compiled Table 1 summarising the forms of parental involvement identified by each participant and a research report on the findings of the study.

## Ethical considerations

Ethics clearance for the study was obtained from the College of Education's Research Ethics Review Committee at the University of South Africa (reference no.: 2020/11/11/51358093/12/AM). In addition, permission for the study and involvement of the four schools and respective teachers was obtained from the Western Cape Department of Education's Research Directorate. Next, we obtained permission to conduct research from the four primary schools' principals and school governing bodies. All the participants received a letter of invitation to participate in the study which detailed the purpose of the study and assured the participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time (Cohen et al. 2018). Informed consent was then obtained from the 12 participants, after assuring them that their privacy, confidentiality and anonymity would be protected (Maree 2016). In addition, the participants granted written permission for the online interviews to be recorded. The ethical requirements further involved protecting the participants from harm and avoiding

**TABLE 1:** Forms of parental involvement.

Participants' responses'	Parenting	Communication	Volunteering	Learning at home	Participation in decision making	Collaboration with the community
Teacher 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x
Teacher 2	✓	✓	X	✓	x	x
Teacher 3	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x
Teacher 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x
Teacher 5	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x
Teacher 6	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x
Teacher 7	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	x
Teacher 8	✓	✓	X	✓	x	x
Teacher 9	✓	✓	X	✓	x	x
Teacher 10	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x
Teacher 11	✓	✓	X	✓	x	x
Teacher 12	✓	✓	X	✓	x	x

any form of deception (Cohen et al. 2018). Member checking allowed us to confirm that the participants' viewpoints were accurately captured (McMillan & Schumacher 2015). Throughout the process, the rights of the participants were considered, and they were treated with respect and fairness. We also protected their confidentiality, privacy and anonymity by not revealing the names of the schools or the participants. All hard and soft copies of the data will be safely stored for a period of 5 years as required by the university.

## Forms of parental involvement

In being guided by Epstein's (2002) model of parental involvement, we identified four themes in the data. These relate to parenting, communication, volunteering and learning at home, as possible types of parental involvement.

### Parenting

The primary school teachers who participated communicated respect for the parents and the challenges they experienced related to raising children with autism. They acknowledged the general belief that the parents of children with autism would want their children to progress and become independent adults. The participants furthermore demonstrated sympathy because of the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic may have added to the challenges these parents were already experiencing.

The teachers shared their views on what parenting entails for parents of a child with autism. According to the participants, parenting, as a recognised form of parental involvement for parents of children with autism, will focus on or be observable in acts such as the following:

- 'Often parents who are involved at school are also more involved at home because they pay more attention to strategies and material sent from school to help them at home and show the child that he matters.' (Teacher 1)
- 'The reason why parents would become involved mostly is due to investment and wanting their children to progress, become independent adults one day when they grow up.' (Teacher 2)
- 'Parental involvement of children on the autism spectrum is to understand that their child needs a certain routine ... communication boards or PECS or picture schedules ... to communicate with their child at home and use the same activities we use at school.' (Teacher 4)
- 'Parents need to be absolutely hands on all the time but these days both parents work, and it is not always possible. The ideal is for a parent to be involved to spend some time guiding the child in the afternoon, keeping him busy with constructive activities, doing the homework that is provided.' (Teacher 7)
- 'Teachers need to understand parents and speak their language and understand that they are really struggling with a lot of other stuff. Educating parents about the autism spectrum is very important.' (Teacher 8)

- 'Parents with special needs children must be more involved than other parents because they know their child better than anyone else.' (Teacher 11)
- 'I understand that parents have an active involvement in their child's academic and social progress. They help to improve the child's positive attitude towards school and to stabilise the child's behaviour.' (Teacher 12)

These contributions reveal that all the teacher participants recognised the important role of parents and the value of their involvement at school to support their children's learning and development, as illustrated in Table 1. In the view of the participants, this would include the fostering of a positive attitude towards school, providing a stable home environment and teachers educating parents about autism. In this regard, the importance of educating parents about autism being a lifelong condition and supporting parents to play an active role in their child's therapeutic and educational interventions were emphasised as important.

In addition to sharing their perceptions on the parenting role of parents of children with autism in terms of what it entails and how parents can be supported by the school to understand this role, the teacher participants displayed an awareness of the challenges implied by this role. Their views are captured in the following contributions:

- 'I think it is due to a lack of understanding of the autism diagnosis. Parents don't get information on a level that they understand. We may say that a child needs something, but we don't explain why it is important, what impact it would have, or how it could make life easier for them as well.' (Teacher 2)
- 'I think with a lot of parents, there is fear. That is also a big reason why parents are not getting involved because they think there is no need for them to learn how their child thinks and functions because they think autism is something that will go away.' (Teacher 3)

### Communication

All the teacher participants indicated that communication between parents and teachers is essential for effective parental involvement, as shown in Table 1. The participants shared different views in terms of the extent of the communication that is required, with some participants arguing for communication on a daily basis, while others regarding 'frequent' communication as sufficient. Regardless of the different views, all the participants acknowledged the importance of teachers sharing information with parents about their children's progress, while receiving information that may assist them in understanding the family's circumstances and how events that occur at home may influence the child's behaviour at school. The teachers explained their views in the following manner:

- 'I find that parents really want to become involved and want to understand their child's condition. They want to know how to handle meltdowns and how to handle things at home. Often, parents will say, "How did you get

- my son or daughter to do that at school, because I can't get them to do that at home?" (Teacher 1)
- 'Parents should participate in discussions about their children, respond to emails or messages about their children and attend meetings. Now during COVID-19, we have zoom meetings.' (Teacher 4)
  - 'I see it as a relationship, especially when there are special needs children involved. There needs to be a good relationship between a teacher and the parent, because of the child's needs and the things that the parent knows about the child that the teacher is not aware of.' (Teacher 11)

Some teachers posited that parents 'have no excuse for not participating', because of schools generally going out of their way to accommodate parents in order to ensure two-way communication between these two parties. More specifically, the participants referred to the use of a range of communication strategies by schools such as WhatsApp messages, email, message books and online platforms for virtual meetings that were introduced to facilitate parent communication with their children's teachers.

When discussing the various platforms for communication between parents and the school, the participants also identified several reasons for parents potentially not making use of these communication platforms or not communicating with the school on a regular basis. These challenges related to, for example, access to technology or devices, time constraints, financial challenges and lack of support, and would inevitably negatively affect parent involvement, as captured in the following contributions:

- 'I often think parents do not become involved because of a lack of resources and many children come from very poor backgrounds. They don't have access to the internet and email and can't attend the zoom meetings. They don't have cars to come to school to meet with the teacher or principal.' (Teacher 1)
- 'I find that parents who do not have a support system at home, do not have the time to be involved. Most parents are single parents. Also, parents work long hours, and their home situations are too difficult to assist the child.' (Teacher 10)

Next, the participants emphasised the importance of parents' involvement in the IEPs of their children, based on the importance of parents understanding the programmes and interventions that would apply to their children. They said the following in this regard:

- 'We make use of an IEP. The reason for this is there is no set curriculum for children with ASD... their emotional and motor development needs. It is set up by the psychologists and whole multi-disciplinary team and the parents are also involved....' (Teacher 1)
- 'We have the teacher/parent meeting (where) feedback (is) given regularly. Contact with the parent whenever anything happens... We also have IEP meetings where every child has their individualised education plan where a copy of that also sent home to the parents.' (Teacher 2)

- 'Parents need to attend IEP meetings, parent meetings or special events that are held at school. Engaging with the teacher through regular communication regarding the child's specific problems and challenges.' (Teacher 10)

### Volunteering

Although all four schools' websites promoted parental involvement in fundraising activities, only half of the teachers – 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 10 – identified volunteering during the individual interviews, once again referring to fundraising yet also mentioning other attempts to get parents involved on a volunteer basis, as reflected in Table 1. One of the teacher participants shared her views in the following way:

- 'We have the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association). We have fundraisers where the parents can help. Now, we are getting our playgrounds up and running, so, we have Dads coming and helping to prepare a certain area, taking out the weeds... We tried to get the parents involved as much as possible within the guidelines of the current COVID situation.' (Teacher 3)

Some of the other participants confirmed and elaborated on this contribution. They namely stated the following:

- 'The parents are quite involved with school activities where the kids do practical activities like for Market Day ... parents can help with different projects or different committees where they can help with fundraising or where the school really needs hands.' (Teacher 4)
- 'There are only a handful of parents who will be interested or helping with fundraising.' (Teacher 5)
- 'Often, we have fundraising and then a lot of parents get involved.' (Teacher 6)

From these contributions, it seems clear that volunteering by parents often involved fundraising activities, yet a few other examples were also mentioned. The possibility of parental involvement in support of professional knowledge and skills development was, for example, not mentioned, resulting in the deduction that the participating schools probably did not focus on encouraging this form of parental involvement.

### Learning at home

All the participants recognised the importance of children learning at home, to reinforce what has been learned at school, as seen in Table 1. In this regard, the participants emphasised the prominent role of the parent yet also that of the school (teacher) to guide the parent to ensure learning at home and the continuation of what has transpired in school. They once again emphasised the importance of two-way communication in this regard. Some of the participants' contributions are captured in the following quotations:

- 'The parent must work together with the teacher to have the same environment and structures in place for the learner at home.' (Teacher 4)
- 'If parents do homework with their children or if you have behaviour problems with the child, the parent

- should work on it at home or set an example or do a social story.’ (Teacher 5)
- ‘Being hands on with homework and helping children to stick to the schedule. Helping children socialise and to solve problems. It is basically the same as involvement at school, but parental involvement at home is more hands-on.’ (Teacher 7)
  - ‘We need to help the parents to understand what we do at school, so that they can follow it through at home with the child.’ (Teacher 8)
  - ‘Implementing tools or skills that the child learns at school, especially the daily routine, by assisting with home support provided by the educator.’ (Teacher 10)
  - ‘The parents should do the same work as what the teacher is doing and vice versa. Parental involvement at home is being involved in your child and in doing what is the best for your child. An important thing is discipline.’ (Teacher 11)

Some of the teacher participants, however, stated their concern that many parents did not seem interested and, as a result, could be insufficiently involved in their children’s learning at home, despite the importance of this taking place. In these cases, parents would reportedly over-rely on the school and teachers. According to the participants, some other parents experienced certain challenges with regard to the continuation of learning at home, once again negatively affecting this form of parental involvement. These ideas are captured in the following contributions:

- ‘I think it is different factors, social economic circumstances, single parents who don’t have not enough time to spend with their child and I have experienced that parents often avoid getting involved because they have not fully accepted the diagnosis of their child and then they avoid doing anything at all.’ (Teacher 7)
- ‘Lack of knowledge, feeling as if it became too much. Nothing is going to change, like I said, my child is going to always have autism, so why bother.’ (Teacher 8)
- ‘The parents are sometimes overworked and overwhelmed in their daily work schedule, and they have long working hours and then they must come home and help children with other homework and activities so they really sometimes can’t get involved at school like they want to.’ (Teacher 12)

## Discussion

Our discussion of the findings is guided by the four kinds of parent involvement indicated by Epstein’s Parent Involvement Model (2002) that were identified as themes in the data. In terms of parenting as a form of parental involvement (Epstein 2002), it is important that the parents of children with autism understand their role in supporting their children’s learning both in school and at home, by providing their children’s basic needs, assisting them with homework, motivating their children and regularly communicating with their children about what has happened at school (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). In South Africa, the responsibilities related to parental involvement are captured

in legislation and policy documents, being the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA 1996) and the *South African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996)* with the latter defining parents’ rights and responsibilities in terms of their involvement in their children’s education.

All four primary schools involved in the study we report on were compliant with these national legislation and policies related to parental involvement in South Africa, with the participants’ perceptions of parental involvement in school being consistent with the existing legislation. As such, the teacher participants’ definitions of parental involvement in school indicated that they hold a good understanding of what parental involvement entails. For example, the participants’ assertion that parental involvement should occur across all facets of school-related aspects, ‘from supporting the school to supporting their own child’, and their repeated reference to the importance of parents being involved in IEP processes and parent meetings align with the work of others, such as Schneider (2018).

According to the existing literature, parental involvement in education begins at home where parents should provide a secure and healthy environment, appropriate education and various forms of support to their children. Parents and caregivers are a child’s primary and most significant teachers (Ilik & Er 2019) and co-workers in their children’s educational process which necessitates a close partnership between the home and the school (Garbacz et al. 2016). The importance of such a partnership was stressed by the participants in our study, with them also indicating that teachers should guide and support parents with skills and activities to implement and practice at home.

The teachers who participated in our study furthermore grasped the importance of frequent and open communication between parents and themselves. Several participants noted the importance of building a trusting relationship with parents. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants maintained communication with the parents in their schools via social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. This communication was, however, controlled by teachers, consistent with the ‘unidirectional process’ identified by McKenzie et al. (2018), which we view as a top-down approach. Only a few teachers encouraged parents to communicate among themselves on WhatsApp groups and, for example, share their experiences about their children with other parents. Several teachers expressed a preference for email or WhatsApp as convenient communication channels with parents. At all four schools, parent-teacher meetings only occurred between two and four times a year, depending on the school, teachers and parents. This was in particular the case during the COVID-19 pandemic because of national lockdown regulations, resulting in schools utilising alternative methods such as one-on-one meetings between teachers and parents, virtual meetings, emails or telephone calls, taking into account the fact that some parents did not have access to electronic devices or data to benefit from virtual activities. While social media had previously

been used, the schools intensified its use during the pandemic reflecting a global trend (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza 2022; Francis et al. 2022). However, as soon as the restrictions eased, they held individual meetings with parents which is commendable.

With regard to volunteering, as another kind of parental involvement, existing literature recommends that parents can fulfil an active role in volunteering which can take on many forms and involve different activities (Mata et al. 2018). Even though half the participants in our study identified volunteering as important, they primarily focused on fundraising initiatives and activities, making little reference to, for example, parents as experts in their professions who may also play an active role in supporting the school's functioning. Consequently, the teacher participants seemingly failed to encourage parents to volunteer their professional knowledge and skills for the benefit of the respective schools. Because autism is prevalent in all contexts and societies, it stands to reason that the parent body of schools that accommodate learners with autism would represent a diverse range of knowledge and skills that constitute a human resource for schools, yet this resource may not have been utilised optimally by all schools in the past.

Next, in terms of learning at home, all the participants in our study indicated the importance of this type of parental involvement as illustrated in Table 1, consistent with the existing literature and theoretical framework that guided our study (Azad et al. 2018; Epstein et al. 2019; Marais 2020). According to the participants, parental involvement in learning at home will strengthen the learning that occurs at school, as also emphasised by Benner et al. (2016). In the same way, the participants emphasised the importance of parents in sharing information about their children's behaviour, progress and the challenges they face with the school, in order for these two parties to work collaboratively to address these. These findings confirm the importance of firm partnerships between teachers and parents that will enable parents to reinforce what their children learn at school in the home environment and allow parents and teachers to work collaboratively to reinforce learning across home, school and community contexts.

Several participants asserted that parent involvement at home required of parents to be 'hands-on' by helping their children with, for example, homework activities, practicing skills acquired at school and consistently following their child's IEP at home. This finding supports the work of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) who suggest that parents can demonstrate school-related skills to their children, reinforce learning by praising their children and teach children how to do things. Parents should thus lead by example by showing and teaching their children different skills to help them succeed in many areas of life and behave appropriately in different situations, more so in the case of children with autism.

Even though participation in decision making and collaboration with the community are also recognised as important forms of parental involvement (Epstein 2002), these aspects were not mentioned by the participants in our study, with a single exception (Teacher 7) who stated that parental participation in decision making was 'crucial'. Based on this silence in the data we obtained, we recommend that schools should implement active measures to include parents in decisions, governance and advocacy events by, for example, involving them in groups, committees and other parent associations (Epstein et al. 2019; Michael et al. 2012). By participating in the school governing body, parents' voices may also be included in school decisions with other parents becoming more aware of their shared experiences and connections with other families (Hebel & Persitz 2014). In this way, schools and parents can work in partnership to ensure all learners' success (Garbacz et al. 2015), thereby aligning to the recommendations of the South African Schools Act (Department of Education 1996). In the same manner, schools should collaborate with organisations in the community to leverage resources that may strengthen their programmes, family practices and children's learning and development, and to access health, educational, social and cultural services (Michael et al. 2012).

## Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm the importance of involving parents, and particularly parents of children with autism, as active partners in education. As parents are the primary educators of their children, they need to establish a safe and secure home environment and reinforce learning across home, school and community contexts. Effective communication between parents and teachers as well as trusting relationships are at the core of effective parental involvement. Even though the findings of our study point to the role of parents as volunteers, schools can more actively pursue this aspect, by mobilising the strengths, knowledge and skills of parents, in support of effective schooling and the healthy functioning of children in society. Parents may furthermore be involved more actively in decision making and planning processes at school in a bidirectional process. As collaboration was severely constrained during the COVID-19 pandemic, future research is needed to determine how parents of children with autism collaborate with the community.

Epstein's six forms of parental involvement can be used as a guide for schools to intentionally create enabling environments that will promote parental recognition and engagement characterised by an equitable partnership at primary school level. Based on the finding that the schools that participated relied on alternative innovative ways to involve and communicate with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be concluded that schools can take the lead to facilitate broader parental involvement even when parents seem unwilling and hesitant to take responsibility for becoming involved. It needs to be taken into consideration, however, that alternative ways of communicating, such as



technology-driven strategies, may pose additional challenges in the form of accessibility and confidence to implement these methods on the side of the parents. Schools will therefore have to plan for these potential challenges in order to ensure optimal parental involvement.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

M.J.V.R. collected the data as part of her Master's degree in Education study. M.G.C.-J. supervised the study, verified the data and drafted the article, and M.J.V.R. contributed to the subsequent drafts.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, M.G.C.-J., upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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