Adeshina Emmanuel Babatunde

Fostering the relationship between home and school:
A case study of a senior secondary school in The Gambia

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty	Laitos – Department
Faculty of Education	Department of Education/Institute of Educational Leadership

Tekijä – Author	
Babatunde, Adeshina Emmanuel	

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

The study examines the extent to which the relationship between home and school affects students' academic achievements. A senior secondary school in The Gambia was chosen for this study. The focus of the research was to identify and describe intentionally designed programs and practices that foster the involvement of home in school activities and its important outcomes for the stakeholders (home and school).

A qualitative method using semi-structured interviews was used to collect the data from the school principal, four English language teachers and ten parents in order to explore the nature and the degree of support they provide for students. The data was analyzed by the researcher using content analysis method. Relevant literature gathered from various academic sources and the work of previous researchers provided an important theoretical framework for this study.

Findings from the data collected identify motivation, communication, collaboration, shared leadership, flexibility and transparency as important factors in a successful home-school relationship.

The study proffers recommendations on fostering the relationship between home and school through the provision of systematic support for parents via seminars and workshops. The inputs of home and school should also be honored in order to pave the way for greater participation and effective support for student achievement. Checks and balances also should be in place so that involvement does no turn to interference.

Asiasanat – Keywords

parental involvement, home-school collaboration, home-school communication

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JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan sitä, missä määrin kodin ja koulun välinen yhteistyö vaikuttaa oppilaiden koulumenestykseen. Tutkimuksen kohteeksi oli valittu yksi lukio Gambiasta. Tutkimuksen keskiössä oli tunnistaa ja kuvailla tarkoituksellisesti suunniteltuja ohjelmia ja käytänteitä, joilla tuetaan kotien osallisuutta koulun toimin- toihin ja millaisia seurauksia niillä on kodille ja koululle.

Tutkimus oli laadullinen ja aineisto kerättiin teemahaastatteluilla. Haastatteluihin osallistui koulun rehtori, neljä englannin opettajaa ja kymmenen vanhempaa. Haas- tatteluiden tavoitteena oli saada osallistujien näkemyksiä heidän opiskelijoille anta- mansa tuen luonteesta ja määrästä. Aineisto analysoitiin sisällön analyysin keinoin.

Saatujen tulosten mukaan motivaatio, kommunikaatio, yhteistyö, jaettu johtajuus, joustavuus ja läpinäkyvyys ovat tärkeitä seikkoja onnistuneessa koti-koulu suhtees- sa.

Tutkimus tarjoaa suositukseksi sille, kuinka kodin ja koulun suhdetta voisi vankistaa vanhemmille suunnatut seminaarit ja työpajat. Kodin ja koulun panostuksia tulisi myös kunnioittaa ja tulisi tasoittaa tietä laajemmalle osallisuudelle ja tehokkaalle tuelle opintomenestyksen edistämiseksi. Tarkastuksia ja arviointia tulisi myös tehdä, että osallisuus ei häiriintyisi.

Asiasanat – Keywords
vanhempien osallisuus, kodin ja koulun yhteistyö, kodin ja koulun välinen kommunikointi

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1   INTRODUCTION

The ways in which schools position parents, or the partnerships that are established with parents, are particularly important in an environment where the public school is a key social institution. Home and school have traditionally been viewed as two separate systems with separate roles and responsibilities in the education of children (Faust-Horn, 2003). In recent years in The Gambia, parental interest in the education of their children has gained a more visible status than before. Policy makers want them to be more involved in school, possibly even helping to run them in some ways. But, like the situation in the United Kingdom, many head teachers and their professional associations fear that this means interference rather than involvement (Lucas, 2005).

More specifically, this study will raise fundamental questions about how the relationship between students' families and their school seems to affect students' academic performance in a senior secondary school in The Gambia. Parents, like schools, have varying resources available to support their children's education. These resources include educational competence, relative class position, income and material resources, social networks and cultural capital and are what can be used to advance their children's school careers (Graue, 1999 citing Lareau, 1989). The problem of parental exclusion is seeking to push the 'task' of educating the child solely on schools. This study focuses on investigating the extent to which the relationship between home and school affects

students' academic achievement and exploring the perception of the roles of parents in the education of their children from the parents' and school's points of view. The involvement of home in schools is a tricky issue. Schools have never really worked out whether they are 'right' if they involve parents or 'wrong' if they do not. Yet when children misbehave, we are all too happy to blame the parents.

"Schools receive their students from families and send them back to their homes, where the schools assume the families will provide the support that children need to grow and learn. This circle, in which home and school share the resources of children, is one that has been the focus of development, debate and data collection" (Graue, 1999, p.1). The best schools, according to an office for standards in education report (2007, p. 4) survey, are schools that involved parents and carers effectively in pupils' education. Practice in such schools was characterized by versatility, flexibility and determination. Most educational institutions have some kind of a formal home-school group, whether it is a Parent Teacher Association (P.T.A) or a School Advisory board: they are all working to bridge the gap between families and schools. Both parents and educators have a large stake in children's success and linkages promoted to facilitate it (Graue, 1999; Greenberg, 2006; Donkor, 2008).

Raising standards is a common goal for all educational establishments. This is the aim of the educational reforms taking place in The Gambia. The Gambia government appears to be very clear on what they would like the educational sector to achieve but less clear about the impact that the interaction between home and school actually has on students' academic achievements on one hand and its transforming effects on the school and the learning process on the other. On August 21ˢᵗ. 2008, stake holders in The Gambia educational sector met in Banjul (capital city) to witness the signature of the re-endorsement of the Educational Sector Medium Term Plan (2008-2011). This plan is expected to

serve as a roadmap for the attainment of policy targets set within the period 2008-2011, including universal access to lower basic education of quality, increased access and equitable resource allocation to upper basic education, early childhood development and literacy programs. Specific emphasis would be given to gender gaps and issues faced by disadvantaged groups. No mention was made of involving parents in the achievement of the set goals.

This research will transcend the role of parents from being just fathers and mothers to teachers, so that as students go back home from school they will know that they are going back to another school: another learning environment facilitated by parents. It will open up an avenue for developed nations to gain first-hand knowledge of the challenges of education in Africa and help international donors to channel resources towards strengthening the bond between home and school. The findings may also help school managers to review the design of their parental involvement programme so that the roles of parents in the learning process will no longer be perceived as 'interference' but 'involvement'.

1.1   Purpose of the research study and research questions

This study aims to investigate the extent to which the relationship between home and school affects students' academic achievement and to explore the perception of the roles of parents in the education of their children.

The quality of home-school interaction has been found to be more important for fostering student learning outcomes (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). Importantly, scientific findings about the effects of home involvement in education and family-school partnership have moved past a descriptive, co-relational database to include the effects of home-school interventions (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Nye, Turner & Schwartz, 2006). More will be accomplished if fam-

ilies and communities work with children, with each other and with schools to promote successful students (Ames et al., 1983). This study, therefore, aims to raise fundamental questions about how the relationship between students' families and their school seems to affect students' academic performance in a senior secondary school in The Gambia (Mout Mbye Senior secondary school):

1. What are the factors and practices that can foster the relationship between home and school?

2. How can the connection between home and school affect students' academic performance positively?

1.2 Background of the study

The Gambia is named after the Gambia River which flows through its length from east to west for three hundred miles; The Gambia is a small country, 500 kilometers long and 25 to 50 kilometers wide, and has an area the size of 11,300 square kilometers including 2,077 kilometers of inland water area (The Gambia Information Site). It is one of Africa's smallest countries and unlike many of its West African neighbors it has enjoyed long spells of peace and stability since independence from British colonial rule in 1965. In July 2008, the total population was estimated to be 1.73 million people while the annual population growth rate was estimated at 2.72 % (The Gambia Information Site). The population is predominantly Muslim with more than 90% following Islam. The remaining 10% are mostly Christians of different denominations including Anglicans, Methodists and Roman Catholics. There is, however, no fanaticism, and peace prevails between religions and ethnic groups.

The principal ethnic groups are the Wollofs, Fulas, Jolas and the Mandinkas. Gambians are usually tall, dark and sturdy people with fine features and an easygoing charm. Each ethnic group speaks its own language, but Eng-

lish is commonly spoken as well as being the official language of the country. There is not only harmony between the different groups, but a fusion of cultural interaction and intermarriages to such an extent that the country can be called a melting pot of West African ethnic groups.

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, there have been records of settlement in what is now The Gambia by the Wollof, Malinke and Fulani people since the 13th century. The Portuguese were the first European explorers, entering the Gambia River in 1455 followed by the French in 1681. During the 17th century, The Gambia was settled by various companies of English merchants. It became a British Crown Colony in 1843 and an independent nation on February 18th 1965. (Hughes & Perfect, 2006.)

Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara served as The Gambia's president from independence to 1994 but did very little to develop education. By 1998, less than 50% of Gambian children went to school (Department of State for Education, The Gambia 2007). There were not enough physical facilities to accommodate the growing number of children that needed to be in schools, and the education of Gambian children was severely hampered by the lack of textbooks, particularly relevant textbooks and other resource materials. Lack of trained teachers seriously hindered the quality of education while government spending was inconsistently related to developing education. (Crispin Grey-Johnson, 2000.)

A major milestone in The Gambia's political history was the overthrow of the Jawara government in July 1994 by young and junior military officers led by Colonel Yahaya Jammeh. New elections were held in 1997 and Jammeh became the new civilian president of the Second Republic. When the new president took over power in 1994, he made his commitment to provide education to Gambians clear by allocating over one-fourth of the national budget to education. In the mission statement of the new government posted on the country's official website, the new president said, "We want to transform The Gambia

into a trading, export-oriented agricultural and manufacturing nation, thriving on free market policies and a vibrant private sector, sustained by a well-educated trained, skilled, healthy, self-reliant and enterprising population and in so doing bring to fruition this fundamental aim and aspiration of Vision 2020". (Dept. of State for Trade, Industry and Employment, Message from the President, 2004).

A review of the Education Policy was done concentrating on three important issues: *access, quality and relevance* (Department of State for Education, 2007). A master plan was prepared by the Department of State for Education to assist in the implementation of the Revised Education Policy, and it covered the hitherto neglected areas of basic education, teaching facilities, early childhood education, girls' education, school feeding programme, special education, adult education and computers in school projects. Strangely enough, no reference or allusion was made to involving parents in forging a new path in developing education in The Gambia.

1.3   Concepts and terminologies

Parental involvement

In this study, the terms ''parental involvement' and ''family involvement'' are used interchangeably in order to give recognition to the fact that students may and often do have a variety of adults who can provide support, interaction and guardianship in the child's upbringing. Parents are the adults in the household and may include members of the extended family who assume an active role in the child's upbringing (Violand-Sanchez, Sutton, Ware, 1991). Epstein (cited in Violand-Sanchez et al., 1991) identified 5 categories of parental involvement in the education of their children: providing for children basic needs, communicating with school staff, volunteering or providing assistance at their child's school,

supporting and participating in learning activities with children at home and participating in governance and advocacy activities.

Parental perception

Parental perception is shaped by parents' beliefs about their own ability to influence their child's success. (Ames C. et al., 1993.) Parents' perception of the school, their child's teacher and their own child as well as beliefs about their own ability to make a difference in their child's learning may be important determinants of how parents interact with their child and become involved in their learning (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Parental perception of school, teachers and their child is an important motivation-related variable that has significant impacts on children's academic achievement in school (Epstein, 1990 & Coleman, 1987 cited in Ames et al. 1993).

School-Home communication

School-home communication, if properly structured, signifies the process by which information that helps parents become more knowledgeable about children's learning activities, are imparted and shared between the school and home (Ames et al., 1993). School-to-home communication involves instructionally meaningful and personally relevant information that serves to create ''knowledge partners'' in parents, give parents confidence in the school, establish positive beliefs about their child as a learner and foster an interest in their child's learning and progress (Epstein, 1990). Home-school collaboration focuses on the relationship between home and school and how parents and educators work together to promote the social and academic development of children (Elizalde-Ultnick, 2002).

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature on human capital and social capital theories will be used to provide a framework for understanding the relationship between education and society. Goldin (2003) observed that there is common belief in the relationship between the wealth of a nation and its people, which is human capital. Human capital, he noted, is influenced by social learning and may also be enhanced by creating environments in which people observe, listen and interact with one another, gain knowledge and use it in making choices. Social capital refers to social cohesion among members of society and their collective capacity to act on behalf of the common good. Social capital adds to the growth and development of schools by enhancing student success in school as well as by encouraging and facilitating parental empowerment and involvement in their children's education (Donkor, 2008). The underlying message of the social capital theory is that relationships matter (Field, 2003).

2.1 Human capital and education

Human capital refers to the skill and knowledge embodied in productive labor that is viewed collectively as an asset to society. It emphasizes how education increases the productivity and efficiency of workers by increasing the level of cognitive stock of economically productive human capability which is a prod-

uct of innate abilities and investment in human beings. The provision of formal education is seen as a productive investment in human capital, which the proponents of the theory have considered as equally or even more worthwhile than that of physical capital. (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008 p. 158.)

According to Becker (1964), society can invest in developing human capital through education and training with an expectation to generate a return by increasing a nation's capacity for productive work. Becker states that formal education is not the only way to invest in human capital. He asserts that no discussion of human capital can omit the influence of families on the knowledge, skills, values and habits of their children. He believes that parents affect educational attainment as well as other dimensions of their children. Parents feel that in an era of scarce skilled manpower, the better the education their children can get the better their chances are of getting well-paid jobs. Poor parents often look at their children's education as the best means of escaping poverty. Olaniyan & Okemakinde (2008, p. 161) also noted that "the concept of human capital has provided a useful bridge between the theoretical concerns of students of the developmental process and the practical requirements of parental assistance to planners".

Human capital refers to the resources that parents possess, primarily represented by their educational background, but also by their economic and social status. At this point, it is pertinent to note that a deficit of educational training may or may not contribute to the child's failure at school. Students' academic success may depend largely on what happens in the relationship within the family. Becoming involved with the students' schools and teachers is a serious way of restoring human capital. Such involvement is important because it helps bridge the gap between home and school for the child. (Becker, 1993.) Peng and Wright (1994) found that parents' high expectations were a powerful predictor of student achievement. Boal (2004) found that parental in-

volvement is associated with greater achievement in mathematics and reading. Thus, perceptions of the value of education held by citizens and parents as well as being involved in and supporting their schooling is crucial to their academic success (Donkor, 2008). It also helps students to function in a school setting where shared goals and values develop – that is a situation where teachers are not expecting something from students that conflicts with parents' expectations.

2.2   Social capital and education

Social capital, referring to connections within and between social networks, is a core concept in business, economics, organizational behavior, political science, public health and sociology (Field, 2003). The central idea is that 'social networks' are a valuable asset. Putnam (2000) observes that social capital refers to connections among individuals and social networks sustained through norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. In this regard, social capital is closely associated with the concept of civic virtue. Putnam persuasively argues that social capital is a key component to building and maintaining democracy, and social interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and knit together the fabric of society. In this regard, Field's (2003) central thesis of social capital theory is that relationships matter. Social capital binds people together and helps them make links beyond their immediate friends and neighbors. Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other and to knit the social fabric. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks can bring great benefits to people.

Coleman (1994, p. 32) defines social capital as a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: they all consist of some aspect of a social structure and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure. The importance of social capital lies in its ability to allow citizens

to resolve collective problems more easily. Putnam (2000) argues that people often might be better off if they cooperated with each other when doing his or her share. Social capital greases the wheel that allows communities to advance smoothly. The networks that constitute social capital also serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information that facilitates the achievements of goals. Social capital emphasizes community connectedness. When people lack connection to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views, expressed during casual conversation or in more formal deliberations.

The notion of social capital remains an important reference point in discussions of how it may be intentionally developed with a social group, community, or society. For example, social capital may contribute to enhancing the capacity of children in society through trust, networks and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group and larger community. This perspective illuminates the role of school in society as well as the importance of parent engagement in school affairs and providing support for the education of their children. The networks that constitute social capital also serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information that facilitates achieving our goals (Putnam, 2000 p. 290).

Noguera (as quoted in Donaldson et al., 1999), believed that schools, parents and the community were responsible for the development of social capital. He recognized the existence of positive and negative social capitals. A group of bullies, for example, exhibits loyalty, trust and a strong sense of belonging, but their actions have negative impact on the schools' learning environment and society. The role of parental involvement in school would be to develop the positive social capital to suppress the negative ones. Leithwood (1994) also found that educational achievement of children is influenced by the efficacy of education to contribute to the future well-being of their children, which enhanced their participation in extracurricular activities in groups and

teams, academic learning and improved classroom behavior. Social capital is additionally enhanced by the creation of healthy relations between parents and school personnel as well as external networks including partnerships with other schools.

Growing evidence suggests that social capital can be built in schools through parental involvement. Dika and Singh (2002) pointed out that social capital is derived from two types of relationships: the relationship between a student and his or her parents; and relationships between the parents and other adults, particularly adults who are connected to the school that the students attend. This perspective indicates that parents play a primary role in promoting the status attainment of their children in their respective schools. Catts and Oz-ga (2005) identified several school social capital indicators which have relevance to this study:

- Community and family contacts with school
- school-related social activities among staff and with parents
- participation in school governance by staff, students, parents and communities
- Communication and information within schools and with communities.

3 PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

3.1 The importance of parental involvement

In a comprehensive literature study, Christenson and Sheridan (2001), observed that families play a meaningful role in children's educational success and that the interface of home and school is an element that must be accounted for when examining children's school performance. The literature study identified parents and teachers as partners in a mutual effort toward a shared goal and spelt out three prerequisite conditions (Approach, Attitude and Atmosphere) as essential for creating and sustaining quality family-school interactions for children's learning.

Greenberg (2006, p. 20) suggested that children benefit tremendously when parents help them bridge their two most important worlds: the home and the school. She identifies the parent as the major provider of the child's education from birth through adolescence. When parents and teachers work well together, everyone benefits, especially the child who now senses that an entire team of adults is on his or her side.

Pasquarette (2006, p. 50-51) explored the communication between home and school in regard to children's literacy. The study explored first graders and their parents and their family literacy habits in an attempt to help create a strong bridge of communication between home and school. Findings imply that

all parents (100%) either agreed or strongly agreed that reading is important and that it is developed at home and school. Parents (100%) agreed that a strong home and school relationship is important and that it is necessary to create a bridge between home and school where knowledge is being passed in both directions.

Report of a survey conducted by Ofsted between September 2006 and February 2007 in the United Kingdom to evaluate the extent to which schools involved parents and carers in the education of children and young people and how effective this involvement was showed that:

1. all schools that participated in the survey recognized the value of working with parents and carers, but some paid insufficient attention to identifying which areas would benefit most from their involvement and how to evaluate their impacts,

2. The schools were good at giving academic information to parents and carers about the curriculum, examinations and coursework requirements,

3. Parents and carers valued regular meetings to discuss their child's progress and targets for improvement,

4. In some schools, parents and carers contributed well to the children's learning by sharing their expertise and interests in the classroom. This depended on the school finding out about parents' and carers' skills and interests and making it possible for them to contribute. Parents and carers who took part gained valuable insights into learning (p. 5).

Tamis-LeMonda and Rodriguez (2008, p. 2-4) researched into the roles of the home environment on young children's language and learning. Their research could be classified under two broad questions:

(1) Which aspects of parenting matter for children's early language and learning and why?

(2) What factors enable parents to provide a supportive environment to their young children?

Results of the research indicate that the quality of parent-child interactions plays a formative role in children's early language and learning. Additionally, parents who contingently respond to their young children's verbal and exploratory initiative through verbal descriptions and questions tend to have children with more advanced receptive and productive language, phonological awareness and strong comprehensive skills. The researchers, however, agree that additional work is needed to understand how best to support parents in their provision of positive home environments for children. Future research should investigate the ways that multiple aspects of the home learning environments jointly contribute to developmental outcomes in children.

3.2 Ways to implement home-school interactions

Violand-Sanchez et al (1991, p. 12-13) discussed the need to strengthen the bond of cooperation between home and school and provide useful information about parent involvement in general and presented a framework for fostering cooperation between home and school. The authors investigated the efforts to develop and nurture cooperative links between schools and families in Arlington (Virginia) public schools, at both district and school levels. This study is particularly relevant because of the changing linguistic, ethnic and racial demographics of Arlington as a result of immigration. School-based efforts, empowering parents, the role of the principal in Parent involvement, Parent Education workshops and improving communication between home and school were categories of findings of the survey. This study calls for a re-examination of the assumption that has traditionally defined parent involvement in the school. It also suggests that if cooperation is to be realized, there must be commitment to opening op-

portunities for participation to families and to provide needed administrative support, time and access to resources to school staff if they are to work cooperatively with their students' families.

Ames, Carol et al. (1993, p. 6) conducted a study on school-to-home communications and parent involvement and examined the relationship between teachers' school-to-home communications and parental perceptions and beliefs, parental involvement and children's motivation-related outcomes. The teacher sample included 14 second- grade and 11 fourth-grade teachers who volunteered to engage in three categories of school-to-home communications: (1) provide parents with information about classroom work and practices, (2) provide parents with information about their child's work and progress, and (3) provide parents with assistance in working with their child on schoolwork at home. The findings of the study suggest that the frequency and content of school-to-home communications are important. When these communications contain information that may influence parents' perceptions of their child as a learner, when they give parents a sense of efficacy and when they make the parent feel comfortable with the school, parent involvement may be enhanced.

3.3 Principals', teachers' and parents' views/roles about/in home-school interaction

Becker and Epstein (1982) conducted a survey of approximately 3,700 public elementary school teachers in more than 600 schools in 16 of the 24 school districts in Maryland to measure how elementary school teachers feel about parent involvement in home learning as a teaching strategy. Overall, the findings of the study indicate a very positive view of parent-oriented teaching strategies. Over 95 per cent of the respondents reported that they talk with children's parents, ask parents to check and sign students' homework and interact with par-

ents of their students on a regular basis. Further results showed that principals generally support the concept of parent involvement and that most of the principals have strong opinions in favor of parent volunteers in the classroom. The teachers' responses to the questionnaire suggest that many teachers strongly believe that parent involvement at home could be an important contributor toward achieving the goals they set for themselves and the students.

A study of the importance of the relationship between school and families, how they shape the recognition of the nature of the local community served by the school, the nature of the educative process that needs to occur given the knowledge and aspirations held for and by the young people who are being educated in Brisbane, Australia, was carried out by Bartholomaeus (2002). A survey of the contents of newsletters collected by the author from secondary schools in rural and metropolitan Brisbane indicates that principals and teachers have strategic roles to play in positioning parents to understand and affect positively their children's academic achievement. Further findings indicate that parental responsiveness (also referred to as parental warmth and supportiveness) and parental demandingness are important components of good parenting which intentionally foster individuality and self-assertion by being attuned to and supportive of children's special needs and demands.

Reali and Tancredi (2004) sought to generate knowledge about teachers' professional development processes and how to collaboratively construct strategies to bring together schools and their students' families in order to foster learning. The research attempted to answer the following questions:

(1) Does the adoption of a constructive-collaborative model involving university-school partnerships, based on the strengthening of parent-teacher relations produce favorable results in the professional education of teachers?

(2) If so, what processes are involved? Results of a set of three studies carried out in Sao Paulo, Brazil, revealed that teachers who participated in this

research felt that the students' parents were not interested in their children's schooling process and that they either were not involved or were confrontational in dealings with the school. The teachers felt that parents' investment in educational issues was low and that their ability to understand what was taught at school was limited. However, it was observed that parents expressed great interest in the school and its educational process, even when they were low-income, less well educated and had children with a past history of school failure. The study further suggests that school should be considered as the place for the construction of new knowledge about families' involvement in their children school lives, that the knowledge and experience of teachers and families should be respected and shared by all.

Smit and Driessen (2005) conducted two studies, both in primary and secondary education, concerning parents' expectations and teachers' reactions to intercultural circumstances. Both studies were carried out in the ethnically diverse city of Rotterdam. Results of the studies show that there are large differences between the various ethnic minority groups, but also that a larger part of the parents are really interested in the education that their children receive. Parents indicate that they are committed to this education and also wish to participate in it. The problems arising from this, however, usually involve the communication between parents and school. Further findings also showed that the teachers interviewed had little knowledge of the socialization processes which take place at home.

3.4 The outcomes of school-home interaction

In the United States, Finney (1995) discussed the implications of active parenting for children and adults in the home and at school. The study took an in-depth look into the importance of parents being active in schools and the im-

portance of a supportive home environment. Drawing from the works of noted authors like Berger (1991), Borger (1986), Bubolz and Grifore (1986), as important theoretical frameworks in the study of home-school relationship, the study sought to establish that the link between parent involvement, both in the home and at school, and academic achievement was highly significant. The study was a big attempt to make society aware of how the relationship between parents and children affects academic achievement. The result of this study showed that parent involvement has major impacts on the academic success of a student in many ways, among which are: increased learning abilities of former low achievers; increased motivation; decreased television viewing and establishing communication with the family.

Based on the literacy need in the state of Louisiana, Hopkins (2000) conducted a research to evaluate the effectiveness and usefulness of a *Ready to Learn* literacy workshop in two strategic areas in Louisiana. This project was interested in whether the literacy workshop could equip parents to enhance and develop their child's literacy skills and to enhance home-school interactions. Results show an increase in participants' scores in four of the five workshop objectives. Results also show that the workshops were valuable to participants in encouraging literacy in their families and successful in teaching participants new literacy strategies and skills to use with their family.

Brantley (2003) explored the positive outcomes of parent participation in supporting strategic reading strategies at home. The study develops a one-night workshop for parents to attend where they learn about the benefits of reading nightly with their child. This workshop is an influential part of developing a strong parent-school partnership and it teaches parents how to develop and support family literacy in their homes. Key findings of this study indicate that the best way for students to become better readers is to continuously read both in and out of school and that eliciting the help of parents to both monitor

and support their child's reading at home is very essential. Findings also show that a vast majority of parents are interested and concerned about their child's achievements in school and that they enjoyed working with their children, and the workshop gave them a structured approach to spending educational time together at home.

Faust-Horn (2003) indicated that the perceptions held by parents and educators related to home-school collaboration influences the academic success achieved by students in the classroom. Data collected from a study survey distributed to parents and educators indicated that there are significant differences in the perceptions held by parents and educators on the relationship between home-school collaboration and academic success in the classroom. Leaning heavily on a review and analysis of current research and literature related to home-school collaboration, this study offered many useful recommendations for parents and educators which I find very relevant to the proposed study.

A meta-analysis including 52 studies of secondary schools across the United States undertaken by Jeynes (2007) to determine the influence of parental involvement on the educational outcomes of urban secondary school children. Statistical analysis was used to determine the overall impact of parental involvement as well as specific components of parental involvement. The first analysis consisted of computing effect sizes for the overall parental involvement variable and for programs of parental involvement. The second analysis assessed the association between specific types of parental involvement (e.g. checking homework and parental expectations) with student achievement. The third analysis examined the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement by race. Results indicate that the influence of parental involvement is significant for secondary school children and that parental involvement affects all the academic variables studied. The positive effects of parental involvement hold for both white and minority children.

Donkor (2008, p. 147) investigated parental involvement in education in Ghana. The study sought to (1) know the nature of parent support - i.e. perceptions and value of education in Ghana, (2) identify the factors associated with parental values and parental involvement in education that influence the nature and degree of educational support that they provide to their children and (3) raise fundamental questions about parental perceptions towards education in a community school in Ghana that has relevance for many other countries in Africa. Data indicated that majority of parents interviewed acknowledge the value of education and its importance to society. The findings implied that parental involvement in school activities and communicating with their children's classroom teachers is associated with high academic achievement. Further findings also indicated that children of parents who provide supportive home learning environment have higher levels of motivation to learn and a sense of self-efficacy.

An investigation of current parental support for student learning with information technology (IT) in Hong Kong by Kong and Li (2008) showed a persistent positive perception of and support for IT among educators and parents which signify a solid foundation for the extension of student learning from the classroom to the home environment. Further findings also reflect the high level of expectations that school heads have about parental support for student learning through the use of IT in the home environment. The majority of the parents also agreed that they found it helpful to identify and discuss common problems in relation to their children's use of IT at home through home-school collaboration.

3.5 Conclusion

Review of empirical research and various academic literature has indicated various and different results. Previous researches in different cultures and countries have used different methodologies to investigate the relationship between home and school. Some conclusions from the previous researches are summarized in the following points.

1. The link between parent involvement, both in the home and at school, and academic achievement is very significant (Finney 1995; Donkor, 2008).

2. Parental involvement in school activities and communicating with their child's classroom teachers is associated with high academic achievement. Children of parents who provide supportive home learning environment have higher levels of motivation to learn and a sense of self-efficacy (Donkor, 2008; Ames, et al., 1993).

3. If cooperation is to be realized, there must be a commitment to opening opportunities for participation to families and to providing needed administrative support, time and access to resources to school staff (Violand - Sanchez et al 1991; Hopkins 2000).

4. Principals support the concept of parent involvement and have strong opinions in favor of parent volunteers in the classroom (Becker & Epstein 2001; Reali & Tancredi, 2004).

5. Parents agree that a strong home and school relationship is both important and necessary to create a bridge between home and school (Pasquarette, 2006; Kong & LI, 2008; Greenberg, 2006)

6. Teachers have little knowledge of the socialization process which takes place at home (Smit & Driessen, 2005).

4 RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative method with the use of semi-structured interview questions was used by the researcher to gather data. In this chapter, the rationale for choosing a qualitative research approach will be explained, and it is followed by a general description of how the study was conducted. Each key element of qualitative research will also be examined. Further explanations will also be given for the selection of the participants, the justification for the study, research design and analysis as well as the problems the researcher encountered in the course of conducting interviews.

4.1 A qualitative case study

The fact that the research paradigm must match the research problems was seriously considered before choosing the qualitative approach. The choice was actually made after a series of consultations and advice from the supervisor.

Marshall and Rossman (1999, p.11) described the qualitative research as the type of research that "… entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for study, that values participants' perspectives on their worlds and seeks to discover those perspectives" . Qualitative research views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants. It is primarily descriptive and relies on people's words as the primary data.

Qualitative research is a type of research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad and general questions, collects data consisting largely of words from participants, describes and analyses these words for themes and conducts the inquiry in a subjective manner. The qualitative paradigm is a multisided method of conducting research. It recognizes the need to listen to the view of participants; the need to ask general open questions and collect data in places where people live and work and portrays research as an instrument of advocating for change and bettering the lives of individuals (Creswell 2008). The qualitative approach, in its broadest sense, helps the researcher to know more about something than he or she did before engaging in the process (Bodgan & Bilken 2003; Creswell 2008).

Qualitative research is interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. An important characteristic of qualitative research is that the process is often inductive. Researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses or theories. Qualitative researchers build towards theory from observations and understandings gained from being in the field. One must physically go to the people, setting, site or institution, in order to observe behavior in its natural setting (Bilken & Bodgan 2003; Merriam 1988). Bits and pieces of information from interviews, observations or documents are combined and arranged into larger themes as the researcher works from the particular to the general (Eisner, 1991; Kirk & Miller, 1986). The key concern is to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participants' point of view, not the researcher's.

Another characteristic of qualitative research is that it is richly descriptive. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has observed and learned about a phenomenon. Quotes from documents, participants' interviews and field notes are included in support of the

findings of the study. These quotes and excerpts contribute to the descriptive nature of qualitative research (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2002).

Also, the multi-dimensional nature of qualitative research allows the researcher to study things in their natural settings (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Its interactive nature requires the immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for study, values participants' perspectives on their worlds and seeks to discover those perspectives (see e.g. Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to interact with the participants in their natural setting and to use the participants' words as the primary source of data. The aforementioned is a sure way of eliciting first-class information (see also Borg & Gall 1989; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In addition, a qualitative approach emphasizes the researcher's role as an active learner who can tell the story from the participants' points of view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants (Creswell, 2008). My interest in writing in a literary style was also a minor consideration for choosing the qualitative approach because this allows the researcher to bring himself into the study as he engages a storytelling form of narration.

The overall purpose of qualitative research is to achieve an understanding of how people make sense of their lives (from their own perspectives), delineate the process of meaning-making and describe how people interpret what they experience (Bodgan & Bilken, 2003; Strauss & Corbin 1990; Kirk & Miller, 1986).

Case study research is one of the several approaches to qualitative inquiry. By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the research problem. The decision to focus on qualitative case study by the researcher stems from the fact that this design is chosen precisely because the researcher is interested in insight, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis test-

ing (see Merriam 1988, p.10). Case study is a design particularly suited to situations where it is impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables from their context. Merriam (1988, p.11) also defines the purposes of a case study as two-fold: "… to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the groups under study" and "… to develop general theoretical statements about regularities in social structure and process".

Case studies focus on particular situations, events, programs or phenomena. The case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon and for what it might present. This specifying of focus makes it an especially good design for practical problems – for questions, situations or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice (cf. Yin 2003). The researcher's study focused on a particular situation (fostering the relationship between home and school). The case itself is important for what it reveals about the phenomenon (research problem) and for what it might represent. The researcher selected one senior secondary school in The Gambia for study simply because the school was one that has interestingly overcome most of its challenges to academic growth through parental involvement. Also the respondents are easily available and accessible to the researcher (see Borg & Gall 1989, p.437). The researcher's focus was on investigating the extent to which the relationship between home and school affects students' academic performance and exploring the perception of the roles of parents in the education of their children.

The most important factor that went into my decision in choosing the qualitative case study was the need to match the approach to the research problem. When an exploration is needed and one in which all the complexity of a situation must be explored, researchers use qualitative research (Bodgon & Bilken, 2003, p.62). The problems that this research sets out to investigate needed to be explored to obtain a deep understanding. The problems identified in this study required the use of an inquiry process of understanding the problems

based on building a complex holistic picture formed with words reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in a natural setting (see Borg 1989).

The importance of the researcher in qualitative case study is of prime importance. In this particular case study, the researcher as an instrument was responsive to the context and found it easy and necessary to adapt techniques to the circumstances without being manipulative of the participants. The importance of the researcher in qualitative case study cannot be overemphasized. As the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, the researcher mediates the data. Data gathered through this human instrument (the researcher) assumes a life of its own instead of through an inanimate inventory, questionnaire or machine (Merriam 1988, p.19). For a qualitative case study, the problems need to be explored to obtain a deep understanding. In a case study, a substantial amount of data is collected on the specific case selected to represent the phenomenon. An important purpose of case studies is to develop an understanding of a complex phenomenon as experienced by the participants. This is achieved when the researcher becomes the 'primary measuring instrument' (Borg & Gall, 2003 pp. 435-445). Thus, this research is a qualitative case study which seeks to explore and understand the factors and practices that foster the relationship between home and school and how such a relationship boosts students' academic performance in The Gambia. It is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity (Merriam, 1998). The paramount objective is to strive to understand how two important stakeholders in education (school and home) work together as a whole. Patton (1985, p.1) gives a succinct explanation of the nature of qualitative research as "… an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there".

4.2 Context of the research

Mout Mbye Senior Secondary School

The senior secondary school was founded by the Wesleyan Mission. This followed the visit over 25 years before by Mother Anne-Marie Javouhey, one of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny, who visited Banjul and planned a mission which came into being in 1849. In 1898, the school was re-opened as the Methodist Boys' High School, and in 1915 the Girls' High School was opened in Banjul.

The boys' and girls' high schools were merged in 1959 to form the Gambian High School, and in 1994 the name of the school was changed to Mout Mbye Senior Secondary School when the government's education policy was changed. The main curriculum is science-based though other subject areas such as the Arts and business are taught in classes. The school is on two shifts: morning and afternoon shifts. There are 18 classes from Grade 10 to 12 in the morning and 12 classes in the afternoon. The school has a population of 1,729 students consisting of 880 boys and 849 girls.

4.3 Data collection

4.3.1 Semi-structured interview questions

For the purpose of this study, the semi-structured interview questions were used because it was best suited for my research needs. Using the semi-structured interviews for the principal, teachers and parents gave the researcher the opportunity to probe and ask follow-up questions (see Foddy, 1995). Moreover, two types of interviews were conducted in the course of this study: Individual and focus group interviews (see e.g. Creswell 2008). The individual interview normally involves two people: the interviewer and the interviewee,

while the focus group interviews apply to a carefully planned discussion involving the interviewer who guides the discussion and a group of respondents. This kind of a discussion group is designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

4.3.2 Interview as a data collection method

Berg (1999, p.30) defines interviews as a formal or an informal meeting between two people or among a group of people for the purpose of obtaining information. The interview is a successful tool in conducting research. The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and understand the meanings of central themes in the life of the subjects. The main task of interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say. Interviews in qualitative research are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experience (Kvale 1996; McNamara, 1999). Interviews are an important part of any qualitative research project because they provide an opportunity for the researcher to investigate further, to solve problems and to gather data which could have been obtained in other ways (Cunningham 1993). No consideration of interviewing would be complete without looking at the major interview structures. Three major categories can be identified: the standardized (formal) interview, the unstandardized (informal) interview and the semi-standardized (guided semi-structured) interview (Denzin & Lincoln 2008; Berg 1999; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The standardized interview uses a formally structured schedule of interview. The interviewers are required to ask subjects to respond to each question (Berg 1999). In summary, this kind of interview is designed to elicit information using a set of predetermined questions that are expected to elicit the subjects' thoughts, opinions and attitudes about study-related issues.

Unstandardized interviews, in contrast to standardized interviews, do not utilize schedules of questions. Naturally, unstandardized interviews operate from a different set of assumptions. First, interviewers begin with the assumption that they do not know in advance what all the necessary questions are. Consequently, they cannot fully predetermine a list of questions to be asked. They also assume that not all subjects will necessarily find equal meaning in like-worded questions. In an unstandardized interview, interviewers must develop, adapt and generate questions and follow-up probes appropriate to the given situation and the central purpose of the investigation (Berg 1999; Trochin 2002; Kvale, 1996).

The semi-standardized interview is one where the interviewer asks all the same major questions, uses a predetermined list of questions to guide him or her but asks questions freely as he wishes and even joins the conversation to find out what they think about the topic. Although the interviewer in this technique will have some established general topics for investigation, this method allows for flexibility and exploration of emergent themes and ideas rather than relying only on concepts and questions defined in advance before the interview (Berg 1999; Uwe, 2009).

Focus group interviews have proven to be very useful because some people do sometimes need company to be emboldened to talk and some topics are better discussed by a small group of people who know each other (Lewis 2000). Focus group interview affords participants to freely express themselves. It is however important to note that I guided the conversation. I was fully aware of my need to be mentally alert, free from distraction and to patiently probe my respondents (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

4.3.3 Limitations of interviews

The semi-structured interview is the most common form of interviewing. In it, the interviewer has worked out a set of questions beforehand but intends the interview to be conversational. Thus the main job is to get the participants or interviewees to talk freely and openly while making sure you get the in-depth information on what you are researching (Rubin & Rubin 1995). The main objective of the interview is to understand the participants' point of view rather than make generalizations about behavior. Although the semi-structured interview has many benefits, it also has many disadvantages. One of its weaknesses is its total dependence on the skill of the interviewer. It is also time-consuming and expensive and the depth of qualitative information may be difficult to analyze (for example, deciding what is and what is not relevant). The researcher also has no real way of knowing if the respondents are lying.

A major limitation in this study was the inability of two out of the nine parents interviewed to respond in English. An interpreter was used but there were still some difficulties in getting information from the said parents (see Creswell 2008; Rubin & Rubin 1995; Borg & Gall, 1989).

4.3.4 Selection process of the participants and semi-structured interviews in the present study

Prior to interviewing the participants, formal consent was sought from the school principal. A visit was arranged with him in which the researcher explained thoroughly his intent in using the school as the sample population for his study. He read the research study permit and expressed his willingness to allow me to carry out the research after he was given an overview and purpose of the study. The principal also arranged a meeting with the researcher and the four English teachers where the intent of the researcher and the purpose of the study were clearly communicated. Parents were contacted by telephone since

they live in different areas and since attempting to speak to them simultaneous-ly would be impossible. Each participant was duly informed about what will occur during the research study and about the intended use of the data that are to be collected. All the participants in the study (principal, teachers and parents) had a clear understanding of what the study was about. They were aware of the intended use of the research data to be collected and everyone gave their consent (see e.g. Gall et al., 2002, p.82).

I used purposeful sampling in selecting the participants in the study. In purposeful sampling, the goal is to select participants that are likely to be 'information-rich' with respect to the purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2002, p. 178). Since the study is focused on fostering the relationship between home and school, obtaining useful information from the principal, English teachers and parents is considered purposeful and a true source of data for this research. English language teachers were chosen because the researcher's intent was to study how the interaction between home and parents affects academic growth in the subject. The researcher selected the participants mentioned because they manifest the phenomenon to be studied intensely. The relevance and contribu-tions of the ten parents chosen reflect their effectiveness for the majority of par-ents of the school. Selecting the particular parents to participate was a bit com-plicated in a school that has a population of 1,729 students. Therefore, a combi-nation of purposeful, non-probability and convenience sampling was used in selecting the ten parents interviewed (Gall et al 2007, pp.174-175; Miles & Hu-bermann 1994, p.28). Ten parents were identified. In selecting the parents to be interviewed, the level and intensity of their participation in the Par-ents/Teachers Association (P.T.A) was considered. Eight of them were literate while the remaining had to be interviewed through an interpreter who has a good working knowledge of the local language.

In conducting this research, proper channels in setting up a study were strictly followed. The participants involved (principal, teachers and parents) gave their consent before being interviewed and they were made to fully understand their roles in this project. Right from the onset, the parties involved understood that this research is not in any way harmful to the people and institution involved. The privacy and confidentiality of the information elicited form the participants were guaranteed. Research participants were told at the onset of the study who will have access to the data collected. The principal also informed the other participants that he had read the research permit request signed by the Department of the Educational Leadership of the University of Jyväskylä and assured them of my competence and legitimacy to carry out the interview (see Borg & Gall 2003, p. 84).

The principal was especially helpful in getting the teachers and parents to participate in the study. The parents knew him well and were quite comfortable with his recommendations of the researcher. He acted as an effective collaborator and used his leadership skills to help me gain access to participants (see e.g. Creswell 2005, p.209).

Following the principal's approval, face to face interview was conducted involving the senior secondary school, four English teachers and ten parents (see also Patton 2002; Berg 1989, p.33; Creswell 2008).

The interview was divided into three types: the principal was individually interviewed at a chosen date after school hours in his office. The interview session with the principal lasted for two hours and some minutes. A focus group interview was conducted for the English teachers because their interview questions were the same. The focus group session with the teachers lasted for about three hours and forty-five minutes since all the teachers were painstakingly allowed to express their views without the researcher showing any sign of being in a hurry. Interviewing the parents was a bit problematic because of

their hectic work schedules and different locations. Thus, they were individually interviewed, and getting to meet and conducting the interviews for the parents spanned a period of two weeks.

The interview was conducted in English since almost all the participants were quite literate in the language. As earlier mentioned, the use of an interpreter was necessitated because two of the parents could not speak or write in English. All the participants (except the two illiterate parents) expressed their readiness and agreement to be interviewed in English since many of them are from different tribal backgrounds and speak varying local dialects. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed (see Berg, 1989). The process of transcription took approximately two weeks and turned out 42 pages of transcribed material.

Before the commencement of the interview, participants were assured that their privacy and the confidentiality of information provided would be fully protected. It is also important to note that the real name of the school selected for this study has not been used. Rather, a pseudo name has been adopted to protect its identity and anonymity. Only the principal and teachers signed the interview consent forms. The parents stressed that there was no need to sign anything since they have been given detailed information about the study and its purpose (see also Borg & Gall 2003, p.72). An important factor in the interview process is *trust* (Borg & Gall 2003, p.247). The researcher assured all the participants in the study of the confidentiality of the data collected. It was also very clear to all the participants that their participation was voluntary. The researcher understands the extreme importance of confidentiality so the participants' identities are coded. My supervisors' advice was also invaluable in this area.

The researcher strictly adhered to the research questions when planning the interview questions. My supervisors went through my questions, made necessary corrections and approved them before I conducted the interview.

4.4 Data analysis

Data transcription involves turning or transforming recorded speech into written form. This means listening to an audio or video recording and then typing or writing as a written transcript (Borg & Gall 2003). In the researcher's case, this means the transforming of verbal interviews with thirteen individuals into written form (typed). For this study, the researcher used the content analysis method to change the verbal interviews into useful findings and to make sense of textual data. In content analysis, the researcher explores textual data (in this case, transcribed data) with a view to grouping together similar types of utterances and ideas (Burnard, 1996). The content analysis method tries to reduce transcribed text to a few words in different categories. It is a way of analyzing data and categorizing them into meaningful text (Cohen et al. 2007, p.475). Emerging themes are identified from the data and the importance of such themes is measured by its number of occurrence in the data (MacDonald & Tipton 1993, p.197). Teamwork, regular communication between home and school, positive perception of roles, strong motivational support, collaboration and shared leadership were some of the recurring themes that the researcher extracted from the collected data.

The semi-structured interview was used in the data collection so that the participants could express their views more freely about home and school interaction. My intent was to elucidate information from the participants about programs and practices that foster the involvement of home in school activities and its important outcomes for the school and home. The analysis of the tran-

scribed data was made from the recurring themes inherent in the data. Data analysis was made with strict adherence to my two research questions listed below

a) What are factors and practices that can foster the relationship between home and school?

b) How can the connection between home and school affect students' academic performance positively?

5 PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

5.1 Description of parental involvement

Principal's perspective

The respondent is the principal of the senior secondary school, and that gave him the automatic position of the chairman of the association. But, according to him, he voluntarily, on assumption of office, relinquished the position to a parent elected by the association and opted to be the assistant chairman. The respondent said, *"When parents see openness and sincerity from school administration, they always reciprocate with positive inputs too"*. He opined that encouraging teamwork and empowering all parties to be involved would lead to readiness to assume responsibilities. He noted that the action of voluntarily relinquishing the leadership of the association to an elected parent has *"… significantly reduced my administrative burden"*. This has not, in any way, reduced his involvement and participation in the activities of the association. The respondent encouraged constant communication with parents. He revealed that he has a phone line that is a *'parent-hotline'. "Whenever it rings, I know a parent is calling"*, he said. He said parents were free to call or come in person to inquire about their wards and to offer advice or criticism. The respondent also explained that he encouraged his teaching staff to talk to and hear from parents. He also said that typed invitations were sent to parents for P.T.A. meetings. Public media (radio and televi-

sion) were also used to announce P.T.A. meetings. Such meetings, according to the respondent, were where parents and school staff bared their minds on any pending issue raised before the school. He further explained that the majority of the problems and challenges facing the school have been solved at such meetings.

The respondent acknowledged that there have been some problems in the process of interacting with parents but also pointed out that joint discussion between the parents and the school staff has always proved useful and effective in dealing with such problems. He said he always made it clear to parents that the school cannot *'do it alone'*. What he did when such a situation arose was to make parents see that their suggestions and advice carry a lot of weight and such suggestions, criticism and advice are needed to pass through the joint discussions at P.T.A. meetings. Parents, according to him, may not respect his disagreement but they could not fault the decision of 500 parents (or more) at a single meeting.

Teachers' perspectives

The responses of the four teachers interviewed reflected a very high sense of commitment to the association in general and to involving parents in the learning process in particular. Although only one out of the four teachers held key positions in the association, they all showed in the responses to the interview question that they have been very active in the association, in communicating with parents and teaching in the extra-study class. They all stressed regular attendance at P.T.A. meetings as being *"part of our duty"*. The assistant secretary said that his position in the association was helpful to getting him involved because it had given him the opportunity to communicate with parents more frequently. He describes himself as *"the eyes of the P.T.A. in the classroom"*. One of the respondents described his role of managing the school's website, apart from

teaching, as being very active. He said that he decided to use his information technology skills for the benefit of the school, although he was an English teacher, when he saw the commitment of the principal to encouraging parents to participate. Another teacher in the group said that apart from being deeply involved in the P.T.A. because he was a teacher in the school, he felt it was important for him because he has two sons studying in the school.

Another respondent viewed the P.T.A. meetings as an *"ideal forum for parents to air their views and opinions"*. He confessed that having taught in two public secondary schools before coming to the present school, what he had seen in terms of parental involvement was incomparable to all other schools he had worked in. He referred to parents' eagerness to attend P.T.A. meetings as very encouraging even for teachers. Another respondent in the group replied in the affirmative that he encouraged parents to come with suggestions and ideas all the time. He believed that *"no school is an island"* and considered inputs from parents as *"a great help in keeping the balance"*. He also heaped praise on the principal for pioneering active parental involvement in the students' learning process.

A common theme identified in the responses of the respondents was the regularity of communication with parents. One of the teachers admitted that educated parents were more eager and accessible to communication because they know how valuable education is. Non-educated parents, according to him, only *'appear'* when serious disciplinary problems that had to do with their children cropped up. *"We only get to see them when the school requests to see them or if there is a problem,"* he said. Another respondent in this group also pointed out that mothers - in contrast to fathers - seemed more interested in their children's progress in English language. The respondent acknowledged the respect accorded to English in the country above all other subjects. In the respondent's experience, mothers have demonstrated an appreciable attitude of interest in

the learning process of the students. The respondent also noted that the majority of parents who attend P.T.A meetings were mostly women. One of the respondents said communications with parents have been regular but most of such contacts were actually initiated by the respondent. The respondent also supported the observation that literate parents were quicker to communicate than non-literate parents.

All four teachers responded that they have had personal contacts with parents and that such contacts always proved to give birth to important and positive feedback about the students. One of the respondents cited an example of a student who was having bad grades in written exercises in English but spoke very good English. After some enquiries, he contacted the father and a meeting was arranged. The respondent pointed out the father's attention to the student's untapped potential in learning. He strongly advised the father to assist him at home. The father heeded his advice and the student's grades improved considerably.

Another way of actively involving parents in the learning process was by the initiation and maintenance of frequent communication with parents. A teacher in the group cheerfully pointed out many instances of being invited for dinners by parents. Needless to say, the respondent added, they were not really interested in feeding her but to talk about their children's progress in the subject. A respondent in the group also said that he started having personal contacts with parents when he noticed that the students who had problems in English in his class were not in the extra-study class. He said that he discovered that their parents had warned them not to go because they were not ready to pay additional fees. He spoke to the parents and made them realize that the class was free and the expense of running it was borne by the P.T.A. It became clear to him, of course, that those parents have never been to any P.T.A. meeting and did not know what was going on. One of the respondents answered by citing

the example of an uneducated parent that called on Fridays every week to know the progress of his son and willingly listened to whatever suggestions the teacher offered. The idea of setting up a special extra class, according to him, came from a parent who traveled a lot and who was worried that his absence might have been the reason why his children were not doing well in English. He brought this idea in a P.T.A. meeting and he was supported by other parents.

Parents' perspectives

In general, all the parents interviewed saw their roles and involvement in the P.T.A. as inputs into the progress of their children. A parent said, *"Although I am a busy business man, I still think it important to make time to do what I can in the association because whatever I do is not for the benefit of the teachers but for my children"*. There was a generally positive perception of their roles and involvement in the P.T.A. All the parents indicated that their input (financial or otherwise) was child-centered. An illiterate parent said that although the language of communication in the P.T.A. meetings was English, he patiently listened to translations to the local dialect because he did not want to miss out on anything that would contribute to the progress of his children.

Parents in their responses acknowledged that they have often had personal contact with the English teachers and it was always in response to a problem or complaint about their wards. Seven out of the nine parents interviewed cited examples of cases and times where they have had to come to the school to see the English teachers and iron out one or two problems. Two of the parents indicated that they have had to work with the English teachers to ensure that their children turn in their assignments on time. One parent said that the English teacher actually invited him over to the school to commend him for paying close attention to his child's performance in English. The only illiterate parent in the group said that constant contact and feedbacks initiated by the teacher

made him know that the particular teacher taught English. As far as he was concerned all teachers taught everything. Summarily, all the parents said that they have had personal contacts with the English teachers of their children.

The general consensus among parents in their responses was that the school communicated with them very regularly. One parent even noted that the school principal visited him twice and that the English teacher often called him by phone if there was a need. All the parents also commended the school for facilitating such regular and effective communication. It is important to note, however, that parents who hold administrative positions in the P.T.A. enjoyed a more regular communication with the school. However, all the respondents commended the principal for being very open and ready to listen to them. They acknowledged that there had been a few times of disagreements but the principal and teachers always handled such friction with professionalism. One respondent said that the principal and teachers were always receptive to his ideas and even when they did not accept such ideas, they were very diplomatic in getting their dissension across to him. Parents, however, pointed out P.T.A. meetings as avenues for parents to freely express themselves. The general consensus was of the readiness of the school staff to listen to parents. *"The principal treats us as if we are members of the school staff"*. A respondent said. Answers from all parents indicated that the principal always demonstrated a high level of openness and flexibility in decision-making.

5.2 Outcomes of parental involvement

Principal's perspectives

The respondent remarked that parental involvement was *'wonderfully supportive'* when he thought of what the school had achieved through parental support. He noted that despite the fact that the school was supposedly to be funded

by the government, the school would not have gone far if all they relied on was the *'doubtful'* government subventions. In his opinion, parental involvement was not outright interference if it was properly managed. He described the P.T.A. as *a 'balancing tool that provides the needed equilibrium so that involvement does not become interference'*. The respondent said he has had to endure series of probing questions from some teachers who felt at the beginning of his tenure that he was being 'too open' with parents. But over a period of time, he added, they could see the wisdom behind his action. He repeated that when parents see openness and sincerity from school administration, they would reciprocate by making positive inputs too.

The respondent revealed that inputs from parents towards improving learning were countless. He noted that such inputs were very valuable considering the inability of the Gambian government to meet the numerous needs of the school. He cited many examples of parental inputs during the course of the interview. The *'parent-hotline'* was suggested by a parent during one of the P.T.A. meetings and its setting up and maintenance was sponsored by the P.T.A. He also pointed to the renovation of the school science laboratories as a good example of what parents have done. The parents took up the renovation project, *"… after our numerous requests for financial assistance from the government were ignored"*, he said. He described the assistance given by parents as *'a huge relief'* to him. A project that has had a huge impact on the school academic life, according to him, was the extra-study class for students who had difficulties in English language. Another project in the embryo was the implementation of an idea suggested by a teacher: adding an interactive forum on the school's website. This, according to the respondent, would give parents opportunities to have audio-visual contacts with the school administration while they (parents) were at their home or work.

The respondent commended the parents for being supportive of the school. He then pointed to many areas where such support had been very helpful. The interactive forum that was being proposed as an addition to the school's website, according to him, has received tremendous support from parents. He said that since the idea came up, many parents have been calling his office and wanting to know when the forum would be up and running. At the time of this interview, the school was planning a Christmas party for the staff, parents and students which was solely sponsored by the P.T.A. According to the respondent, it was a heavy spending but the school did not need to stretch its already over-burdened budget. It was funded by the P.T.A. The program with the biggest impact that has the total involvement of the P.T.A. was the extra-study class organized for students who have learning difficulties in English. Although this class has not been extended to other subjects, he said the amount of success and improvement recorded has prompted the school to start thinking in that direction.

The respondent said parental involvement in the practices and programmes has indeed contributed to strengthening the relationship between the school and the parents. He said that parents now have a more *"communicative rather than confrontational approach"* to him and other teaching staff. He also noted that such was not the case in other public schools in the country where parents expect the school to deliver in spite of the obvious constraints. He also acknowledged his administrative burden has become lighter because of the responsibilities that parents have assumed. He perceived that shared leadership was a very effective method of getting the home involved. Parental impact, according to him, has been more obvious in easing the disciplinary problems of the school and helping to improve the performance of students in English language.

Teachers' perspectives

All the respondents agreed in their answers that their contacts with the students' parents have been immensely beneficial. One teacher in the group said talking to parents has actually become a learning process for him. He said he had spoken to caring and uncaring parents but the most important part was that such contacts helped him to identify the root of his students' problems and thus created the avenue for him to deal with such problems. Another respondent in the group said that contact with parents has made work easier. *"When parents know where the weakness of the children is, it becomes easier to work with them in finding solutions"*, the respondent said. A common benefit identified by all respondents in this group was the ease of maintaining discipline and calm in class since the students know that parents were just *'a phone call away'*. Class control which has always been a problem in public schools in The Gambia had become less stressful. A teacher in the group said that the opportunity to talk to parents has enabled her to know the home environment and situation where the child was from and that, according to her, was important in a country like The Gambia where ethnic and cultural backgrounds were very diverse.

All the respondents acknowledged that partnering with parents had helped a lot of students with learning difficulties in English. Several examples were alluded to: a particularly inspiring example was given by a respondent who noticed a significant drop at the rate at which students turned in assignments. He noted that many started coming up with excuses of being sick especially when it came to essay writing. He noticed that their enthusiasm was directed towards simple exercises and class work. They carefully dodged the weightier and more significant work of essay writing. He raised this in a P.T.A. meeting and parents present promptly agreed to monitor their wards in this area. Thereafter, he noted, there was a significant improvement. A teacher in the group also spoke of the impacts parental follow-ups had on his students.

English, being a second language in The Gambia, must be reinforced with follow-ups at home or what had been taught might not stick. He said he usually made it a point of duty to tell parents to help him by showing interest in what the students did at school.

One of the respondents was the brain behind the idea of setting up an interactive forum on the school's website in order to further encourage parental inclusion in school administration. He commended the parents for being very active in the school and referred to their immense financial inputs as very important. However, providing needed assistance in academic work at home for students was far more important, he added. Another teacher in the group considered his input into the extra-study class for students who have learning difficulties in English as his own quota of supporting and improving students' learning outcomes in English. He particularly liked the informal approach and atmosphere in the class and the fact that the numbers of students were small. This, according to him, afforded him the opportunity to concentrate on problem areas with individual students without the restraints of time. All the other teachers also agreed that the atmosphere in the extra-study class was far more conducive to teach and concentrate on the problem areas on a one-on-one basis with students.

All the respondents agreed that there was a significant difference in the motivational level of students who have strong parental support in contrast to those who did not. A respondent in the group said he had noticed that strong parental support in the student learning process usually comes from literate parents. Another teacher in the group described the motivation level of students who have strong parental support as *'impressive'*. *"I have noticed that where there is strong parental support, the motivation level has always been impressive"*. He said the best student in English was from a home where the parents were very interested in his school work and were ready to assist and encourage him at all

times. Those parents were also active members of the P.T.A., he noted. A teacher in the group also stressed the importance of parent literacy as a launch pad for high motivation level in students. *"Such parents are usually literates and they know the importance of English as a global language,"* he said. In his own view, the difference in motivation level of those who have strong parental support and those who do not have is *'noticeable'.* A teacher in the group who also has two of his children studying in the school admitted that going through what had been taught in class with his children had assisted them to overcome learning difficulties in English and boosted their motivation.

Parents' perspectives

The respondents readily agreed that teaming up with the teachers had been immensely useful. One parent said that he was very relieved that the English teachers in the school were *'solution-minded'.* They attributed the success of the extra-study class (English) to the combined efforts of the teachers and parents. More than one of the parents pointed out that the corrosive effects of the 21st century like movies, games and sports on students needed constant attention if students were to do well in school. One parent was happy that the English teacher always took it upon himself to contact him because his son was very shy and quiet by nature and never told him a thing about his challenges in his studies. He furthermore said that his numerous contacts with the teacher made him to realize that the extra-study class for students who have learning difficulties in English was not. *"… a ploy to squeeze money out of our pockets but a genuine attempt to help our kids".* Another parent succinctly described the contact as very beneficial and commended the school for being *'distinct'* compared to other schools in their relations with parents. He said he felt as if he was part of the school administration. Another common theme raised by the parents was the trust they had in the teaching staff's competence and expertise in dealing with

students' learning difficulties in English. The problems identified by the parents varied but they all expressed total confidence in the ability of the school to work it out. A parent said her son's grade was poor in English because she encouraged him to put more attention on science subjects but after talking with the teacher, she realized that she needed to change that approach of motivating her son. Another respondent cited his son's obsession with games as an example. Even in class, he said. The boy would be fiddling with the games on his mobile phone and would not pay attention to the teacher. The English teacher simply called the parent and suggested that a less complex phone with only basic functions (without games application) be given to the student. The parent saw this suggestion as very helpful and was surprised because other public schools would have seized it. *"I am never too busy to help my kids "*, he said. Another parent recounted how his daughter, who was born and raised in a different country where English was the first language, found it hard to adjust to the Queen's English taught in the school. Working with her English teacher really helped, according to the parent. The difficulty was overcome with the collaborative efforts of the parents and teacher. A vital thread of thought ran through their responses: they were sure of finding solutions to whatever challenges arise as long as they work with or follow the advice of the teachers.

Parents shared a common perception that their active involvement in the P.T.A. (in every possible way) was vital to supporting and improving their children's learning outcomes. Attendance at meetings, readiness to offer financial contributions and the willingness to offer suggestions, advice and criticism to the school were some of the things mentioned by parents in their answers. *"I see the P.T.A. as one of my avenues of supporting my child's learning process"*, a parent noted. Another common theme that was noticeable in their answers was providing support at home through what a parent called *"reinforced teaching"*. All the parents, with the exception of the illiterate parents, said they did spent

time to go over what had been taught in English class with their children. A parent said that he made it a point of duty to remind and see that his son has completed his assignments. Another respondent said that he periodically checked his child's books, asked to know if there were outstanding assignments and ensured that the assignments were done. *"Students have problems because they are busier than parents!"* he jokingly remarked. Providing support for his child by helping to draw a line of balance between games, fashion, music, sports and academics has been very helpful, he observed. *"We must help the school to draw a line between fiction and reality"*.

5.3 Future needs of parental involvement

Principal's perspective

The respondent expressed his total belief in parental involvement in the students' learning process. He stressed that the school would benefit more from this in the long run. He said every time he looked back and assessed some of the things the school has achieved through interaction with parents, he felt more convinced that Gambian public schools would fare better if parents were allowed to participate. All the schools needed to do was to make parents aware of the immense benefits that the students would gain if they partnered with the school in the learning process. *"After all,"* he said, *"it's all about the students"*.

Teachers' perspectives

All the respondents agreed that parental involvement should be encouraged more. One respondent described parental involvement as *"very beneficial"*. In his view, this century has many distractions for youths. Caring but firm interaction with their parents is a must for future success. Another respondent pointed to the effect of parental involvement in discipline. He said disciplinary issues had

eased off substantially, therefore paving the way for a conducive atmosphere suitable for learning. He believed that most parents knew their limits in terms of involvement and that what sometimes made them overreact was the desire to show that they cared. He felt a wise teacher should be able to define the limits for parents without necessarily stepping on their toes. A respondent also pointed to the inability of the government to support public schools, making it necessary for parents to come in. As an English teacher, parental inputs in terms of complaints, feedback and advice have been helpful for teachers. Another teacher indicated that getting parents involved in education was a challenge but in the long run both the school and home would benefit from such partnership. In his opinion, if getting parents involved was a challenge, the risk of parents exceeding reasonable limits was the least of the worries for the school. *Parental involvement should be encouraged more"*, he said.

Parents' perspectives

All the respondents interviewed affirmed their belief that students stand to gain more if parents are encouraged to participate actively in the teaching and learning process at school. Thus, they wanted more active roles in the day-to-day affairs of the school. One of the respondents believed that parents have a lot to contribute since they have the original intention and reason to send their children to the school. He drew the attention of the interviewer to the fact that the government was already over-burdened and parents could help the school to ease that burden. Another respondent cited constant communication, in terms of encouragement, with teachers, as a way of improving parental participation. It was obvious, according to him, that teachers were poorly remunerated. As far as he was concerned, he said no one could pay them (the teachers) enough for what they do.

A respondent said that the ball was actually in the parents' court. In his view, parents should show more willingness to be part of the teaching-learning process. Even though he was not literate, he had learnt that his educational status had little to do with his child's learning process once he showed his support to the school and listened to the principal. *"Parental support should be complementary to feedbacks from the school"*, he said. Some of the respondents said the government should not be quickly excused from involvement. If the two institutions (parents and government) joined forces together, a high percentage of the challenges facing school administration would disappear, he said. One parent pointed to how the relationship between the school and the principal has brought growth and advancement to the school. The respondent is of the opinion that parental inputs had positively affected and improved the school. Active parental involvement, in his view, is the missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle of the Gambian education.

6   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, the themes that emerged in the analyzed data will be discussed with a view to providing "a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account" of the analyzed data (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.93). This discussion will, in essence, link the findings and the various literatures chosen for this study. Common themes that emerged from the principal's, teachers' and parents' data will be discussed in such a way as to make credible arguments in relation to the research questions. The only source of the researcher's data is interview.

An important theme that emerged in the responses of the principal, teachers and parents was their positive perception of their roles. Brantley (2008) has found that the importance of parents' involvement in students' learning is paramount to their success in school. As observed in this study, teachers too acknowledged the importance of parents in the academic development of students. Teachers perceived teaching without parental assistance as *"highly frustrating"*. They therefore saw parental inputs as pivotal in promoting positive developmental outcomes in students. Bartholomeus (2002) argues that principals and teachers have strategic roles to play in positioning parents to understand and affect positively their children's academic achievement. Both principal and teachers agreed that joint discussion with parents during P.T.A. meetings have proved fruitful in situations that would have otherwise ended in a dead-

lock. All the parents involved in this three-dimensional approach (principal, teacher and parents) to teaching, recognized and respected each others' roles and all worked not to generate conflict but to complement each other. Pasquarette (2006) describes this type of relationship as a strong bridge between home and school that shares knowledge, information and practices in both directions (p.6).

All the respondents perceived motivation as helpful in monitoring and supporting students' learning. Motivation-related variables are seen as important because of their contribution to students' academic growth. The literature about parental motivation indicates that teachers' communication with parents and the teachers' requests on parents to check and assist their wards with their homework are some of the motivational variables identified by respondents (Becker & Epstein, 2001). The principal perceived the tremendous support the school has received from parents as being highly motivational on the entire school staff and students. Teachers that participated in this study noted the difference in the academic performance of students who have strong motivational support from their parents and those who do not. Motivation received from home was perceived as very instrumental to students' academic success. Parents too agreed that their ability to positively motivate their wards towards learning was significantly related to the students' academic success and to the school's perception of their parents' involvement. Violand-Sanchez (1991) has identified participation in governance and advocacy activities in school by parents as a way of motivating both staff and students. By "governance and advocacy", the author refers to the avenues by which parents can influence decision-making in a school system. Parents involved in this study saw their roles in the P.T.A. as a way of motivating the school staff and being updated with precious information about their wards.

Smit and Dressen (2005) identified communication as increasingly important in defining the relationship between home and school. The authors pointed out that communication and consultation are needed characteristics in the relationship between home and school. Parents in this study saw the school as partners with whom they should co-operate. Parents valued feedback they received from the school because such information kept them updated about their wards' classroom work and practices. They perceived communication as a prerequisite for their involvement and participation. The school principal made communicating with parents a high priority on his agenda. He did not see himself as a boss but rather a facilitator seeking to open the school to a variety of groups for a common purpose (educating the child). The effect of school-to-home communication was also evidenced by the reduced rate of indiscipline in the school. Ames C. et al. (1993, p.19) also suggests that when parents perceived that they are knowledgeable about classroom learning and received a regular reports of their wards' progress, they feel like a partner in the children's learning process. In this study, teachers' communication practices were seen by parents to be highly influential in their involvement. Communication therefore was seen as having a differential impact in generating greater parental involvement. The frequency and content of school-to-home communications was seen as important by the principal, teachers and parents. Teachers' communication was related to parents' reported frequency of talking to their children about school, discipline, monitoring their children's school work and assignments and helping them to learn. Donkor (2008) in his investigation of parental involvement in education in Ghana also postulated that parental communication with students' teachers is associated with high academic standards.

It is pertinent to note that all the respondents (principal, teachers and parents) agreed that problems or challenges can occur from the school or home or the combination of the two. It is also believed by the respondents that a col-

laborative approach to finding solutions is preferable and more effective than passing the burden to just the school alone or home alone. This perception is supported by Pasquarette (2006, p. 9) who described collaboration as a strong home and school relationship that necessitates creating a bridge between home and school where knowledge is being passed in both directions. The school, in this study, saw it as important not only to give parents information but also to use parents as a resource. That collaboration was actively supported throughout the interactions that take place in the form of P.T.A. meetings, consultations and inputs of advice and criticism to the principal and teachers. It was in the course of such meetings that new knowledge and ideas were discovered and areas where the school needed the aid of parents were highlighted. The principal also encouraged his teaching staff to work with students' parents with a view to reducing the burden they carry as teachers. One example was maintenance of discipline in the classroom. Collaboration with parents by teachers has helped, not to scare students into being well-behaved but to 'scaffold' them into higher realms of thinking and acting, thereby generating a positively impressive disciplinary comportment. Learning becomes easier in an environment that is stress-free and where the child senses that an entire team of adults is on his or her side (Greenberg, 2006; Tamis-LeMonda & Rodriguez, 2008).

Both the school and parents involved in this study appreciated the importance of English language as being fundamental to students' academic readiness and achievement. Parents especially recognized that positive growth in the use of English language is central to addressing achievement gaps both within and outside the school. Therefore, both home and school work collaboratively to ensure that their students overcome any detected difficulties in learning the language. The school took a leading role by setting up an extra-study class that specifically addressed such difficulties while parents supported the school by reinforcing what had been taught in class. This was done through

shared book reading and checking and ensuring that school assignments were done. The principal, teachers and parents perceived their relationship as collaborative and participative. It is also vital to note that this perception was born in mind with a child-centered view.

Shared leadership was very prevalent in the data gathered in the study and it was demonstrated most fluently by the principal in his relationship with parents. The principal recognized the value of working with parents and relied on a wide range of communication to achieve this. This perception is supported by the Ofsted report (2007) which says that the best schools are those that value parents' involvement and made them active partners. The principal in this study demonstrated a high degree of flexibility in his leadership role and relationship with parents. It was more common for him to allow the P.T.A. to discuss and make decisions than for him to impose on them. This has generated a lot of respect for the principal and kept the school and home focused on a common goal: educating the child.

The parents also perceived flexibility and openness in the leadership style of the school. They all saw that the communicative rather than a confrontational approach of the school engaged them in the learning process. They see the P.T.A. as an ideal forum for them to air their views and opinions. Due to the high level of openness in decision making, parents feel that they are members of the school staff. They see their roles in the school as complementing and reinforcing the teachers' roles and thus providing the students with a consistent message about schooling and learning. The attitudes parents and educators hold about each other set the stage for an atmosphere that is conducive for the formation of effective relationships. Such atmosphere was characterized by trust, solution-oriented communication and mutual problem solving (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

The teachers too perceived parental involvement as being significant in academic achievement. They welcomed ideas, advice and criticism and always consulted with parents first when they seemed to hit a deadlock in classroom relationships with students. Jeynes (2007) has identified parental involvement as the primary vehicle to raise academic achievement. The teaching staff recognizes the synergistic effect of home and school on indicators of students' academic performance (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Donkor, 2008). Being English language teachers, they knew the importance of the subject as being fundamental in understanding other subjects taught in the school and its importance outside the school walls. Various examples of involving parents in solving academic and disciplinary issues were referred to in the interviews. It is obvious that the principal's belief that the "school is not an island" has been inculcated into the teachers too.

All the respondents expressed a desire for an increase in parental involvement in the learning process. The principal and the four English teachers perceived parental involvement as beneficial and therefore advocate for increased participation of parents in advancing the academic achievements of students especially in the English language. A teacher indicated that getting parents involved was a huge challenge at first but in the long run both school and home would benefit from such a partnership. Brantley (2003, p. 3) lent credence to this perception in his explorative study of the positive outcomes of parent participation in supporting strategic reading strategies at home. He believed that parents can have a great impact on the achievement of students when they are actively involved in the daily learning that takes place in the classroom and by volunteering their time at home for educational activities.

Parents' perceptions of their abilities to assist in the child's learning and attainment of important educational goals may be partly a function of the degree to which parents identify the school as open and approachable. Of utmost

importance is the school's willingness to include parents and be responsive to parental inputs and desires with respect to children's learning experiences. The willingness to bring in parents can also be attributed, according to a teacher interviewed, to the inability of the government to fully support public schools. He perceived that no matter how attractive a school vision was, without the necessary funding it would only remain a vision and never a reality. The financial assistance that the school has received through the P.T.A. has transformed many of the school's visions into reality. Results of the interviews with parents indicated that they also wanted more active roles in the day-to-day affairs of the school. This perception was mainly due to the recognition of the need to complement the school's efforts in getting them involved, poor remunerative standards of the teaching staff and the obviously positive results that their past involvement has brought. Ames C. et al. (1993, p.9) argues that parents' perceptions of the school, their child's teachers and their own ability to make a difference in their child's learning are important determinants of their willingness to be involved. Results of the interviews showed that parents felt responsible for initiating the learning process in their children's lives and therefore felt uncomfortable if the school was overburdened. Parents' support and reinforcement are needed if changes made within the school and the teacher practices are to result in an appreciable level of anticipated improvement (Christenson, 2002).

Team work and shared leadership were very prevalent in the result. Both home and school saw their roles as complementary rather than overbearing on one another. All parties were allowed to come up with new ideas, suggestions, criticism and innovations that will add to and reinforce the academic performance of students. The principal recognized the innate abilities and skills of the teachers and parents, and he skillfully tapped into those skills and abilities through constant interaction with parents and granting considerable independence to teachers to function in class.

The financial input of parents into the school is a strong example of motivation that deserves to be mentioned. Parents seemed satisfied with the organizational structure of the school and were willing to continue to work with the school staff that has given them so much leeway in being involved in the education of their wards. Encouraged by the positive results they have seen since they became more involved, parents advocated for more involvement and participation. The results of this study provide evidence for a synergy of skills and competencies focused on raising the academic status of students in the senior secondary school chosen for this study.

This study is a qualitative case study of a senior secondary school in The Gambia. It focuses on fostering the relationship between home and school and how that relationship affects students' performance in the English language. The research questions were: (1) What are the factors and practices that can foster the relationship between home and school? (2) How can the connection between home and school affect students' academic performance positively?

The school principal, four English language subject teachers and ten parents were identified as participants in the study. The interview questions for the participants can be found on the appendix pages. The principal and the parents were individually interviewed while a focus group interview was organized for the four teachers. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Findings from the data collected indicated that the participants have a positive perception of their roles. All the participants acknowledged the interdependence of their roles in the academic development of students. Results of this research also identified motivation, communication, collaboration, shared leadership, flexibility and transparency as essential factors in a successful home-school relationship.

One of the areas that need to be improved is the provision of systematic support for parents. Workshops and seminars could be organized and parents

should be encouraged to attend these meetings where they can learn how to increase their parenting skills and reinforce their knowledge of different types of parental involvement.

A culture that not only welcomes involvement but also honors the strengths and contributions of stakeholders needs to be created. This would pave a way for greater participation and effective support for student achievement. When stakeholders are honored through awards and open recognitions, a mark of self-worth and responsibility is printed in their minds and this propels them to do more. However, checks and balances must be put in place so that involvement does not subtly turn to interference. This normally occurs when parents become excessively involved.

7 VALIDITY

7.1 Validity of the Research

Tracy (2010, p. 840) highlighted eight criteria by which a high qualitative methodological research is identifiable:

1. Worthy topic - This study emerged from a 'timely social event' (Tracy, 2010, p. 840.) It was borne out of the obvious and desperate need of schools to align with parents in solving the problems that they face in improving academic standards in The Gambia.

2. Rich rigour - The research invested immense amount of 'time, effort, care and thoroughness" duly assisted by the supervisor in doing this study (Tracy, 2010, p.841). Relevant literature taken from different parts of the globe was reviewed in order to provide a strong base for the study. The process of data collection was done with patience. Every participant responded to interview questions in an atmosphere that was relaxed and free. The huge pile of data that was collected was analysed thoroughly and care was taken by the researcher not to tamper with the essence of the responses during data analysis.

3. Sincerity - The research process was marked with transparency and trust (p.842.) Although the principal and teachers read the re-

search permit request signed by the Department of Educational Leadership, the parents did not bother to do that. They took the principal's word for it. In the instance where one of the parents was illiterate, an interpreter who was quite competent in translating the request to English was used to guarantee the accuracy of the data.

4. Credibility – Credibility refers to the trustworthiness and plausibility of the research findings (p. 844.) Participants were encouraged to voice their opinions without the researcher attempting to directly or indirectly put words in the participants' mouthes. The data analysis was also marked by thick description which did not in any way reduce the authenticity of the responses.

5. Resonance – This stands for the researcher's ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience (p. 844.) The researcher, in this study, sought to present it in a way that reflects not only the responses of the participants but also the emotions behind them. The researcher engaged the use of personal narrative and storytelling techniques so that the reader will not be bored (p.845.)

6. Significant contribution – This research was not built on past researches alone but offers new understandings that emerged from the data analysis (p. 846).

7. Ethics – The researcher also took time to follow ethical procedures by safeguarding the participants from undue exposure. This was done by using pseudonyms where names could reveal sensitive information which may be damaging about the participants (p.847.)

8. Meaningful coherence – With the help of my supervisor, I have attempted to make sure that the study hangs well together. "Studies

that are meaningfully coherent eloquently interconnect their research design, data collection and analysis with their theoretical framework and situational goals" (p. 848.)

The aforementioned criteria are what guarantees the credibility and reliability of qualitative research. Patton (2002, p. 93) also posited that the credibility of the qualitative method rests on the rigorous methods that are used in carrying out the study. I put all of the aforementioned into consideration before and during the process of conducting this study. I did not design my research and interview questions in isolation but relied heavily on the concrete assistance from my supervisor and insight gleaned from other studies related to my research intent.

I had a series of individual meetings with my supervisor in the course of carrying out this study. Such meetings gave birth to constructive criticism and useful advice which enabled me to stay on course. My classmates and competent lecturers in the field of educational leadership also offered strong inputs in the form of critique and commendations during seminar presentations.

Tracy (2010, p.840) described qualitative methodology as "... an art, effort, piles of data and time in the field". Healy and Perry (2000) explain the reason for the piles of data and time in the field as the qualitative researcher's attempt to gather and rely on multiple perceptions about a single reality. My supervisor guided me through the process of analyzing data collected in order to avoid biases and to extract themes which constitute the research findings. The extracted themes are the hidden and the deeper meanings behind the responses to interview questions. Johnson (1995, p.4) described this process as an engagement in "... research that probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features". Appendix E includes a sample of how the themes were extracted from the collected data. Based on data analyzed, the following themes were identified: shared leadership, team work, positive perception of

roles as parent and teachers, frequent and regular communication, collaborative approach to problem-solving, motivation as a tool for student learning, flexibility and transparency in leadership style.

I took conscious effort to protect and safeguard from undue exposure the identity of the participants in the study by securing all personal data (Tracy 2010). This step is necessary to avoid unnecessary exposure of private information and to encourage them to participate in future researches.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies can also be carried out in a more expansive way so as to involve students too in the research. This will open up a new spectrum of learning on how parental involvement has been beneficial from the students' point of view. It will also give another angle to the study where one can evaluate which party may need to increase their participation in home-school relations.

Future researches can also be expanded beyond secondary school levels to post-secondary institutions. Is it possible that parents still influence learning even when their wards are 'independent' and studying in a more relaxed and less monitored environment? More qualitative studies that focus on such subjects are needed.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I sincerely thank you for allowing me to take some of your precious time in this interview session. I am a student in the Master's Degree programme in Educational Leadership and I am writing my thesis on the topic: Fostering the Relationship between the Home and School – A case study of a Senior Secondary School in The Gambia. The purpose of the study is to find out how the fostered relationship between home and school can impact the academic achievements of students. The research data to be collected would consist of face-to-face interview with you, four English language teachers and ten parents. The data collected will be used for research purposes only and will be treated with confidentiality.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE PRINCIPAL

1. How are you involved in the Parents Teachers Association of the school?

2. How do you communicate with parents in order to seek ideas or suggestions on administrative support and school leadership?

3. Are there any concrete inputs from parents towards improving learning?

4. Do you think that intense parental involvement is being supportive or outright interference?

5. Have you any problems in the process of interacting with parents because of a rejected idea or suggestion from them? How do you solve these kinds of problems?

6. Do you encourage teachers to collaborate or work with parents in improving students' learning outcomes?

7. What practices and programs, apart from the P.T.A, are put in place to encourage parental partnership with the school?

8. Do you think that these practices and programs have contributed to strengthening the relationship between the home and school?

9. Do you believe the school should do more to encourage parents in the education of the child?

Thank you for taking part in this interview.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE TEACHERS

1. Describe your involvement in the Parents Teachers Association of the school?

2. How often do parents communicate with you to know the progress of their child?

3. Have you ever had or do you often have personal contacts with parents to provide important feedback about their wards?

4. Would you describe this contact as beneficial or not?

5. Have there been cases where students' learning difficulties in English have been solved by partnering with parents?

6. What are you doing, as a teacher, in collaboration with the parents to support and improve students' learning outcomes in English?

7. Have you noticed a difference in the motivation levels of students who have strong parental support in contrast to those who do not?

8. Do you encourage parents to give suggestions and ideas on how to better help students to learn?

9. Do you think parental involvement should be encouraged more or should there be a limit to how much parents become involved?

Thank you for taking part in this interview.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE PARENTS

1. Describe your involvement in the Parents Teachers Association of the school?

2. How often does the school communicate with you in respect to knowing the progress of your child?

3. Have you ever had or do you often have personal contact with the English teacher(s) in order to know the progress of your ward?

4. Would you describe this contact as beneficial or not?

5. How important do you see the English Language as a subject?

6. Has your child ever had or is he or she presently having difficulties in learning the English language?

7. As a parent, what are you doing to support and improve your child's learning outcomes in the English Language?

8. Have you ever offered ideas or suggestions to the subject teachers on how to better help students to learn? If yes, do the principal and the teachers consider these ideas and suggestions?

9. Do you believe the school should do more to encourage more active participation of parents in the teaching-learning process at school?

Thank you for taking part in this interview.

APPENDIX E: DATA ANALYSIS SAMPLE

Participants' words	Themes
Principal: *"I have always made it clear to the parents on countless occasions that the school alone cannot do it alone. Their decisions carry a lot of weight"*	Shared leadership and teamwork
Parent 4: *"I used to be very critical of school teachers but since I got involved in the P.T.A., I have come to realize that they need as much help as we can give"*	Positive perception of role as a parent
Parent 7:*"The principal and teachers of this school deserve commendation for maintaining regular communication with us. Just a call to the hotline on the principal's desk and I can know where and what my children are up to"*	Communication
Teacher 4: *"I have suggested to parents the help of home-study teachers to supplement what was taught in school in cases where the parent is too busy to do so. I have noticed that where there is strong parental support, motivation level has always been impressive"*	Parental support as a tool for motivation