

# Parental Involvement in Primary Education in Uganda



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How primary schools in Bukedea, Kumi and Mbale district  
involve parents in the education of their children

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## ABSTRACT

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According to previous research, parental involvement is expected to improve academic achievement and student behavior, school climate and school program. There are six areas in which activities can be organized in order to create parental involvement (Epstein, 2001). These areas contain the cooperation between schools and parents in terms of socialization and education of the child; the communication between parents and schools; volunteering activities of parents in school; parental influence on decision-making; and the collaboration between schools and the community.

The aim of the current research was to find out how primary schools in Uganda involved parents in the education of their children. During March and April 2011 ten primary schools in three Ugandan districts were visited. By doing observations in schools and semi-structured interviews with head teachers, teachers and parents, the practices used by schools to involve parents were investigated. According to the participants there was a lack of cooperation between parents and schools. Two-way communication between parents and schools was absent. Besides, only a few schools created opportunities for parents to volunteer in school. Moreover, the functionality of parent committees showed great differences between schools. Finally, not all schools had a good relationship with the community and this relationship seemed to become less important in urban areas.

Two obstacles that impeded parental involvement in the Ugandan context were illiteracy and poverty of parents. This study showed that these two barriers could be partly overcome, in order to create opportunities for all parents to become involved in education.

## INTRODUCTION

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In 2000 the United Nations formulated the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's). One of the MDG's states that by 2015, children all over the world should be able to complete one full course of primary education (United Nations, 2010b). In the last ten years the amount of children attending school increased with seven percent (UNESCO, 2010). Still, almost 70 million children do not attend basic education (United Nations, 2010a). Nearly 45 percent of these children live in Sub-Saharan Africa or South-East Asia.

Besides the focus on the amount of children that is attending school, the quality of education also receives attention. According to the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2004) children's cognitive, creative and emotional development should be encouraged by schools. Research has shown the importance of partnerships between schools and parents in relation to quality improvement of education. Parental involvement in schools is often associated with enhanced student achievement, behavior and well-being as well as with democracy and empowerment (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Jeynes, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

Parental involvement in education is an important issue for governments and non-governmental organizations in many developing countries. On national, regional and local level, policies are developed in order to increase involvement of parents (Bray, 2001; Suzuki, 2002). However, previous studies have shown that the implementation and effects of these policies are not always successful. Poor socio-economic circumstances can impede parental involvement in education. Involving parents can be difficult when parents and schools do not have the required knowledge, skills and means (Aronson, 1996; Peña, 2000; Prew, 2008; Smith & Liebenberg, 2003).

The aim of this study is to examine the efforts of schools to involve parents in primary education in three districts in Uganda. The following research question is formulated; "How do schools in rural and urban settings involve parents in primary education in Bukedea, Kumi and Mbale district in Uganda?" The study provides insight into the activities organized by schools to involve parents in education despite the socioeconomic barriers.

## THE UGANDAN CONTEXT

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Uganda is a low income country situated in the east of Africa. After its independence of the United Kingdom in 1962, Uganda experienced decades of instability. The last twenty years, the political and economical situation of Uganda became relatively stable. Despite economic and political stability, the country is still facing several problems. A lot of people live in poverty and life expectancy is low (Robinson, 2006). According to UNESCO (2011) between 2000 and 2007, 76 percent of the Ugandan population lived on less than two US dollar a day. The estimated population was 32,7 million in 2009. The Ugandan population is young: the median age is 15.1.

In 1997 the government of Uganda introduced a policy of free primary schooling, called the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy. Tuition fees, previously collected among parents, have been abolished. From that moment on schools received a UPE grant from the government. Primary school enrolment increased from 2,9 million to 5,7 million children within a year (Suzuki, 2002). Besides the increase of enrolment, the UPE policy seemed to have a positive impact on the poor, by improving their access to school (Nishimura, Yamano & Sasaoka, 2008).

Despite these improvements, primary education in Uganda is still facing several problems (Saito, 2006; Suzuki, 2002). While tuition fees have been abolished, parents may still have to pay for school facilities like exercise books, exams, uniforms, transport and school development funds. Such costs continue to make education inequitable. Many



pupils are dropping out before they have reached the last grade in primary school. Approximately 95 percent of all Ugandan children is attending school, but only 32 percent of all pupils survives to the last grade (UNESCO, 2011). A report of the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (2003) shows that 55 percent of primary school dropouts left school because of the costs. Furthermore, quality of education is said to be poor. The UPE policy has resulted in fast growing enrolment rates, often at the cost of quality. Despite the increase of expenditures on education, there is a shortage of trained teachers and available classrooms (Deininger, 2003; Nishimura et al., 2008). The average Ugandan teacher-pupil ratio is 1:57 (UNESCO, 2009).

Along with the UPE policy, a process of decentralization was introduced. Hanson (1998) defines decentralization as “the transfer of decision-making authority, responsibility and tasks from higher to lower organizational levels or between organizations”. Every primary school in Uganda is supposed to have a school management committee, which takes responsibility for managing the school. It is a policy-making body that represents the local government, parents and teachers. Primary schools should also have a parent-teacher association, which represents parents and teachers. This association is supposed to strengthen the cooperation between parents and teachers and to give these stakeholders a voice in the decision-making process (Suzuki, 2002; Saito, 2006; Yan et al., 2007).

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

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In this section, literature on parental involvement will be reviewed. First, the general concept of involvement will be explained. Second, the variables that affect involvement will be discussed. Third, involvement and the variables will be considered according to the Ugandan context.

Previous scientific research has made a distinction between parental involvement and parental participation in schools. Parental involvement refers to the basic obligations of parents and the involvement of parents in daily routines of the school and at home (Fan & Chen, 2001; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996), whereas parental participation refers to the influence of parents on organizational and policy level of the school (Bray, 2001; Suzuki, 2002). However, there is an overlap in the two concepts. Epstein (2001) considers participation in decision making as one of the means to reach parental involvement in schools. Moreover, Zimmerman & Rappaport (1988) describe participation as ‘involvement in any organized activity in which unpaid individuals participate in order to achieve a common goal’. So the two concepts are connected and therefore in this thesis they both will be examined under the denominator *involvement*.

Parental involvement in schools presumes some kind of partnership between schools and parents. Partnerships between parents and school are beneficial to school climate and school program improvement (Epstein, 2001). Moreover, parent involvement increases school attendance and improves student behavior and school discipline (Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Other studies reveal the relationship between involvement of parents and academic achievement of the child (Fan & Chen, 2001; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Jeynes, 2005). Furthermore, parental involvement in children’s schooling can result in teachers’ increased understanding in children and their community, parents’ increased understanding of how schools operate and opportunities for two-way communication between schools and parents (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003).

Underlying the concept of parental involvement is the assumption that different environments influence a child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Epstein, 2001). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological approach emphasizes the importance of the connections and interactions in the child’s environment. He states that strong connections and interactions between parents and school are beneficial to the development of the child. To be effective, these interactions must occur on a regular basis.



Similar to this approach is the theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2001). Epstein assumes that home, school and the community are the three main contexts in which children are growing up. According to Epstein, the influence on children's development is optimized when families, schools and communities have overlapping objectives and responsibilities for children. She claims that home, school and community need to cooperate in defining goals and organizing activities. In this way, the overlap of spheres will be extended, which is expected to increase parental involvement in schools and teacher's involvement with families, as well as child well-being and achievement.

According to different studies, it is particularly the task of educational institutions to bring together the three contexts in order to maximize children's potential for success (Epstein, 2001; Pelco, Jacobson, Ries, & Melka, 2000; Prew, 2009; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Smith & Liebenberg, 2003). To create opportunities for all families to become involved in education, schools have to organize activities within six different areas that fall in the overlapping spheres: parenting, learning at home, communicating, volunteering, decision making and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2001).

First, a supporting home environment should be established. Epstein (2001) refers to the basic obligations of parents, like the provision of nutrition, shelter and safety. It also includes the transmission of values, beliefs and attitudes by parents. Parent's attitudes are positively associated with academic achievement of the child (Fan & Chen, 2001). If parents are not able to establish a stable home environment, schools should support families (Epstein, 2001). By setting up family-support programs, organizing parent education and by doing home-visits, schools can assist parents in their basic responsibilities.

Furthermore, schools also have to encourage parents to become involved in students learning activities (Epstein, 2001). Schools should provide parents with information about the subject matter and they should give parents tools and information about how they can support their children's academic achievement. When parents are provided with strategies on how to help their children, they might get more involved in their child's education. Hereby, the attitude of the school staff towards parents is important (Epstein, 2001; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Peña, 2000).

In addition, schools can use different methods to inform parents on a regular basis about child development and school programs and policies (Epstein, 2001; Peña, 2000). In the communications to parents, schools should take into account the language and the illiteracy of some parents (Peña, 2000). Former studies emphasize the importance of two-way communication between parents and schools instead of one one-way communication to enable



parents to share information and concerns about their child (Epstein, 2001; Moles, 1993). When schools create a welcoming environment, parents will feel more confident in their contact with school staff (Peña, 2000).

Moreover, families should be involved as volunteers in the school (Epstein, 2001). This volunteering can have public and private benefits; volunteering can increase overall school quality and allows parents to act as a role model and influence school decisions (Gee, 2011). Parents can assist inside the classroom by supporting teachers and children, or outside the classroom by helping administrators and organizing activities. Schools should also invite parents at events like student performances or sport days.

Additionally, schools have to involve parents in decision making, for example through parent organizations and advisory committees. By giving parents a voice in decision making parents are expected to get empowered (Epstein, 2001). In previous literature, involvement of parents is also associated with empowerment (Bray, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Suzuki, 2002; van 't Rood, 1996). Empowerment has to do with the acquisition of skills that lead to the opportunity for people to play an active and participating role in their own environment (van 't Rood, 1996). Through empowerment, parents are expected to become aware of the conditions of their children in school as well as of their rights as parents to cooperate with the school and their opportunity to create change. This awareness is expected to lead to a lasting dialogue between school and parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Last, to optimize the partnerships between parents and school, collaboration with the community is needed. Following the theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2001), it is important that schools, parents and the community interact in order to maximize children's achievements (Grolnick, et al., 1997). Hence, schools can be linked to social and health services and cultural or recreational programs. Goals of community programs should be adapted to school programs, in order to create unity between the different contexts.

According to Epstein (2001), if the objectives of the different spheres of influence do not correspond with each other, this can affect the outcomes. When there is a discrepancy in the goals between school, parents and the community, the influence of the different spheres is likely to decrease for student outcomes, parental involvement in schools and teacher involvement with families.

Moles (1993) describes three factors that might account for low rates of collaboration between schools and parents. These factors are limited skills and knowledge among parents and school staff for successful collaboration; limited opportunities for interaction; and psychological and cultural barriers between families and schools. Intimidation by the

educational jargon and disinterest on the side of school staff can hinder communication between parents and school (Peña, 2000). Furthermore, a low socioeconomic status, parents' limited educational background and negative school experiences influence parental involvement negatively (Aronson, 1996; Peña, 2000). Another common barrier is the conflict between the planning of school activities and the working hours of parents (Bauch, 1993; Peña, 2000). The several reasons mentioned above, impede parental involvement and limit many from being actively involved despite opportunities provided by the school (Peña, 2000).

## CURRENT RESEARCH

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This research will investigate how Ugandan primary schools try to involve parents. The study focuses on the involvement of parents in the daily routines of schools as well as on the involvement of parents in decision making in schools. The following sub questions are formulated:

1. How do schools cooperate with parents in the socialization and education process of children?
2. Which channels do schools use to communicate with parents?
3. In what ways do schools create opportunities for parents to volunteer in school?
4. How do schools involve parents in decision making?
5. How do schools collaborate with the community?

The literature mentioned above will be used to structure the interviews and the outcomes of this study. However, it is questionable if the studied literature which is derived from Western research is usable in the Ugandan context. Most Western literature starts from implicit assumptions which are based on an individualistic frame. In African collectivistic countries the role of the broader community could be much more significant than is expected from a Western point of view (Prew, 2009).

In his research on South African schools, Prew (2009) found that to be involved communities need to have interest in a good relationship with school, in terms of money or service; school as well as the community needs to benefit. His research showed that schools often have disagreements with communities over management of funds. The lack of financial

transparency impedes the involvement of communities in schools. Similarly, Suzuki (2002) describes that Ugandan parents experience a lack of school accountability, because of little transparent school finances, and the existing power inequality between parents, teachers and head teacher. Other research emphasizes the limited access of parents to information about school and the intimidating school system as reasons for limited involvement (Mfum-Mensah, 2004; Saito, 2006; Smith & Liebenberg, 2003; Yan et al., 2007).

Furthermore, research shows that in poor communities a lot of parents are dealing with stress considering poverty and limited access to basic needs (Smith & Liebenberg, 2003). The long working days of parents can impede parental involvement. Moreover involving parents from poor communities can be hard because parents do not live near the school and because parents are often illiterate (Prew, 2009). Communication with illiterate, poor parents can be difficult, because they cannot read and do not have a phone. On the other hand indifferent attitudes of school staff towards struggling communities can be a reason for limited parental involvement, because parents might not feel welcomed and respected by schools (Smith & Liebenberg, 2003). In addition, schools are dealing with poor facilities and fast growing enrolment rates (Deininger, 2003; Nishimura et al., 2008). It is assumed that these factors could influence the involvement of parents in Ugandan schools.



## METHOD

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### DESIGN

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In this research, the activities organized by schools in order to involve parents were investigated through qualitative data collection. To get a comprehensive view of parental involvement, head teachers, teachers and parents in urban as well as peri-urban and rural schools were approached. First, semi-structured interviews with head teachers were conducted. Second, group interviews with teachers and parents have been organized at each primary school. The interviews were conducted by using topic lists. Furthermore, observations have been done in the schools.

Data was collected in March and April 2011 in three districts in Eastern Uganda; Bukedea, Kumi and Mbale district. Two urban schools, five peri-urban schools and three rural schools were covered. Three peri-urban schools in Bukedea district and three rural schools in Kumi were visited. In Mbale district, two urban schools and two peri-urban schools were selected (see table 1). All the schools were government aided (UPE) schools.

The districts and the schools were selected in collaboration with Catholic Education Research and Development organization (CEREDO), Edukans, Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU), Nabweya Parish Development Association (NAPADA) and SNV Uganda. The schools in Bukedea and Kumi were linked to CEREDO, which organizes programs in schools in order to increase the quality of education. The peri-urban schools in Mbale district were linked to NAPADA, an organization which focuses on community strengthening. The urban schools in Mbale were selected in collaboration with a master student of IUIU, who knew the head teachers in both schools. The two organizations and the university were linked to either Edukans or SNV Uganda, both Dutch non-governmental organizations with education programs in Uganda.

All of the approached schools responded positively. Since they were contacted through the above mentioned organizations, it was easy to reach them and they were willing to cooperate. It was not hard to arrange interviews with head teachers and teachers, because most of the time they were present at the school compound. In most schools, the teachers were selected by the head teacher. In every school teachers of upper and lower classes joined the interviews. In the group interviews a gender balance has been taken into account.

Most of the interviewed parents were members of the parent-teacher association or the

school management committee. These committee members were selected because they were expected to have a good view on the activities that are taking place in the school. Additionally there has been tried to involve other parents in the data collection, to include the vision of non-committee members as well.



In a few schools it was complicated to reach the parents, since most of them only visited the school occasionally. Most head teachers were willing to arrange a meeting with some parents. However, in some schools this was not successful, since the head teacher had a busy schedule or because he found it difficult to reach the parents. In one school the teachers helped by sending some children home to call their parents. In another school the parents were contacted without any help of the head teacher, by going into the community. Parents from one urban school have not been reached.

## PROCEDURE

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Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the efforts made by schools to involve parents. The aim of the research was to get insight in the cooperation between schools and parents in terms of education and socialization; parent-school communications; parental volunteering in school; parental influence on decision making; and the collaboration between school and the community. In each school, at least two teachers with a maximum of seven were interviewed in a group. Parents were interviewed in groups of two to five people. The head teachers were interviewed individually. During the interviews a topic list was used, which made the interviews semi-structured. Furthermore, free observations were done during tours through the school and the school area. All interviews took place at the school compounds, except for two interviews with parents. One interview was conducted in the office of one of the parents, while another one took place in church.

Most of the participants spoke English, but during three interviews with parents a translator was used to translate the local language.

#### RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

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In group interviews people could be inclined to give social desirable answers, which can be misleading. To avoid this, the interviews were held with a maximum of seven participants. During the discussions the researchers created a good atmosphere and gave every participant a chance to speak.

Furthermore, the interviews with teachers and parents were held separately and the head teacher was not allowed to join the group interviews, because this could influence the answers of the teachers and the parents. In one of the interviews with parents, one parent turned out to be a teacher in the school as well. This interview has not been used in the results, because the teacher could have influenced the answers of the other parents.

Moreover, the use of a translator could have affected the answers. Although a full instruction about the aim and the topic of the research was given to the translator, the interpretation and the opinion of the translator could have affected the results.

By triangulation the validity has been secured. Parents, as well as teachers and head teachers were interviewed using roughly the same topic list. Their answers were compared to ascertain the internal validity of the questions.

Last, the influence of personal involvement from the researchers was limited, because the participants only met the researchers during the interviews. What could have affected the interviews is the fact that the researchers were from a different culture.



Table 1

*Research Participants According to Geographical Situation*


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<b>District</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Urban</b>	<b>Peri-urban</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Head teacher</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Parents</b>
Bukedea	Bukedea PS		X		1	4	5
	Bukedea Dem.* PS		X		1	5	3
	Okunguro PS		X		1	4	2
Kumi	Adesso PS			X	1	4	4
	Atuitui PS			X	1	4	4
	Ongino PS			X	1	7	2
Mbale	Nabuyonga PS		X		1	5	2
	Nabweya PS		X		1	2	3
	Namanyonyi PS	X			1	4	4
	Nashibiso PS	X			1	5	0

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*Note.* PS = Primary School, \* Dem. Demonstration

## RESULTS

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The aim of the current research was to find out how primary schools in three districts in Uganda involve parents in the schooling of their children. The results were linked to the different areas in which involvement can take place; parenting and learning at home, communicating, volunteering, decision making and collaborating with the community.

### PARENTING AND LEARNING AT HOME

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The schools used various methods to make parents aware of the importance of coming to school. Some schools used stakeholders like the parent-teacher association, school management committee and local counselors to create this awareness. During annual general meetings in school, the head teacher and the two committees tried to inform parents about their role as a parent in the school. During meetings in the community and mass in church parents got also informed with this and some schools organized individual teacher-parent meetings.

Head teachers and teachers reported that they expect parents to visit school at least once a term, send their children to school in time and provide scholastic materials, uniforms and meals for their children. In all the schools this seemed to be a problem. Parents as well as teachers and head teachers reported that a lot of pupils lack these basic needs, since a lot of parents around the schools were living in poverty. In one of the schools teachers asked the parents to provide cheap materials like boxes and ropes. The teachers of the lower classes used the materials to develop learning materials.

Sometimes a school called an urgent meeting for parents. One teacher reported that they had an urgent meeting last year because of an outbreak of cholera. They called parents and informed them about hygiene and health. However, no other school reported any organized activity from the school to educate parents about a certain topic or to let parents participate in a workshop.

One school reported a project of a non-governmental organization that made parents aware of the importance of schooling. Moreover, two schools had a taskforce committee, which tried to reach parents who were not involved in school by going into the community, doing home visits and talk with them about school issues. One head teacher stated that his teachers sometimes visited the homes of their pupils or met their parents in the church and

talked to them about educational issues.

Some parents reported that they visited school also without an official invitation. This visitation was to monitor their child's behavior, academic progress and the arrival time of teachers. Teachers and head teachers took the opportunity to talk to parents when they visited school.

Two schools tried to involve parents in children's education by organizing class days or education weeks. Parents were invited to monitor the performances of their child by coming into the classroom. The class days were also meant for interaction between the teacher, parents and the pupils about the school work of the child. Furthermore, in one school teachers gave homework to the pupils that had to be signed by the parents. Some parents also reported that they helped their child with their homework or that they asked relatives or neighbors to help. When teachers had a problem with a child or when a child was not performing well, the parents of that child were invited for an individual teacher – parent meeting. This happened in all the schools, but not very often and only when it was severely necessary.

In two of the schools the respondents mentioned education in sanitation, hygiene and environment as meaningful for both students and their families. Children learned for instance about hygiene and were instructed to practice it at home. Another example is that children learned how to take care of trees, crops or animals at school. Sometimes they worked together with the parents in the school garden. Some schools advised to practice this at home as well. Children could take the practical skills they learned at school back home to practice and to talk about it with their parents. In this way, the subject matter became more meaningful for parents and the involvement of parents in school became easier and got enforced.

Although one teacher mentioned the combined effort of parents and teachers to educate a child, most teachers, head teachers and parents reported that only a few parents attended meetings in school. In most cases these meetings were almost entirely attended by women. Most schools had difficulties with reaching parents. According to head teachers and teachers, this difficulty had several reasons. Participants in urban and peri-urban schools said this is because a lot of parents are working in town. In the more rural areas teachers as well as parents thought that parents did not come to school because a lot of parents were unschooled. In most schools the respondents said that unschooled parents were not interested in education. Others thought that unschooled parents were not involved in their child's education because they do not understand the subject material.



In all schools there were parents who visited the school on regular basis. In every school the head teacher had a guestbook which all visitors were supposed to sign. This guestbook revealed that the parents who visited the school were often members of the parent-teacher association or the school management committee, or parents who were for instance involved in school as a cook or watchman. Other parents stopped over at the school frequently because they were living nearby or because they were visiting a market close to the school. One school in Kumi was situated next to the weekly market and on a market day a lot of parents could be seen around the school compound. However, most parents only interacted with the teachers and the administration when they were invited for an annual general meeting, class days or individual parent-teacher/head teacher meetings. In all the schools, the annual general meeting was the main event for parents and schools to interact with each other. During this meeting parents were able to express their views and to discuss with the teachers and the administration of the school. Some respondents stated that an annual general meeting is an effective manner to reach all the parents, while in other schools only a few parents turned up during such a meeting. Two schools organized class days once a year, where parents were invited to visit the class of their children. Parents then had the opportunity to interact with the class teacher about their children's work. Sometimes parents were invited for an individual meeting with the teacher or the head teacher. However, all the respondents stated that this was only occasionally when there is something urgent concerning the child.

In all schools head teachers and teachers also mentioned written letters as a major strategy of communicating with parents. Parents were usually invited by written letters for important meetings like an annual general meeting. Some schools sent circular letters at the end of the term to inform parents about what is going on in the school. A teacher of a peri-urban school stated that written invitations are important because parents feel honored when they are invited; without an invitation parents hardly come. Furthermore, all schools also used other types of communication because some parents, especially in more rural areas, were illiterate. Therefore, the schools used radio announcements, posters on trees, telephone calls, local leaders and church leaders to call parents for meetings or to inform them about school issues. Furthermore, all the teachers used children to pass messages verbally to parents. In one school teachers sent children home to call parents for a focus group interview for this research.

In every school the parent-teacher association was mentioned as an important link between parents and the school. This committee represented all the parents in the school. If parents had suggestions or complaints they could turn to the chairman of the parent-teacher association, who then speaks to the head teacher and teachers on behalf of the parents. Yet, in some schools the head teacher was the main contact person for the parents in the school, and communication between parents, teachers and committees like the parent-teacher association and the school management committee was conducted through the head teacher. In most cases it was not clear if and how parents interacted with the school. Most head teachers said that parents could turn to the head teacher or the chairman of the parent-teacher association, but the procedure for suggestions and complaints was not clear.

#### VOLUNTEERING

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Teachers, head teachers and parents all reported that parents were involved in co-curricular activities. Parents came to watch and encourage their children while performing sports, music dance and drama and arts and crafts. Generally the parents were not invited by school but came on their own initiative. In three schools, teachers asked parents to help them training the children in athletics or music. Parents were used as resource persons for guidance and counseling, as well as for teaching children and teachers about their profession or telling cultural and historical stories and songs. One head teacher invited a health worker from the community to teach pupils about hygiene and health. Another school invited parents to watch learning TV. Some parents came to watch, though most of these parents were members of the parent-teacher association or the school management committee.

Moreover, parents were involved in agriculture and construction. They brought for example seeds, crops, bricks and sometimes money to the school. In two schools, parents also prepared food for teachers or food for during an annual general meeting. One school reported the existence of an agricultural department, a committee that involves parents by plowing the school garden. Also, parents of four schools helped teachers voluntarily with cleaning the school compound as well as with building and repairing school properties, like the borehole, latrine or teachers' houses. There existed a difference between rural and urban schools. While it was usual for parents of rural schools to contribute to school by doing labor or giving materials like bricks and firewood, parents of urban schools were more likely to contribute in terms of money.

SMC MEMBERS	
ODEKE PETER	FOUNDATION BODY CHAIRPERSON
OTANG JOHN MICHAEL	VICE CHAIRPERSON
ADONG BETTY	TREASURER
OMAYO PETER	MEMBER
OJAKOR FRANCIS	MEMBER
ADONG ANNA MAGRATE	MEMBER
MURDN SILVER	MEMBER
IBERUT LAWRENCE	PARENTS REPRESENTATIVE
OPENY KIZITO	OLD BOY
ADOME KIZITO	REPRESENTATIVE FOR EDUCATION
AKWI HELLEN OKOED	HEAD TEACHER/SECRETARY
ATORI GRACE	PARISH REPRESENTATIVE
OKWI SAMUEL	TEACHERS REPRESENTATIVE

## DECISION MAKING

In all schools, both a parent teacher association and a school management committee were present. In all schools the head teacher was the secretary of both the parent-teacher association and the school management committee. All head teachers possessed lists with both the members of both committees in their office.

According to the respondents the parent-teacher association is the body that is supposed to link teachers and parents. Another task of the parent-teacher association was mostly to make parents aware of the importance of contributing money or materials for the construction and development of the school. The parent-teacher association was supposed to perform at the practical level; they were the ones who implemented new ideas in the school. Furthermore, most of the respondents said that the members of the parent-teacher association should represent all parents. Respondents stated that every parent of the school should be aware of the members of this committee, because

PTA MEMBERS	
IBERUT LAWRENCE	CHAIRMAN
OSIRE ALPHOSE	VICE CHAIRMAN
IKEDE ANNE ROSE	TREASURER
OKWI JULIUS	MEMBER
IBERET JULIUS	MEMBER
IKEDI C IMMACULATE	MEMBER
OLUKA GRACE	MEMBER
OKWI LAWRENCE	MEMBER
AKWI OKOED HELLEN	SECRETARY

the parents were the ones who selected them. Most respondents said that members of the parent-teacher association and other parents met each other in the community. It was not clear if and how parents could contact members of the parent-teacher association if they had questions, ideas or complaints.

The school management committee on the other hand, was mentioned as a governance body. According to the participants this committee is supposed to have three main roles; administrative, supervisory and consultative. Members of the school management committee were supposed to approve and supervise the school's budget, supervise teachers and learners and lobby with the local government and non-governmental organizations. In one school the reverend of the church was a member of the school management committee. This committee mostly performed at policy level.

All schools organized an annual general meeting at least once a year. During this meeting, parents were allowed to come up with ideas concerning school issues. One school

also reported that the annual general meeting was the opportunity for the school management committee to share new ideas and ask for the approval of parents for implementing these ideas. In other schools the participants said that the school management committee does not need an approval of parents for the implementation of new ideas. The annual general meeting was also the opportunity for head teachers to share the school performances of the preceding year and discuss the plans for coming year.

In two schools the participants reported the construction of a school improvement plan. This plan was made by the parent-teacher association, the school management committee, parents and the local government during an annual general meeting. In one school this plan existed out of five activities that the school had to run that year, such as fence the school.

Three schools reported the existence of parent committees other than the parent-teacher association and school management committee. These committees were mostly subcommittees of the parent-teacher association or school management committee and dealt with for example construction of the school or discipline issues.

Most participants acknowledged the parent committees and the general meetings as means for giving parents a voice in decision making. Though, in some schools the head teacher was the person who took all the final decisions, so the function of the annual general meetings, the parent-teacher association and the school management committee was not clear.

#### COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY

The relation with the community seemed to be important for the relationship between parents and the school. Especially in peri-urban and rural settings, daily life took place around the school compound and schools as well as parents stated that it is important to maintain a good relation between the school and the community. All schools were founded by churches in the community, so head teachers tried to keep a good relationship with the church leaders. In one school, an interview with parents was held in the church of that community. This church was situated next to the school compound. Also the link with local leaders was important for the understanding between school and the community.

All the participants said that the community was allowed to have their meetings and events at the school compound. In one urban school there was a meeting of parents and community members taking place at the school compound during a focus group for this



research. In one peri-urban school the teachers reported that a local counselor decided that all the community meetings should take place in school to bring parents nearer to the school. The communities in rural and peri-urban areas were allowed to borrow school materials like desks in case of a funeral or a wedding in the community. The participants from urban schools did not mention the use of materials; a member of the school management committee stated that there is no need for it in urban areas.

Rural and peri-urban schools also helped in other ways when a funeral or a celebration took place in the community. Sometimes a school collected money and materials, or teachers and pupils attended and helped with the ceremony. Parents mentioned that this is appreciated by the community. In the two urban schools, head teachers and parents mentioned a cleaning day. On this day, the schools organized the pupils to clean the area around the school. According to the participants, this is how school tried to help the community.

Furthermore, in rural and peri-urban sites schools and the community sometimes shared a borehole or water tap. Yet, in some areas there was disagreement about the use of a tap because of a conflict over land property. Here, the communities felt that in the past the school had taken their land. This affected the relationship between the school and the community. Local leaders sometimes mediated when there was a conflict between the school and the community. It was remarkable that the school compound in rural and peri-urban areas was open while the school compound in urban areas was fenced.

Three schools mentioned their links with a community-based organization or a non-governmental organization. These organizations tried to create a sustainable relationship between the school and the community, by setting up community projects in the school, like renovation of the school building and cultivation of the school garden by the community. In one of the peri-urban schools a pile of bricks for the construction of a classroom was lying at the school compound. This school building was going to be constructed by the community based organization of that community. Furthermore, one of the rural schools was linked to a health centre with which the school works together in teaching children sanitation and hygiene.

There was a difference between urban and non-urban schools regarding the relationship between the school and the community. Head teachers and teachers of several rural and peri-urban schools stated that communities felt responsible for sending their children to school. Sometimes community members brought truants to school when they were walking along the road or when they were hiding in the bush. Besides that, community members

motivated each other to send their children to school and sometimes a community helped parents who could not afford to send their children to school.

On the other hand, one of the head teachers in town stated that there was a lack of shared responsibilities. Children who were hanging on the streets were not encouraged to go to school by people from the community.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

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The current study examined how primary schools in Uganda involve parents in the education of their children. Ten schools in three districts in Eastern Uganda were covered. The practices of parental involvement were investigated by doing semi-structured interviews with teachers, head teachers and parents. The theory of Epstein (2001) on parental involvement was used for structuring the interviews and the results. The different perspectives of teachers, head teachers and parents have been compared to secure the validity of the questions. Furthermore, observations have been done and pictures have been made to complete the image of the schools.

Limitations inherent to the cross-cultural bias could not be avoided completely and could have affected the interpretation of the answers of the respondents. Furthermore, during three focus groups with parents a translator was used. This could have affected the reliability because of the interpretations of the translator. Third, social desirability could have influenced the answers of the respondents since teachers and parents were interviewed in groups. However, social desirability has been avoided by guaranteeing the privacy of the participants and by ensuring the academic purpose of the interviews being conducted.

Epstein (2001) presumes that involvement has to take place in different areas; parenting and learning at home, communicating, volunteering, decision making and collaborating with the community, in order to involve all parents in school. The current study has shown that schools experienced difficulties in involving parents in all areas.

Although schools tried to inform parents about the importance of being involved in their child's educational development, the cooperation between schools and parents in the socialization and education of children was minimal. Some parents came to school to seek advice, but teachers did not seem to support parents in their basic obligations at home. Even though schools used various ways of communicating to parents, two-way communication between schools and parents was lacking. A few schools reported some willing parents who were voluntarily involved in the school. These schools used parents' musical or technical expertise by organizing workshops. Other schools asked parents to contribute voluntarily in terms of money, food or materials.

The Ugandan schools reported at least one general meeting a year, but in most schools only a few parents attended those meetings. In all schools parent committees were present. However, the functionality of these committees showed considerable differences between schools. Some schools had a very active parent committee that also tried to reach the less

involved parents, where other committees did not go into the community to contact these parents. Furthermore, it was not clear-cut whether the parent committees made decisions in terms of school policies or if it was up to the head teacher to take final decisions.

All schools were linked to either a health centre, a community based organization or a religious body. Local leaders as well as religious leaders were used to maintain contact between the community and the schools. However, not every school had a good relationship with the community and the meaning of the community was declining in urban areas.

Illiteracy and poverty seemed to be restrictions for the involvement of parents in Ugandan schools. Where parents need to have knowledge and skills to guide their children with homework, a significant amount of parents in the Ugandan context did not attend school their selves and was illiterate. The low or absent educational level of most parents was a problem for teachers when asking parents to help children with their homework. In previous research, lower levels of parental education were associated with lower levels of parental involvement (Aronson, 1996; Gee, 2011; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Moles, 1993; Peña, 2000).

Furthermore, a great amount of parents in the Ugandan context lived in poor circumstances. They were often not able to attend school meetings or to help in school voluntarily, since they had to work in order to foresee their family with food. Poverty can be an obstacle for parental involvement in school (Aronson, 1996; Peña, 2000). Lee and Bowen (2006) endorse this with their findings that people living in poverty are expected to be less involved in school, have less academic interactions with their children and have lower academic expectations. The illiteracy rate and the poverty level of Uganda seemed to be obstacles for the creation of parental involvement.

However, the current study showed that these obstacles could be partly avoided. The Ugandan parents were often skilled in fields like agriculture or music. Two schools used the expertise of parents by asking them to demonstrate their talents in school for learners and teachers, which made the knowledge and skills of parents valuable. Earlier research emphasized that if parents see their selves as teachers and if they feel more capable, they are more likely to become actively involved in their children's education (Grolnick et al., 1997). Other schools described small projects where pupils got the responsibility to take care of a tree or an animal. The skills learned at school could also be practiced at home. By educating the pupils not only with theoretical knowledge but also with practical skills, the subject matter becomes more meaningful for children and parents. In this way, the education-level barrier could be overcome to some extent.



Furthermore, two schools reported the organization of class days where parents were able to communicate with school staff and could take a look at the performances of the child in the classroom. By organizing these class days schools created the possibility for two-way communication between parents and school staff. During such days teachers could also advise parents about how to assist their children with school work. In previous research, the importance of class days is emphasized in order to maximize parental involvement (Epstein, 2001; Grolnick et al., 1997; Peña, 2000). Parents who are guided by teachers in how to help their children, are more likely to become involved in their child's education.

Finally, some schools used task force committees consisting of parents to go into the community and communicate with parents about school issues. Previous research describes the importance of home visits by school staff, in order to create parental involvement (Epstein, 2001; Peña, 2000). Since teachers in Ugandan schools often had overcrowded classes, they lacked time for doing home visits. The task force committee supported the teachers, by doing home visits. Parents were reached in their own environment and in this way obstacles in terms of visiting school could be avoided. Parents were able to share their concerns and questions with the task force committee and this committee shared the feedback with the school staff. In this manner, two-way communication was encouraged. Although the effectiveness and the sustainability are not shown yet, the schools were positive about this concept, because even the less- or not involved parents were reached by this committee.

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