

## **Causes of Poor Parental Involvement in Educational Activities: Case Study of a Primary School in Gaborone West, Botswana.**

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### **Abstract:**

*Poor parental involvement in schools and educational activities at basic education level is a concern the world over. Governments have promulgated deliberate educational policies to institute parental involvement through structures commonly known as Parents and Teachers Associations (PTA). Despite this structural approach, many countries including Botswana, experience poor parental involvement in educational activities. This study, therefore, adopted a quantitative methodological design to investigate causes of poor parental involvement in a school located in a low-income township area in Gaborone - Botswana. The study confirms that there is lack of effective parental involvement in that school. One of the major challenges is that school activities and meetings are often held when the majority of the parents are at work. It is therefore, recommended that PTA activities be held at a time that suits the parents. It is also recommended that schools should assign parents specific activities and tasks; and that teachers must be encouraged to visit their children's homes to dialogue with parents on educational issues in order to inspire parents to participate in the education of their children.*

**Keywords:** parental involvement, parents and teachers association, school-parent relationship, participation in school activities, fundraising, homework

## Background

As soon as it obtained self rule from the British government in 1965, Botswana adopted four national principles to guide the country's philosophy of nation building. These were democracy, development, unity and self-reliance. Within the philosophy of self-reliance, PTAs became a cornerstone in the impetus for educational development. Since then, parental involvement (PI) in school activities has become part of the policy of school partnerships in Botswana. The Revised National Policy on Education of 1994 (RNPE), which is the current Botswana education blueprint, posits that "the government should intensify the efforts to encourage the establishment of PTAs" (Republic of Botswana, 1994: 52). The policy statement goes further to state "... that Parents and Teachers Associations provide an effective forum for schools to keep in close contact with the communities that they serve, and therefore ensure that parents take an interest in, and contribute to the education of their children". PTAs are required to participate and contribute in school and educational development. Specific to the primary school system, the RNPE states that "PTAs should be encouraged to add...for example in the provision of computers and library books, in order to enrich the curriculum of the school" (Republic of Botswana, 1994: 16). This requires every school to ensure that parents participate in school activities, hence the motivation to identify barriers to PI in the school system in Botswana.

This case study investigated factors that contribute to poor PI at a public<sup>1</sup> primary school in Gaborone West suburb in the City of Gaborone in Botswana. The city has twenty-nine public primary schools. The school studied is a property of the Government of Botswana and the school infrastructure is provided by the Gaborone City Council. The school is located in Gaborone West suburb - a location whose social index is characterized by residents who are in the city's lowest socio-economic bracket. The majority is either unemployed or survives on government-sponsored social safety nets of temporary labour intensive low paying jobs. The housing situation in the area is so poor that many of the residents stay in congested shared Self-Help Housing Agency<sup>2</sup> (SHHA) houses. Many residents live a kind of nomadic life, moving from place to place in and outside the suburb in search of accommodation

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<sup>1</sup> Public primary school refers to government primary school owned by local authority

<sup>2</sup> Self-Help Housing Agency is a government scheme that subsidizes residents of low-income Botswana citizens to build houses in towns and major villages

and employment. These residents are evidently too busy running their errands to participate in their children's school activities. The school has maintained an enrolment that ranges from 600 to 800 pupils. It is a mixed day school which accommodates both boys and girls of ages ranging between 6 ½ and 13 years. It is an open mainstream school that admits children with mixed low level socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Over the years, the school has maintained a teacher population establishment ranging between 20 to 25 teachers. It has consistently been staffed with trained teachers, and has reasonably good infrastructure.

The school was selected because, despite its commendable infrastructural developments and teacher establishment over the years, it has recorded continuous low performance in the Primary School Leaving Examination<sup>3</sup> (PSLE). The school also experiences difficulty in mobilizing parents to participate in day-to-day activities of the school although it (i.e. the school) faces the challenge of low performance in the PSLE. One of the reasons behind the school's failure to achieve good results is the semi-nomadic life of the residents of the suburb, who seem to have little time for school activities. However, most of the problems that prevent parents from active involvement in the school are not yet known.

### **Aims and Objectives of the study**

We carried out this study bearing in mind the observation by Pansiri (2008a: 491) that "instructional leadership has ... a duty to create an enabling environment for parent-school relationships..." Such an environment is expected to motivate parents in a low-income township area to support school activities. The aim of the study was to investigate causes of poor parental involvement in this low-income township area. The objectives of the study were:

- To identify factors that contribute to low parental involvement in school activities
- To determine effective ways through which schools could get parents involved in school activities and the education of their children

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<sup>3</sup>. Primary School Leaving Examination is a national examination that is taken at the end of primary education

The study was conducted on the basis of the hypothesis that when parents are actively involved in school activities, children's level of learning and achievement would rise and the school results would improve.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is located within the theoretical framework of supply and demand raised by Sifuna (2007). Sifuna (2007: 688) argues that parent-school relationships occur when there is a balance between supply (availability of trained teachers, infrastructure and instructional materials), demand (parents and children's motivation, desire and attitudes on the opportunity cost of schooling), and learning processes (children's effective learning experience in the classroom). The effectiveness of parent-school relationships therefore takes place when there is a balance between supply and demand. To problematize parent-school relationships, it is important to reflect on the position of the RNPE within this theory. Public primary schools are provided for by government through local authorities known as district and town councils. The RNPE outlines the infrastructural facilities that a standard primary school ought to be supplied by council. This includes,

A maximum of 22 classrooms, administration block with office space for the headteacher, deputy headteacher, typists, staff room and 2 storerooms for storage of books and food; library; resource centre; fully equipped science room...; room for health activities; a sports field..; a tool shed for agricultural and other tools; teachers quarters with a minimum of 2 bedrooms; adequate toilet facilities...; sufficient land for agricultural purposes...; electrification of school buildings;... typewriters/computers; reprographic equipment...; telephone...; library books [and] support staff; ... each teacher should be provided with accommodation (Republic of Botswana 1994: 15-16).

The policy further states that;

...the responsibility for the provision of infrastructure, including decisions on the categories of contractors to be engaged, rests with the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing. Computers, in particular, should constitute some of the equipment in the proposed resource centres... (1994: 16).

The policy puts clear emphasis on government. Parents only come in minimally through the influence and leadership of the PTA.

This policy, which is perhaps peculiar to a developing country, presents a situation where the priority given to the provision of education is relatively high, given government's commitment to the provision of facilities and staffing. The demand and motivation for parental contribution towards the opportunity cost of schooling is therefore minimal. In other words there is very little contribution expected from parents. The case of Botswana shows that government plays a major role compared to parents and the community, a system that Pansiri (2008b) describes as the predominance of bureaucratic type governance. The involvement of parents rests on the availability of a PTA to mobilize and engage them.

### **Literature review**

PI has become a concept that covers a broad area in school management discourse. According to Desforges and Abouchaar (2003: 4), Western literature on PI consistently shows that the concept includes parents' "contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance." At a parent-learner level, PI is reduced to parental engagement (PE). Harris and Goodall (2006: 59) argue that PE "centres on the support that parents can show for their children, the encouragement given and the role models provided". Western literature (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2006) has established that both PI and PE are much more pronounced at infant and primary education levels and diminish as children progress to higher levels of education. This study however focuses on PI at a primary school in Botswana. The school's residents social index reflects "living in materially uncompromising circumstances" (Harris & Goodall, 2006: 24) of Gaborone West suburb. Although this study limits itself mostly to PI, some aspects of PE will be given due attention in some cases. This is because some aspects of PI also promote PE towards the goal of improving learner achievement, especially that Western literature shows that PI "is strongly influenced positively by the child's level of attainment" (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003: 4).

Studies about PI in schools and children's learning activities are varied. In terms of factors contributing to poor PI and PE, some have

pointed out that the level of education of parents determine the degree to which a parent gets involved in his or her children's school work, while others argue that these depend on the ability of teachers to mobilize and motivate parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Dauber and Epstein (1991) argue that better educated parents are more involved at school and at home. However, it has been found that parents are not assisted on how to "become involved in several types of learning activities at home, including listening to child read" (Epstein & Dauber, 1991: 297). David (1993) emphasizes the importance of home visits by teachers, where teachers take the opportunity to help guide parents in assisting children with home work. This approach was also found to be useful in helping parents to participate in school fundraising activities. It has been argued that parents should be helped to discuss television shows and practice spelling and writing skills with their children, and that schools should assign "homework that requires parent-child interaction and discussion..." (Epstein & Dauber, 1991: 297). This is important because studies have found that parents do not know where to start, when to find time, or how to go about making positive connections with the school. In remote areas of Botswana, Pansiri (2008b) observes the predominance of "bureaucratic type PTA governance" (2008b: 454) where teachers are not certain about the role of parents in school. He also identifies a communication gap between the school and parents in these areas.

Single-parent status is another variable that has been found to contribute to levels of PI. Hornby (2000), Pang and Watkins (2000), Fan and Chen (2001) and Bernard (2004) observe that while PI promotes positive attitudes towards school, for children who live in single-parent families it is much more difficult for parents to have high levels of involvement in their children's education. It has been established that children from single parent families have more academic and behaviour problems than those from two-parent families (Kohl et al, 1994). Single parents often have fewer resources such as money, social support and time to invest in their children's education and development.

Another factor that was found to limit parents who are working from participating in school activities is employment (Taliaferro et al, 2009). While this is more common in towns, it has been found that parents in rural areas are also too busy with subsistence activities to find time to participate in school programmes (Pansiri, 2008b). Pansiri argues that some parents in remote areas of Botswana feel that PTA executive members represent them, so that they do not have time for

the school. The time and activity relationship has also been highlighted by Blamires et al (1997). They argue for “open days to be held at times chosen to enable parents to attend” (1997: 3).

Communication has been found to be a critical factor in issues of PI (Cotton & Reed, 1989; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Blamires et al, 1997; Coleman, 1998; Sandovnik et al, 2001; Molefe et al, 2009). Epstein and Dauber (1991: 293) argue that “holding conferences with all student parents, [and] communicating with parents about the school program” are some of the factors that could show teachers’ positive attitude towards parent’s involvement. Another strategy of communicating with the parents is “providing parents both good and bad reports about student’s progress” (1989: 293). Cotton and Reed (1989) state that if parents receive phone calls, read and sign written communication from the school, and perhaps attend and listen during parents teachers’ conferences, greater achievement accrues than would be the case with no PI at all. Similarly, Blamires et al (1997: 3) argue for “written reports on children to be made at least once a year [and] the child’s work to be seen by parents”.

Sadovnik et al (2001) emphasize the use of newsletters as one medium of communication that can be used to notify families about school events or invite them to attend school activities. The bottom line though is the argument by Molefe et al (2009) that schools benefit most if parents and teachers work together as partners in children’s education. They suggest that good communication with teachers at school makes children learn well. All these studies suggest that communication is basically one of the main shared jobs in a school for improved PI.

In terms of activities that parents can engage in to help children in their school work; studies have raised a number of ideas. Munn (1993: 124) explains that “The parents’ role is to reinforce school values and to support the school if there are problems with their children...”. He maintains that parents can provide teachers with information on the effects of the school programme. It has also been found that “children whose parents help them at home perform better...” (Bloom, 1992: 19). Stier et al (2011: 1) argue that “almost any form of parent involvement appears to improve student performance”. Similarly, Wolfendale and Keith (1996: 33) state that, “educators have long argued for a closer involvement of parents in their children’s education.” Involvement may mean anything from fundraising for the school, or becoming members of the PTA, thus participating in school decision-making activities. It is

argued that PI improves children's homework habits, reduces absenteeism and rates of dropout as well as enhancing academic attainment (Stier, et al, 2011; Wolfendale & Keith, 1996). PI is generally much more advanced in Western countries. In these countries, interventions such as parent training programmes, initiatives that enhance home-school links and programmes of family and community education have been embarked upon to mobilize and encourage parents to be involved in the education of their children (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

In the case of Botswana, Pansiri (2008a; 2008b) found that low academic achievement, high rates of absenteeism, early school withdrawals, and lack of interest in homework were high among boarders in remote primary schools, where the schools were not accessible to parents.

In conclusion, there is a lot of literature available about PI in schools in the West and very little in the case of Botswana. The international literature identifies demographic variables such as parent levels of education and single-parent status, social distance, poor communication and lack of engaging parents in school activities as critical issues in efforts to enhance school-community relationships. The literature advocates effective school-home relationships. The two studies on Botswana (Pansiri, 2008a; 2008b) identify marginalization of parents from school instructional management systems in remote schools and the predominance of bureaucratic type governance where parents are not involved. So far little is known about issues of PI in Botswana's education system. This study is therefore based on the understanding that "families and schools are inevitably related..." (Hoover-Dempsey, 1987: 417).

## **Method**

Quantitative design was adopted for this study, and data collection was through the medium of questionnaires. According to Moore (2000) and Simmons (2003), the questionnaire enables a study to cover a larger population in a research constituency. This design was found more appropriate for this study because it was carried out in a period of three months, in order to cover a large population of parents. The respondents were parents of children who attended the school in the case study.

To select a sample for the study, the researchers worked with class teachers in order to identify respondents. A stratified sampling technique



(Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996) was used. This entailed teachers dividing the population into classes based on variables such as infant classes, middle classes, and upper classes. In each of the three groups, a simple random sample of parents was selected. Teachers were confident that the sample accurately represented not only the overall population of parents, but also key subgroups, such as parents of infant, middle and upper classes. The initial plan was to include thirty (30) respondents from the infant department, thirty (30) from the middle department and thirty (30) from the upper department. The total targeted number of respondents was ninety (90).

The researchers used a five-point and a two-point likert-scale questionnaire type. The questionnaire was written in simple and direct English. It was meant to match the educational levels of members of the community so that was clearly understood by all. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. Section A covered bio-data. The bio-data was considered necessary because it allowed the researchers an opportunity to get an idea of the caliber of parents that the school served. The data was also necessary for purposes of triangulation in order to create a clear relationship between parents and the nature of problems that the school experienced.

The focus on research objectives and questions was guided by sections B to D. Section B covered five items of the five-point likert-scale on factors that contribute or hinder parental involvement. Section C had four five-point likert-scale items testing effective ways in which a school communicates with parents. Section D had four *yes/no* items exploring strategies that parents could possibly use to help children in learning activities at home. These three sections carried thirteen items. The items were kept to this minimum in order to make it easier and simpler for parents to complete.

Each one of the ninety (90) students selected was handed a questionnaire to give to their parents to complete at home. However, only fifty-three (53) out of the ninety (90) questionnaires were returned. This made a 58% rate of return, which was significantly lower than originally anticipated. A follow up was made about three times to collect the remaining questionnaires but they were still not returned. Through informal interactions with both teachers and children, it was discovered that the non-working and less literate parents are the ones who did not return the questionnaire. Despite the low rate of return, the researchers' target was valid enough to represent the population.

## Findings

The data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Graphs and charts were generated to reflect percentages on each of the nineteen items in all sections (A to D), that is, both the bio-data section and research objectives items. This section discusses the findings. Some graphs and charts are presented as illustration points.

The respondents' demographic data is presented under item 1 to 4 to cover the qualifications of the parents or guardians, their sources of income and accommodation, and the types of parenting. This data was considered important in showing the relationship between parents and their feelings and involvement in school activities. The findings reflected the following:

### 1) Highest Qualification Attained

*Figure A1: Highest Qualification*

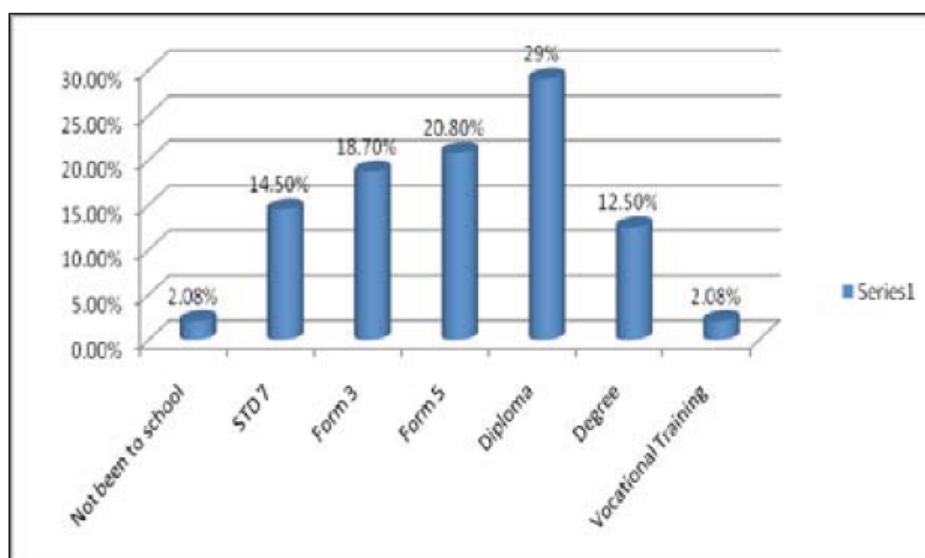


Figure A1 presents highest qualifications of the respondents. Those who have not been to school were 2.08%. Standard Seven holders were 14.5%. Form 3 holders were 18.7%. Those who hold Form 5 certificate were 20.8%. Diploma holders were 29%. Degree holders were 12.5%. Lastly, 2.08% were holders of vocational training. What is clear is that only a few parents in this SHHA suburb got a university qualification.

## 2) Source of Income

Figure A2: Source of Income

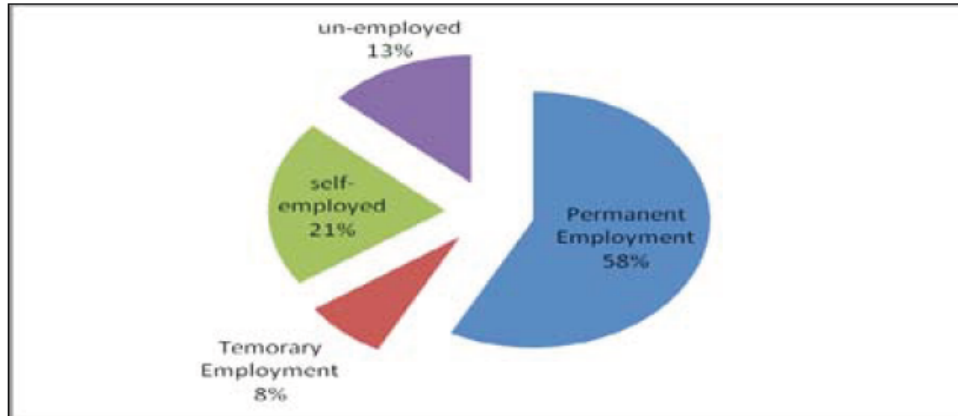


Figure A2 presents sources of income of the respondents. Parents in permanent employment were 58%. Those who work in temporary employment were 8%. The self-employed were 21%. The respondents who are un-employed were 13%. While 58% of the respondents were on permanent jobs, the SHHA suburb is for people in the low income bracket. The self-employed would be largely those who run small household based tuck shops. The temporary employment bracket covers those parents in government subsidized labour intensive schemes for the unemployed.

## 3) Type of Accommodation

Figure A3: Type of accommodation

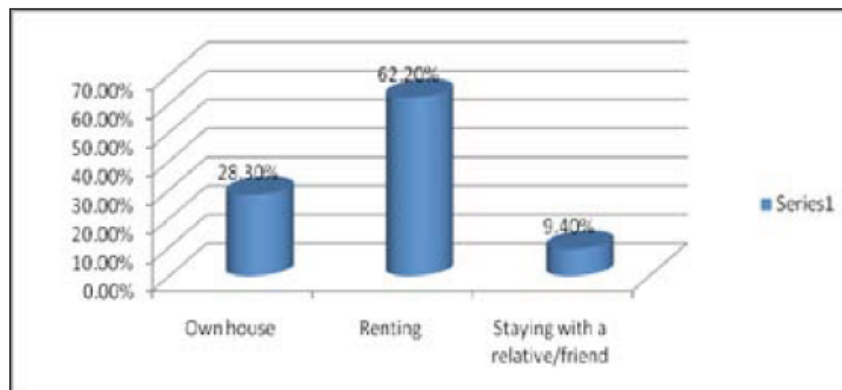


Figure A3 illustrates types of accommodation for the respondents. It reflects that 28.30% owned houses. 62.2% were in rented accommodation.

Lastly, those who stay with relatives or friends were 9.40%. This shows that housing ownership for the school constituency is poor because most of the learners have parents who rent accommodation in already poorly built SHHA structures.

**4). Type of family**

*Figure A4: Type of family*

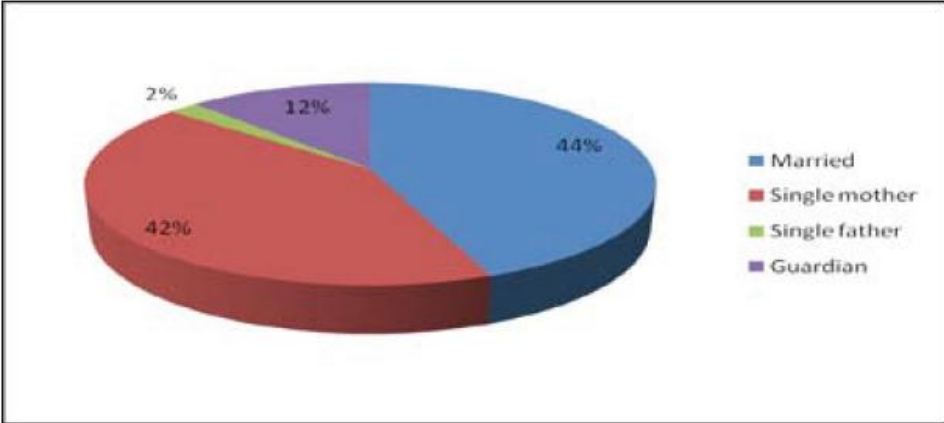


Figure A4 indicates types of family in the SHHA suburb. Respondents who are married constitute 44%. Single mothers are 42% while single fathers make 2%. Guardian parenting is 12%.

Items 5 to 14 present data that are used to measure levels of PI. These are in the form of responses to the five-point likert scale statements that address the two research questions.

**5) Role in Child Learning**

*Figure B1: Playing a Role in Child learning*

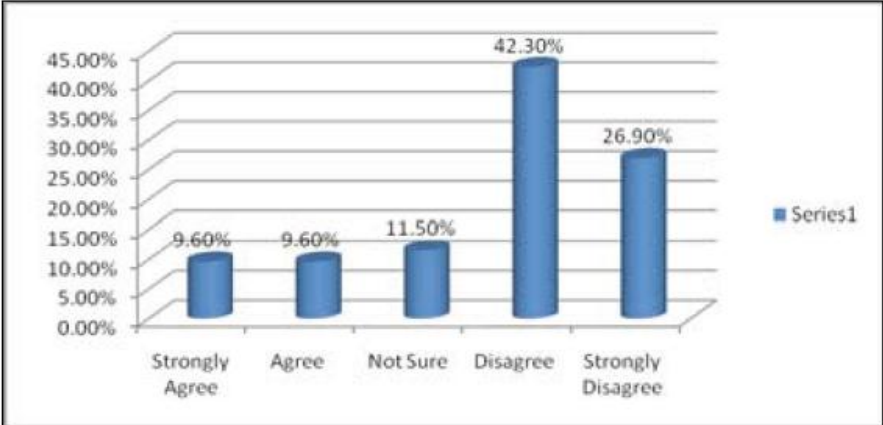
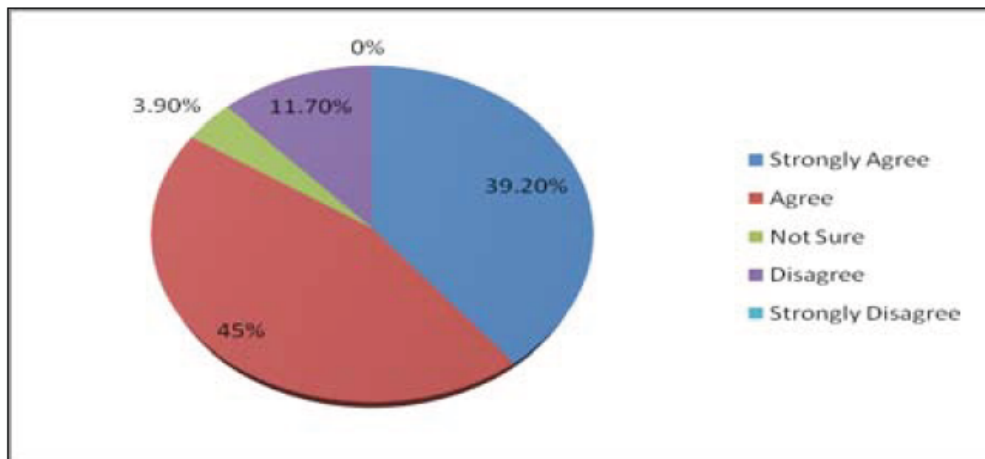


Figure B1 indicates parents' responses to the role they play in their children's learning. Respondents who strongly agree were 9.6%. Those who agree were also 9.6%. Those who were not sure were 11.5%. Those who disagree were 42.3%. Lastly respondents who strongly disagree were 26.9%. This means 69.2% did not play any role in the learning of their children.

**6) Meetings held during the day when parents are at work**

*Figure B2: PTA Appropriateness of Meetings Times.*



According to Figure B2, most PTA meetings were held during the day when most of the parents were at work. For example, 39.2% of the respondents strongly agree, while 45% agree that meetings were held during the day when they were at work. Those not sure were 3.9%. Respondents who disagree were 11.7%.

**7) Announcements for PTA meetings**

*Figure B3: Missing Announcements for PTA meetings*

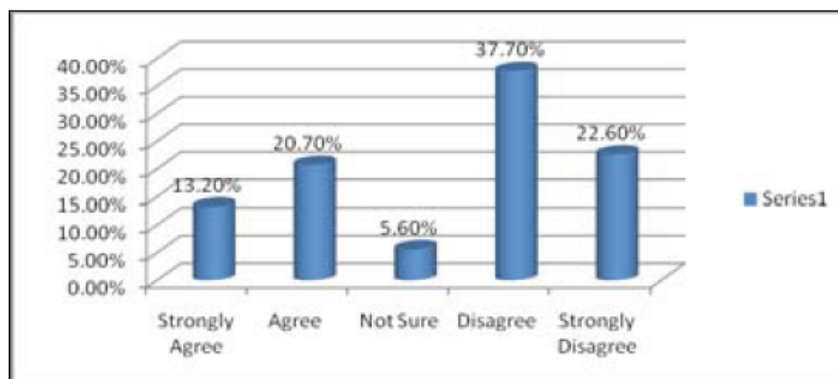


Figure B3 indicates the degree to which parents miss announcements for PTA meetings. About 13.2% strongly agree that they missed announcements, while 20.7% agree that they also missed such. At least 37.7% and 22.6% disagree and strongly disagree respectively. The fact that 33.9% claim to miss announcement raises a concern on how meetings are communicated to parents.

**8) Assignment of PTA Tasks to Parents**

*Figure B4: Parents never assigned PTA tasks*

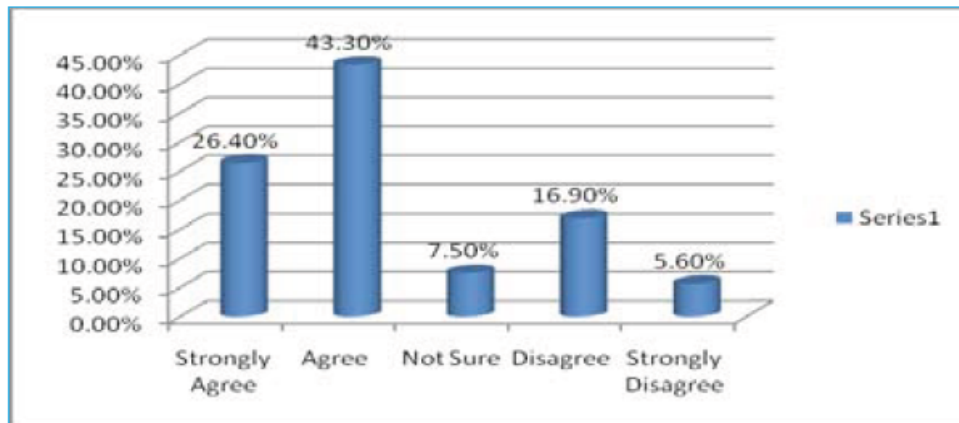


Figure B4 reflects the degree to which parents were assigned PTA tasks to perform at school. The data reveals that 26.4% and 43.3% of the respondents strongly agree and agree respectively that they were never assigned any PTA tasks. Respondents who were not sure were represented by 7.5%. The 16.9% (disagree) and 5.6% (strongly disagree) were those who were never assigned specific PTA tasks.

**9) Teachers and Home Visits**

*Figure B5: Teachers do not visit homes*

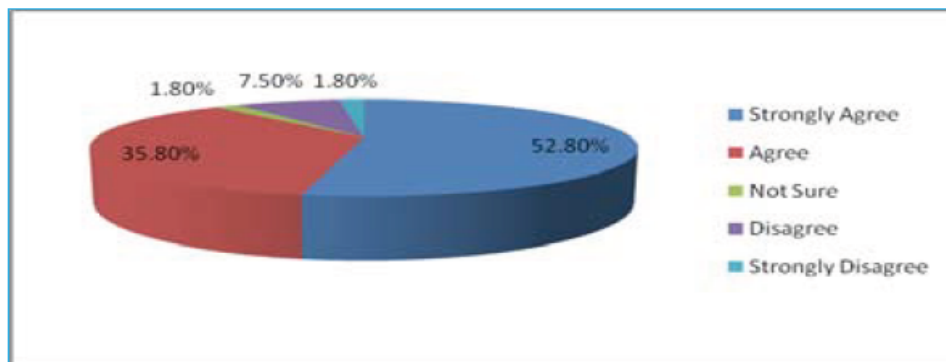


Figure B5 shows that teachers do not visit homes. Respondents who strongly agree that teachers did not visit homes were 52.8% and those who agree were 35.8%. Respondents who were not sure were 1.8%. Those who disagree were 7.5% while 1.8% strongly disagrees.

**10) Parents Preference on Communication Systems**

*Figure C1: Communication system preferred*

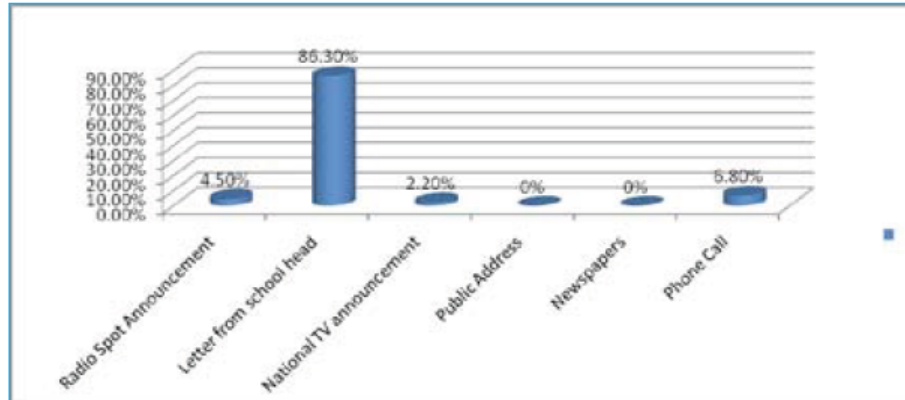
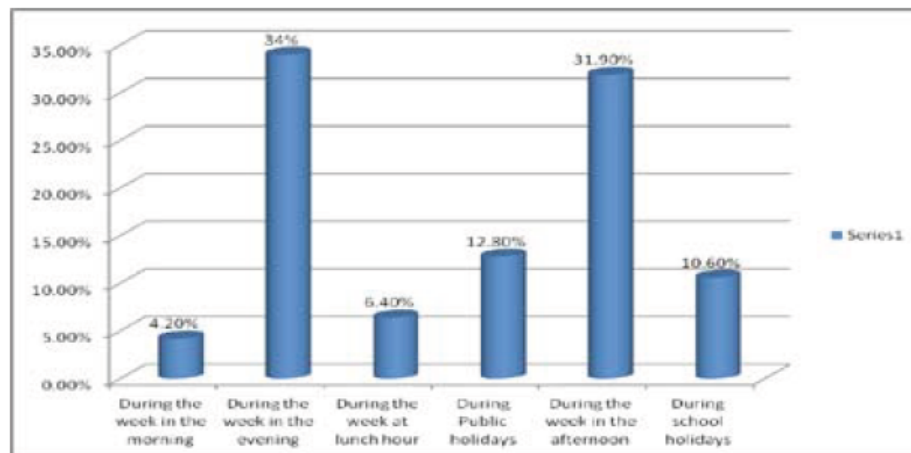


Figure C1 presents communication systems preferred. The respondents who preferred radio spot announcements were 4.5%. Those who preferred a letter from the school were 86.3%. The respondents who preferred TV announcements were 2.2%. No one preferred announcements through newspapers. Lastly, those who preferred a phone call were 6.8%.

**11) Times Suitable to Parents for school activities**

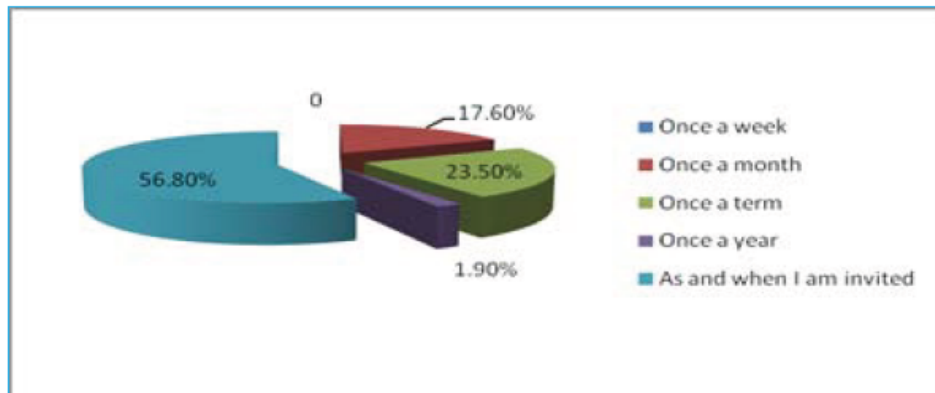
*Figure C2: Times suitable for parents*



*Figure C2* indicates times suitable for parents to participate in school activities. Respondents who suggested morning activities were 4.2%. Those who suggested evening activities were 34%. Respondents who preferred lunch time activities were 6.4%. Those who suggested public holiday activities were 12.8%. Those in favour of afternoon activities were 31.9%. Lastly 10.6% preferred school holiday activities.

**12) Availability to Participate in PTA Activities**

*Figure C3 Availability to Participate in PTA Activities*



*Figure C3* illustrates appropriate times to attend PTA activities. Many (56.8%) respondents suggested participating in PTA activities as and when they were invited. Those who preferred to attend PTA activities once a term were 23.5%, while those respondents who suggested attending PTA activities once a month were 17.6%. Only 1.90% attends as and when they are invited.

**13) PTA Events Liked the Most**

*Figure C4: PTA Event Liked Most*

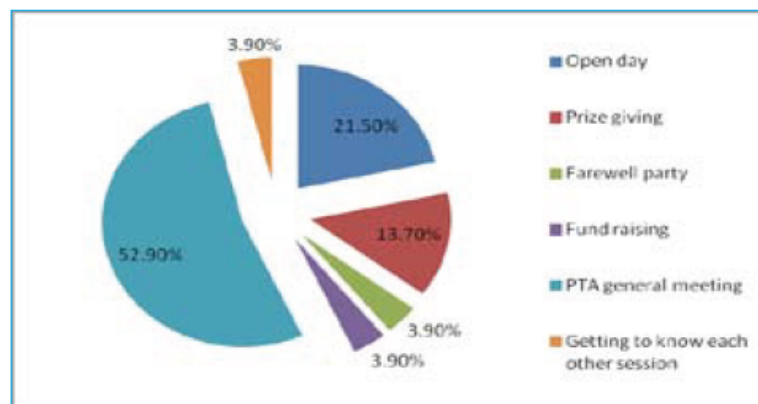
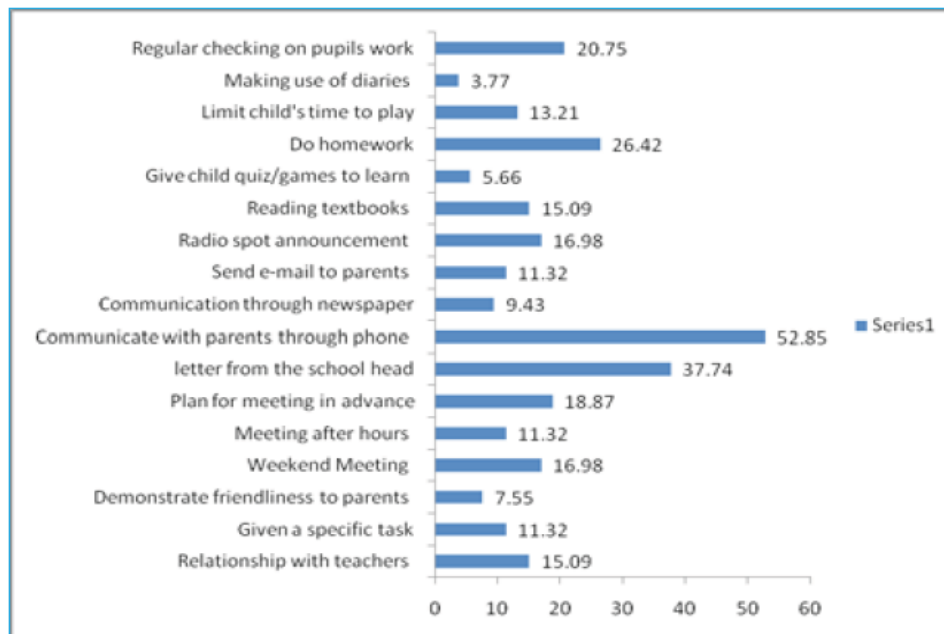




Figure C4 reflects PTA events liked most. The data shows that 52.90% of the respondents preferred PTA general meetings while 21.50% of the respondents liked school open-days. Some (13.70%) liked prize-giving activities. Events liked the least (3.90%) are farewell-parties and fundraising activities.

#### 14) Suggestions from Respondents

Figure D: Parents Suggestions/Recommendations



The study requested the respondents to suggest ideas and strategies for improving school-parent relationships. The suggestions are presented in Figure D. Interestingly, out of the 53 respondents, 12 did not advance any suggestions; 15 respondents raised between one and two suggestions; and only about 50% of the respondents answered all questions which asked about suggestions for improving school-parent relationships.

#### Discussion and Interpretation

The research wanted to first establish factors that influence PI in school activities designed to support children's learning. An analysis of the responses shown in Figure B1 reveals that 69% of the respondents proposed that they did not play any role in their children's learning. In view of Sifuna's (2007) Supply and Demand Theory of school

participation, it can be argued that the level of demand for learners' schooling is less because parents are not engaged. Many reasons could perhaps be drawn from the characteristics reflected in the bio-data. The data reflects that 62% of the respondents were Form 5, diploma and degree holders. While literature reveals that parents levels of education influences their level of involvement in school activities (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2006), this particular study may mean that there is a relationship between the quality of the role parents play in the learning of their children and their level of education. This is so because a few of them, as shown in Figure A1 above, studied at graduate degree level. While one would expect the Form 5 and diploma level holders to play an active role in the education of their children, indications are that they did less to engage their children in learning. Type of parenting is also a factor in the study (see Figure A4). For example, 44% of the respondents were single parents. Literature from the west has established that single parenting is a barrier to PI (Kohl et al, 1994; Hornby, 2000; Pang & Watkins, 2000; Fan & Chen, 2001; Bernard, 2004; Harris & Goodall, 2006). This particular study also reveals that single parenting is an issue in Botswana society, and this could affect PI in education.

Factors contributing to low PI were explored (see Figure B2). 84% of the respondents indicated that PTA meetings are held during the week when parents are at work. This may mean that parents do not attend meetings due to scheduling which is not favourable to them. This is consistent with the revelation that 84% of parents were employed, as shown in Figure A2, mostly in jobs where they did not have time to attend PTA meetings during week days. These results confirm previous studies that employment can be an obstacle to PI (Harris & Goodall, 2006; Taliaferro et al, 2009).

In terms of communication (Figure B3), this study found out that only 60% of the respondents received announcements for PTA meetings, while 33% said they did not. Much as a large number (60%) received announcements, a significant number (33%) suggested that communication between the school and the community is not adequate. Having found similar challenges in Western contexts, previous authors suggest a number of strategies through which schools could communicate with parents, such as conferences (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Cotton & Reed, 1989) and newsletters (Sandovnik et al, 2001). To make up for the 33% that does not receive announcements of PTA meetings, there is need to improve strategies for announcements.

As argued in the background to this study, the involvement of parents rests on the availability of a PTA to mobilize them. On the question of whether parents were given specific tasks by PTA to help the school (Figure B4), 68% indicated that parents did not participate because they are not given tasks to perform. This suggests that parents were not given an opportunity to do some work for their school, thus subjecting the school to a system of “bureaucratic type PTA governance” (Pansiri, 2008b: 454) where parents are kept at arm’s length in so far as school management is concerned. Elsewhere it has been found that PI depends on the ability of teachers to mobilize and motivate parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). This suggests that the school management has to train PTA members on strategies for mobilizing and motivating parents. It has been noted that parents do not know where to start, where to find time, or how to go about making positive connections with the school (Stier et al, 2011). It is thus advisable to train PTA members on strategies for parent mobilization (Republic of Botswana, 1994).

Figure B5 presents views about teachers’ visits to children’s homes as a motivation strategy for PI and PE. Many parents (87%) indicated that teachers hardly visit their homes to discuss children’s learning. This could be taken to show that there is a social distance between the home and the classroom. David (1993) and Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) argue that teachers’ visits to children’s homes is important and could enhance improved participation in homework. According to Souto-Manning and Swick (2006: 190), “lack of familiarity with the schooling discourse proved to be a major obstacle to their children’s success...”. It has been argued that there is need to improve the working relationship between teachers and parents. The two parties need to work together to improve children’s participation in learning activities (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). This need therefore necessitates the teachers’ duty to visit children’s homes.

Four major suggestions on how to make parents participate in school activities more effectively were raised (Figure D). Some parents (17%) suggested that PTA meetings should be held during weekends. Another group (15%) proposed that parents and teachers relationship should be improved. Some respondents (11%) called for specific tasks to be assigned to parents while another 11% suggested that meetings should be held after working hours. These are critical suggestions that schools and PTAs may have to consider.

On the improvement of school head-parents communication, the

majority (Figure C1) of respondents (86%) preferred letters from the school head. In addition 7% of the respondents preferred to receive telephone calls. Written communication and phone calls were found to be amongst the most effective strategies that enhance parental participation in school activities (Cotton & Reed, 1989). This confirms the suggestion by Blamires et al (1997) that “written reports on children to be made at least once a year, the child’s work to be seen by parents” (p. 3). To improve communication between the school and parents (see Figure D), 53% of the respondents proposed that the school should use the telephone to communicate with parents. Use of letters from the school head to parents was also been advanced by 38% of the respondents. In addition 17% of the respondents suggested radio spot announcements while 11% called for communication through e-mails. These are very important suggestions which both the school management and the PTA may have to take into account.

Suitability of time for parents to participate in school activities was considered a factor in PI (Figure C2). Many (66%) respondents suggested evenings and afternoons during week days. Some parents (24%) preferred activities that are done during public and school holidays. This is in line with the bio-data which indicates that many respondents were employed and meetings were held during the day when they were at work. However, the majority of the respondents (57%) indicated that they were available to participate in PTA activities as and when invited. The other (24%) indicated that they were available to participate in PTA activities at least once in a school calendar term. The data shows that no parent was available to participate in weekly PTA activities. This is understandable in view of the fact that a majority of the parents (Figure A2) were in the working class.

The most preferred PTA events (Figure C4) were PTA general meetings (53%), open days (22%) and prize giving ceremonies (14%). As Blamires et al (1997: 3) argue, “Open days [need] to be held at time chosen to enable parents to attend”, and this is the event where parents collect their children’s school reports. The respondents also suggest that written reports on children ought to be made at least once a year. This study, however, discovered that parents have little interest in participating in fundraising activities and farewell parties for completers. Lack of interest in fund-raising activities works against the RNPE which requires PTAs to provide “computers and library books in order to enrich the curriculum of the school” (The Republic of Botswana, 1994: 16).

## **Summary and Conclusion**

This study investigated causes of poor PI in a primary school that services a community in a low socio-economic location in the City of Gaborone in Botswana. PI in education in Botswana is a national policy requirement. While the government is the main provider, PTAs are expected to mobilize parents to participate minimally in both school activities and their children's learning (Republic of Botswana, 1994). Therefore PI is both the PTA and the individual parent's obligation designed to support the school and the individual learner to achieve the best in educational opportunities availed. Very little has been written about PI in Botswana in international literature, and this is something which makes the current study a useful piece of work that contributes important knowledge about PI in education in the context of a developing country.

The study adopted a quantitative research design. The principal tool for data collection was a questionnaire. Respondents were parents of children who go to the school. Out of the ninety questionnaires distributed, only 53 (58%) were returned. This rate of return was fairly low, and was partly attributable to poverty and the low educational background of parents who did not complete the questionnaire. Most of those who completed the questionnaire were workers on permanent employment. A few were from those on temporary jobs and the self employed. Their educational background ranged between Form V and diploma qualifications; and many of them were single parents. The low rate of return could be due partly to the method of entrusting children with questionnaires, where there was no direct communication on the significance of the exercise between researcher and respondent.

This study has established that time affects parents' attendance and participation in PTA and school activities. It was found that 84% of the respondents were employed in jobs that did not allow them time to attend PTA meetings and other related activities on week days, hence their failure to avail themselves at school as and when required. There obviously exists a clash between parents and school and PTA activities.

The study has also established that there was social distance between school and home. This is so because 70% of the respondents indicated that the school or PTA was not assigning them any specific tasks. As a result, parents rarely got the opportunity to do some work for the school. There also was social distance between home and the classroom.

Teachers did not visit their children's homes, and so opportunities for parents to meet teachers of their children are rare.

Common societal challenges such as single parenting, parents' low level of education and their weak economic status are problematic factors for the school constituency. These factors need to be interrogated further in order for the school to deal with them more effectively.

Respondents preferred to receive communication through letters or telephone calls from the school head in order to improve the school-parent relationship. The school head was seen as the most trusted central figure by most parents (87%). The majority of parents preferred to participate in PTA general meetings and the school's open day activities. However, they did not want to participate in PTA fundraising activities and prize giving ceremonies. This could mean that parents did not want to participate in activities that required money from them, despite the fact that the national education policy expects them to raise funds for the school. This issue is understandable given the low socio-economic status of the suburb.

In conclusion, while literature in Botswana identifies the marginalization of parents from the school instructional management systems (Pansiri 2008a) and the predominance of bureaucratic governance in remote schools (Pansiri, 2008b), this study argues that the same problem obtains in urban schools located in low-income areas as evidenced in this study.

Two sets of recommendations drawn from these observations are proposed. These are 'Improving Methodological Approach' and 'Improving Practice'. Researchers need to apply a qualitative research design in further research in order to address the question of improved rate of return and inadequacy of answering questions. This will allow more direct and deeper interaction between researcher and respondent with a more balanced and meaningful sample of participants. On 'improving practice', the school management team and the PTA need to:

- engage parents in strategic planning of school activities to accommodate time available to parents
- entrust and assign parents with specific tasks to carry out for the school
- encourage class teachers to visit children's homes
- venture into intervention activities to promote PI such as

- establishing a parent training programme initiative to enhance home-school links and programmes of family and community education. Such activities will encourage and inspire parents to participate in school programmes and PTA fundraising activities
- identify the needs of less privileged families and conduct seminars to help them with strategies of helping learners with homework
  - carry out further action research to find out the relationship between low-income earning parents and literacy and how these factors affect their participation in children's learning activities.

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