RELI
Regional Education
Learning Initiative

PARENTAL EMPOWERMENT & ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

The Regional Educational Learning Initiative (RELI) under the coordination of Zizi Afrique Foundation; Curriculum Equity Project has begun a process of co-creating a regionally-relevant parental empowerment and engagement framework that will strengthen the design, implementation, evidence collation and synthesis of parental empowerment and engagement within RELI and beyond. The desk review focuses on consolidating evidence of effective approaches to parental empowerment and engagement.

The summary below provides insight into:

- Goals of Parental Empowerment and Engagement
- Concepts and Theories of Parental Engagement
- Frameworks of Parental Empowerment and Engagement
- Best Practices in Parental Empowerment and Engagement

1. Goals of Parental Empowerment and Engagement

Goals for PE&E can be grouped into three broad categories:

01 Student focused
The goal should be student focused and should be to improve attendance and completion of students, learning and development, refine their purpose and also redefine the purpose of the school for the community and society at large.

02 Community focused
To adequately enlist the engagement of communities in school and learning related activities, it is important that the communities are involved and engaged in the wholesome learning of the child.

03 System focused
To achieve sustained parental empowerment and engagement, having system focused goals are important, these have to be simplified enough from the national goals to the school goals

Barriers to PE&E

The main barriers to family-school engagement can be summarized into:

Main Barriers

Other Barriers

2. Concepts and Theories of Parental Engagement

Over the years there has been different shifts in concepts and understanding of parental empowerment and engagement:

1. **Shift from involvement to engagement:** Involvement alludes to one directional while engagement alludes to partnership and more involvement.
2. **Shift from deficit-based lens to family engagement:** Moving from focus on what parents don't have and can't do to creating platforms that emphasize on how parents can get involved.
3. **Shift to co-design and co-creation in parent engagement:** Siloed design and implementation to schools and parents working together to identify, define and address the shared challenges and focus on improving the educational experience for children.

With this understanding, family engagement will become an equitable partnership among parents, teachers and the community.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory or Bioecological Systems Theory

This theory looks at a child's development within the context of a system of relationships that form his or her environment. The theory states that the child's interactions with his family environment steer their development as its most impactful in the child's life.

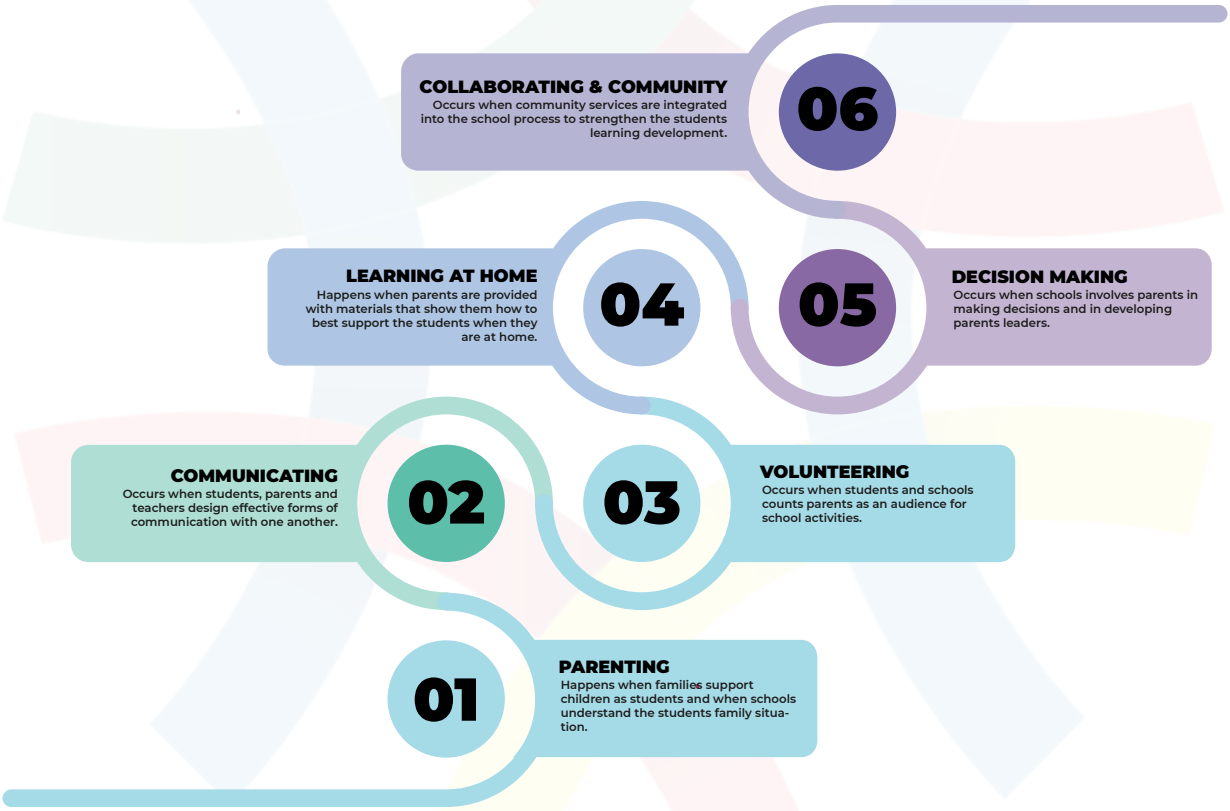
Funds of Knowledge Theory

The theory is based on the premise that all families have a wealth of knowledge and resources due to their socio-economic, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or educational backgrounds. The environment of the individuals determines what is learned and developed.

3: Frameworks of parental empowerment and engagement

Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnership

This is the most influential framework of parental involvement that has been developed. The framework identifies six main types of parental involvement in their children's schooling and collaborating with the community.

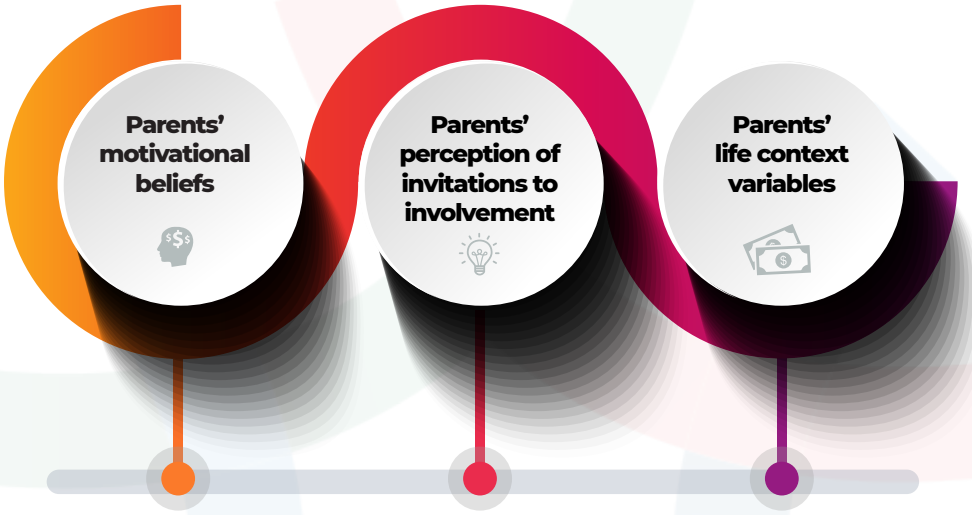


From the perspective of Epstein's framework, the analysis of RELI partners initiatives reveals:

- The most common components of the Epstein framework within the RELI partner's initiatives are collaborating with the community and communicating.
- The least common components of Epstein Framework were decision making and volunteering.
- The critical success factors for parental empowerment and engagement include having a strong community collaboration component, volunteering from the school and community, and parenting that is supportive to the children.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of the parental involvement process focus on understanding how parents/families become involved in their children's education and how their involvement influences student outcomes.



Invitations by teachers to parents requesting them to engage in specific activities that help students better their performance have been shown to contribute to learner's outcome

Parents actively believing that they should be involved in their children's education and feeling a positive sense of efficacy in helping their children learn

There is significant difference between the involvement of families from different economic backgrounds. Those from lower SES have multiple barriers that affect their involvement.

REFLECTIONS
ON THE MODEL

Parents predominantly want the best for their children. Schools however have had an upper hand when it comes to parent's involvement in the schools life.

This has led to reduced parent's agency because parents wait for invitation from schools or educators and therefore the communication is largely unidirectional.

The parents from the lower social economic status are usually the ones with the lowest agency and voice because they are the ones likely to be having challenges supporting their children because of lower education level.

Research has shown that parents who get involved in their children's education are likely to positively influence their children's outcome.

However the social economic status of various families have negatively affected this.

Parental Engagement Framework - Department of Education, South Australia

The parent engagement elements for the South Australia department of education are drawn from the key dimensions of the National Family-School Partnerships framework below:

Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships

This framework focuses on how to cultivate effective family-school partnerships. Using the essential conditions as the precursor to successful initiatives for this framework, the pre-conditions are relational, linked to learning, asset based, culturally responsive, collaborative, interactive, systemic, integrated and sustained.

Relational	Relationships built on mutual trust are important for any sustained engagement between parents, families and educators or schools. This trust has to include respect, integrity, competence and personal regard. The parents have to feel equally important.
Linked to learning and development	The parents/family/community engagement must be aligned to the learning and development goals of the children. Parents are the “first teachers” of the children and therefore should be incorporated in the planning of their children’s goals.
Asset-based approach	This approach focuses on the strengths that parents or families bring to the children’s learning experience. It recognizes parents as equal partners.

Culturally responsive and respectful	Recognizing the culture of families and communities and how to tap into the culture to enhance the learning and development of children is critical.
Collaborative	Tapping into the expertise of parents and that of the teachers would result in the highest gains for the learners. Schools should find ways to co-create with parents and this requires inclusion of parents in decision making processes.
Interactive	It is important that strategies utilized provide opportunities for parents to be trained or capacities built, but more important is that they apply the knowledge and skills in an interactive way.
Systemic	Parental empowerment and engagement approaches should not just be for certain “parent champions” or “teacher champions” but rather should be systemized with all leaders embracing and committing to them.
Integrated	Family/parental engagement should be integrated in systems, structures and processes across the organization.

It identifies and groups the challenges in two: the school related challenges and the family or parent related challenges. Ultimately, the framework seeks to contribute to effective partnerships that support student and school improvement.

REFLECTIONS

ON THE DUAL CAPACITY FRAMEWORK

The RELI partners’ initiatives are strong on community engagement but this is likely that they are one way (from partner/school to the parent) since there was no strong co-creation or co-development demonstrated.

PE&E is more effective if it is approached from a systemic and integrated perspective. There are few organisations that program their PE&E initiatives in this way hence leading to parents and families from the most vulnerable groups not being included.

This means that the unintended effect of many PE&E initiatives is exclusion of those furthest behind as they are directly affected by lack of basic needs.

4: Best Practices In PE&E

General Best Practices

It is inherent that both parents and teachers need enough training to be able to efficiently and effectively engage. These are some of the best practices:

1. **Relational trust is emerging as an important consideration for effective family-school engagement.** This trust is generated when people go beyond what their role dictates, honor their word and are respectful of one another's circumstances and opinions.
2. **Developing a parent-friendly and conducive environment at schools.** Having a school culture and environment that would encourage parents/family engagement is important to have sustained and useful engagement from all parents
3. **Having diverse communication channels that foster engagement.** Even though the majority of parents and schools agree that communication is the most important means of fostering engagement, often times there is actually little done to have an inclusive approach to communication.

Best Practices of Developed Countries

Since context is important in determining appropriate strategies for parental empowerment and engagement, it has been noted that some of the strategies that apply in developed countries may not be applicable in developing countries. The following aspects of parental engagement adapted from the Epstein model of parental involvement appear to matter most:

1. **For Family-Led Learning:** high expectations and aspirations for children; shared reading; parent-child conversation; positive environment for homework; cognitively stimulating environment; and support for children's social and emotional well-being.
2. **For Family-School Partnerships:** parent-teacher communication; engagement in the school community.

These practices are involved in families across all social-economic statuses.

Best Practices of Developing Countries

In the majority of developing countries, communal approaches have been known to work better as opposed to individualized approaches. For the countries with lower incomes and potentially more marginalized groups, as part of strengthening the relational trust, adopting home visits by school staff have been found to yield the greatest results in engaging families. This leads to more empathy from the school to the parents.

1. **Understand the learner background:** For the countries with lower incomes and potentially more marginalized groups, as part of strengthening the relational trust, adopting home visits by school staff have been found to yield the greatest results in engaging families.
2. **Equipping the teachers:** Teachers working in under-resourced environments need to have more knowledge, insights and capabilities of ensuring that they are aware of the different dynamics at play as they interact with the learners and their parents. Therefore, equipping the teacher to be aware of the context they are working in, the power they have over the children and parents, and the effect of their biases and beliefs on their delivery of quality teaching is really critical.
3. **Communicating with families:** Sharing information about education to be one of the most cost effective strategies in engaging families.

Best Practices of Communities Furthest Behind

For communities furthest behind, it is important that specific focus is on the marginalization context for the different families.

1. **Approaches parents from an asset based view:** Schools and teachers need to shift their mindsets from the deficit-based to asset-based mindset and appreciate that parents and families desire the best for their children and are often ready to contribute or empowered to do so.
2. **Empowers parents even in resource-constrained homes:** In spite of the inadequate facilities or materials at home, the intervention should work to enable parents with low or no cost strategies to support learning, including integration of learning into daily activities and utilisation of available resources.
3. **Co-creating intervention programs:** Ultimately, to be effective in scenarios of communities furthest behind, the schools partner with parents to co-create programs that take into consideration all the components of parental/family empowerment and engagement.

Emerging Critical Components of PE&E

This section summarizes the emerging critical components of effective parental empowerment and engagement. The main focus is the

components for the communities furthest left behind.

Critical Components At Various Levels			
Home	**School**	**Community**	**System**
Use low-tech for accessibility Connect with the parents via home visits Build capacities of parents	Train educators Design adaptive and responsive parent engagement programs	Listen and understand communities' motivations Identify and tap into the community resources	Collaborate to demonstrate the viability, scalability and sustainability Building agency among the parents to engage in vision building Consult parents first and allow them to be drivers of the agenda

For RELI partners, the PE&E initiatives have thus far focused on:

- **Collaboration with communities:** This includes home-learning in different spectrums (supporting parents to engage the learners, or through social media, or through issuance of learning materials); in-person meetings for the rural areas and home visits; and inclusion of refugees and children with disabilities in collaboration with parents and communities.
- **Communication and capacity building:** This includes use of parent support groups, public awareness and sensitization, use of radio and bulk SMS.
- **Engagement of learners:** This includes having parent/family participation in supporting learning at home, availing community spaces for learning and provision of learning materials (including study workbooks)
- **Unique components:** Some of the RELI members had incorporated the use of virtual mentorship and training for some of the parents in urban areas with access to connectivity. For the resource poor communities, some of the RELI members have also integrated economic empowerment initiatives.