

**BARRIERS TO FAMILY- SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS:  
EXPLORING CHALLENGES IN LSEN SCHOOLS**

by

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This study is a tribute my father, Willem van Heerden, who passed away during the beginning of this year and who always believed in me.

## ***Two Sculptors***

I dreamed I stood in a studio  
And watched two sculptures there;  
The clay they used was a young child's mind  
And they fashioned it with care.

One was a teacher; the tool she used  
Were books, music and art.  
One, a parent who worked with a guiding hand  
And a gentle, loving heart.

Day after day the teacher toiled  
With touch that was deft and sure,  
While the parent labored by her side  
And polished and smoothed it o'er

And when at last their task was done,  
They were proud of what they wrought;  
For the things they have molded into the child  
Could neither be sold nor bought

And each agreed he would have failed  
If he worked alone,  
The parent and the school,  
The teacher and the home.

(Author Unknown in Salisbury ,1992)

## SYNOPSIS

The implementation of Education White Paper 6 (2001) has put renewed emphasis on the role and the rights of families with children with barriers to learning. This policy has changed the role of the family greatly from being traditionally only involved in activities such as fundraising and homework, to that of participating in curriculum changes, learning support provisioning and services.

Family involvement in the education of a child with barriers to learning, has significant and wide-ranging effects and family-school partnerships are the most valuable external relationships that any LSEN school should develop. As the principal of a LSEN school, the researcher experienced a lack of involvement by many families. This became a concern, as the learners referred to a LSEN school, are all at risk.

This study explored the perceptions of the families regarding their involvement in the education of their child in a LSEN school, as well as what they perceive as possible barriers to family-school partnerships. The focus was on the micro-involvement of the family with the individual child, with specific reference to the role of the family in the multidisciplinary team at the school.

The researcher conducted three focus group interviews with families at three similar LSEN schools in Gauteng. The interviews were semi-structured and all data collected were recorded and transcribed. The three units of data were analysed, organised into meaningful themes and coded. Patterns emerged, which was clustered into sub-categories and categories. Interpretations were made which led to the research conclusions.

The findings of the study identified two main categories: barriers relating to the family and barriers relating to the LSEN school: Barriers relating to the family

referred to emotional barriers, socio-economic challenges and the view that families have on LSEN schools and the support and services they think these schools should offer. Barriers relating to the school referred to the lack of avenues for family involvement, inadequate family empowerment, with specific reference to the rights of families in the education of their child with barriers to learning, insufficient interaction amongst families in the school and poor communication which lead to misconceptions and marginalizing of families.



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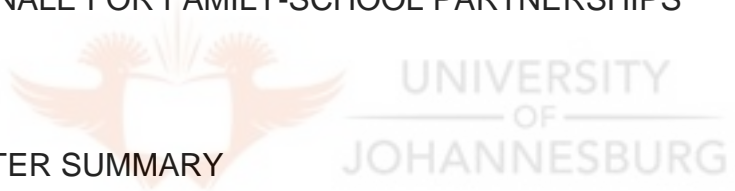
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# **CHAPTER ONE: ORIENTATION TO THE RESEARCH**

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will provide an orientation of the research by focussing on the motivation for the study, the problem statement, aims and methodological framework.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND AND IMPORTANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

Most families (refer par. 1.4.2) have strong feelings about their children's educational experiences. They want their children to succeed at school. When a child experiences difficulty in school, such as severe barriers to learning, the family is suddenly faced with other realities. They often tend to blame the school or education system without considering their own responsibility towards their child's education.

Families accept the role as primary educators of their child at conception and this continues through the child's years of growth and development (Batey, 1996:45). This lifelong commitment makes them experts with respect to the needs of their children, as well as a valuable source of information to the professionals (refer par. 1.4.6) at the school (McConkey, 2001:105). These professionals at the school will come and go, but families have a lifelong commitment. Bauer and Shea (2003:8) supported this statement and added that families must be allowed to engage actively in their children's education for an educational program to be effective. This is especially true for children with severe barriers to learning (refer par. 1.4.1). Lim (2003:174) stated that families of children with barriers to learning, like all other families, have hopes and dreams for their children and in order to attain these dreams, schools and families must work together in an honest, sensitive and empathetic collaborative partnership.

Foskett and Lumby (1997:101) stated that family-school partnerships are the most valuable external relationships that any school should develop. Families should no longer be treated as visitors or guests who are only invited to certain events or meetings at the school or as mere recipients of report cards. This is no longer enough.

The South African Schools Act (Act No 27 of 1996) has put renewed focus on the role and the responsibilities of the family in the education of their children. Families are encouraged to become active participants in the education and academic progress of their children. The implementation of Education White Paper 6 (2001) has put renewed emphasis on the role and the rights of families with children with barriers to learning. Unfortunately, the disregard for the rights of families by schools on the one hand and the lack of active family involvement on the other hand, are contributing to barriers to quality education for all (Department of Education, 2001:18). The Department of Education has identified lack of parental recognition and involvement as an area of concern that should be addressed by all stakeholders (Department of Education, 2005b:12).

Family-school partnerships have been the topic of many international studies, but very little research has been done locally with regard to the involvement of families in LSEN schools and possible barriers that may prevent them from getting involved in partnerships with their child's school. According to Smit and Liebenberg (2003:1), South African research in general on family involvement is extremely limited and Frank (2003:94) stated in his mini-dissertation on the role of school based support teams (SBST's) (refer par. 1.4.8) in Gauteng schools in South Africa, that schools are experiencing serious problems with family involvement and that research should be done regarding barriers that prevent families from engaging in their children's education.

This study attempts to ascertain the barriers to family involvement in schools for learners with special education needs (LSEN) from the perspective of the families. The main focus of this study is on the commitment level of the family with regard to the education of the individual child and on the role of the family as members of a multidisciplinary team working with the child.

### **1.3 MOTIVATION**

This study was chosen because of the lack of family involvement experienced by the researcher in her capacity as the principal of a LSEN school. Families often did not turn up for scheduled meetings to discuss their child's academic progress. General family-school meetings were attended by a few faithful families. Tactics such as the handing out of report cards at meetings failed as many report cards were never fetched by families. Staff at the school often debated the reasons for this lack of family involvement. They often made statements such as, "One would expect the family of a child who is at risk, to be even more involved and caring than other families."

### **1.4 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS**

The following concepts need to be clarified:

- 1.4.1 Barriers to learning: It refers to barriers within the child, within the education system as well as barriers within the "broader social, economic and political context" (Swart & Pettipher, 2006:17).
- 1.4.2 Family: In this study reference will be made to "family" rather than "parents" as it encompasses all the different types of caregivers such as biological parents, legal guardians, grandparents, brothers and sisters or any other family member who might be involved in the child's education (Landsberg, 2006:219).

- 1.4.3 Learning disability: “This term refers to a range of barriers experienced in receiving, processing, expressing or retrieving information, any of which may affect the person’s ability to function effectively in one or more areas such as spelling, grammar, following of instructions, spatial relations and numbers.” (Department of Education, 2002:159).
- 1.4.4 LSEN School: LSEN stands for Learners with Special Education Needs. The three focus school used in this study will be referred to as LSEN schools due to a lack of a more suitable description. White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001:18-19) refers to all types of LSEN schools as so called “Special Schools”. Circular 35/2004 sent out to LSEN schools differentiates between “Special Schools” and “Specialised Schools” (Department of Education, 2004a:1). No directive has yet been given to schools previously known as LSEN schools as to their new description and thus my decision to refer to the three focus schools used in this study as LSEN schools.
- 1.4.5 Ordinary or mainstream schools: Local public schools.
- 1.4.6 Professionals: This term is used by the researcher as LSEN schools employ not only teachers, but also other professionals such as psychologists, speech and occupational therapists and lately also nurses (Department of Education, 2004c:1; Department of Education, 2007:1).
- 1.4.7 Multidisciplinary team: This team consists mainly of the teacher(s), therapists, psychologist and family members (Hamill & Everington, 2002:150). Other professionals such as doctors, neurologists and psychiatrists are called upon to assist when necessary.
- 1.4.8 School Based Support team (SBST): The SBST is a flexible team and could have different compositions depending on the resources in the school (Landsberg, 2006:67). In LSEN schools it could consist of the teacher(s), a psychologist, a speech and occupational therapist as well as the family of the child.

## **1.5 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Family involvement in the education of a child has significant and wide-ranging effects and it stands to reason, that families who have children with barriers to learning, should even be more involved with the education of their child than other parents as these learners are more at risk. The implication for LSEN schools is that families should be treated as equals and should be encouraged to become active participants of the multidisciplinary team working with their child. Family-school partnerships should be established. If it is found that families are not involved as expected, reasons should be found why not and how this problem could be addressed by school management teams. This study will thus explore the perceptions of the families regarding their involvement in the education of their child in a LSEN school, as well as what they perceive as possible barriers to family-school partnerships.

The following questions need to be answered:

- How do families in a LSEN school perceive their role as members of the multidisciplinary team working with their child?
- What do families in LSEN schools regard as possible barriers to their involvement in the education of their child?
- What are the needs of families in LSEN schools regarding becoming more involved in the education of their child?
- What practical approaches could be suggested to the school management team (SMT) of a LSEN school to improve family-school partnerships in the school?

## **1.6 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of families in LSEN schools (refer par. 1.4.4) with regard to their involvement in the education of

their child with specific reference to their role as members of a multidisciplinary team (refer par. 1.4.7) working with their child and to suggest practical approaches as to how school management teams could improve these family-school partnerships.

To achieve the above central aim the following sub aims need to be addressed:

- to explore the perceptions of families in LSEN schools with regard to their role in the multidisciplinary team working with their child;
- to explore the perceptions of families in LSEN schools with regard to possible barriers to their involvement in the education of their child;
- to establish the needs of families in LSEN schools with regard to their involvement in the education of their child;
- to suggest practical approaches to improve family-school partnerships in LSEN schools.

## **1.7 METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION**

A literature study on family-school partnerships in schools for learners with special education needs (LSEN), was conducted. This theoretical study formed the framework for the research.

### **1.7.1 Research design**

A generic qualitative research design was employed to gain an understanding of the perceptions of families at LSEN schools with regard to possible barriers that may exist that prevent them from becoming involved in family-school partnerships such as being active members of the multidisciplinary team working with the child (Merriam, 1998:12). This qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to interpret life from the perspective of the participants (Bisschoff, 2005:22). The qualitative approach

was inductive and interpretive and the researcher analysed the data gained through the focus group interviews in order to get a better understanding of what is practically possible in addressing barriers to family involvement in LSEN schools.

Focus group interviews allowed the researcher greater insight into the perceptions of the families regarding the whole topic of family involvement in LSEN education. The power of a focus group interview as a research tool laid in the fact that it allowed for greater interaction by the participants. The prompting of the other participants led to a more open, spontaneous conversation where participants said exactly what was on their mind which might not have been the case in a one on one interview session (O' Donnell 1988:71 as cited by Venter, 2000: 88-89). The researcher's aim was to deliver a product that contains rich descriptions and interpretations (Merriam, 1998:29).

Purposeful sampling of three specific LSEN schools in Gauteng was done. Each of these three schools specialised in offering education to learners with specific barriers to learning (refer par. 1.4.1). The researcher was familiar with the site as she was employed as a principal at one of the sample schools. The other two LSEN schools in the sample were both conveniently situated and allowed for easy access. Participants for the three focus group interviews were identified through network sampling (Merriam, 1998:63). The researcher approached the school management team of each of these schools to assist with the identification of at least fifteen parents at the school whose children were in the lower grades (grades one to seven). The researcher attempted at selecting a diverse group of participants as Lim (2003:152) stated that schools should be aware that different family structures may have an impact on family involvement.



### **1.7.2 Theoretical framework**

The rationale behind family-school partnerships will be discussed in chapter two. Focus will be placed on barriers to family-school partnerships as well as strategies to build sound family school-partnerships.

### **1.7.3 Data collection**

A focus group interview was held with six to nine parents at each of these three selected LSEN schools to explore their views and perceptions regarding family involvement in multidisciplinary teams and family-school partnerships. The focus groups were useful tools to obtain specific types of information from “clearly identified sets of individuals” such as families with children in a LSEN school (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990:51). The aim was to have a minimum of six participants at each focus group interview and each interview lasted between one and one and a half hours.

A semi-structured interview with open ended questions was held with each focus group. This type of interview was appropriate as the researcher, as a principal of a LSEN school, had enough knowledge about the topic to frame the needed discussion in advance (Morse & Richards, 2002:94). The researcher practised the interview beforehand by conducting pilot interviews with an individual parent and peers to eliminate possible weak questions and to gain some practise in interviewing. The focus group interviews were conducted at the selected schools after hours and over weekends at a time that was convenient to all the participants.

#### **1.7.4 Ethical standards**

The researcher abided by the basic ethics codes of behaviour. Ethics in social research refers to the “moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of the researcher throughout the research process” (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002:14). Participants were assured that all information was treated as confidential, that their identity would be protected in so far it is possible and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time should they feel uncomfortable.

These ethical standards will be discussed fully in chapter two.

### **1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study did present with certain limitations. Interviews were only held with families and not also with the professionals at the LSEN schools who might have had a different perception with regards to barriers to family-school partnerships. Most of the participants who were prepared to take part in the focus group interviews were reasonably involved. The researcher, therefore, could not manage to get completely uninvolved families to participate in such an interview in order to hear their views on possible barriers to their involvement in their child’s education. The participants were aware that the researcher was a principal of a LSEN school and this could have had an influence on their answers. The categories that were identified overlapped to a large extent due to the barriers being so interlinked and often interrelated. The researcher ensured reasonable confidentiality of the data generated by the group, but this cannot be said of the individual members of the group as one of them might have disclosed what was being said and by whom (Morgan & Krueger, 1993:12).

## **1.9 CHAPTER DIVISION**

Chapter one presents the orientation to the research. In chapter two the theoretical framework for the study is presented. In chapter three the research design and method are discussed. In chapter four a description of the data is presented. In chapter five the discussion and interpretation of the data is presented. Chapter six provides the conclusions, limitations of the study and recommendations.

## **1.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Chapter one served as an orientation by providing motivation for the research. The problem statement and aims for the research were stated. Key concepts were clarified and the limitations of the study were given.

In chapter two the data gained from the literature study will be presented which will form the theoretical basis for the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this literature study is to elucidate what the role is that families of children with barriers to learning have to play in the education of their child and how to harness family power from a management perspective. The legal implication for families as well as the implementation of Departmental policies will be touched on. Not denying the importance of the involvement of families in the governance of their child's school as stipulated in SASA (1996: Section 16), the focus of this study will be more on the micro-involvement of the family with the individual child, with specific reference to the role of the family in the multidisciplinary team working with their child.

The researcher will aim at developing a theoretical framework, describing barriers to family involvement that may prevent families of children with barriers to learning from fully participating in the education of their child and ways to address it. Because of the existing gap in South African literature concerning family involvement in LSEN schools, the results of this study will be compared with relevant international literature as well as comparable South African research on family involvement in ordinary schools as certain trends may be extended to LSEN schools.

### **2.2 ROLE OF THE LSEN SCHOOL**

Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs education was Gazetted in July 2001 and in August 2003 conceptual and operational guidelines regarding the implementation of Inclusive Education were circulated to schools (Department of Education, 2003). The policy on inclusion brought about a shift away from the medical model where learners were classified according to their disabilities, to a more educational model with the focus on the level of

support needed to meet the needs of the child. This moves away from a “medical-deficit” or a “within-child” model was necessary as it was found in social sciences that the barrier to learning was often not within the learner, but within the school system, family or the community (Swart & Pettipher, 2006:5). The term “special needs” was replaced by “barriers to learning” as the focus shifted in 1990 from intrinsic causes to learning problems to also include all external factors such as barriers within the site of learning, within the education system and within the broader social, economic and political context that may have an influence on the education of the learner (Swart & Pettipher, 2006:16-17). The aim of inclusion is the integration of learners with barriers to learning into ordinary also known as mainstream schools (Swart & Pettipher, 2006:7).

The policy on inclusion, Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001:29), paved the way for many changes such as including children with barriers to learning in ordinary schools, but it also stipulates that children who need high intensity support should still be accommodated in Special Schools (refer paragraph 1.4.4). Education statistics of 2005 revealed that 0,6% of learners in South Africa are accommodated in Special Schools (Department of Education, 2006b:3). According to the policy on inclusion, Special Schools would be strengthened rather than abolished and the considerable expertise and resources that are invested in Special Schools will be made available to neighbourhood schools (Department of Education, 2003:11).

Inclusion brought about a change in the “ideology of professionalism” as the role of the professional support providers had to be reinterpreted. The attitude of professional superiority whereby professionals project themselves as the most knowledgeable who could dictate to families on how best to meet the needs of their child, had to change (Engelbrecht, 2001:18, Swart & Phasha, 2006:220). There is a new acknowledgement of the rights of all stakeholders in the education of a child (Department of Education, 2002:17;

Van Heerden, 2002:8). Family-school partnerships in LSEN schools will be crucial if the needs of these learners, who need high intensity support, are to be met.

## **2.3 FUNDAMENTAL GROUNDS FOR FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN LSEN EDUCATION**

The fundamental grounds for family-school partnerships could be linked to the rights of the family pertaining to their child's education, the obligations that these rights bring to families and the basic principle of being involved in the education of one's child.

### **2.3.1 The rights of families with respect to the education of their child**

It is reported that in many countries up to the beginning of the 1980's, the rights of families with respect to the education of their children were limited and the voice of families with children with barriers to learning was even more muted. Families had to trust and accept the decision of professionals (Lindsay, 2004:16). This was changed with the adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework by the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 in Spain, where the right of every child to receive quality education was reaffirmed (UNESCO, 2004:382-385). In 1995 a Parents' Charter was developed in Scotland to inform families of children with barriers to learning that they have the same right with regard to the choice of school that their child could attend as any other parent and that the government has to cover all the costs involved (Riddel, 2004:125). In many European countries such as the UK, Austria, Netherlands, Lithuania and the Czech Republic, families freely express their preference for the school they want their child to attend (Meijer, Soriano & Watkins, 2004:338). The rights of families with regard to their child's education are thus juridically prescribed and legislation now mandates that families are to be consulted by schools in

all assessing and decision-making processes or when recommendations are made that may have an impact on the education and future of their child (Spinelli, 2002:22). Despite this new awareness of the rights of families, certain problems still exist. Pinkus (2001:1) reported that although policies on special needs in Britain focus on the vital role of collaboration between the home and the school, families and professionals say they experience the opposite.

In South Africa, the promulgation of the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), the promulgation of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA, 1996:16) and the publishing of White Paper 6, Special Needs Education (Department of Education, 2001) have empowered families by affording them the inalienable right to decide what form of education is best for their child. This is long overdue as South Africa has managed in the past to marginalise most families in the education system through politics (Engelbrecht, 2001:19). The publishing of White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) has placed a long needed focus on the education and support of learners who are experiencing barriers to learning in South Africa. Supporting documents such as the Conceptual and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of Inclusive Education: District Based Support Teams emphasise the increasing importance of the family in the education of a child with barriers to learning (Department of Education, 2004b:19).

### **2.3.2 The obligations of families regarding the academic achievement of their child**

Loock, Mestry and Moloji (2005:109) stated that teachers and other professionals at schools are placed in a position of *In loco parentis* which means “in the place of a parent.” This however does not imply that the families are substituted by the teachers. Parents remain the primary caregivers of their child (Morton-Young, 1995:77; Nojaja, 2002:21) and no

school can any longer unilaterally decide what is best for a child (Loock, et al. 2005:106). Families have a right to fully participate in their children's educational program, but it goes without saying that it is up to them to claim this right and that this right infer certain responsibilities and obligations on the side of the families such as being involved in the education of their children. Fertman (2004:81) stated that families have an obligation to empower themselves and to build their own capacity as they have to advocate for their children and act confidently on their behalf. The full responsibility of the education of a child can thus not be placed squarely onto the shoulders of the school.

Families of children with barriers to learning need to become involved in their child's education by fostering close relationships with the school that the child has to attend. Bauer and Shea (2003:49) explored the responsibility of fostering family-school partnerships and alluded to the fact that much of it is the responsibility of the families. Unfortunately, many families lack professional skills and specialized knowledge of learning areas, vocational training and therapies. Nojaja (2002:27) concluded that families in general often depend on the trained educational skills of the teachers and other professionals to ensure that their children reach their optimal potential socially, emotionally, physically and academically. The implication for a family with a child with barriers to learning is that they have to request clarification when needed to make sure they understand the educational programme followed with their child. They should monitor their child's progress in school and periodically ask for feedback.

Nojaja (2002:21) stated that the school relies heavily on the input of families as they are "intimately attached" to their children. It is the observations and comments of parents and grandparents as the child's main supporters that can lead the teacher to find the best way of managing the child's learning processes more effectively (McConkey, 2001:105). Families are thus obliged



to share relevant information about their child's education and development with the school (Hornby, Davis & Taylor, 1995:86; McConkey, 2001:105) as one cannot assume that the problem always resides with the learner (Henley, Ramsey & Algozzine, 2002:151).

According to Spinelli (2002:22), families do not form part of the actual multidisciplinary team in a school, but the role of the family has increasingly been stressed in all aspects of the classification, programming and placement of the child. Families play a key role in the early identification of barriers to learning. The pivotal role of the family in the education of a child cannot be emphasised enough as children with barriers to learning often have complex problems and an easy diagnosis is not always possible (Henley, et al. 2002:151).

In South Africa, the view on the increasing role of parents as stakeholders in all decision making concerning their children is supported by the new guidelines to inclusive education in South Africa (Department of Education, 2005b:13). This acknowledgement of the rights of families implies that they should form part of the multidisciplinary team working with their child.

### **2.3.3 Family involvement as a matter of principle**

Family involvement could be viewed as a matter of principle (Nojaja, 2002:88) and forms an integral part of parenthood (Du Plessis, 1993:93). Families have a responsibility to give their children moral support so that they can perform and achieve well at school (Hornby, et al. 1995:87). They must ensure that their children are well-informed and suitably educated to lead a responsible life. This implies that they are responsible for teaching their children a value system and how to play the game of life (Du Plessis, 1993:94). Family support should be ongoing and involvement should not be withdrawn as soon as the child goes to school or grows older (Bauer & Shea,

2003:168). The family and the school should supplement each other in providing for the educational needs of the learner.

## **2.4 FAMILY - SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

The role of the family has changed greatly from being traditionally only involved in activities such as fundraising and homework to that of participating in curriculum changes, learning support provisioning and services. Family involvement ensures that the programmes offered by the schools meet the needs of their child with barriers to learning. Empowered families play a key role in the social, emotional and educational development of their child (Fertman, 2004:81). Research is clear that if we want effective family involvement it entails more than just getting families to schools (Salas, Lopez, Chinn & Menchaca-Lopez, 2005:52). The new tendency in schools is to move away from trying to get families involved in school activities to the fostering of partnerships with families.

The success of family-school partnerships depends on the collaboration between the family and the school and according to Engelbrecht (2001:23), this is “a catalytic process used in interactive relationships among individuals working together toward a mutually defined concrete outcome.” It implies that people with diverse expertise and experience share the responsibility and work together to generate new solutions to mutually defined problems. The combined efforts of the family and the school are required to meet the diverse needs of these children with barriers to learning. Swart and Phasha (2006:219) stated that the building of such a relationship takes considerable time and energy from both the family and the school.

Riddel (2004:127-128) and Batey (1996:26) argued that the family and school need to work together with the family as the client exerting “consumer power” and that the school should go the extra mile to involve them in as

many ways as possible. This implies a right to give an input and to be taken seriously. When examining the “voice” of families in the education of their children, the question could be raised whether education is becoming more and more “demand-led” with families as stakeholders (Sliwka & Istance, 2006:29). Wilson (2004:228) stated that families are viewed as “visionists” and that their voices should be heard in schools with respect to assessment, effective approaches to teaching and learning and school activities. This view is supported by Duhaney and Salend (2004:364). They stated that families are often the driving force behind many services offered to their children as they are potential initiators and advocates of reform. Families were the direct driving force behind the whole concept of inclusive education (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, Kitching & Eloff, 2005:1). It is clear that through the combined efforts of family and school, much more can be done to benefit learners than what could be gained by the family or school acting separately (Swart & Phasha, 2006:220). Partnerships, including family-school partnerships, are built on a foundation of leadership, participation and involvement (Bauer & Shea, 2003:84).

Individuals in any group must recognize the ever present a hierarchy of involvement, in order for good collaborative efforts to take place. Some will participate at minimum level, others at associative level and still others at decision-making level (Barbour & Barbour, 2001:331-332). No partnership can be fostered if the school hasn’t recognized, accepted and validated the level of involvement that already exists between the family and the school (Fertman, 2004:85).

Morton-Young (1995:77-78) stated that teachers describe four types of families: Those who are actively involved; those who are interested, but refrain from involving themselves maybe due to the fact that they think the teachers know best; those who are interested, but due to other factors beyond their control cannot become involved and those who show no interest

due to feelings of hostility or resentment against schools or persons in authority.

Barbour and Barbour (2001:270) explained that there are a number of ways to involve families in the education of their child with barriers to learning, but the responsibility rests with the school to educate families with regard to the type and level of involvement that will assist their child. Four levels of involvement are mentioned, but as this study focuses on the family involvement with the individual child, only the first three will be explored: The first level is the basic level of assisting at home with homework, reading, playing and other activities. The second level is the participatory level where families visit classrooms, attend meetings or assist with resources on projects. The third level is the commitment level where families volunteer regularly as an aide or by assisting the teacher in the class as a class assistant. The final level is the advocacy where families take part in the decision making level on the schools by serving on the School Governing Body (SGB) or on committees.

A family's involvement with the individual child refers to a micro-educational level involvement and according to Nojaja (2002:82), it entails that the individual parent becomes involved in the child's education through direct personal contact with the teachers of the child by discussing the educational problems and progress of the child openly. The family should also interact with the learners and other families at the school. By doing so a network and support base for the families could be set up.

Epstein (2002:14-16) offered a framework of six types of interventions that should be initiated by schools in order to support families and to get them involved in the school:

- Parenting: Support and assist families with parenting and childbearing skills as well as with the creating of a home environment that is conducive to education.
- Communication: Create effective two-way communication, namely school-to-home and home-to-school communication.
- Volunteering: Involve families in the school as an extra supply of resources.
- Learning at home: Educate families in how they could enhance a child's learning activities at home.
- Collaborating with the community: Tap into the resources of the community to improve the teaching and learning in the school.

These concepts are not new to schools. They do however need to be translated into well-planned and well-implemented practices and it will be up to each school to tailor make it to its own individual needs (Epstein, 2002:13). This is crucial as each LSEN school has its own unique school culture fostered by the community it serves.

## **2.5 KEY STRATEGIES IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

Schools have a responsibility to implement empowering strategies for families in the school and to create opportunities for them to assist their own children while also supporting other families (Thompson, Lobb & Elling, 1997:100-101).

### **2.5.1 Recognise the family as the child's most important support system**

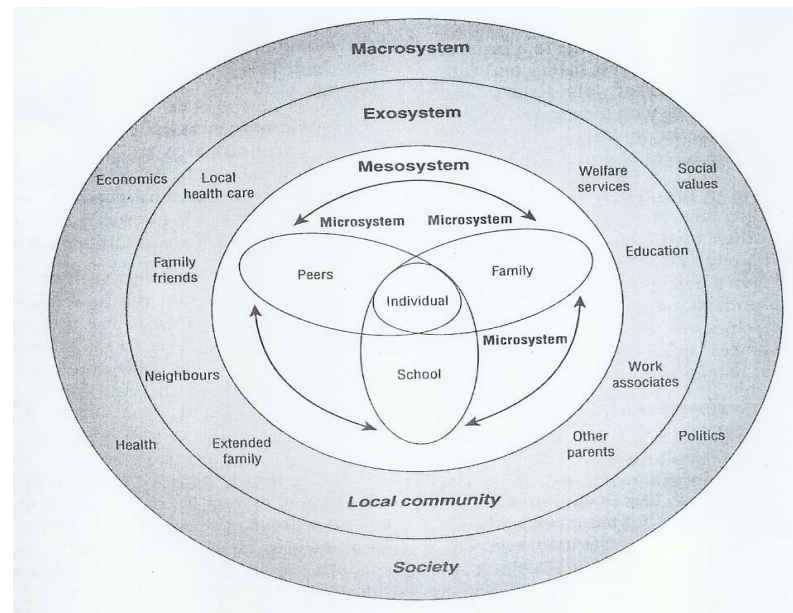
Across human cultures, the family is regarded as the major social institution and vital to the development, socialization, and education of a child (Morton-

Young, 1995:77; Petr, 2003:11). The family is viewed as a system, interacting with and within other systems.

Swart and Pettipher (2006:9-12) stated that the most important challenge in our education system today is to comprehend how the academic progress of the individual learner could be linked to other systems surrounding the learner. They referred to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and the revised bio-ecological model when they emphasised the reasons why an individual cannot be separated from the system within the social context and why barriers to learning should be addressed within the context of other social challenges.

The ecosystemic model consists of three systems namely the mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The mesosystem consists of the individual learner, the family and peers. The three microsystems within the mesosystem, continuously influence and modify one another. It must be mentioned that although the learner is not directly involved in the exosystem, the family of the learner may be involved. An example is the place of work of a parent. The stress at work could have a negative affect on the relationship between a family and child which again could affect the child's development. The macrosystem refers to different beliefs, attitudes and ideologies. Cultural diversity could have an impact on family-school partnerships. The chronosystem refers to time frames and how the composition of a family influences the interactions and processes through which that family goes. It is against this background that the fundamental grounds for family-school partnerships in LSEN schools will be discussed in this study.

Figure 1 Ecosystemic model (Swart & Pettipher, 2006:11)



For the purposes of this study the focus will mainly be on the individual learner, the family and the school within the mesosystem.

Swart and Pettipher (2006:12) explained that a partnership between two systems, such as the family and the school can only work if the rules and values of each system are known and respected by both parties. This could be easier said than done as Swart and Phasha (2006:219-220) stated that to develop sustainable family-school partnerships, schools should understand the complexity of family structures. The reality is that families are moving further away from the typical nuclear family situation. There has been a move away from the concept of “parent-teacher” to “family-school”. The word “family” includes all types of caregivers (refer par. 1.4.2). According to Morton-Young (1995:3) different types of families define “family” differently. Some would think of a basic nuclear family when the word “family” is used, other would think of an extended family, or clan, or even friends and clergy. Single-parent families are common and other children are raised by grandparents or foster parents. Gay or lesbian families often adopt a child.

Family members are key decision makers in the lives of a child and exert major influence over the development of a child. When communicating with families, it should be acknowledged that the family and not the school, is the most important part of a child's life and that a child's whole life centers on the family it belongs to (Fertman, 2004:97; Petr, 2003:11). According to Fertman (2004:83), the role of the family in the life of a child with barriers to learning is completely different from that of the school. The school plays a more detached, objective and rational role based on insight, resources and abilities to support the child, while the family's involvement is "universal in all aspects of the child's life". No child can be fully understood without looking at the family system that the child is coming from. Van Heerden (2002:10-11) explained that each family has its own value system and deals with change in its own way. Families also rely on other family members for support and it is within this pattern of daily routine that a child has to fit in.

Nurturing and caring schools often reveal a positive attitude towards the families of the children in the school (Epstein, 2002:7). Schools that adopt a family-centered approach, focus on the family's strengths, cultural perceptions, strategies that were adopted by the families as well as the needs of the family (Dunst, 2004:341; Hulsebosch & Myers, 2004:133). Dunst (2004:352) stated that in reality such family-centered practices are more utilised in early childhood development and pre-schools than in schools and that many professionals who claim that they employ family-centered approaches, only does so partially. Much research on the effect of family-centered approaches on the development of a child with barriers to learning, still needs to be conducted.

### **2.5.2 Acknowledge the socio-economic challenges of families**

The family as a social institution is under considerable strain and in danger of crumbling. This is due to "high divorce rates, poverty, the erosion of



traditional support provided to families by small communities and caring neighbourhoods and the growing influence of the media and peers over children” (Petr, 2003:11). Added factors are the socio-economic demands made on families today such as technological changes, tough inflexible work schedules and limited time. The result is overburdened families (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005:77; Prinsloo, 2006a:460; Swart & Phasha, 2006:221).

There are numerous socio-economic constraints in South Africa that have a definite hampering effect on family-school partnerships. Singh and Mbokodi (2004:303) revealed, with real life examples, that many black learners in South African schools come from a home environment that is not conducive to learning and that it has a definite effect on the learners’ academic performance. The consequence is that South African teachers are faced with numerous learners who are at risk emotionally, behaviourally and academically (Engelbrecht, 2001:19).

Poverty is a definite factor in family-school partnerships. Van der Westhuizen and Masoge (2001:194) explained that poor families avoid the school out of fear that they would be asked for a financial contribution. Many families in South Africa have no choice but to leave parenting to the extended family, as they have to commute long distances between their work in the urban areas and their home in the townships or rural areas (Swart & Pasha, 2006:221). This is worsened by the lack of own transport or adequate public transport facilities. Poor families can also not afford the transport fees (Van der Westhuizen & Masoge, 2001:194). It is important to note at this point that there are only a handful of LSEN Schools in South Africa with the result that learners and families have to travel long distances to reach these schools (Department of Education, 2005a:21). Families often have to rely on lift clubs and school transport services which again lead to less direct contact between families and the school (Swart & Phasha, 2006:224).

Swart and Phasha (2006:221) stated that the socio-economic status of families and the level of education in South Africa are closely linked. It is important to note though that socio-economic factors have a greater impact on school-based activities than on family-based activities. This means that although the socio-economic status of families may have a direct impact on the involvement of families in their child's school, it does not mean they are not involved at home. Families may not always be able to come to the school, but they might be involved with the child's learning at home.

Poor literacy levels of many South African families hamper parental empowerment programmes in schools. Liaison between the family and the school is further complicated by poor communication due to a lack of telephones especially in the rural areas (Van der Westhuizen & Masoge, 2001:194; Prinsloo, 2006b:27-32, 460; Swart & Phasha, 2006:221).

The impact of HIV/AIDS in South African schools is significant. Adams (2006:2) painted a dark picture when she referred in a recent newspaper article to the devastating effect of HIV/AIDS on young women in South Africa, especially those between the ages of 25 and 34 and the negative impact it will have on the family life of many South Africans. This illness has caused havoc in the extended families as many caregivers (refer par. 1.4.2) die as result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The consequence is that many children in South Africa will grow up in single parent or child headed families (Prinsloo, 2006b:31; Swart & Phasha, 2006:220).

These adverse economic circumstances make it increasingly difficult for families to become involved in their children's education and to many families survival is the main priority and involvement with their children's education becomes unimportant or secondary (Morton-Young, 1995:79; Prinsloo, 2006b:29). Consequently, schools could experience conflict when the value orientation of the school differs from that of the family (Prinsloo, 2006b:28).

The impact that a child with barriers to learning has on a family, will be discussed in order to understand why some families feel so overburdened.

### **2.5.3 Identify the impact of a child with barriers to learning on a family**

Petr (2003:10) stated that professionals have an obligation to support the families in the school. A child with barriers to learning places a huge amount of strain on sometimes already fragile family ties as the whole family gets affected (Henley, et al. 2002:382; Van Heerden, 2002:12). Discovering that one's child has barriers to learning, could be very traumatic to families and accepting the inevitable is not easy. Dreams and plans have to be adapted or constantly revised, with no clear guidelines available to families (Blamires, et al. 1997:17). Families could suffer emotionally, physically and mentally in their quest to meet the many needs of their child with barriers to learning in the school (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005:79).

Some parents are plagued by guilt, fear and anxiety and may start to question or even to blame themselves. They wonder what they have done wrong or what they are going to do (Henley, et al. 2002:381). They may make statements such as, "We are only parents and we do not have any special expertise." Other families might blame the school for not meeting the needs of the child, asking what the teachers are going to do to help or why the expectations of the school are so high. Whether families are unsure, angry or overwhelmed, it is important for them to voice their concerns and desires so that they can become actively involved in their child's education (Hamill & Everington, 2002:135).

Bauer and Shea (2003:168) and Hornby, et al. (1995:95) explained that all families of children with barriers to learning, require counselling or support from the school at some point in time, even though they may often not formally request it. Secondly, that the dynamics in these families evolve and

change over time. These families are confronted with difficult choices, strong emotions, interaction with many professionals and a constant need for information. Hornby, et al. (1995:92) stated that the school sometimes just need to accept the fact that some families could be so overburdened, that they simply are not able to become involved with their child's education the way the school expects them to.

According to Lee and Ostrosky (2004:107), teachers should establish the impact that the child with barriers to learning has on his or her family in order to create a supportive environment in which the families would feel safe and comfortable enough to participate.

#### **2.5.4 Acknowledge the strengths in a family**

Unfortunately, the personal needs of the family who has a child with barriers to learning, are often not being met by professionals (Wolfendale, 1989:142). Some professionals adopt a "parents-as-cause" attitude and blame or criticise the family for the child's problems (Fertman, 2004:82; Lee & Ostrosky, 2004:102). The family is often viewed as a threat to the child's well being, rather than the child's most important source and support system (Petr, 2003:12; Swart & Phasha, 2006:223). Swart and Phasha (2006:223) argued that the medical model (refer par. 2.2 lines 4-6) is to be blamed, as it leads to harmful connotations between the child with barriers to learning and his family. Professionals tend to focus on the deficiencies of children and families and often refer to concepts such as "displaced anger" and "compensation for guilt feelings" when dealing with families.

Too often, families feel under attack rather than supported by the very people who are trying to be helpful. Families are often uncertain about what to do and about their own importance (Bauer & Shea, 2003:93). Some families harbour old feelings and negative attitudes dating back to their own

childhoods that are being called up (Alant & Harty, 2006:85; Barbour & Barbour, 2001:269; Batey, 1996:32; Fertman, 2004:82). In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid left many families with a negative attitude towards education. Swart and Phasha (2006:222) stated that families often feel uncertain and unwelcome in schools, but that it is possible to change these perceptions over time.

A strength perspective is needed to overcome all of this (Petr, 2003:34). This perspective recognises that most families are doing the best they can at any given time, especially considering the enormous economic and social pressures that exist today. The strength perspective avoids negative professional jargon, such as “dysfunctional families”. Families seldom see themselves as dysfunctional, but rather regard the service system for children as chaotic and unresponsive. The school or education system is often blamed by families when their child does not progress at school. It is this view of reality that schools face when talking with these families and this view can and must be reversed before a partnership can be achieved.

### **2.5.5 Encourage informed family voice in decision-making**

Partnerships between families and teachers should be the core element of any special education program. Programs in which families are empowered do much to empower children in achieving success (Batey, 1996:27; Hornby, et al. 1995:87).

Their intimate knowledge and the life-long commitment of a family to their child with barriers to learning make them the experts on their child’s needs (Du Plessis, 1993:93; Hornby, et al. 1995:92; Karge, 2004:41). Hornby, et al. (1995:93) stated that professionals at schools should commit themselves to respect the rights of families and to ensure that decisions benefit the wider needs of the family. The main goal of a family-school partnership should be

to achieve consensus within the partnership through teamwork and collaboration.

Henley, et al. (2002:228) supported this view and argued that true collaboration in a team can only take place if “parity” in other words “equality” exists where each person has equal power in decision making. Unfortunately, this does not always happen as professionals sometimes ignore the information or opinion offered by families as they regard themselves as the experts in the situation or on the team (Petr, 2003:33). Wolfendale (1989:141 - 142) stated that families complain of “being heard”, but not “listened to” by professionals at the school. She argued that families are still kept at “an arm’s length” and that this results in a sad situation of misunderstandings and inadequate communication.

A family has the right and responsibility to be involved in making informed decisions about their own child’s academic programme and to contribute freely and without fear on issues concerning their child’s action, behaviour, attitudes, language and culture (Salas, et al. 2005:52). Families want to be kept informed and need to know that the teacher respect their views (Batey, 1996:46; Henley, et al. 2002:225; Morton-Young, 1995:79). It stands to reason, that in order for families of children with barriers to learning to make informed and sound decisions, they need the same information as the other team members if they are to be true members (Lim, 2003:149).

Hornby, et al. (1995:98) and Batey (1996:46) explained that families of children with barriers to learning get extremely anxious when their child is assessed and they wish to be consulted as active partners in this whole process of collecting and receiving data. Documentation on the role of families in early identification of barriers to learning and intervention, promote the role of families in all decision making, with the aim of empowering them to

become the main providers of the support to their children (Department of Education, 2006a:30).

Family involvement when a child is still in the lower grades differs from the involvement of families once the child reaches the higher grades. Bauer and Shea (2003:168) stated that families get less involved with their children's education as the children grow older. Swart and Phasha (2006:11) explained this tendency by stating that families often believe their children become more independent as they grow older. It could also be that they feel they lack the necessary skills to support the older child. Families on the other hand, complain of being marginalised by the school once their child reaches the higher grades and that there is very little interaction between the school and families. This creates a problem, as supporting an adolescent with barriers to learning, calls for increased information and support. According to Swart and Phasha (2006:224), contact with families in the higher grades is scaled down, as it takes too much time and energy from the already overburdened teachers and other professionals at school.

Petr (2003:33) described the role of teachers and other professionals at school as that of advisors or consultants to families whose decision-making authority and responsibility is respected. They should not decide on behalf of a family what is best for their child because they doubt the ability of the family to make the right decisions. This view might be too simplistic as findings in the literature revealed that families of children with barriers to learning often do not have the knowledge or skills and they turn towards the school for the necessary guidance and support (Spinelli, 2002:42). This problem is compounded by the findings in the literature that "parents of special needs" children often become "special needs parents" as they are too overburdened by a lot of emotional psychological baggage which could prevent them from becoming actively involved in a partnership with the school (Blamires, et al. 1997:32).

LSEN schools make use of a multidisciplinary team approach whereby a team of professionals work together with the families to achieve mutually agreed outcomes for a learner (Delta Park School, 2007:1). During feedback sessions with the families, the team members organize information about the child's strengths and concerns, potential contributing factors for concerns and potential solutions for improving the situation. Families are empowered by forming part of this team and have to contribute to the problem solving (Hamill & Everington, 2002:150). Swart and Phasha (2006:228) felt that such an approach could lead to conflicting recommendations as professionals representing various disciplines see the learner individually and then make a recommendation to the teacher who could still choose to implement the recommendations or not. They advocated a collaborative approach, as it entails that a group of people work together to accomplish mutually defined goals. Uys (2006:416) referred to a "trans-disciplinary" approach. Petr (2003:33) stated that the input and wishes of the family are vital during the entire special education intervention process.

#### **2.5.6 Face the challenges of diversity**

Developing effective partnerships can be particularly challenging when professionals and families are different in race, culture, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status (Petr, 2003:35). It is important for schools to be open and accepting of all these variations, because the family remains the child's most important resource, no matter what the family looks like.

Family-school partnerships can only work if the school shows an understanding towards the culture of the family that the child comes from (Swart & Phasha, 2006:222). Culture refers here to our beliefs, values and attitudes and expectations. Van Heerden (2002:11) explained that the cultural background of a family has an undeniable impact on the way its members react towards certain circumstances or how they view children with



barriers to learning. Misinterpretations of cultural beliefs and values could lead to a break down in communication between the family and the school.

Batey (1996:23) suggested that schools should be sensitised to approach families from diverse cultural backgrounds in an appropriate manner. Swart and Phasha (2006:222) warned against stereotyping cultural groups, as within any culture there are differences. Schools should realise that it is important to treat parents as individuals as each parent has a unique view of his/her child's barrier to learning and this view must be respected (Morton-Young, 1995:78). Schools must also accept that no two parents are alike, says Morton-Young (1995:78-79). Each family brings a different set of values and attitudes to the school. Some families have strong convictions and view points on certain issues pertaining to their child's education and this must be respected by the school. Schools must be prepared to listen to families and to negotiate around viewpoints.

Schools could face numerous challenges when dealing with families from diverse cultural backgrounds: Bauer and Shea (2003:98) stated that some cultures experience difficulties with involvement in their children's education as they hold professionals in high esteem and they feel that they interfere, if they become involved. Some cultures even regard teachers, who ask families for help, as incompetent. It is important for the school to be familiar with the different perspectives held by the different cultures with regard to family involvement. Schools need to know how to involve families from diverse backgrounds as these different backgrounds have a direct effect on learner achievement (Salas, et al. 2005:52).

### **2.5.7 Professional staff development with respect to family-school partnerships**

Epstein (2002:11) argued that teachers and other professionals at schools want to forge partnerships, but that they lack the basic know-how. She urged that they need to be trained how to deal professionally with families and how to encourage family-school partnerships. Unfortunately, this might be easier said than done. South Africa experiences a serious shortage of qualified teachers a newspaper article mentioned that of the more than 300 000 teachers, only 54 100 are highly qualified, 150 700 are qualified and 47 600 are unqualified (Carstens, 2007:21; Rademeyer, 2007:9). Ferrara and Ferrara (2005:77) stated that an analysis of teacher-training programs by researchers revealed that very little time is spent on strategies to enhance family-school partnerships and that almost no professional development in schools take place in this regard. Teachers lack the basic skills to interact effectively with families. It is thus up to the management of the school to ensure that programmes are implemented to train teachers on effective collaboration with families (Swart & Phasha, 2006:225).

Petr (2003:11) argued that this mind shift to involve families optimally in the education of their child won't be easy as professionals have historically been trained to be child-centered rather than family-centered. Teachers start their careers without any understanding of family systems, concepts of caring, and the ability to understand, implement and assess good family-school partnerships (Epstein, 2002:24). Teacher training programmes seem to prepare teachers inadequately for their interaction with families. Van der Westhuizen and Masoge (2001:192) concurred with these findings and stated that South African teachers have to be trained to enable them to cope with the growing needs of family involvement.

Some teachers resist family involvement as they feel that the school then no longer “belongs” to them (Barbour & Barbour, 2001:336). The implication is that teachers are not trained to utilise the power of family involvement to enhance the performance of learners in schools. Henley, et al. (2002:229) and Van Heerden (2002:16) stated that this type of attitude is unnecessary as the aim is to try and achieve mutual goals to the benefit of the child where collective responsibility is accepted by all members of the team.

Landsberg (2006:66) stated that LSEN schools should establish a school-based support team which is responsible for the provisioning of learning support together with the teacher(s) involved. Professionals at the school will have to be trained for their role on this team. This team should be flexible and accommodate different stakeholders that include the teachers, other professionals in and outside the school, as well as the families of the learners. The school-based support team has numerous functions in the school, but for the relevance of this study only the following will be mentioned: It has to establish networks that promote effective communication between learners, teachers and families. It facilitates the placement of a learner in another school if necessary. It has to ensure family involvement and it provides on site support to teachers.

Attfeld and Williams (2003:31) placed the principals at the forefront of all collaboration in schools. Unfortunately, it was found that the principal often lacks the commitment to create positive partnerships (Batey, 1996:34). Van der Westhuizen and Masoge (2001:192) stated that many South African principals were still of the opinion that families are not to be involved in the decision-making of the school. In South Africa the traditional bureaucratic management style of principals had to make way for a leadership and management style that promotes collaboration in order to achieve optimal outcomes for all the learners with diverse needs (Swart & Pettipher, 2001:32). The art of leadership is to ensure that the bond of collective

responsibility in the partnership is maintained and strengthened. Batey (1996:12-25) identified certain responsibilities of principals in the development of partnerships with families. He explained that it is the duty of the principal to ensure that the intellectual capital in the school is developed. This can be done through the active building of partnerships by establishing relationships with the families in the school. A principal should anticipate and waylay the fears of the teachers that parent-partners may take over the management of the school. A principal should manage cultural diversity and ensure that families from all backgrounds are afforded the opportunity to become involved in the education of their child. This can be done by creating a welcoming atmosphere in the school and through effective communication.

### **2.5.8 Effective communication between the family and the school**

Good communication between the home and school results in a feeling of shared responsibility and ensures that the professionals at school and the families at home have the correct information to make informed decisions about possible interventions for a child (Alant & Harty, 2005:85; Henley, et al. 2002:390). Lack of communication could lead to misconceptions by the families concerning the role of school systems and education support services (Fertman, 2004:82). This might result in disappointment as families could feel that the education system has failed them and their child.

Families raised several concerns that could prevent them from voicing their personal opinions, especially if it is in contrast with the opinion of the professionals at school. Fertman (2004:82) stated that families complained that they often feel marginalized, embarrassed and without support. Others object that the school perceives them as uncaring, overburdened and as a result as ineffective parents. Wolfendale (1989:141) agreed and highlighted that families constantly complain that very little negotiation takes place

between them and the school and that they often fail to elicit what teachers expect of them.

Families of children with barriers to learning indicated that they appreciate the guidance given to them by the school (Hornby, et al. 1995:95), but that they often feel intimidated when confronted with the so called “experts” in the field (Henley, et al. 2002:381). They feel that the professionals look down on them, that they are referred to as “those parents” and that they are paid mere lip service from the school (Batey, 1996:34). They often assume that the professionals know all the right answers and they do not feel comfortable speaking up, especially if the teacher uses jargon when explaining something to them (Henley, et al. 2002:378; Singh & Mbokodi, 2004:304). Fertman (2004:82) warned that the use of such “unexplained jargon” may even be perceived as condescending by the families and thus create the perception that there is a deliberate attempt to exclude them from their child’s education.

Research done in ordinary schools in South Africa revealed that families often regard the school as an autonomous institution with professionals and that any form of family involvement constitutes a kind of intrusion (Van der Westhuizen & Masoge, 2001:192). Research on black parental involvement in ordinary schools in South Africa revealed that families feel that they are only invited to the school to discuss the disciplinary problems of their children or to report something (Singh & Mbokodi, 2004:304; Van der Westhuizen and Masoge, 2001:192). These types of perceptions could result in a break down in communication between the family and the school.

Salas, et al. (2005:52) stated that “sound research affirms that if we want parents as empowered individuals and decision makers they need to comprehend what special education teachers are asking them to do. In order for that to occur, parents must be aware of their children's learning environment, be able to interpret information about academic programs, and

be able to evaluate in understandable terms the achievement of their children and the school.” Hornby, et al. (1995:94) explained that families of children with barriers to learning want the school to acknowledge them when assessments are planned, when the child’s progress is reviewed and when an alternative placement is considered. Basically, there has to open communication with the families and the school needs to inform the families about their rights with regards to their child’s education.

A national study on parent involvement reveals that schools allow little input from families when an IEP (Individualized Education program) is developed for a child with barriers to learning (Newman, 2004:29). Families who visit a school expect individualized feedback on their child’s academic progress (Swart & Phasha, 2006:223). Unfortunately, open communication is not common, as families complained that they are not treated as equal partners by the professionals at school (Wolfendale, 1989:141). Literature indicated that the communication practices of professionals in schools, influence the enthusiasm with which families want to participate in their children’s education (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005:79). Teachers who are warm, open, sensitive, flexible, reliable and accessible enhance the spirit of collaboration between home and school (Lim, 2003:149).

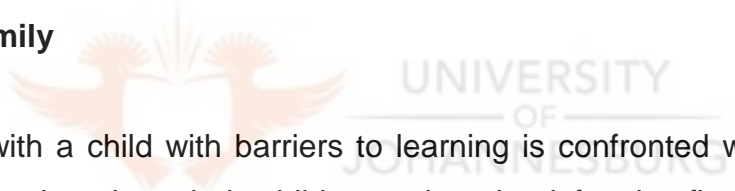
Family-school meetings should always be properly planned and professionally executed and in order for this to happen professionals at the school must be properly trained prior to any feedback session (Hornby, et al. 1995:98). During these feedbacks, professionals should be aware of the impact of non-verbal communication. The body language of professionals such as eye rolling, looks of disgust or pity, head-shaking or demeaning comments about the child’s behaviour could also cause a rift and mistrust between the family and professionals (Anstine-Templeton & Johnston, 2004:60).

Epstein (2002:8) stated that frequent interaction between the school and families will create an ethos of hard work and collaboration.

## **2.6 RATIONALE FOR FAMILY- SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

Each partner plays a vital role in the success of a family-school partnership. Wolfendale (1989:149) wrote about having a “collective responsibility” between the family and the school. This collaboration between home and school is essential in order to achieve maximum results. It is important that a family with a child with barriers to learning be made a partner in all decision making as this will result in an increased sense of ownership of the program followed with the child, as well as a shared vision for the child (Batey, 1996:20).

### **2.6.1 Family**

The logo of the University of Jona Nessborg is located in the background of the text. It features a stylized orange bird or sunburst design above the text 'UNIVERSITY OF JONANESSBORG' in a light grey font.

A family with a child with barriers to learning is confronted with an array of new demands, when their child attends school for the first time, as they attempt to cope with the burden imposed by their child’s inability to fit into a normal routine of school life (Henley, et al. 2002:380). Few children with mild disabilities are identified prior to formal schooling and the cause of the problem is not easily identified. Families often need to consult a variety of professionals and they face the challenge of coordinating all these services and activities (Fertman, 2004:83). Many families turn to the school for guidance and advice to support them through this whole process of accepting and dealing with their child’s barriers to learning.

The teachers and other professionals play a critical role in LSEN schools as they can support and guide families in what can be an overwhelming experience. They can ease their anxiety and stress by recommending the

services and provisions that the child may need. They coordinate the whole process so that it is provided effectively and efficiently (Spinelli, 2002:42).

Three definite causes for tensions in family-school partnerships have been identified namely, home work strategies, behaviour of learners and a difference of opinion with regards to the utilization of medication with children with severe barriers to learning (Anstine-Templeton & Johnston, 2004:65-68). The answer to these challenges is the development of families through specific empowerment programmes. It allows families to become better informed about what their children are learning in school. Another resolution might be what Blamires, et al. (1997:20) described as “parent-led” but “school facilitated” support groups. Families could act as a support network to other families by sharing ideas and approaches thus empowering themselves (Riddel, 2004:127-128).

Homework causes a lot of stress in a family with a child with barriers to learning and ongoing communication between the family and the school can smooth out many problems (Newman, 2004:37). Swart and Phasha (2006:221) gave useful tips to LSEN schools to help combat this anxiety about homework such as a homework hotline, homework tutoring after school and workshops to inform families about the curriculum and how to support their child better.

Families who are actively involved in their child’s education achieve a greater understanding of the challenges that the school faces and they become more supportive of efforts by the school to improve education (Steyn, 2002:20). As families become more involved in their children’s education, they gain more confidence and start feeling more positive about their role as a family (Batey, 1996:21; Epstein, 2002:13). They become more knowledgeable, more confident and better equip to ask questions and to challenge the status quo (Steyn, 2002:20). They become advocates of change (Batey, 1996:27). The



end result is an increased participation and greater interaction with the school (Epstein, 2002:13; Salas, et al. 2005: 52). Henley, et al. (2002:378) explained that it is not about how much time families spend in the school that counts, but it is the responsibilities they assume. The advantage of this type of involvement and recognition from the school is the improved self-worth and self-esteem of the families (Batey, 1996:21). According to Thompson, et al. (1997:100-101), empowered families are enabled families, who manage to exert greater control over their own lives.

The key to a successful family-school partnership is the learner, who acts as the glue between the family and the home and who is the sole reason behind the connections between the family and the school (Epstein, 2002:8; Nojaja, 2002:53). The ultimate goal of a family-school partnership is increased collaboration between the family and the school which leads to consistency and a reinforcement of educational matters at home (Hamill & Everington, 2002:153).

### **2.6.2 School**

Research has shown that when a school makes a commitment to involve families, improved results have followed and schools have benefited greatly. Not only does family involvement improve the quality of support that the school could offer the learners, but the professionals themselves could benefit from this liaison.

In a LSEN school, family involvement is essential as a child with barriers to learning does not have easily identifiable problems and in order to give the appropriate level of support to the learner, the school needs to look at the child holistically (Henley, et al. 2002:151). This implies that the school should see the learner as a child, who is part of a particular family system. No Individualized Support Plan (ISP) can be drafted for a child without the input

of the family. It is essential that the family and school must agree on common goals for the child (Newman, 2004:29).

By communicating with the family, the teachers can gain an important home perspective about a learner's interests, problem areas, developmental history and attitudes towards certain tasks (Henley, et al. 2002:225; Spinelli, 2002:338). According to Ferrara and Ferrara (2005:80), researchers have concluded that family involvement during the school day have a profound positive impact on learner achievement. It is clear that the intellectual development of the child relies heavily on family-school cooperation (Batey, 1996:27; Epstein, 2002:8, Newman, 2004:37; Nojaja, 2002:50). Families whose input is valued, become advocates of crossover learning between the school and the family (Henley, et al. 2002:225). The result is that the intervention done at school is thus continued at home. This alliance between the family and school leads to improved academic achievement, better attendance, fewer behavioural problems by learners and greater understanding between the family and school (Barbour & Barbour, 2001:285; Batey, 1996:27; Swart & Phasha, 2006:213). Other advantages for the school are improved "school-family" communication, more productive family-school meetings and a greater understanding of the home situation of the child (Epstein, 2002:13). It is clear that a child could only stand to gain from such a positive interaction between the family that he comes from and the school.

The teachers could benefit directly from family involvement. They are often overburdened and the assistance of family volunteers could reduce their workload considerably (Van Heerden, 2002:17). In many schools in America families volunteer in the classrooms, sponsor orientation programs, conduct alcohol education classes, welcome new families, arrange for guest speakers, provide library assistance, and much more (Henley, et al. 2002:378). Prinsloo (2006a:459-460) gave interesting examples of how

families in South Africa are already involved in their children's school and ways they could become involved. In one rural primary school, grandmothers are planting vegetables on the school grounds to feed the learners and they also wait at the gates in the mornings to give hugs to those little ones who look sad or miserable. The warm caring atmosphere in the school led to improved academic results and school attendance. In a school in Durban, South African grandmothers are trained to listen to learners read in an attempt to promote literacy levels in the school (McConkey, 2001:107).

According to Lim (2003:137) staff morale was reported to be higher in schools where family involvement was substantial. Possible reasons for this could be that by collaborating with the families, teachers earned more respect from the families for their profession and this again led to increased job satisfaction.

## **2.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY**



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The importance of family involvement is far reaching and the benefits are so immense that they are impossible to ignore. The success of such a family-school alliance is based on mutual respect, shared ownership, shared commitment, a clear understanding of one another's role and defined common goals of the team. The ultimate goal is "synergy" between all the stakeholders involved in the education of a child with barriers to learning (Van Heerden, 2002:17). Such collaboration will only work if it's done in the spirit of Masifunde, which means: "Let's educate together". Many challenges in LSEN schools still need to be overcome as the focus only recently shifted to learners with barriers to learning and inclusion.

In chapter three the research method and design used in this study will be further explained.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will focus on a detailed discussion of the research design and method. Attention will be given to the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of this study. The research design is a systemic and structured plan or “blue print” for finding answers to research questions (Mouton, 2001:55). The objective of the research design is to plan, structure and execute the research project in such a way that the validity of the findings will be maximized.

### **3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

A basic or generic qualitative research design that is explorative, richly descriptive and contextual will be conducted. This approach entails the identifying of recurring patterns in the form of categories identified in the data. The aim of such a generic approach is the discovering and understanding of a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives of people (Merriam, 1998:11-12).

#### **3.2.1 Qualitative research design**

Niemann (2000:283) explained that qualitative research methodology developed as a result of the post-positivistic approach where information was not collected in terms of “regimented methods”. Qualitative research is also referred to in literature as the phenomenological approach. Qualitative methodology focuses on comprehending one’s world and interpreting it from the participants’ frame of reference, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in their world (Merriam, 1998:6; Niemann, 2000:285). The essence of qualitative research is “verstehen” (Bisschoff,

2005:30). According to Waghid (2000:25), qualitative research is closely linked to the use of rationality. The crux is to reach a stage where the researcher could understand the person acting in a situation as well as the reasons behind the person's actions. It entails the detailed writing of field notes to capture the words and behaviour of people.

Merriam (1998:6-8) indicated five main characteristics of qualitative research:

- The main focus is to discover, explore and understand a phenomenon with the focus on the process rather on the product (Merriam, 1998:11).
- The researcher is the primary instrument in the process of gathering and analysing data.
- Field work is usually involved and the researcher has to meet or observe the participants in their natural setting.
- Qualitative research is designed to inductively build, rather than to test concepts, hypotheses or theories. The researcher uses an inductive strategy and hopes to find theory that explains the data.
- The product is characterised by a rich description where words and pictures are used to convey meaning.

Based on the above mentioned characteristics, I decided that qualitative research would be an effective method of research in addressing barriers to family-school partnerships in LSEN schools from the perspective of the parents. By conducting focus group interviews with the parents in three similar LSEN schools, I as the researcher and the primary instrument would be able to get close to the participants to hear and to observe them in a setting that they are familiar with such as their child's school. According to Mouton and Marais (1992:167), a qualitative researcher allows the phenomenon to speak for itself and reflect it as accurately and honestly as possible.

### **3.2.2 The descriptive, interpretative and explorative nature of qualitative research**

The aim of this study was to conduct exploratory research into relative unknown territory (Mouton & Marais, 1992:45) and to allow rich descriptions to form the foundation of the research interpretation in an attempt to fully understand the phenomena. I investigated the perceptions of families, with children with severe barriers to learning, regarding their involvement as parents in their child's school. I attempted to identify barriers to family-school partnerships that may exist with the main objective to determine practical approaches which LSEN schools could implement to enhance family-school partnerships. A thick, rich description was given of the information gained by conducting a focus group interview at three LSEN schools by describing the data as accurately as possible. The interpretation of the data allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomena. Exploration and discovery were elements of this study as limited South African data on the topic is available and I attempted to provide new insights into the problem (Mouton & Marais, 1992:45).

### **3.2.3 Focus group interviews**

I decided to conduct a focus group interview at each of the three LSEN schools that would form part of this study. A focus group interview is a qualitative research technique and takes place when a group of between eight to ten participants met in order to discuss a specific topic or questions put to them by the researcher (Frey & Fontana, 1993:29-30; Venter, 2000:62). Stewart and Shamdasani (1990:57) suggested a number between six and twelve as a manageable size. The aim was to collect qualitative data from a small group of participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990:17). The advantages listed below by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990:16) convinced me that this would be the most effective method of collecting the data.

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990:16) listed the following advantages of using a focus group interview as a valuable research instrument:

- It is more cost effective and less time consuming than interviewing individual participants. A shorter notice period could be given.
- The researcher could clarify responses, ask more probing questions or follow-up questions. The non-verbal body language (frowns, smiles, nods, gestures and so forth) of the participants could be observed and noted. According to Morgan (1997:3), as cited by Smit and Liebenberg (2003:1), it is an opportunity to conduct a less structured interview.
- The participants offer the researcher data in their own words. This creates the opportunity to obtain large amounts of rich descriptive data. The researcher could note the nuances, feelings and emotions behind the words and make the necessary links. According to Albrecht, Johnson and Walther (1993:52), communication is “symbolic in nature”. Individuals attach meanings to symbols such as the words they use.
- Participants react to other group members and this often spontaneous interaction result in the exchanging of more ideas. This view is supported by Morgan (1997:3) as cited by Smit and Liebenberg (2003:1). Data is often uncovered this way that might have stayed hidden during an individual interview. Morgan and Krueger (1993:17-18) explained that at the beginning of the interview session, some participants might be more reserved of their opinion, but the “cuing phenomenon” creates a situation where the response of the other participants triggers a range of responses from all the participants as they agree or disagree with one another. A comfortable, friendly setting has a huge advantage as the participants start to feel connected as they begin to get an understanding of the views of other people who might be in a similar situation as what they are. Venter (2000:96) recommended that first names are used to keep the interview relaxed. A successful focus group interview often has a feel-

good effect on participants and this is a valuable end in itself. The flexible nature of a focus group interview allows for easy application in a variety of settings and with a variety of individuals.

- This type of research instrument is ideal when participants are not particularly literate or still children.
- Focus group interviews are easy to analyse as the responses of the participants are direct and clear. Morgan and Krueger (1993:15) added that it allows for a platform where people without or with less power could freely express their feelings and perceptions in a secure setting amongst others with a similar interest. Homogeneous groups such as parents from one school with a common interest (in this case a child with barriers to learning), yield much information (Venter, 2000:95). The idea is that those in power should listen to what the man on the ground has to say about topics of concern. Focus groups allow therefore for greater participation due to fewer inhibitions, greater insight into problems and a more spontaneous sharing of ideas. Participants may become aware of new concepts or ways of thinking (Morgan & Krueger, 1993:17). Respondents feel safer and more comfortable in a group to speak their mind than in a one to one situation (Venter, 2000:88).

As the researcher I took note of the following negative aspects of using a focus group interview as a research instrument (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990:17): The small number of participants in a focus group interview makes generalization to the larger population difficult. People who offer to participate in such a focus group interview, might not be representative of the larger population that the researcher wants to reach. Dominant participants may over-power other members in the group and prevent them from speaking their mind. The researcher might put too much faith in this live interaction of the participants. Open ended questions typical to focus group interviews



complicate the analysis of the data. The researcher may unknowingly provide the participants with cues to the type of response that is required.

According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990:16), a focus group could be used to generalise, when the group of people is rather homogeneous and when a flaw in a new product or program needs to be identified. This research instrument thus suited my topic as participants were all parents of children with severe barriers to learning placed in a LSEN school. The “flaw” that had to be investigated was barriers to family-school partnerships in LSEN schools.

The researcher’s role as moderator during such a focus group interview is extremely important. According to Morgan and Krueger (1993:6-7), the moderator should be well prepared, attentive and skilful or else the results would be the same as with a poorly designed questionnaire. A skilled moderator will create an atmosphere where participants feel comfortable to share their own personal view point without fear of intimidation. The success of a focus group interview also depends on the match between the topic being researched and the participants’ ability to contribute meaningful data (Morgan & Krueger, 1993:13).

I opted to act as the moderator during all three focus group interviews as I wanted to hear first hand what the parents had to say. My position as a principal of a LSEN school gave me the necessary background to maximize the research opportunity as the primary research instrument (Merriam, 1998:45) through relevant and probing follow-up questions. I made my position as principal of an LSEN school and as researcher clear at the start of each interview session. I implored the participants to open their hearts and to speak to me as a mother, who also has a child with severe barriers to learning and not to me as the principal of a school.

### **3.3 SAMPLING**

A unique sample (Merriam, 1998:62) of three LSEN schools was made. I chose the LSEN school that I was the principal of as well as two other similar LSEN schools. These three schools were selected based on the fact that they catered for the same type of learners. The learners in these three schools were all referred to these schools because of their severe barriers to learning and specific learning disabilities. These three schools did not cater for learners with severe physical barriers. The location of these three schools allowed for easy access. Telephonic and written contact was made with the principals of each of the other two LSEN schools. A letter was forwarded to the School Governing Body of each of the three schools asking permission to conduct focus group interviews with a selected group of parents at the school. A copy of the permission letter from the Department of Education was included as well as a cover letter explaining the type of research, the aim of the research, who was invited to take part in the research and the time frames that were applicable. Anonymity was also ensured. All three focus group interviews were scheduled to be over within one hour as quality gets lost with longer interviews (Mouton, 2001:104). Written permission was obtained from the School Governing Bodies of all three the schools to conduct research at the schools on barriers to family-school partnerships in LSEN schools.

The snowballing or networking (Merriam, 1998:63) technique was applied where one person refers the researcher to another and so forth. The principals (including myself) asked grade three to seven teachers to identify parents that they thought would possibly be interested in taking part in a focus group interview on family involvement. The school then forwarded these names to me. I randomly `contacted families on these lists telephonically and explained the purpose of the study to them. I tried to select a participant from each grade to ensure that a better perspective could be

achieved. Often these parents referred me again to other parents who might be willing to take part in the focus group interviews. I continued with this process until I had at least eight to nine names of parents who confirmed that they would like to take part in this study. According to Venter (2000:95), the ideal size of a focus group is between five and twelve participants as larger groups are more difficult to handle. Place, time and venue were scheduled with each focus group.

At the third school permission was received from the School Governing Body, but no names of parents were forthcoming. After repeated phone calls to the school, I was requested to fax a cover letter to the school with my contact details and this was placed in their newsletter. I again received no reaction from any parents. I contacted the school once again and a list of all the grade three to six parents was faxed to me. I selected parents at random from each grade and contacted them telephonically. I explained the purpose of the study to them and invited them to take part in a focus group interview. The time was scheduled for the following Saturday morning from 9:00 till 10:00 in the staffroom of their school. A diverse group (different sexes, cultures and family dynamics) of seven parents reacted positively to the invitation to take part.

### **3.4 DATA COLLECTION**

My knowledge of LSEN and my position as the principal of a LSEN school allowed me to ask relevant and probing questions (refer Annexure A: Interview guide). I decided on conducting a semi-structured (Merriam, 1998:74) focus group interview at each of the three LSEN schools. The interview was guided by a list of about eleven specific open-ended questions and possible sub-questions should the initial question be misunderstood. The interview was piloted to iron out any problems that may arise from poor questions. It was also tested against the opinions of colleagues at the school.

This also afforded me the opportunity to practise conducting such an interview (Merriam, 1998:75).

During these three semi-structured focus group interviews (between structured and open-ended), a list of issues pertaining to family-school partnerships were explored which allowed the researcher to gain an insight into the perceptions of parents on this specific topic (Merriam, 1998:74). It allowed the researcher the opportunity to respond with follow-up questions as new ideas emerged from the participants. The amount of data collected on a specific topic, depends on the participants. The participants at all three these schools participated eagerly in the discussions and this yielded a vast amount of useful information. The interviewer had to guide the participants back to the topic of discussion throughout the focus group interviews.

At the first school that I am the principal of, I decided to hold the interview during the evening on the first night of the revue that was staged at the school. I focused on families who indicated that they would be attending the revue on the Friday night and therefore had to wait for their child on the Thursday evening. It was convenient for them to take part in the focus group interview while waiting for their child. Parents whose child had been in the school for two years or longer were invited to take part. The response was extremely positive and a diverse group (different sexes, cultures and family dynamics) was called together. Eight parents turned up for the focus group interview held in the conference room of the school. In all three focus groups parents with children in different grades were invited to take part in the focus group interviews. This allowed for a wider feedback.

The interview at the second LSEN school was scheduled for 10:00 till 11:00 one Saturday morning in the staff room of the school and the one at the third LSEN school from 9:00 till 10:00 in their staff room. A Saturday morning was chosen as that was the time most of the participants indicated that they

would be available. A diverse group (different sexes, cultures and family dynamics) of seven parents were interviewed at the second school. At the third school, the two black parents withdrew from the interview due to other commitments and ill health. The one white participant never arrived. The remaining six participants were all white.

At each of the focus group interviews the participants met about twenty minutes before the commencement of the interview to have something to eat and to drink. During this time I welcomed each participant and introduced him/her to the rest of the group. Each participant received a sticker with the name that he/she would like to be called written on it. My own name was also indicated on a sticker. I requested that we interact on a first name basis in order to create a more relaxed atmosphere. The chairs were positioned around a table with the tape recorder in the middle. Once everybody had something to eat and to drink, I invited them to take their place around the table. I explained that I would conduct the interview in English as the groups are multi-cultural and English is the one language that we all could understand. It was clear during the telephonic contact that all the respondents could understand English. Participants who experienced difficulty expressing themselves accurately in English, were allowed to speak Afrikaans. I translated to English whenever Afrikaans was used.

I took time to explain the study to them as well as my role as researcher. The confidentiality clause was pointed out to them. I handed each participant a permission letter and asked them to read through it on their own and to sign it if they were satisfied. I answered all queries. With the permission of the respondents all three the focus group interviews were taped and notes were taken.

### 3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

During this phase sense is being made of the data by “consolidating, reducing and interpreting” what the researcher has seen, heard and read (Merriam, 1998:178). Permission was asked to record all three focus group interviews and notes were taken by the researcher to help identify the voices of the different participants as the voices of some participants did not record well. The recordings were transcribed verbatim immediately after the interviews by the researcher as it offers the best data base (Merriam, 1998:88). This aided the interpretations of the analysis. Nuances were also noted as it gives more meaning to the words. Qualitative research wants to afford the researcher the opportunity to get insight into the minds of the participants, the way they think and perceive things to be (Merriam, 1998:71). According to Venter (2000:90), a focus group interview could not only tell the researcher more about a specific phenomenon, but it could also change people’s behaviour. This could possibly happen if the group dynamics allowed for a high level of interaction and participants came to new insights while sharing their own ideas and thoughts. At all three the focus group interviews at the LSEN schools, the participants went home with new knowledge gained during the interview. They also indicated that they had found it to be a very positive experience, which was hugely rewarding to me as the researcher.

Knobel’s (1993:45) approach was followed with the analysing of the three focus group interviews. This method consists of two parts: The first part is the mechanical component where the researcher physically had to transcribe the data and organise it into meaningful topics or themes by literally cutting and pasting sections into “categorical and conceptual collections.” The terms and themes were based upon the researcher’s knowledge of the topic and grouped into meaningful categories. The second part is the interpretive component where the data has to be coded and patterns detected.

According to Knobel (1993:42-44), the analysis of the data collected during a focus group interview, is quite demanding. He explained that a huge amount of subjectivity is required in the interpretation and analysis of the data. Care was taken to place the statement of a participant in the context of the broader discussion that took place. Some irrelevant topics, generated by the participants, were transcribed, but left out of the analysis and Annexure B.

The following steps were taken in the analysis of the data: Firstly, each transcribed text was read several times to get a thorough overview. The schools were coded according to the sequence that the interviews that took place, for example “first interview”, etcetera. Fictitious names were given to each participant and the first two initials of these names were used. Notes were made on the race, sex and marital status of each participant in case it would give some more meaning to their statements. Notes, consisting of word and phrases were made in the margin indicating possible topics. A list of all topics in each interview was made and similar topics were clustered together. An overview grid (Knobel, 1993:47-48) was drafted in the form of a grid with topic headings on the one axis and focus group sessions on the other axis. This was used as a working document. A brief summary of the content of the discussion of each group on a specific topic is written in each cell. This grid provided an overview of the content of the transcripts. Common themes and concepts were identified. The topics were then grouped into major topics, unique topics and leftovers. Topics of special interest were noted that were not part of the initial discussion guidelines as well as topics unique to a specific school. All the data collected on a specific topic with the relevant codes was then compared, analysed and summarised.

### **3.6 DATA CONSOLIDATION**

The emergent themes were sorted and organized into categories that reflect the focus of the study. According to Merriam (1998:183) these categories

should become the answers to the study. Mutually exclusive categories were identified that were also conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998:184).

### **3.7 DATA INTERPRETATION**

Knobel (1993:95) stated that the interpretation of the data, forms the second part of the analyses of a focus group interview. Deductions were made regarding the research findings by reducing and refining the categories. Patterns were noted and links were made with regards to family-school partnerships and possible barriers that may exist. The literature review formed the background to all the interpretations. The data was interpreted and tentative recommendations of practical approaches that could be implemented by LSEN schools to remove barriers to family-school partnerships were made.

### **3.8 TRUSTWORTHINESS**



It is important to trust research results and results can only be considered trustworthy if its validity and reliability can be accounted for. With qualitative studies the researcher has to provide such a rich description that the results would make sense to the reader (Merriam, 1998:198-199).

#### **3.8.1 Objectivity**

Niemann (2000:283) stated that objectivity “takes on a whole new image if it becomes related to attitudes and mental actions, while reliability and validity are concerned with procedures and results.” Keller (1985:117), as cited by Niemann (2000:284), argued that objectivity in qualitative research is only possible when the researched, in other words, the participant, speaks for itself. This was achieved by conducting focus group interviews with the parents of learners with severe barriers to learning at their respective



schools. In contrast with quantitative research, qualitative research views subjectivity as something positive. This view is based on the assumption that human behaviour can only truly be understood if it is placed in context, thus being “in the world”. The researcher is a person with specific ideas and has a theoretical frame of reference. Data is thus gathered, analysed and interpreted by the researcher against his own frame of mind. Merriam (1998:103) stated that qualitative research assumes some level of subjectivity and interaction during the data collection process, as the researcher acts as the primary instrument of data collection. Niemann (2000:284) supported this view by stating that absolute objectivity in qualitative research is not ever achieved. Merriam (1998:84) warned that in order to achieve objectivity, the interviewer has to assume and maintain a neutral position during the whole interview even though the response from the participants is in complete contrast with the prior knowledge, beliefs or values of the interviewer. As the interviewer I did my best not to be drawn into a discussion that could have an effect on the aims of the research. The main aim was to let the parents speak for themselves. I had to take special care that my experience and position as the principal of one of the sample schools, did not cause me to be biased. I managed to achieve this by constant reflecting on my own frame of reference and assumptions regarding the research topic (Hansen, 1979:45 as cited by Bisschoff, 2005:36).

### **3.8.2 Reliability**

Reliability in research implies the absence of random or casual errors (Niemann, 2000:284). The following methods were used to ensure that the research complies with maximum internal reliability (Niemann, 2000:284):

Data triangulation was employed. This indicates the use of two or more kinds of data sources such as interviews, dossiers, artefacts, literature and other. For the purpose of this study data was gathered through an in depth literature

study and a focus group interview at three LSEN schools. Data collected at the three schools were compared and a cross analysis was made.

Consensus was reached. The participants in each focus group interview agreed on findings such as specific needs or concerns that they have as parents regarding their involvement in the school. Besides what was being said by the participants, I noted body language such as the nodding of heads or confirming interjections.

Mechanisation was employed as all three the focus group interviews were recorded and notes were taken. Verbatim transcription took place immediately after each interview while it was still fresh in the mind of the researcher.

Auditing can take place as all information regarding the research (notes, transcriptions and tapes) will be preserved, so that the findings can be verified by independent persons. The tapes and copies of the transcriptions will be kept at the University of Johannesburg for five years.

The accuracy of the “interpretive analysis” is increased if the analyst is closely involved with the collecting of data (Knobel, 1993:50). For this reason I acted as moderator and analyst.

### **3.8.3 Validity**

Niemann (2000:285) stated that in order to determine the degree of validation of a research project, a researcher has to ask the following questions:

- Am I as the researcher really measuring what I think I am?
- To what degree have the findings also been tested or refined by other research?

Albrecht, Johnson and Walter (1993:63) warned that certain factors could affect the validity of the data gathered at a focus group interview. These factors are social desirability, low levels of trust, face-politeness needs, researcher bias and deception. These factors were taken into consideration during compilation of the focus groups. I ensured that the groups were as diverse as possible and that no persons with major powers in the school were included in the groups that could result in intimidation and a face-politeness. To overcome this issue at my own school, I made it clear from the start that I am not doing the research in my capacity as the principal of the school, but as an educator in a LSEN school and as the mother of a child with severe barriers to learning. I also requested the participants to be open and honest in their opinions and informed them that positive as well as negative perceptions are needed to deduct a thorough investigation into the problem.

The researcher has further attempted to ensure validity by developing a logical framework for the study as suggested by Niemann (2000:285). I made use of participants who could contribute valuable information to the study such as families who have children with barriers to learning in LSEN schools. A balance was created between allowing the “object to speak for itself” and using abstracted categories for analyses and interpretation. A thorough analysis of the literature study on the topic was done, until the point of theoretical saturation. I compared data, especially international literature with current available South African literature. External validity was ensured by giving an accurate as possible description of the research process, reasons for the choice of methods, the circumstances under which, and the context in which the research was conducted. A “thick description” of the research situation and context was provided so that others can determine whether or to what extent the research are valid or can be useful in their own situation and context.

According to Sink (1991:197) as quoted by Albrecht, et al. (1993:51), focus groups are grounded in the “human tendency to discuss issues and ideas in groups” and this leads to a degree of external validation. A social forum such as a focus group may offer more ecologically valid data as it is assessing the opinions of people in a group instead of an asocial setting.

### **3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

I used the term “participants” as according to Merriam (1998:132) it implies a willingness and a volunteering to participate in the study. I also referred to the participants as the “parents”, a “mother” or a “father”. The anonymity of the participants was assured in the cover letter as well as in the permission letter that they were requested to sign. Fictitious names were given to the participants in an attempt to protect their privacy during transcription. With my initial telephonic contact with the participants and with the commencement of each focus group interview, it was stressed that their participation is entirely voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the interview at any time. At the first school, a husband and wife were excused half way through the interview to attend their child’s revue. The necessary respect was extended to the principals of the participating schools by requesting permission from them and their School Governing Bodies to do research in their respective schools. During all three the focus group interviews, I informed the participants of my status as a principal of a LSEN school.

### **3.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Chapter three explained and justified the research design and method. The qualitative research design, as well as the use of focus groups as an interview method was discussed. The data collection, data analysis, consolidations and interpretation was discussed. The trustworthiness and ethical considerations were discussed.

In chapter four the results that were acquired through the analysis of the transcriptions of the three focus group interviews will be discussed



## **CHAPTER FOUR: DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter a rich narrative description of barriers to family-school partnerships, as uncovered during the three focus group interviews at three different LSEN schools, will be given. The data of each focus group interview was transcribed and coded. Fictitious names were given to participants. Themes and patterns in the data of each of the focus group interviews were uncovered. The themes and patterns of all three the focus group interviews were linked and certain sub-categories emerged. This presented the researcher with an overview of the current situation regarding barriers to family-school partnerships in LSEN schools. Quotations of four lines and longer will be typed in a smaller font (Faculty of Education, 2005:14).

### **4.2 DESCRIPTION OF BARRIERS TO FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS**

During each focus group interview at the three LSEN schools, the researcher focused on the needs and concerns of the participants as well as on their perceptions of barriers to family-school partnerships. Positive suggestions made by the participants as to how LSEN schools could promote effective and sustainable partnerships with families, were noted as good practices that should be promoted. Much attention was placed on the micro-involvement of the families with the individual child.

#### **4.2.1 The emotional needs expressed by families**

During the focus group interviews the participants raised certain concerns and needs that they as parents have. They voiced their own personal need for support in some way or the other. They emphasised that the lifelong

commitment of having to deal with a child with barriers to learning could become overwhelming to them as parents. A mother told the group that she was an A-grade student and that she had to receive therapy in order to help her to accept the reality of a child with barriers to learning (Annexure B: First interview, line 1133). Another mother voiced her need as follows:

*“Sometimes are we big enough to say, ‘Please, swop, I as a parent am now battling, can you assist me?’”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 906-907).

*“It’s actually to call for that kind of help and I have never been denied that. I must say, that part quite even to the extent someone mentioned earlier, very often parents need therapy as a result of..., honestly”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 908-911).

*“I think all of us know that we cried ourselves to tears in the evening, cried the whole evening , had sleepless nights , I think we all went through it ”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 498-500).

A mother stated that she felt that families do need therapeutic intervention and she suggested that this could be done by the school psychologist, especially during their induction into the new LSEN environment (Annexure B: First interview, lines 657-658). Mothers described how they had to adapt their vision for their child (Annexure B: First interview, lines 216-217, 526-528). One mother said:

*“How are you going to deal with changing your attitude and expectations of your child , because really, our children are born and you look at this future doctor, or lawyer or president and here they start school and they are not going to become any of that. So, we too have expectations”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 664-500).

A father explained his emotions on discovering that his child had barriers to learning:

*“It’s all about emotions. You get so clouded with emotions, you know uhm, as you say uhm, your expectations actually are clouded.”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 680-681).

The participants stated that they are confronted on a daily basis with their child’s frustrations of not being able to cope academically and of being different from their siblings (Annexure B: First interview, lines 457-459, 486-488) and peers (Annexure B: First interview, line 25). Two mothers blamed themselves for their child’s problems. One mother wondered where she had gone wrong. She questioned her own competency in supporting her child and developing him holistically. She added that she needed help to deal with all these things. They said the following:

*“Because you know sometimes we look at it and I think we go through these stages that I have done something wrong that my child can’t cope. [Confirming noises from others] Then we’ve got to deal with all those things and we need help to deal with those things”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 676-678).

*“... by my stress in total my stress in his life, his whole learning experience, his whole self-esteem and his future, I’m actually the cause of the problem”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 528-530).

*“I mean, how do we cope with that and how do we cope with this child and make sure that we build his self-esteem consistently, because all of us don’t know how to do that. We don’t know how to ...”* (Annexure B: First interview, line 671-673).

The high stress levels of these families and their daily struggle with their child with barriers to learning were highlighted by the statements made by some of them. The confirming noises that immediately could be heard from the other participants, indicated that they could identify with these challenges



mentioned by some of the participants. A mother with three children in this specific LSEN school, said the following:

*“There are days when I also just wanna sit and cry, but that is more exhaustion and frustration of my own...”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 548-549).

*“ ... but are you understanding what I’m telling you, how I’m battling at home – hours and hours and hours”* (Annexure B: First interview, line 886-867).

A father said:

*“But being involved in your child facing school here and helping him, I don’t think we need to... The reality, it’s a struggle. [Confirming noises from whole group] It’s definitely a struggle, it’s not easy going”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 454-456).

In all three the focus groups the participants indicated that they have consulted with numerous professionals such as doctors, specialists and therapists with the hope that they would receive a solution for their child. They said:

*“But I also got sick and tired of taking her to doctors and doctors and specialists and specialists. It is costing you a lot of money and you don’t get the answer ...”*

(Annexure B: First interview, lines 699-700).

*“So we sort of agreed with the teachers, principal and the psychologist. I think they’ve got reports on top of reports. Like right now, I have another appointment with another neurologist, because like we don’t know what to do any more”* (Second interview, line 359).

This paragraph described the emotional need of families. The next paragraph will focus on the effect that the socio-economic status of a family has on Family-school partnerships in a LSEN school.

#### **4.2.2 Socio-economic challenges of families**

Socio-economic barriers to family involvement in all three the LSEN schools were identified. Participants mentioned the travelling that has to be done to get to the LSEN school (Annexure B: First interview, line 102, 167). Participants who worked full-time, spoke agitatedly when they explained how they were battling to fit all their responsibilities into one day. They said that they experienced life as being rushed with little time to spare for their children:

*“Everything is a rush these days...everything, it’s a rush to get home!”*  
(Second interview, line 58).

One working mother stressed that she only had approximately two hours in the evening to spend with her child. When she got home at 18:00, she still had to prepare supper. The result was that there was no time to monitor her child’s homework and she had to rely on the aftercare facility at the LSEN school to see to it that her child’s homework was done (Second interview, lines 211-216).

One father claimed that nowadays both parents needed to work if they were to survive (Second interview, line 63). His wife resigned from her full-time work and accepted a half-day position to be able to offer greater support to their child with barriers to learning. He stated that they had to make many sacrifices in order for his wife to stay at home. The researcher understood this to be financial sacrifices:

*“There is a lot of sacrifice for a parent to stay at home and it is exceptionally difficult ... “ (Second interview, lines 65-68).*

The same father questioned the role that families play these days, as well as their level of commitment and involvement with their children (Second interview, lines 55-57). He concluded that their involvement was not what it was meant to be. Participants in this focus group nostalgically referred to the past when one parent could stay at home to look after the children and when there were fewer pressures on children and on them as a family (Second interview, lines 59-64). A single black mother referred to the different life styles of today’s youth and the increased demands made on them when she said:

*“ .. their life style has changed, it’s different from ours. There are so many demands for our children, even more than when we were children“ (Second interview, lines 85-95).*

The same mother complained that she found it difficult to cope and felt strongly that there should be a parent at home. She said:

*“You know the situation becomes more complicated if you have a child with special needs and being a single parent. You know, somebody needs to be at home” (Second interview, lines 87-89).*

*“I’m pulling hard guys, it’s not easy” (Second interview, line 94).*

A mother commented that a responsible parent does everything for his or her child. She was adamant that her child would never need anything for school (Second interview, lines 39-43).

One mother complained that a meeting with a teacher at the school could take up the whole morning. She added that not only did she have to take time off from work, but she also worked a very long distance from the school. She said:

*“No, there was, but I must come during working hours and I can’t do that. As it is, I have to take time off to take Ally to the doctor and this and that. But it takes a lot for me to come here during a working day and I work in the middle of Johburg CBD, so for me it makes more sense to come to a parents evening, which is outside our working hours”* (Third interview, lines 130-134).

The researcher concluded that there are numerous socio-economic factors to be taken into account when trying to foster family-school partnerships. The next paragraph describes how families view LSEN schools.

#### **4.2.3 The families’ view on LSEN schools**

Mixed feedback was received from the participants as to how they felt about the LSEN school that their child attended. Positive feedback was received in two of the focus groups. The participants indicated that they loved their child’s school very much. They said the following:

*“Well, you know they... The compliment I can give is these teachers and these people that work at the school are very committed and very loving to our Children.”* (Third interview, lines 512-515).

*“I think what makes a difference in our situational school, children with special needs, is that your educators definitely have a passion for teaching. Otherwise they wouldn’t come into this profession. You experience that passion”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 55-58).

*“It is definitely not about the money or..., it is about the child. They love the children”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 59-60).

One father, however, made it quite clear that his son was not placed in a LSEN school because they wanted to, but because they had no suitable alternative. He felt that the mainstream schools in South Africa were not equipped to handle children with barriers to learning. He said the following:

*“I think many people would admit, but maybe not openly, that this school is not a school of choice. It is not because I’m living here right next to the school, that I’m sending my son or my daughter to this school. It is a school where the need arose, that I had to send him...”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 88-92).

*“Because of their limitations... in their limitations, it is pie in the sky. It’s a different ball game if you have schools like they have in Norway and Sweden, then it will be a different story, where you have 15 to 20 children in a class where individual attention is given to all of them. But in classes of 40, this child is going to be lost. So, it is never going to work with the limitations we are having at the moment”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 342-347).

Participants stated that they initially wanted their children back into mainstream as soon as possible. Some still felt that way. They said:

*“I was hung up on it in the beginning as well when my child started here, my first child. My first question was, ‘How long are you going to keep him here, as I want him in a mainstream school?’ ”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 272-275).

*“But the ideal is to get them back into mainstream.”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 391-392).

A father stated that by placing his child in a LSEN school, his child had to adapt to a different environment (Annexure B: First interview, line 167). He also hinted at a possible stigma attached to a LSEN school (Annexure B: First interview, line 25). A mother, who was of the Muslim faith, commented that by placing their son in a LSEN school, they had to remove him from a community that was familiar to him. She said:

*“... to deal with taking their child out of a mainstream environment, what are the repercussions of that in your community and how do the people see you and how do you perceive yourself...”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 662-663).

When questioned on what they wanted for their child with barriers to learning, the participants indicated that they wanted their child with barriers to learning to be happy and for the child's strengths to be developed by the school (Annexure B: First interview, lines 23, 212, 218, 235, 246, 867; Second interview, lines 155-156). They saw no point in sending their child to a LSEN school, if these expectations were not going to be met by the school (Annexure B: First interview, lines 164-165). They firmly believed that all the teachers at a LSEN schools had been trained to work with children with barriers to learning. Some stated:

*“I think you work with a team of specialists and the teachers themselves are educated in dealing with children with specific disabilities. (Annexure B: First interview, line 39-41).*

*“I really expect them to do their part. I want to believe that they are trained in dealing with children of this nature. So, if there are loopholes like this, where our children are not well looked after at school, especially with their medication, I have a serious problem with that.”* (Second interview, lines 154-159).

*“This is a Special School, the teachers need to be trained and if they are not trained, they do not qualify to be in this school. This means that the future of our children is at stake, bottom line!”* (Second interview, lines 175-178).

A mother informed the group of the unprofessional behaviour of certain teachers at the LSEN school. Her frustration was evident when she said:

*“And I decided to come to school to talk to the Deputy Principal, to talk to the class teacher... uh...the problem teacher... I’m sorry, because you know, the situation was getting completely out of hand and I realised the very wrong things the very teachers were doing and the same time it boiled down to our children.”* (Second interview, lines 229-235).

Some participants had concerns about the curriculum, the amount of homework, the level of difficulty of the work in comparison to mainstream and the concessions that their children should be receiving during tests and examinations (Annexure B: First interview, lines 45, 105, 129, 335-341).

This paragraph described the view that the participants had of a LSEN school. In the next paragraph a description will take place of how the participants see their role as families in a LSEN school.

#### **4.2.4 The families’ view on family-school partnerships in LSEN schools**

The participants generally perceived their involvement to be more than families in mainstream schools. They wanted to be involved (Third interview, line 608) and indicated that more families would like to become involved (Third interview, line 1046).

One black participant felt that her skills and the skills of the teachers at the LSEN school should be combined for optimum academic intervention (Second interview, lines 484-487). A mother made a comparison between themselves and families, whose children had similar problems, but were still

battling in mainstream education. She felt that they had a higher level of involvement as they took action and found placement in a LSEN school for their children (Annexure B: First interview lines 178-185). She requested the following from a LSEN school:

*“I think it is a two-way thing where the school has to make sure that they meet us half-way, because they know that we are wanting to be part of the team and that we are wanting to be part of the child’s education.”* (Annexure B: First interview, line 186-189).

The participants testified to positive changes with their children since they became more involved in the school. They mentioned noticing increased motivation to succeed at school, higher marks (Second interview, lines 221-223) and improved behaviour (Annexure B: First interview, line 308-309, 722-723). They said the following:

*“Exactly, you are adding value for her and to the school. It is not like you are just part of yourself, you know. I’m not saying, you know, she gets motivated, my mother she is interested, also she is assisting in the school. She gets motivated”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 30-33).

*“But finally, the gist of the matter is that since I started coming to school, I don’t have a problem with my son. Suddenly, he is a good boy. Overnight he is a good boy”* (Second interview, lines 300-301).

The levels, as well as the avenues for involvement varied in the three LSEN schools. The following was mentioned: Participants in all three the focus groups indicated micro-involvement, by being involved with their child’s homework or by monitoring their child’s progress. Both mothers and fathers indicated their involvement with their child’s homework. They alternated not to neglect the other siblings or according to the needs of the child and their



own skills (Annexure B: First interview, lines 488-496, 531, 573-584-, 588-591; Second interview, line 135; Third interview, lines 533-538). A mother indicated that her husband was more involved with their son's school work, than what she was (Annexure B: First interview, line 584). The results obtained from this study indicate that homework related issues were the cause of high stress levels in these families. A mother pointed out, that families should consult with teachers and meet the school half-way. She said:

*"You know, find out, get to know your teacher. Tell your child's teacher the problems you are experiencing and, you know, go 50-50, because the teacher is there to help your child. Also, you need to lift up your child, it is not the responsibility only for the teacher to...to, you know, to ensure that your child's... eh... is doing good. As a parent also you must ensure that your child... that you are meeting the school half-way ..."* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 199-205).

Participants suggested other ways that they could become involved in the education of their child: Some indicated that they were willing to take learners on outings (Annexure B: First interview, lines 935, 1012, 1015). A mother pointed out that some families might object if their child was taken on a school outing by another parent. She said that they might say:

*"You are not qualified, you are not going out with my child!"* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 1026).

Participants indicated their willingness to look after the learners while the teachers are busy offering examination help to others (Third interview, line 806). They also offered to assist with marking or with other administrative tasks (Annexure B: First interview, lines 984, 1024). They offered to assist with revues and the supervision of learners (Third interview, line 387). Others offered to assist with fun days (Annexure B: First interview, line 1030), fundraising (Annexure B: First interview, line 1034) and sport (Annexure B: First interview, line 1037). When asked by the interviewer whether they would

go as far as to read stories to a class, some mothers indicated that they would be willing, but added only if they had the time (Annexure B: First interview, lines 974-975, 1764; Second interview, line 598, 600). The participants showed a concern for the workload and working conditions of the teachers and expressed a wish that something could be done to help them. They made suggestions such as more flexible hours, better remuneration or extra allowances such as cell phone allowances (Annexure B: First interview, lines 914-916, 952, 966). The researcher noted this as a sign of goodwill towards the teachers.

The researcher found it disconcerting that some participants referred to the contributions that they could make in an almost derogatory way. The following comments were made:

*“Look after a class while amanuenses is going on. I’m sure we are capable of doing that”* (Third interview, line 832).

*“...give us something we can do, even if it’s menial.”* (Third interview, line 830).

Some participants testified to being rejected by the school when they wanted to get involved. One black participant, who was a qualified social worker, said that she had offered her services to the school to teach the learners some basic life skills with the focus on cultural diversities. She reported that, although the principal initially encouraged her to continue with the project, the cooperation from the side of the school was not what she had expected. She felt unappreciated by the school and said the following:

*“And then I started doing life skills. But, I want to tell you as parents, that somehow I was not appreciated ... and I was not given somehow the respect that I expected. Sometimes I will make arrangements with the principal, the teachers, you know and then when I come to do*

*life skills nobody knew that I was coming, the classes were not ready.”* (Second interview, lines 238-244).

She informed the other participants that she was going to ask for an opportunity to speak at the next general family-school evening to address the issue and to ask whether they would appreciate her help or consider it as interference (Second interview, lines 323-326). This information managed to upset the other black participant as she immediately offered her support to this mother and said that she should not address these challenges alone, but ask for their help. She said:

*“What you are doing is good, but what I think you need more parents to be involved so that we can push the problems up. We must work together, we must know when you are coming to the school. We must come with you and help you. You mustn’t come alone and maybe have a problem, because that opportunity, we need it, we need it for our kids. So we must ... must push it with you, you mustn’t be alone to ... You should not be doing this”* (Second interview, lines 314 -321).

In one of the other focus group interviews, two participants reported on incidents where the school had rejected their goodwill and offer to become involved in the school. According to these participants, they got a small group of parents together to practise a dance item that they wanted to perform during the revue of the school. They saw it as a way of showing their appreciation to the school (Third interview, line 709). They reported that their children loved their involvement, but that the school did not appreciate their effort (Third interview, line 749). They were encouraged by the principal of the school, but in the end were only allowed to perform on the first evening. The one mother said:

*“It was very difficult to get every parent here on a Thursday night and how nerve wrecking it was to stay on the stage, ok... And we practised our move and we did our thing and then we*

*rocked up and said, we got something for you. Boy, were we..., we were taken to pieces!"* (Third interview, lines 717-723).

Another example was given of how the families were invited to organise a fun day at the school. Representatives were chosen and meetings took place. The next thing they knew the teachers had taken over all the arrangements. The participant stated that this action by the teachers offended them. She said:

*"The next thing we new the teachers were involved. Thank you for us, because it was nice because we just had to be there and not do anything, but the point is , it was supposed to be a parents' thing ... and I felt a bit offended. I so want to help you, I want to be part of this, but you now saying, no the teachers are organising.. 'Don't worry Ms F, don't worry, It's fine, it's fine.' Ok, all right and I rocked up and did my hour and walked away"* (Third interview, lines 408-414).

She was of the opinion that the teachers might have felt threatened or that they perceived parents as incompetent (Third interview, line 426). She seemed to be annoyed by this and said that the school should know who the families are that they could rely on (Third interview, line 434). She said:

*"I think they were scared to give us control. I really, really do. Scared to let us take it over, scared we can't do it. Or, that we are going to mess it up."* (Third interview, lines 426-429).

Participants complained that the school asked for help at the beginning of the year, that class representatives were chosen, but then no follow up was made (Second interview, lines 585-588; Third interview, lines 459-462). In all three the focus groups, the participants made it clear that they wanted to be involved in their child's school and their child's education. They did however expect the schools to tell them what support was needed and to guide them

in how they could be of assistance (Second interview, lines 580-581; Third interview, line 697).

This paragraph dealt with the view participants had on their own involvement in the LSEN school and on family-school partnerships. The next paragraph focuses on ways to empower families.

#### **4.2.5 Families' view on family empowerment in LSEN schools**

The need of families to be educated and empowered was emphasised by the participants. The participants in one of the focus groups praised the family empowerment workshops on drug abuse and different syndromes, held at the school (Third interview, lines 1102-1103). They indicated that they wanted to expand their knowledge not only by learning from the professionals at the school, but also through networking with other families.

*“And for me, it is very important to actually meet with other parents, actually learn from one another (Uhm, Uhm) and also from the teachers and therapists and so on”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 80-82).

The participants complained that they did not know the other families in their child's class (Third interview, line 1010). One participant stated that it took more effort to set up networks in a LSEN school (Third interview, line 1048). Their perception was that they would be more involved in the school, if they knew more families in the school. A mother said:

*“Ja, get all of us, get all the parents together and then we would bond with whoever we want with and then we could make friends and whatsoever and then it continue year after year, and you gonna have us eventually talking and then getting involved. It will be a long term project.”* (Third interview, lines 1034-1040).

A mother spoke longingly of the little network they had amongst the families when her child was still in the lower grades. The perception of the participants was that they did not receive the same support from the school once their child reached the higher grades. The need for ongoing family support was suggested when this mother said:

*“We had a parent who looked after all the parents...”* (Third interview line 443)

They had a parent who acted as a class representative and who gave them a class list with the names of all the other families and their telephone numbers. This acted as a support network as they could contact other families to confirm homework or to make play arrangements (Third interview, lines 441-451). Participants indicated that they often had to cope with a lonely child at home as the classmates were seldom from the same area and the school a long distance from home. Playtime after school and over weekends became a huge burden to these families and just one more thing they had to cope with (Annexure B: First interview, line 929; Third interview, lines 952-1003).

The lack of family empowerment was mentioned in one of the focus groups. A father complained that the school neglected its duty by not informing or educating families on the latest medicines on the market or on syndromes and suitable diets. He said that they often had to consult professionals outside of the school for guidance. The participants felt that it was the duty of the school to empower them by supplying them with the necessary information. This would help them to cope better with their situation (Second interview, lines 704-710).

#### 4.2.6 The families' view on their role in the multidisciplinary team

Mixed feedback concerning the role of the family in the multidisciplinary team, was received from the participants. In only two of the three schools, were the participants familiar with the term *multidisciplinary team*. The majority of the participants from these two schools, indicated that to be part of a team was important to them (Annexure B: First interview, lines 51, 78, 188, 241, 350, 353-355). They explained that being involved in a multidisciplinary team, makes them feel good (Third interview, lines 364-367, 376-378). One mother stated that in comparison with the mainstream school where her child had come from, she felt more part of a team at this specific LSEN school. She experienced the collaboration in the multidisciplinary teams as extremely positive. She sketched a positive picture of concerned families working closely together with caring and well qualified staff:

*“But I think the parents are more involved, because you get feedback on a day to day basis. Every child is on a different progress phase as well, so for me the individual attention, is definitely one benefit, but also being part of a team, because the feedback sessions, um, is for me actually the highlight (Yeh, from another participant), because just the evaluation form, or a progress report doesn't mean so much than get the interaction with the teachers and get the feedback”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 130-136).

Other participants from the same school, felt differently about the multidisciplinary meetings held at the school. A lack of input by the families into the Individualized Support Plans (ISP) of their child with barriers to learning, was highlighted. A mother pointed out that there was no introductory meeting where they as a family were given the opportunity to inform the professionals at the school about their child's background, likes, dislikes, hobbies and possible approaches that might work better for their child. A need was expressed for the school to get to know them better and for a climate of collaboration between family and school to be fostered right from the beginning. She said:

*“But until the feedback session, there isn’t a session with the parents to say, what can you tell us about your child, a parent interview so that uhm, we get some idea of these the types of things we can do for your child, these type of things that uhm, we would like to know about your child to help us in preparing some type of program to help your child and what can you tell us about your child so that .. You know, it becomes a two way thing from the beginning where they get to know us also “(Annexure B: First interview, lines 648-656).*

The mother with three children in the one specific LSEN school, gave a more negative feedback of the collaboration in the multidisciplinary teams. She spoke passionately when she informed the group that she did not feel that her input was valued in these multidisciplinary discussions. She complained that the professionals had not taken the time during the meeting to listen to her views on her children’s academic progress and needs. In her opinion there was no parity in this whole collaborative process. She thus found that the meeting was of no benefit to her as a parent. She said the following:

*“In fact, I even turned down one session previously and I’m saying, it’s not adding value to my life, they are not hearing me! (Annexure B: First interview, lines 639-640).*

*So, for me what would be valuable, is that in an informal session there should be equal participation. I should be allowed to participate” (Annexure B: First interview, lines 637-639).*

This mother’s dissatisfaction and frustration with the way the multidisciplinary meetings were conducted at the school and her fear that the next meeting was also going to result in a situation of “I say” and “We say”, convinced her to decline the invitation to another meeting. She said:

*“So yes, based on this I become very frustrated and as I say, it was this year I refused to come to one feedback session. I just said, I’m not coming, because I just didn’t want that*



*confrontation again of saying, 'Don't just tell me about my child, I'll tell you' "* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 839-843).

The same mother informed the group that the professionals at the school tended to indicate to her that they knew better. She voiced her intense frustration with the fact that when she did try and give the school some advice on how best to handle her child, the reaction from the professionals was that the school viewed the child differently. She said:

*"... I'm told that that is not how we see your child. And I'm saying, hear me, I live with this child."* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 631-632).

She perceived this to indicate that she was wrong and they were right. She pointed out that she was the one, who spent the majority of the time with her children and not the staff at the school and that by implication she should know her children's needs the best. She voiced her intense frustration of being marginalised when decisions were being made pertaining to her children's academic programme. She demanded to be heard. She said:

*"But there are times when I become so frustrated that I walk out and I say, they are not even knowing what I am telling them, because they are the educators and this is where the teamwork, the word teamwork and I like it very much, but it needs to be from both sides, that if there is teamwork"* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 806-809).

The participants indicated that they viewed themselves as the primary educators of their children and that they knew their children and their needs the best, not the professionals at the school. They said:

*"They haven't lived with him. They haven't been there from the day they were borne, so to know where I come from and where I have been.."* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 813-815).

*“We give birth and nurtured them..”* (Second interview, line 496).

One mother described how difficult it was to convince the LSEN school to accept her child (Second interview, lines 824-758). Another mother told the group that the school had recommended that her child should be placed in another type of LSEN school, but that she had refused. She made it clear that she regarded the school only as a resource and that she would be the one who assesses her child and determine what was best for him. She said:

*“This brings me to my point, you know, my role within the team. I think that it is very much a personal thing. The school is there as a resource and the educators and therapists. And it’s is up to me as a parent to assess my child and to know what is good for my child”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 755-757).

A black mother gave testimony of professionals who relentlessly pressurised them as a family to consider the use of medication as treatment for their child’s barriers to learning (Second interview, line 351). This happened even though the school was fully aware that they as a family was against the use of medication (Second interview, line 344). She felt bullied by the school and said:

*“His condition doesn’t need any medication, but they pushed and pushed and as they were doing that, he was always in trouble”* (Second interview, lines 351-353).

In one of the focus groups, the participants were clearly not familiar with the whole concept of a multidisciplinary team or being part of a team. The question was misunderstood by the participants and when asked about teamwork and their role, they referred to teamwork amongst family members. They failed to link it to the school. One participant eventually said that she had heard of the term before (Second interview, line 332). The researcher had to qualify the question by directly referring to the school and education

and even then the question was met with a long silence with the whole group shaking their heads. A father jokingly stated that he had never sat around a table in that specific school before and that the focus group interview was the first time (Second interview, lines 338-339). One mother stated that there was only evidence of teamwork when an assessment of a child had to take place. She did not see herself as part of a team. She said:

*"... they have their team ..."* (Second interview, line 429).

The participants in one of the focus groups voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of communication and consultation in the school. They were dissatisfied with the fact that they were not notified when their child was going to be assessed or that therapy was going to commence or discontinued. They explained that they were informed of these decisions by their children (Second interview, lines 533, 541). A mother explained that she had become anxious and concerned when her child had informed her that she was going to be assessed at school. She said:

*"I think last week my child told me he was going to be assessed, but I didn't know about that, I only hear from him that he was going to be assessed and then I start wondering. They must tell you the results after the assessment"* (Second interview, lines 541-544).

The group perceived themselves as being restricted to the teacher who acted as a buffer between them and the therapists (Second interview, lines 447-448) and they felt that they were only allowed access to the other professionals at the school, if they intervened and voiced their unhappiness with the whole situation (Second interview, line 488). None of the participants in this particular focus group had ever asked to speak to the whole team simultaneously (Second interview, line 441). The impression was that they were not aware that this could be done. It was clear that the whole concept of

families being part of a multidisciplinary team, was not advocated in this particular LSEN school. A mother said:

*“So, by and large and more often than not, it’s almost one sided until a parent intervenes and say, you know what, I don’t like this any more or until a child stresses so much that you really need to do something, like I felt I need to come to school and do something”* (Second interview, lines 488-492).

A mother stated that she had consulted with an outside educational psychologist even though the school employed its own psychologists (Second interview, lines 547-549).

The sustainability of a multidisciplinary team approach, was raised by the participants. The participants in two of the focus groups indicated that the multidisciplinary team approach was only applied in the lower grades where the families were invited to regular meetings with all the professionals to discuss the best possible ways of supporting the learning needs of their child (Second interview, line 219; Third interview, lines 227, 218).

In two of the focus groups, participants who also had a child in the higher grades in the same LSEN school, described how they encountered a completely different culture in the high school. They stated that they were no longer invited to multidisciplinary team meetings and that feedback was seldom received even when they asked for it. A mother said:

*“In the high school it changes, it’s a totally different culture, but the exact same needs are there. They still need psychologists, they still need ..., but don’t ask for feedback!”* (Third interview, line 259).

They indicated that these multidisciplinary meetings were substituted by mass family-school meetings, held in the evenings. Participants complained

that it did not allow enough time for them to truly discuss concerns with their child's teachers and that they were subjected to waiting in long queues (Second interview, line 573). This seemingly ineffectiveness of these meetings was summarised by the following statement of one of the mothers:

*"A ten minute thing. It's total chaos in that hall, I actually hate it. I see one teacher then I'm out of there!"* (Third interview, lines 197-199).

Participants in two of the focus groups complained that only some families were invited to these meetings at school. A mother mentioned that a possible reason for these selective invitations could be to counter the long queues (Third interview lines, 143-147). Three of the participants indicated that they had received a note with the last meeting to say that their child had made good progress and that they did not need to attend the meeting if they did not wish to do so (Second interview, lines 558-559, 560; Third interview line 350). They said:

*"This year they had formal parents' evenings, but you come by invitation only."* (Third interview, lines 349-350).

*"Ja, en somtyds laat weet die onderwysers jou dis nie nodig om hulle te sien nie, dan sien jy nie die onderwysers nie. Dan sien jy hulle dalk die einde van die jaar as jy haar finale rapport kry. Hulle kommunikeer via die huiswerkboek"* (Second interview, lines 449-452).

A direct translation would be: *"Yes, and sometimes the teachers let you know that it is not necessary to see them, then you do not see them. Then you might see them at the end of the year if you receive her final report. They communicate through means of a homework diary."*

A mother commented that if it was not for the report card, she would not have had any idea about her child's progress (Second interview, line 556). Another mother who had a daughter with physical barriers (she suffered from slight

cerebral palsy, was blind in one eye, with only 20% eyesight in the other eye), had also not been invited to family-school meetings (Third interview, lines 237-240). She complained bitterly that because her daughter was well behaved, the school never invited her to any of these meetings. It seemed to be her perception that only those families of children who misbehaved, were invited to meetings with teachers. The following statement highlighted how much effort she had put in, as a parent, to interact with her child's teachers and how even then she was not accommodated. She said:

*"Parents' evening to me is a voluntary thing. If you want to be at the parents' evening, you want to be there. You don't want to be invited and I have written... I got my daughter's school book and I have written on numerous occasions that I would like to get invited to parent evenings and I never get invited."* (Third interview, lines 117-124).

She argued that she had been denied the opportunity and the right to discuss her concerns about her child's physical barriers with the teachers. It was quite evident that although she might have been satisfied with her child's academic progress, she had other serious concerns to discuss with the school (Third interview, lines 266-267, 237-242). She said the following:

*"All I'm saying is, she has got a different need to maybe the rest of the kids in the class and I just want to sit with each teacher for five minutes and say... I stood in queues where they didn't even want to see me, but I waited until they finished with their class and ..."* (Third interview, lines 244-251).

Participants explained that those families in their school, who were not invited to parent meetings and who wished to see the teachers or therapists, had to make an appointment during the day. One mother told the group that she behaved forcefully and attended these meetings whether she had been invited or not. She told the group that she had managed to see the teachers that way (Third interview, lines 165-168). The participants all felt that they had a right to bring their concerns to the attention of the teachers and family-

school meetings should be voluntary. They expressed a need to interact with all the teachers dealing with their child and to get to know them personally (Annexure B: First interview, lines 887, 892, 996-997; Third interview, lines 193, 208). They said:

*“Uhm, you know it makes it a lot easier if we know each other and know the teacher.”* (Annexure B: First interview, lines 1004-1005).

*“We just want to meet the Maths teacher, we just want to meet the Geography teacher, say, ‘You are the person we are talking to. What are your expectations?’”*(Third interview, lines 194-198).

They felt that they wanted to be part of a team working together with the school to reach a common goal for their child (Third interview, line 113). They indicated that families should make a concerted effort to meet the school half-way in all aspects regarding the education of their child (Annexure B: First interview, lines 201; Second interview, line 553; Third interview, lines 609-610).

This feedback on the lack of consultation in the higher grades, visibly shocked a young couple who only had a child in the lower grades. They voiced their concern and the mother stated that they would always want to be involved in their child’s education and that they actually felt quite scared hearing of this different approach in the higher grades. The mother stated that she would not be satisfied with communication through the diary alone and that she wanted to have a personal meeting with the professionals involved with her child at the school. She said:

*“Dis wat my nou laat worry, dis hoekom ek gevoel het... As hy volgende jaar graad vier toe gaan, gaan hy na die senior... Dit gaan my ook pla, want ek wil feedback hê oor my kind.”* (Third interview, lines 321-327).

A direct translation would be: *“That is what makes me worry now... If he goes to grade four next year, he will be going to the senior... That will also bother me as I want feedback regarding my child.”*

*“Soos jy weet, die huiswerk boek of briefie skryf, dit is nie kommunikasie vir my nie. Ek wil die persoon sien.”* (Third interview, lines 368 -371).

A direct translation would be: *“As you know, the homework diary or the writing of a note, that is not communication to me. I want to see the person.”*

A wish was expressed for family-school meetings to be held on Saturday mornings as families would be more relaxed, having more time available for the discussion (Second interview, line 456). The point was also raised that the children were affected during the week, as they had to get to bed early because of school the following day (Second interview, lines 460-462). They also thought that a Saturday morning would be better for the teachers.

Effective communication with families seemed to be a concern. The next paragraph will address communication between the family and the LSEN school.

#### **4.2.7 The families’ view on communication in the LSEN schools**

The study indicated that the three LSEN schools used different methods of communicating with families other than multidisciplinary- and family-school meetings. All three schools communicated primarily with families through newsletters and the homework diary (Annexure B: First interview, line 1075). Two schools sent out regular newsletters (Annexure B: First interview, line 1064; Third interview, line 663). One school included important dates in their newsletter, which was commended by the participants (Annexure B: First interview lines 1067- 1068). Two schools made use of modern technology to communicate with their families: One school had a website (Third interview,



line 655) and the other a cell phone messages system (Annexure B: First interview, line 1065). Participants indicated that they contacted the teachers at home (Annexure B: First interview, line 958) or at the school (Annexure B: First interview, line 1077) if they had a concern or needed to see someone. They also wrote messages in the homework diary (Annexure B: First interview lines 1075).

In all three the schools challenges were identified to effective communication. The deterioration of the quality of the newsletter was mentioned. It apparently did not address the needs of the families any more (Third interview, lines 631-635). Participants indicated that they did not only want the sport results, but that they would like information on all the activities happening in the school, especially the positive things. A mother indicated that her child did not always hand her the newsletters (Third interview, line 647). Only a few participants from the one school were aware that their school had a website or that they could access the newsletter on the website (Third interview, lines 655, 659). A participant stated that the school should have informed them of this resource in a newsletter.

Concerns with the homework diary were also mentioned. A mother complained that she found the homework diary to be ineffective as her child cannot write legibly due to his barrier to learning and she would appreciate it a great deal if a directive from the teacher could be sent home. This way she could support her child better at home with his homework (Annexure B: First interview, lines 1086). Another mother mentioned the same concern and said that to overcome this specific problem with the homework diary, she had offered to type out assignments and to make copies for each child in the class (Third interview, lines 595-596).

The miscommunication at one school was highlighted when a father complained of the seemingly mixed messages he had received in the past,

concerning his child's progress in the school. The professionals contradicted themselves when reporting on his child's progress and this confused them as a family. They relied on the advice of the professionals at the school on how best to meet the needs of their child. He said:

*"But psychologists are saying one thing to us, the educators are telling us another story, his assessment report is saying he is coping. We know he has his limitations, but he is going to cope. So, it places the parent as a lay person in a difficult position. You listen to psychologists, you listen to educationalists, who do you listen to?" (Annexure B: First interview, lines 748-752).*

### **4.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Chapter four presented a description of the perception of the families with regard to family-school partnerships. Possible barriers to family-school partnerships were identified. Positive comments made by the participants were also noted as LSEN schools should share good practices in order to enhance their partnerships with families.

In chapter five the interpretation of these results will be presented with reference to the findings in the literature review.

## CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the categories and the final categories will be discussed and interpreted as it emerged from the data collected during the research. These categories will be interpreted against the theoretical framework provided in Chapter two.

### 5.2 DESCRIPTION OF CATEGORIES

The symbiotic relationship that exists between the family and the school and the interrelatedness of certain barriers, complicated the identifying of exclusive categories. The researcher identified two main categories of barriers to family- school partnerships in the data described in chapter four namely, barriers related to the family itself and barriers related to the functioning of the LSEN schools.

Table 1 Categories and sub-categories

CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Barriers related to families	Emotional barriers Socio-economic barriers The families' view on LSEN schools
Barriers related to schools	Failing to advocate avenues for family involvement Inadequate family empowerment Inadequate interaction amongst families Inadequate communication

The final categories identified as barriers to family-school partnerships are presented in table 5.1. The major categories will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework.

### **5.3 BARRIERS RELATED TO FAMILIES**

The results of the study revealed that there are certain barriers to family-school partnerships that reside more on the side of the families.

#### **5.3.1 Emotional barriers**

The results showed that the family of a child with barriers to learning, finds it very difficult to cope and that the whole family is affected (refer par. 4.2.1). The participants voiced their own personal needs and stated that they felt overwhelmed. Single participants, complained that managing the reality of the home and school situation, was a daily struggle as they lacked the home-based support of a partner. The emotional needs of a family with a child who experiences barriers to learning, are well documented in literature. Henley, et al. (2002:382) and Van Heerden (2002:12) (refer par. 2.5.3) stated that a child with barriers to learning could have a devastating affect on all family members. Ferrara and Ferrara (2005:79) (refer par. 2.5.3) explained how the life-long commitment of families having to deal with a child with barriers to learning, could impact on the emotional, mental and sometimes even physical well-being of family members.

Evidence was found that accepting the reality of having a child with barriers to learning, was not easy. The participants indicated that they needed therapy to accept the reality of the situation as they had to adapt the dreams they had for their child. Blamires, et al. (1997:17) (refer par. 2.5.3) concurred with this result and compared this process of accepting the reality of having a child with barriers to learning, to a “grieving process”. Families have to overcome their own emotional barriers before they could offer effective support their child. The study revealed that the families consulted numerous professionals in their quest for answers to try and solve their child’s problem. This result is supported by Fertman (2004:83) (refer par. 2.6.1).

Participants revealed that they sometimes blamed themselves and wondered where they had gone wrong. The observation was made that they wanted to give their child only the best and that they felt like failures if they could not become a “super parent”. Henley, et al. (2002:381) stated that some families often blame themselves as they are plagued by guilt, fear and anxiety. Participants made it clear that they expect the staff and especially the support staff at the school, such as the psychologists, to offer them the necessary counselling (refer par. 4.2.1). They felt not only that all new families should be counselled, but that there should be ongoing support for all families. They pleaded that they wanted to help develop their children holistically, but that they lacked the necessary skills and knowledge. They felt incompetent as parents. This finding is supported by Hamill and Everington (2002:135) (refer par. 2.5.3), Nojaja (2002:27) (refer par. 2.3.2) and Bauer and Shea (2003:49) (refer par. 2.3.2).

The implication is that besides for academic support and guidance, emotional support and counseling will also have to be offered to families of children in a LSEN school. This finding concurs with the research of Bauer and Shea (2003:168) and Hornby, et al. (2004:107), who stated that LSEN schools should realise that all families with a child with barriers to learning, require counseling or support from the school at some point in time even though they may not specifically request it (refer par. 2.5.3). This implies that the teachers and other professionals in a LSEN school, should become more family-centered in order to determine the needs of a family. A “parent-as-cause” (refer par. 2.5.3) attitude should be avoided by the school, as it would compound the self-criticism of families that was found in the study. This conclusion is supported by Lee and Ostrosky (2004:102) (refer par. 2.5.3), who stated that some professionals tend to blame the family for the learner’s problems.

Participants reported that the decision to uproot their child, by taking their child out of a mainstream school and placing the child in a LSEN school, was one of the most difficult decisions they had ever made. The lack of effective inclusive practices in ordinary schools was the motivating force behind their reason to place their child in a LSEN school (refer par. 4.2.3).

A big concern to the participants was the placement of their child in a school far from home, as this brought about certain social and religious challenges. Education statistics showed that LSEN schools made up only 6% of all schools in South Africa. Families therefore, had no alternative, but to enroll their child in a school far away from home (Department of Education, 2006b:3). A participant, who observed the Muslim faith, explained that she and her husband had to face their community when they decided to place their son in a school outside of their community. It was evident that this decision confronted them with certain religious challenges. No supporting evidence could be found in literature. However, as the principal of this specific LSEN school, the researcher was aware of this family's predicament with respect to religious observances, as they had requested permission to fetch their son earlier from school on Fridays.

Some participants mentioned the stigma still attached to LSEN schools due to the ignorance of the general public and how they and their child had to deal with it. The stigma surrounding LSEN schools, could not be collaborated in the literature, although the researcher was aware of it as the principal of a LSEN school. The implication for a LSEN school is to realise that families, who might feel embarrassed by their child's placement, could avoid coming to the school and it could have a negative impact on family-school partnerships. No evidence was found in literature to support this conclusion.

The researcher concluded that the emotional needs voiced by the parents could easily translate into possible barriers to family-school partnerships if it

is not effectively addressed by LSEN schools. According to Wolfendale (1989:142) (refer par. 2.5.4), these personal needs of families are often neglected by LSEN schools. LSEN schools must become a newly aware of the emotional needs of its families and must heed against becoming indifferent. Support systems need to be put into place by LSEN schools (Lee & Ostrosky, 2004:107) (refer par. 2.5.3).

### **5.3.2 Socio-economic barriers**

The results of the study showed that socio-economic challenges such as time constraints, inflexible work hours, distance from school to the workplace, basic survival and having to cope as a single parent and the only bread winner are realities that many families in LSEN schools have to confront (refer par. 4.2.2). Participants stated that in order to meet the economic demands of modern society, both parents needed to work. This added to their already high levels of stress, as a child with barriers to learning needs so much extra support at home. A father stated that they had to make many sacrifices in order for his wife to stay at home to offer extra support to their child with barriers to learning. These results of the study are supported in the literature by Ferrara and Ferrara (2005:77), Prinsloo (2006a:460) and Swart and Phasha (2006:221) (refer par. 2.5.2).

Time constraints presented as the biggest economic barrier to family involvement. Participants complained that they found it difficult to attend meetings with the school during formal work hours. They could not afford to take time off from work and this added to their stress. Most participants indicated that they experienced life as being rushed with little time for their children. A mother admitted that homework support was left to aftercare to deal with. Evidence was found that the socio-economic pressures that families have to deal with, had a direct impact on the micro-involvement of

the family with the education of their child (Swart & Phasha, 2006:221) (refer par. 2.5.2).

Transport of families did not present as a barrier to family-school partnerships in this study, although it features strongly in the literature (refer par. 2.5.2). This could be because the participants all had means to private transport. Distance from school rather than transport, was identified as a barrier to family involvement. Participants stated that they worked far from home and that the LSEN school that their child had to attend, was even further away. Some participants regarded the transport offered to learners by some LSEN schools, as a huge advantage to families. The researcher agreed that transport services provided access to LSEN schools to many learners, but she also concurred with Swart and Pasha (2006:224) (refer par. 2.5.2) that it could present as a barrier to family-school partnerships as fewer face to face contact between the families and the professionals at the school took place.

The influence of socio-economic factors on family-school partnerships, revealed in this study, corresponded with the ecosystemic model presented by Swart and Pettipher (2006:9-12) (refer par. 2.5.1). They found that systems surrounding a child, had an influence on what happened to the child. The impact of the exosystem on the family of the child, such as the distance to the place of work, was evident in this study. Although some participants indicated that more families would like to become involved with their child's education (refer par. 4.2.6), Singh and Mbokodi (2004:303) stated that it was very difficult to get many South African families involved in schools due to their poor socio-economic circumstances (refer par. 2.5.2).

The implication for LSEN schools is that they will have to determine what impact socio-economic factors have on the teaching and learning in the school and then to develop appropriate strategies to limit its influence on



family-school partnerships. The impact of parental socio-economic status on education is according to Swart and Phasha (2006:221), a burning issue in South Africa. Fertman (2004:83) and Petr (2003) (refer par. 2.5.1) stated that the family is the most important factor in the life of any child. Though it is not within the power of the school to change the socio-economic circumstances of families, schools should be sensitive to the needs of families and attend to those barriers where something can be done, such as more convenient time slots for family-school meetings. Swart and Phasha (2006:221) suggested meetings over weekends instead of in the evenings during the week.

### **5.3.3 The families' view on LSEN schools**

The results obtained from the study revealed that families enroll their child in a LSEN school if there are literally no other choices available to them. It is their last resort. The placement of a child in a LSEN school is often seen as a short term intervention by families, with the focus on remediation of the child's learning problems. Families want this to be done as quickly and effectively as possible. This observation was made when participants indicated that the goal should be on placing the child back into mainstream education as soon as possible. This was the initial wish for many of the participants (refer par. 4.2.3). This "quick fix" approach of families could have a direct impact on how involved they are willing to become in a LSEN school. For some it might be just too much effort if they are under the impression that the child is not going to be in the LSEN school for long. No supporting evidence for this conclusion was found in literature. Landsberg (2006:219) (refer par. 2.4) stated that building a family-school partnership, takes time and energy. This implies a certain amount of commitment from both parties involved.

The participants had high expectations of the LSEN school that their child was placed in. They made it clear that only suitably qualified teachers should

be teaching in a LSEN school. They expected the teachers to be experts in the handling of children with barriers to learning. They also expected results, otherwise, they saw no point in placing their child in a LSEN school (See. par. 4.2.3). These results of the study could not be corroborated in the literature. The findings of Fertman (2004:83), Petr (2003:33) and Spinelli (2002:42) (refer par. 2.6.1) though, suggested that families turn towards the professionals at schools because they believe that they are experts. Participants in all three the focus groups had the same basic expectations for their children. They wanted their children to be happy and for the school to develop their child's potential optimally (refer par. 4.2.3). No supporting evidence was found in literature to confirm this observation.

The ideal is that all teachers in LSEN schools should be qualified in handling and teaching learners with barriers to learning. Unfortunately, the researcher's experience as the principal of a LSEN school taught her that few teachers are trained in this area. The shortage of qualified teachers currently experienced in South Africa, is felt by all schools and even LSEN schools can not afford to be too selective (Carstens, 2007:21; Rademeyer, 2007:9) (refer par. 2.5.7). The implication for LSEN schools is that families could become negative towards the school if they are disillusioned by the skills of the teachers at the school. Although it is not within the power of schools to do anything about the current shortage of teachers, intensive and ongoing staff development programmes in LSEN schools, could enhance the skills of the teachers and other professionals at the school. Landsberg (2006:67) (refer par. 2.5.7) named "on site support to teachers" as one of the functions of the school based support team in a school.

The study revealed that many participants were ignorant with respect to the services offered by a LSEN schools such as curriculum and educational support (refer par. 4.2.3). It was evident that they did not fully comprehend the role and functioning of a LSEN school in the education system as a

whole. Families who are misinformed, could become disillusioned and negative towards the school and its staff (refer par. 4.2.3). This observation is supported in the literature. Fertman (2004:82) (refer par. 2.5.8) explained how a lack of communication could result in misconceptions concerning the role of the school and the services it offers. Salas, et al. (2005:52) (refer par. 2.5.8) and Steyn (2002:20) (refer par. 2.6.1) stated that families must understand the learning environment of their child in order to make informed decisions. The implication for LSEN schools is that a concerted effort should be made to educate families regarding the role and functioning of a LSEN school, especially when they enroll their child in this new school environment.

A positive result from the study was that in spite of all the concerns that the participants had, they indicated that they loved their child's school. They experienced most of the professionals at the school as dedicated, with a great deal of compassion and understanding towards their children. This finding could not be collaborated in the literature. The researcher concluded that LSEN schools should harness these positive feelings that families have towards their child's school to foster improved family-school partnerships.

#### **5.4 BARRIERS RELATED TO SCHOOLS**

Barriers relating to policies and procedures in LSEN schools, as well as the attitude of the professionals in the schools, were identified.

##### **5.4.1 Failing to advocate avenues for family involvement**

Evidence was obtained from the study that families want to become involved in their child's school, but that they expect the schools to tell them what type of support is needed and to guide them in how they could be of assistance to the school (refer par. 4.2.4). Barbour and Barbour (2001:270) (refer par. 2.4)

agreed that it is the responsibility of the schools to inform families as to how they could become more involved in their child's education.

The study indicated that micro involvement with the child's education took place in the form of homework support. This implied that "crossover" learning took place, as families reinforced school work at home (Hamill & Everington, 2002:153; Henley, et al., 2002:225) (refer par. 2.6.1, 2.6.2). The majority of mothers and fathers seemed to be equally involved in their child's homework and that they tried to manage to the best of their ability with the resources at their disposal. For example, mothers and fathers alternated when extra homework support had to be offered to the child with barriers to learning, in order not to neglect the other siblings. They also alternated to accommodate the needs of the child and the skills of the parent (refer par. 4.2.4). This result is supported by Petr (2003:34) (refer par. 2.5.4) who advocated a strength perspective. He asked that the school should recognise that most families do the best they can often under difficult circumstances. Participants acknowledged that families had a duty in meeting the school half-way and to share certain responsibilities (refer par. 4.2.4). Fertman (2004:81) agreed that families need to empower themselves and Nojaja (2002:27) recommended that families ask to be informed of their child's academic programme (refer par. 2.3.2).

Participants reported positive changes with their child since they became more involved in the school. They testified to changes such as increased motivation, improved academic performance and improved behaviour (refer par. 4.2.4). These results are supported by the findings of Batey (1996:27), Epstein (2002:8), Newman (2004:37), Nojaja (2002:50) and Hamill and Everington (2002:153) (refer par. 2.6.1, 2.6.2).

This study indicated that families are still caught up in the old ways of parental involvement such as fundraising, assisting with fun days,

supervising of learners during a revue or by giving talks at the school (refer par. 4.2.2). According to Salas, et al. (2005:52) (refer par. 2.4), the focus has shifted from just getting families to school to establishing partnerships with them. Fertman (2004:81) (refer par. 2.4) concurred with this view by stating that the role of families need to change from that of only being involved with traditional activities to involvement in curriculum matters, learning support provisioning and services in the school. This result is supported by the statements in White Paper 6, Special Needs Education (Department of Education, 2001) and other subsequent policies on inclusion referred to in paragraph 2.3.1.

The participants made it clear that they wanted schools to ask for help, as they did not know where help was needed and they were afraid of intrusion (refer par. 4.2.4). Bauer and Shea (2003:98) (refer par. 2.5.6) stated that some families feel that they interfere if they get involved in the school. The implication for LSEN schools is to educate families on how they could become more involved in the school without intruding on the field of expertise of the professionals at the school. This interpretation corresponds with the statement of Barbour and Barbour (2001:270), that it is the responsibility of the school to educate families on ways they could become involved in their child's education (refer par. 2.4).

When prompted on ways how they could become even more intimately involved in their child's school, they indicated that they would also be willing to assist with outings, administrative tasks such as marking and supervising of learners. No supporting evidence in the literature could be found to substantiate whether there are schools in South Africa that allow families to assist with administrative tasks such as marking of papers or assignments. Prinsloo, (2006a:459-460) and McConkey (2001:107) presented a South African perspective of how families in some South African schools are

involved by planting vegetables, greeting learners at the gates in the mornings or assisting with reading (refer par. 2.6.2).

An objection was raised when some participants suggested that they could take learners on outings. The mother stated that some families may not regard another parent as qualified to take learners on outings (refer par. 4.2.4). Not one participant mentioned the option of helping as a class assistant as done in many schools in other countries. Henley, et al. (2002:378) (refer par. 2.6.2) gave examples of how schools in America utilise families as volunteers in the classrooms and many other different ways. The participants indicated that they would be willing to read a story to a class, but quickly added, if they had the time (refer par. 4.2.4).

Negative feedback was received from the participants concerning the collaboration between the family and the school. Participants indicated that they do offer their support to the school, but that there is often no follow up from the school (refer par. 4.2.4). No evidence could be found in the literature to support this result.

A black social worker complained that she had offered to teach life skills at her child's school as part of the life orientation learning area. She wanted to promote collaborative teaching by combining her skills and the skills of the professionals at the school for optimum academic intervention. Unfortunately, the classes were never ready when she got there and she perceived the school to be uncooperative. She felt rejected and disrespected by the professionals at the school. This need for collaborative teaching is supported in the literature by Epstein (2002:14-16) (refer par. 2.4) LSEN schools should tap into all the resources available to them to enhance teaching and learning at the school. This would include the skills of families. Literature revealed that schools sometimes resist involvement of families as they feel that the school no longer "belongs" to them (Barbour & Barbour, 2001:336) (refer par. 2.5.7).

According to Batey (1996:12-25), it is the responsibility of the principal of a school to waylay these fears of the teachers and other professionals at the school (refer par. 2.5.7).

Two participants felt rejected and belittled as the school did not show appreciation for the item that they as a group of parents had performed in the school revue as way of thanking the school (refer par. 4.2.4). No supporting evidence for this result was found in the literature. The researcher concluded that it might be that the item was of sub-standard or that it did not fit in with the rest of the programme.

Participants mentioned that felt offended because the school delegated the arrangements of a fun day to the families, but then took it back. The researcher concluded that the school might have taken back the arrangements as they were not satisfied with the progress. The perception of the participants was that the school was scared that they may want to take over the managing of the school or that parents were incompetent. These results are supported in the literature. Batey (1996:34) (refer par. 2.5.7) explained that families often feel that the professionals look down on them and do not regard them as good enough. Such a perception would have a negative effect on the fostering of family-school partnerships in a school.

The study found evidence that professionals want to forge family-school partnerships, but that they lack the necessary skills to interact effectively with families. This result is supported by Epstein, et al. (2002:11) (refer par. 2.5.7). Ferrara and Ferrara (2005:77) (refer par. 2.5.7) stated that teacher-training programmes do not focus enough on strategies to enhance family-school partnerships. Swart and Phasha (2006:225) stated that it is up to the school management team to train all the teachers and other professionals at the school to collaborate effectively with families (refer par. 2.5.7).

The researcher concluded that a real mind shift is needed in LSEN schools, whereby families are welcomed as equal partners in their child's education rather than being sidelined or only allowed involvement in areas where not much "damage" can be done, such as assisting with fundraising and other similar activities.

#### **5.4.2 Inadequate family empowerment**

Thompson, et al. (1997:100-101) (refer par. 2.3) described empowered families, as families who are able to manage their own lives. This study revealed that each of the three LSEN schools had a different approach to academic intervention and family support, involvement and empowerment.

Contradictory results were received when participants were questioned on their experiences with multidisciplinary discussions and whether they felt part of a team or not. The study revealed that the multidisciplinary team approach and thus the role of the family in such a team, varied in all three LSEN schools. The participants in one LSEN school did not seem to understand the term "multidisciplinary team" (refer par. 4.2.6). They indicated that though they could meet with the therapists individually in their offices, the teachers acted almost as buffers between them and the therapists (refer par. 4.2.6). Not one had ever asked to have a meeting with the whole team working with their child. It did not seem as if they knew that they could request it. This observation was confirmed when one participant jokingly said that the focus group interview was the first round table that he had ever sat around in that school. It was clear that the whole concept of a multidisciplinary team, where families worked together with the professionals at the school, was not advocated in this specific LSEN school. This finding supports the view of Swart and Phasha (2006:228) and Uys (2006:416) that the multidisciplinary approach should be replaced by a collaborative or a trans-disciplinary approach, as it is too much of a one-on-one situation (refer par. 2.5.5).



The term was familiar in the other two LSEN schools and more positive feedback was received. Participants with a child in the lower grades, testified to being part of the decision-making and the formalizing of their child's Individualized Support Plan (ISP) (refer par. 4.2.6). This implied that they were fully involved in their child's education. Newman (2004:29) (refer par. 2.6.2) stated that family and school need to agree on common goals for a child's educational programme. It was evident that these families experienced the multidisciplinary meetings as a positive interaction with the school and that it provided them with moral support, focus and courage. One mother in particular testified to the open relationship that she had with her child's class teacher and how they interacted on a regular basis. It was clear from her testimony that she understood the complexity of teaching learners with various barriers to learning in one class (refer par. 4.2.6). Steyn (2002:20) stated that families who are involved with their child's education show a greater understanding of the challenges that the LSEN schools face in their efforts to improve the education in the school (refer par. 2.6.1). Lim (2003:149) (refer par. 2.5.8) explained how the spirit of collaboration in a school is enhanced, when teachers have open communication with the families of the children that they teach. During the interview it was clear that this mother was knowledgeable and well equipped to challenge certain issues in the school. The researcher agreed with Steyn (2002:20), Epstein (2002:13) and Salas, et al. (2005:52) (refer par. 2.6.1) that this result could be contributed to the fact that the class teacher at the school, allowed this mother to give her input openly and freely with respect to her child's educational programme.

Unfortunately the study indicated that this intimate interaction between the professionals at the school and the families of the learners, was not sustained in the higher grades. The multidisciplinary teams seemed to function mainly in the lower grades (refer par. 4.2.6). This withdrawal of the

therapists in the higher grades left the high school families feeling unsupported and marginalized. They especially wanted to continue to consult and liaise with the teachers in the school. This result is interesting as Swart and Phasha (2006:217) (refer par. 2.5.5) stated that families become less involved in the higher grades as they believe that children should become more independent as they grow older. They also feel they lack the necessary skills to support the older child. Bauer and Shea (2003:168) (refer par. 2.5.5) concurred with this statement.

The study revealed that fewer and fewer face-to-face contact took place between the families and the teachers in the higher grades (refer par. 4.2.6). LSEN schools resorted to ordinary family-school meetings, held primarily in the evenings, in the higher grades. Participants complained that not all the families were invited to these meetings. In one LSEN school only certain families were invited and in another LSEN school some families were told that they did not need to attend, if they did not wish to do so. For some participants, the school report was the only indication of their child's progress in school. This result corresponds with the findings of Swart and Phasha (2006:11) (refer par. 2.5.5) who stated that families of older learners complained of being marginalised by the school and of limited direct contact between families and the school. Swart and Phasha (2006:224) (refer par. 2.5.5) explained this avoidance tactic of schools by stating that professionals are often overburdened and that they avoid meetings with families as it requires extra time and energy that they often do not have.

The participants all indicated that they wanted family-school meetings to be voluntary. They believed that the school only invited families of the more troublesome learners. Research in ordinary South African schools (refer par. 1.4.5) revealed that black families felt that they were only invited to school to discuss disciplinary problems of their children (Singh & Mbokodi, 2004:304; Van der Westhuizen & Masoge, 2001:192) (refer par. 2.5.8).

This lack of direct contact is a serious concern as all learners placed in a LSEN schools are at risk and more face-to-face contact between the professionals at school and the families of the learner is expected if effective partnerships are to be established. Positive family-school partnership in a school cannot be fostered by only focusing on the families of the more troublesome learners. This conclusion is supported by Nojaja (2002:82) (refer par. 2.4) as he explained that a lack of direct contact between the family and the school could have a negative impact on the micro-educational involvement of the families with their child's education.

The implication for LSEN schools is to investigate whether the family-school meetings held in the higher grades address the true needs of the families and the school or "does convenience play a bigger role?" Swart and Phasha (2006:223) (refer par. 2.5.8) stated that the families of children with barriers to learning expect individual feedback on their child and general meetings will therefore not be enough. Swart and Phasha (2006:226) also explained that "open and frequent communication as well as mutual support are the cornerstones" of family-school partnerships.

Participants complained that they were not treated as equal partners in the education of their child (refer par. 4.2.6). Wolfendale (1989:141) argued that schools keep families at "an arm's length" and that this leads to misunderstandings and inadequate communication (refer par. 2.5.5). Some participants perceived the professionals to have an attitude of superiority; one of "We know best". They based this on experiences they had at multidisciplinary meetings where their input was not acknowledged and their views not respected. Participants made it clear that they were the primary educators and thus the experts on the needs of their child (refer par. 4.2.6). This perception is supported by Du Plessis (1993:93), Hornby, et al. (1995:92) and Karge (2004:41) (refer par. 2.5.5). These results provided

evidence that some professionals at LSEN schools were still reluctant to acknowledge the voice of families in the education of their child. This attitude of superiority by the professionals is supported by Petr (2003:33). The implication for LSEN schools is that teachers and other professionals at the school should be informed and sensitised to recognise the basic rights of families as the primary educators and the main decision-makers of their children.

In defense of the professionals at LSEN schools and based on the researcher's experience as a principal of a LSEN school, it should be noted that families sometimes have unrealistic expectations of their child with barriers to learning. This might be because they often lack the necessary knowledge and skills. This conclusion is supported in the literature by Nojaja (2002:27) (refer par. 2.3.2). It is therefore the duty of the school to point out to families that they are not entirely correct in their expectations of their child and then to guide the family to come to terms with the reality of the situation. The researcher concurred with the view of Morton-Young (1995:78-79) (refer par. 2.5.6) that the professionals at LSEN school must be able to negotiate with the families in order to set mutually agreed outcomes for the child. Professionals must also be aware that parents are individuals and that each parent has an own knowledge base, values and attitudes that are brought to the school.

The study found evidence that LSEN schools did not always respect the wishes of the families with regard to medication and placements (refer par. 4.2.6). One participant complained of being coerced by the school to place her child onto medication. Anstine-Templeton (2004:65-68) identified differences of opinion with respect to the utilization of medication with children with severe barriers to learning, as being one of many factors that could impact negatively on family-school partnerships (refer par. 2.6.1). The researcher concluded that families could begin to mistrust the intentions of

the school if they feel bullied into making serious decisions against their will. This could have a definitive negative impact on the fostering of a partnership between the families and the school, as such a partnership should be built on trust.

A participant who had been told to place her child in a different type of LSEN school refused, as she stated that she considered herself to be the only who would make such a decision. She considered the school only as a resource (refer. par. 4.2.6). The researcher agreed that the family has to be consulted when making decisions on the proper placement of a child, but she also felt that the school would neglect its duty if it did not recommend other LSEN institutions that have better resources to cater for the needs of a child. Spinelli (2002:22) acknowledged the role of the school to coordinate the whole intervention process and to advocate the services and provisions that the child may require (refer par. 2.6.1). The advisory role of the professionals at a LSEN school is supported in the literature by Petr (2003:33) (refer par. 2.5.5). White paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001:3) (refer par. 2.3.1) acknowledged the voice of families with respect to the placement of their child.

The results revealed that LSEN schools did not always recognise families as equal partners in education and that they are often still kept at arm's length, thus disempowering them. The implication is that a mind shift is necessary in LSEN schools. Professionals need to see their role as that of advisors or consultants and they need to respect the decision-making authority and responsibility of families. The study found evidence that there is a need to train all professionals at LSEN schools in appropriate and effective interactions with families. This result is supported by Petr (2003:11) (refer par. 2.5.7), who stated that training is necessary, because teachers are historically trained to be child-centered rather than family-centered. The implication is that the school management team in a LSEN school has to

ensure that proper programmes are implemented, that will empower the staff to enhance and foster family-school partnerships. This implication is supported by Steyn (2005:225) (refer par. 2.5.7).

### **5.4.3 Inadequate interaction amongst families**

The study showed that families want to learn from one another and from the professionals at the school (refer par. 4.2.4). Participants however complained of feeling isolated, of not knowing the other families in their child's class and of a general lack of fellowship. They expressed a need to get to know other families in the school and for a support network. The wide feeder area of LSEN schools and the resulting lift clubs led to problems with play groups after school and minimised the contact between families even further. Families become strangers to one another who only meet at school functions. Participants claimed that fun days, father-son events and mother-daughter teas, would make them bond and that it would result in increased family involvement in the school (refer par. 4.2.4). It seemed as if the participants regarded bonding with other families as one of the prerequisites for improved family-school involvement. Both Landsberg (2006:66) (refer par. 2.5.8) and Riddel (2004:127-128) (refer par. 2.6.1) referred to the advantages that networking amongst families hold for family-school partnerships in a school.

These results imply that there was inadequate interaction between families in a LSEN school and that more effort was required to create opportunities for families to interact. This finding is supported by Blamires, *et al.* (1997:20), who stated that this lack of contact could be overcome by creating "parent-led" but "school facilitated" support groups. Riddel, (2004:127-128) explained that families should empower themselves through the sharing of ideas and strategies (refer par. 2.6.1).

In two of the LSEN schools, the participants praised the family empowerment initiatives of the school. However, in the one LSEN school, participants complained that they were not informed by the school of the latest developments in medication. They had to obtain this information from professionals outside of the school. Alant and Harty (2006:85) as well as Henley, et al. (2002:390) stated that families should be well informed to enable them to make the right decisions pertaining interventions for their child (refer par.2.5.8).

The implication for LSEN schools is to empower families by improving their knowledge base and skills so that they can support their children better. This implication is supported in the literature by Batey (1996:27) and Hornby, et al. (1995:87) (refer par. 2.5.5). Good communication between the family and the school seems to be essential for the fostering of family-school partnerships.

#### **5.4.4 Inadequate communication**

The study revealed that school policies and procedures were poorly communicated: The participants were not kept informed as to why the multidisciplinary team approach was not sustained in the higher grades; why the therapeutic intervention in the higher grades was scaled down or why family-school meetings were only available to some families. They felt quite unsupported. This lack of communication left families feeling frustrated and marginalized as discussed in paragraph 5.4.2. This result is supported by Fertman (2004:82) (refer par. 2.5.8). He explained that poor communication could lead to unrealistic expectations with regard to the role of the LSEN school and the education support services it offers to its families and learners. As mentioned before, this lack of insight into the functioning of a school, has a direct negative impact on the empowerment of families and their involvement in their child's school (Steyn, 2002:20) (refer par. 2.6.1).

The implication for LSEN schools is to ensure that families are informed at the outset and on an ongoing basis with respect to its special needs provisioning, policies and procedures in the school. The researcher concluded that both parties must have the same information for a true partnership to work. This apparent ignorance on the side of the families could easily lead to misunderstandings and create a barrier to family-school partnerships. Effective communication will prevent families from becoming disillusioned by the services rendered or the educational programme offered by the school.

The results of this study revealed that family-school meetings in the higher grades fail as a method of communication as discussed in paragraph 5.4.2. These meetings left the participants dissatisfied as long queues and the short period of time allocated to each family, resulted in participants perceiving the whole event as being chaotic (refer par. 4.2.6). Ferrara and Ferrara (2005:79) (refer par. 2.5.8) stated that the enthusiasm, with which families participate in their child's education, depends largely on the communication strategies of the school.

Participants complained about miscommunication and mixed messages in the schools (refer par. 4.2.7). This happens when professionals contradict themselves when reporting on a child's progress in the school and it could lead to uncertainty, confusion and unnecessary stress by the families. Swart and Phasha (2006:11) stated that the multidisciplinary approach could result in unconsolidated feedbacks as different professionals representing the various disciplines in a school, see a learner individually and then make a recommendation. It was evident that interdisciplinary communication amongst the professionals did not always take place prior to a meeting with the families. The implication for LSEN schools is to ensure that feedback sessions with families are always properly planned and professionally executed (Hornby, et al. 1995:98) (refer par. 2.4.4). The effectiveness of the



multidisciplinary approach in LSEN schools in comparison to the collaborative approach suggested by Swart and Phasha (2006:11) or the trans-disciplinary approach suggested by Uys (2006:416) should also be investigated further.

Participants complained that they received no written communication when therapy was to be commenced or discontinued (refer par. 4.2.6). The only information received was from their child. They were not consulted when their child was going to be assessed and feedback was seldom given. The researcher felt that they had a right to be upset as Hornby, et al. (1995:94) and Batey (1996:46) stated that families wanted to be kept informed of assessments and the outcomes thereof and that they became anxious when their child was going to be assessed (refer par. 2.5.5).

The data revealed that the three LSEN schools made use of different methods of communicating with families. The methods, as well as the effectiveness of the methods, varied from school to school. Methods mentioned by the participants were the homework diary, regular newsletters, a sms-system, emails and by placing information on a website (refer par. 4.2.7).

In all three the LSEN schools was the homework diary mentioned as an important method of communication between the school and the family. However, participants indicated that communication through the homework diary was not enough, that they wanted to meet with the teachers and other professionals at the school personally (refer par. 4.2.6). Other concerns with the homework diary were also raised. Many children in a LSEN school cannot write legibly and participants requested that the teacher rather give them a personal directive. The concern about homework in LSEN schools is supported by Newman (2004:37) (refer par. 2.6.1). Swart and Phasha

(2006:221) offered useful tips to combat homework problems in a LSEN school (refer par. 2.6.1).

The quality of the newsletter, as well as the fact that the newsletter was not handed to the parents, was pointed out by the participants as a concern. The effectiveness of a newsletter depends on whether it addresses the needs of families and whether it actually reaches the home. The participants indicated that they wanted to be informed of current events in the school with the focus on the positive things, not only the extra-curricular results (refer par. 4.2.7). This finding could not be supported by evidence from the literature. The implication to LSEN schools is to identify the communication needs of families with regard to the newsletter and to accommodate it to the best of their ability.

One LSEN schools had a website on which the school newsletter could be accessed, but its effectiveness was questioned as not all the participants were aware its existence. A website is an effective method of communication, but then the school must encourage all stakeholders to access it on a regular basis. No supporting evidence was found in the literature.

## **5.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter addressed and interpreted the different barriers to family-school partnerships as identified from the data collected in chapter four. The implications and practical approaches were given to LSEN schools to address barriers to family-school partnerships.

In chapter six recommendations will be made based on arguments that flow from the integration of theory and empirical findings. A summary of the main findings of the research will be given.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In this chapter concluding remarks regarding the findings of the study will be made and suitable recommendations will be given. The strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed and the implication for further research will be identified.

### **6.1 CONCLUSIONS**

The families indicated that they were willing to become involved with a variety of activities should the schools allow them to. Families seemed to be scared of intrusion as they wanted the school to inform them as to where support is needed. Micro-involvement with the individual child took place, as families indicated that they spent many hours supporting their child with homework and assignments. Families seemed to need ongoing emotional support and they turned towards the school for counseling. Support offered to families with a child in the higher grades, seemed to be inadequate. Families wanted to interact with the professionals at school in order to get to know them better. Many families encountered challenging socio-economic circumstances, but it was not always acknowledged by LSEN schools. The schools collaborated with the families in different ways, but poor communication and a lack of empowerment of families led to misconceptions and the marginalizing of families. Much of this could be contributed to a lack of basic skills on the side of the teachers and other professionals in the school as to how to foster family-school partnerships. The rights of families were not always acknowledged and respected by the LSEN schools. Families were often kept at arm's length and not acknowledged as equal partners in the education of their children. The multidisciplinary approach advocated by the LSEN schools should be investigated as it seemed to be effective mainly in the lower grades and even then too much of a one-on-one situation existed. A more collaborative approach is suggested that is

sustainable in the higher grades. The positive feelings expressed by some of the families towards the school, should be utilised by the school as the basis for developing sound family-school partnerships. LSEN schools should learn from the best practises in other LSEN schools how to enhance partnerships in their own school.

## **6.2 STRENGTHS**

The qualitative design utilised in this study was a major strength. The focus group method worked extremely well as participants felt at ease relatively quickly and reacted to one another's statements. This allowed the researcher to move into the background and to observe the participants and to make notes. Follow – up questions could be asked to verify certain statements made by participants in order to get clarity. The researcher's position as a principal of a LSEN school, allowed her to validate many of the statements made by the participants.

## **6.3 IMPLICATIONS**

Further research needs to be conducted regarding the perceptions of professionals in LSEN schools with reference to family-school partnerships.

## **6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

These recommendations should be viewed as practical approaches to assist a LSEN school in establishing a comprehensive school programme as part of the school improvement plan and directed at developing sustainable family-school partnerships within the school.

- 6.4.1 LSEN schools should restructure the relationship between families and the school, with the school welcoming families as respected partners in all decision making processes.
- 6.4.2 Professional staff development programmes of the school should include training on fostering sustainable family-school partnerships.
- 6.4.3 Family empowerment programmes should be developed and implemented to meet the needs of families with children with barriers to learning.
- 6.4.4 All new families to a LSEN school should undergo an induction programme.
- 6.4.5 LSEN schools should purposefully create opportunities for families to become involved in the school, to network and to build their own support groups.
- 6.4.6 LSEN schools should acknowledge the socio-economic factors impacting on the families they serve and accommodate it as far as possible.
- 6.4.7 LSEN schools should investigate the effectiveness of collaboration between the family and the school in the higher grades.
- 6.4.8 LSEN schools should consider employing a collaborative approach rather than a multidisciplinary approach.

## **6.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This study found that the establishing and sustaining of family-school partnerships could enhance effective teaching and learning in a LSEN school. Families need to be guided in how they could become more involved in the education of their children with barriers to learning. LSEN schools should implement more family-centered practices where the contributions of families are welcomed and appreciated.

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## **ANNEXURE A: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**TITLE:** Barriers to family-school partnerships: Exploring challenges in LSEN schools.

### **QUESTIONS**

1. How would you describe your role in the upbringing of your child?
  - 1.1 Sub-question: Give examples other than nurturing of what role you could possibly play in the upbringing of your child.
2. Do you regard yourself as part of a team working with your child? Why do you say so?
3. Do you think that you have a role to play in the multidisciplinary team working with your child and explain why you feel this way.
4. How do you perceive the value that the school places on your input with regard to the education of your child?
  - 4.1 Sub-question: Does the school ever ask your advice in how to handle your child or what is best for him? Could you give a brief example of such a situation?
  - 4.2 Sub-question: Does the school respect your wishes as a parent when you do give your input or suggestions regarding your child?
  - 4.3 Sub-question: Do you feel that the school values your input during feedbacks?
  - 4.4 Sub-question: How did that incident make you feel?
5. What is your understanding of parental involvement?
6. How involved would you like to be in the education of your child?
  - 6.1 Sub-question: What areas do you feel could you contribute more?

- 6.2 Sub-question: What information do you need in order to assist you to contribute more to your child's education?
7. All learners first have to attend a mainstream school before they can be referred to a LSEN school for various reasons: Does your input into your child's education differ from your input when your child was still in a mainstream school?
- 7.1 Sub-question: Those of you who might have another child in a mainstream school, are you equally involved in both schools? Why/Why not?
- 7.2 Sub-question: In what areas were/are you more involved?
- 7.3 Sub-question: How do you feel about the following statement:  
"Parents of children in LSEN schools should be even more involved with the education of their child than other parents."  
If this is not the case, what do you think might be the reason for this?
8. What practices does the school have to make it a welcome place for parents?
- 8.1 Sub-question: Are there any practices in the school that might make you feel uncomfortable should you be on the receiving end?
9. How does the school keep parents informed about what is happening in the school and with the education of their child?
- 9.1 Sub-question: Do you feel the school does enough or is there something else they could do to improve communication?
10. What support do you feel should the school give you with regard to the upbringing of your child?
11. What will your reaction be if asked by the school to assist with any of the following?

- 11.1 To read a story to your child's class once in a while;
- 11.2 To organise or go with on outings;
- 11.3 To organise a speaker/demonstration for your child's class.
- 11.4 To assist as a voluntary aide in your child's class



## ANNEXURE B: TRANSCRIPT OF FIRST FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

This is a verbatim transcription of the first focus group interview held at a LSEN school. Irrelevant contributions are summarised. The transcriptions of the second and third interview are available at the University of Johannesburg. The interview was held on Thursday 25 May 2006 at 19:00 in the conference room of the particular LSEN school. It was held with nine parents from the LSEN school on their perceptions of barriers to family-school partnerships in LSEN schools. Fictitious names are used in the transcript of which only the first two letters are indicated to allow for more space for the transcription. Gender, race and marital status are indicated as it may lead to a deeper understanding of the data. The letter "I" is employed to refer to the interviewer.

### PARTICIPANTS:

Names	Gender	Race	Marital status
Ma	Female	white	married
Lu	Female	coloured	unmarried
Li	Female	white	married
Za	Female	black	unmarried
Pa	Female	coloured	married
An	Female	coloured	married
Da	Male	coloured	married
CA	Male	coloured	married
Wi	Male	black	married

I	1 2 3 4	<i>The first thing that I would like to know is how do you see.... how would you describe your role as a parent in the upbringing of your child? (silence!) If I put that to you, what would you say? Mavis, would you like to start for us.</i>
Ma	5 6 7	Yes, I would not mind. To me role in bringing up my child is total participation with regards to what he learns at home and what he learns at school. And then really I have a passion for believing we

	8 9 10 11	send our kids to a school, to any school and they are only there for a certain number of hours in a day. If you don't carry that through as a parent we haven't fulfilled our role. And that is the key to the success of our children.
<i>I</i>	12	<i>Lulu?</i>
Lu	13 14 15 16	I fully agree with Mavis, more than that my role is the moral up bringing , to assist him to become a moral human being and also I need to participate in his school work as best as I can and sometimes (laugh) I feel that I am doing grade six again.
<i>I</i>	17	<i>Mr Cameron?</i>
Ca	18 19	The first ladies have covered it, perfect, there is nothing much that we can add.
Za	20	Irrelevant question about the electing of a School Governing Body
Ca	21 22 23 24 25	Yes, just to add a little bit to what Lulu has said. To give your kid as much self-esteem as possible, that is of vital importance. They got to love themselves, like themselves enjoy being with themselves feel comfortable with themselves and not be distracted by the stigma of the school and what is different to them.
Lu	26 27 28	Sometimes the child thinks, my mother she doesn't care. When the child sees you're involved in the school, you know, she gets motivated. My mother she is doing something for the school.
<i>I</i>	29	<i>You mean the child gets motivated .....(pause)</i>
Lu	30 31 32 33	Exactly, you are adding value for her and to the school. It is not like you are just part of yourself, you know. I'm not saying, you know, she gets motivated, my mother she is interested, also she is assisting in the school. She gets motivated.
<i>I</i>	34	<i>Is there anyone who feels differently from this?</i>
Wi	35	No, I think we are on the right track
<i>I</i>	36	<i>Um do you regard yourself as part of a team working with your</i>

	37	<i>child?</i>
Wi	38	Yes, I do.
Li	39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54	Much more than in mainstream, because I think you work with a team of specialists and the teachers themselves are educated in dealing with children with specific disabilities, it doesn't matter what it is whether it is learning disabilities or other disabilities. I think these people are trained to deal with the children. Much more patient. I also think in terms of the administration in terms of what this school expects of teachers in terms of control over what's done, in terms of homework, as well as daily work, is much more than in mainstream schools. But I think the parents are more involved, because you get feedback on a day to day basis. Every child is on a different progress phase as well, so for me the individual attention, is definitely one benefit, but also being part of a team, because the feedback sessions, um, is for me actually the highlight (Yeh, from a male voice) because just the evaluation form, or a progress report doesn't mean so much than get the interaction with the teachers and get the feedback.
Ma	55 56 57 58	I think what makes a difference in our situational school, children with special needs is that your educators definitely have a passion for teaching (Yeh) Other wise they wouldn't come into this profession (Yeh). You experience that passion. (Yeh)
Li	59 60	Absolutely, you definitely experience that passion. It is definitely not about the money or... It is about the child. They love the children.
Ma	61	Absolutely!
Wi	62 63 64 65 66 67	The other thing is that although the school is somewhat different if you like, but I have observed the homework that the kids are getting is actually more than your mainstream schools like my child use to attend a mainstream school. At this school here she gets double the homework than you know those mainstream schools, but in terms of communication, I think here ....

Ca	68 69	She did not use to bring the homework home from Sharon Lea (Laughter from all)
Wi	70 71 72 73 74 75 76	No, no, no, she used to bring homework you know, whether she is right or so on, uh you know, it proofs a much larger in those schools but here the focus is actually you know, uh uh paid to every individual. If there is a lack of whatever, uh, you do get feedback on that. Just the other day I went to Tara hospital and ... and suddenly you know there has been a turn around in terms of the improvement of what the child needs to do and so on. I think it is great.
Lu	77 78 79 80 81 82	And to add to that I think also the parent evenings is very positive (yeh) were you get to learn from experts in the various areas and to learn about about the difficulties that the kids (Sure) might be having. And for me that is very important to actually meet with other parents, actually learn from one another (Um, Um) and also from the teachers and therapists and so on.
I	83	<i>Your child is already changing classes, hm?</i>
Lu	84	Yes
Da	85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98	I think for me, and like you said we need to be honest and frank about it during this exercise, I don't want to sound like a critic person, but I don't want to be a praise singer as well. I think many people would admit but maybe not openly that this school is not a school of choice. It is not because I'm living here right next to the school that I'm sending my son or my daughter to this school. It is a school where the need arose, that I had to send him or her to this school. And slightly different to what Willis is saying, sometimes I wonder whether my son is attending a LSEN school or simply another mainstream school. Because I would give you a specific example, like in Mathematics, the maths homework he gets is equal to ... to what mainstream people are doing and that let's me wonder, if he is there for a special learning disability, shouldn't the work be modified to suit his needs to what he can accommodate and to what



	99 100 101 102 103 104 105	he can tolerate. Otherwise you find him sitting in a situation where he becomes frustrated. It is just like a mainstream school. So I mean, if you do live out where I am living I wouldn't send him to school here on a choice because it is a distance, but I send him to this school because there is a specific reason why I'm sending him to this school. He wasn't coping in mainstream, but if he is going to do the same work here as at mainstream, it is a bit of a problem.
Ca	106	.. and I was waiting for that as well. Hundred percent.
Li	107 108 109 110 111 112 113 114 115 116 117 118 119 120 121 122 123 124 125	I think the standard is definitely more or less the same and I have done an extensive exercise last year, because my child was progressing very well, but I was very worried as a parent because I know she was slow in terms of grasping a method and getting that concept how to do a thing. So it will take her much longer in a bigger group and she will totally get lost and I think that is a difference between mainstream and... and a learning disability school if I can call it like that, is your groups are much smaller and these teachers will pick it up that this specific child has got a learning disability because I think most of the times the parents pick it up. I don't know about the rest of you, but I picked up my child was behind, the teacher in mainstream didn't pick it up. I was worried because she couldn't do the homework, she didn't even have an idea about the method of how to do the things. Even if they get this number of homework now at the school they already got an idea. It was explained to me, the teacher showed me this method, where in a mainstream she didn't even an idea how to do the things. Maths is a specific example and I think in a mainstream school it would be very difficult because here there is time spent on method.
Ca	126 127 128	Are we talking all subjects, am I right? ( yes) We are talking across the board. (Hm) I find it is overloading us parents, hey. (Laughter from other parents)
An	129	The work is the same as in mainstream as I compared last year with

	130 131 132 133 134 135	my kids, there is some work that they have done in mainstream that they are not doing here, but the difference should be the fact that the teachers go slower with the kids and that they have more patience with the kids. If a kid says, "Mam, I don't understand this or that", she should take the child and spend more time with the child until the children understands the work. That is why they are here.
Da	136 137 138 139 140 141 142	The other concern that I have is that I'm not sure to what extent the teachers are pressurised to be able to complete x amount of work and it do happen because granted they have smaller classes. But they do the same work that mainstream does and they got to complete a certain amount of work in a specific time, so how much time can you spend on this child? (Ja, from Cameron and other parents)
Li	143 144 145 146 147 148 149 150 151 152 153	But, I also think uh... at a stage some of the children can go back to mainstream. Some of them can go back if their learning disabilities was early enough addressed, but some of them will never go that is also true, but I don't think the school should develop his potential... and to develop it that he can have an adult life and can have an independent work when he is an adult. And... and if it is in a mainstream or in a school for learning disabilities, it is not a problem as these days if you recruit people in the corporate environment and I'm now talking from a human resources perspective... uh because that is my profession, I don't even look at where this child did go to school. [Spoke about her own work]
Ca	154 155 156 157 158 159 160	That is what I appreciate also and I don't think the so called stigma really ('No, No' from Damian) other people have children ... and you sit... you know what I mean, everything, but I MUST get back to your point there (looking at Is), that is a serious point as far as I'm concerned. There is nothing worse than to see your child frustrated because he is just not winning at home and he can't understand why... You know what I mean? You know I think somehow don't

	161 162	know the solution but I do know these people get too much work at home.
Da	163 164 165	But I think my concern simplified is, that he is here for a reason and if that reason is not been addressed, then there is no point because then he could have been at the school next door.
Ca	166 167	Yes and without the added problem and the fact that he had traveling and sacrifice by society, you understand that.
An	168 169 170 171 172 173 174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181 182 183 184 185 186 187 188 189	I think I would like to comment. The...the thing about the TEAM effort here (Hmm from Linda). Because the some... the... the little experience that we have had here that whenever we needed to speak to the teachers they always made the time and the effort (Linda: Hm. Cameron: Yes) where can we reach you, you know, make sure we are all available to see you as a parent. And also they are here for supporting us and supporting our children and listening to... to what our concerns are. (Cameron: I must agree) And the other thing I find very important and I'm talking as an educator now, that I have picked up is that you would find that parents who have children at LSEN schools have made the effort and are parents who will participate more often than parent who than parents who haven't made the effort, because there is lots of children sitting in mainstream schools who just won't get to an LSEN school and they go through the entire system being condoned year after year and because their parents just don't know or their parents don't care or their parents don't take the extra effort. We are sitting here because we made the extra effort and a lot of parents whose kids are here and who have made the extra effort. So I think it is a two-way thing where the school has to make sure that they meet us half way because they know that we are wanting to be part of the team and that we are wanting to be part of the child's education.
Za	190 191	I also think that we as parents we must do follow ups for example I'm talking for my daughter. Sometimes she comes with the

	192 193 194 195 196 197 198 199 200 201 202 203 204 205 206 207 208	homeworks. I don't understand those home works. So I thing as the parents we need to get hold of a teacher if you don't understand do follow ups. You know just to understand it and just to help your child and not to get frustrated. So that the child must understand the homeworks and we can also assist. I think we also as parents must always do follow ups, eh, get contacts, eh, write contacts, get to know your child's teacher, speak to your child's teacher so that if you got problems like more work. You know, find out, get to know your teacher. Tell your child's teacher the problems you are experiencing and you now go 50-50, because the teacher is there to help your child. Also you need to lift up your child, it is not the responsibility only for the teacher to ... to you know to ensure that your child's .. eh is doing good. As a parent also you must ensure that your child ... that you are meeting the school half-way, do follow ups, get to know your teacher also as a parent obviously you know your child so if you see your child is doing slow somewhere she is slow doing write. Just pick up a call, speak to the teacher.
Lu	209 210 211 212 213 214	I think what is important for me as well ... Look I'm hearing that the kids are here for a reason, but kids have different difficulties and we have all learnt that but, yes for me what is very important is that what his strengths are that should be picked up and that it should be developed by the teachers. Sometimes I think that there isn't sufficient ...
An	215	Yes, the emphasis is on what he can't do..
Lu	216 217 218 219 220 221	Yes, look I'm willing to accept the fact that I'm not raising a mathematician.. I'm not trying to do that, but I want to see what else he is really good at that he can do on his own (Ca: 'Yes, sure, really important') and this is what I'm fighting to achieve at the school and to do kinds of things and to identify that and to get him where he can be and that is important.
Da	222	And just to follow up on that. That is exactly the point that I want to

	223 224 225 226 227 228 229 230 231 232 233 234 235 236 237	make is that aren't the teachers and the school as a whole caught up in this whole vibe of being part of the education system, perhaps there is pressure from the department, perhaps there is pressure from officials, principals, etcetera, to function like every other school and in this whole quest to function like every other school to complete the syllabus to make the school explanatory viable etcetera, etcetera. We losing touch we losing that aspect of identifying that this learner, these are his strengths, let's concentrate on that (Ca: Hm) But the things are hamstrung here and the educators are under the pressure of the administration of the school, from the Department etcetera. So in this whole thing we losing sight of the fact that the kids are here for a special reason. Let's look at what these strengths are and let's concentrate on their strengths , but what are we doing, we want to complete the task and the task is dictated to by the Department so the individualism is lost
Ca	238 239	But the ideal is to get them back into mainstream. That is a. very good point.
Ma	240 241 242 243 244 245 246 247 248 249 250 251 252 253	Having all heard that, I agree with you that is why I think the teamwork from the parent's point of view is so important. Do we not very often require the educator to identify what the needs of our children are, what there strengths are what we need to focus on and as parents for me, that is critical, that is my role, to pick up my child. I have a little boy in the school that really battles and to say what am I gonna do to identify his strength and with one of them I put them into horse riding, I have put them into ice skating to develop their self esteem because for me its not about getting them into mainstream its about when they leave, will they be able to stand their own, what kind of job will they be having (Ca: Hm). Any way I've got one child and he is the oldest one of the lot, I cannot read a word he writes I must share that with you, I really can't. I have such a laugh, he comes home and he says "Mommy, have to do this" and

	254	I would say “ What is this Stuart, what does it say?” and he would
	255	say, “I don’t know, that is why I’m asking you” I say, “But you wrote
	256	this” and then he says, “ It does not mean I know what it says.”
	257	[Laughter from group] It actually got to me so I went around to all
	258	sorts of educational shops to get material to help him to write and I
	259	realised something. What are you doing, Mavis, why are you
	260	focusing on the fact that he can’t write, dwell on the things that he
	261	can do. So I’m actually saying here that it’s the parents’ role to say
	262	that they are in a school like this and they are special needs. It’s
	263	impossible for the educators to take each one of our children and to
	264	say what are you going to do to develop my child? The main
	265	responsibility is what am I doing to develop my child. What are the
	266	systems in the school? I have come to the school on many
	267	occasions and said I’m really stuck, what am I doing here and this
	268	child really won’t do this and really won’t do that. But at the end of
	269	the day and you may develop conscience now that if we focus on
	270	the strengths of our children, it is amazing what they can do. They
	271	don’t have to turn out that they can go to a mainstream school but
	272	that’s my personal opinion. I was hung up on it in the beginning as
	273	well when my child started here, my first child. My first question
	274	was,” How long are you going to keep him here as I want him in a
	275	mainstream school?’ and that was in grade one. The child is now in
	276	grade seven and I’m now saying in if I look at the development of
	277	this child, I mean he was on Carte Blanche the other night, if I look
	278	at the development of this child and what he has achieved here then
	279	maybe he didn’t need that mainstream education, just to say he is in
	280	a mainstream. It is the value that they added to my child’s life and
	281	what I get to give back in return contribute to that child and for me
	282	that’s what’s important.
Wi	283	Irrelevant: Spoke about his oldest daughter in mainstream.
Pa	284	It’s like with my son when we first realised that he had difficulties. It

	285 286 287 288 289 290 291 292 293 294 295 296 297 298 299 300 301 302 303 304 305	was in grade one and um you know we went to a special school and the psychologist there said, "What do you want?" and I said and I still say it,"I want a happy child." If I have a happy child, I have a child who is content, who is not going to become a delinquent because he is looking for happiness somewhere else, he is going to go out somewhere else and get mixed up with the wrong kind of kids and get into buy drugs and all the other things and that is what I want a happy child and if he is going to be here and with the support from home and the support from the school and if we work together. But what else I found at this school is that they have a lot of structure. Structure is important especially for kids with learning difficulties. They need to know proper routine and structure and to know that today I'm going to do this and this and you know they are always informed and we are informed in advance of activities that are taking place at the school so that you know that the child who has difficulties. You know concepts like that, the time frames and all that. You've got lots of time to take him and say that in two weeks time this is going to happen so that he doesn't become overwhelmed suddenly by you know something that changes suddenly and that kind of thing. They cope with what is going on and then they feel like they are part of it also.
Li	306 307 308 309	But didn't you experience also that the children are definitely happier here. The first few weeks maybe the first three weeks is a big adjustment, but from the second week there is a change in their behaviour.
Ca	310	They are happy, yeh.
Ma	311 312 313 314	I find it difficult to keep them home when they are sick and it sounds ridiculous, but if you go to any mainstream school the kids are finding a reason not to go to school. I'm having a problem keeping them at home when they are ill
Lu	315	Absolutely

Ma	316	And that says a lot
Lu	317	She is crying when I come to fetch her earlier
Ma	318 319 320 321 322	You know I was told tonight five o' clock. If I heard that 66 times before tonight, I don't know how many times I have heard it: " We have to be there at five o' clock" And it is not about being there at five o' clock it is about being happy, my friend are there, it is not about five o' clock at all
Lu	323 324 325 326 327 328 329	Just at that point, I shudder to think if the policies of inclusion are implemented. I cannot see my child fitting into that set up as there is a lot of structure here as you say and even more than that I know that we need to develop the different strengths in the different children. I think this school is doing very well in that in the sense that there is all the extra activities, like tonight with the revue that's taking place, drama, etcetera Hotel school, metal works and all of that
Li	330 331	And the therapies , you don't have to take your child for additional therapy
Lu	332	And the music I would like to see some more music
Da	333 334 335 336	The question of inclusive education. I think the Department must recognize its limitations. They won't take one step towards inclusive education because the realities is that the department can't even cope with ordinary schools
Ca	337	Yeh
Da	338 339 340	There is such limitations and back logs they are not going to accommodate a child with special needs in a mainstream school , its never going to work
Ca	341	It's not going to happen
Da	342 343 344 345 346	Because of their limitations. In their limitations, it's pie in the sky. It's a different ball game, if you have schools like they have in Norway and Sweden, then it will be a different story, where you have 15 to 20 children in a class, where individual attention is given to all of them. But in classes of 40, this child is going to be lost. So it is never



	347	going to work with the limitations were having at the moment.
I	348 349	<i>If you are saying that you would like team work, who is the team that you are referring to?</i>
Ca	350 351	Us parents and the teachers. I think it exists already in a very big way.
Ma	352	Yes it does
Ca	353 354 355 356 357 358 359 360 361 362 363 364 265 266 267	Everything you are saying is very very true. The teachers are available at any time, everybody is more than happy to help, it is fascinating and fantastic. The only thing I would like to come back to that I never thought of before, God forbid, is what that lady is saying is so true, find the strength and your psychologists and teachers already know more than us how to get that and let him then specialise in that, you understand, what the kid is good at, really push him in that direction and to give him something really, I don't know give school in that, but when the youngster can't grasp Maths and he just can't, then drop it, don't put him through that trauma. They are sitting there, they might be a small group, but they are ten, but he is still not getting nothing. I think that breaks down what is being done here. We've got to re-look I think at that, but that is where it comes again with the syllabus and all the rest, what does the government stipulate, what time constraints and so on.
I	268 269	<i>The syllabus that we have to follow is exactly the same as mainstream</i>
Ca	270 271 272 273	How does one go about changing that or do we have special, you know a complete change of direction because again, that point was completely brilliant. Almost like a technicon you know that a kid specializes in.
I	274	<i>Irrelevant information about PACSEN</i>
Wi	275	So, the school chose Mathematics?
I	276	<i>Irrelevant information about why the school chose Mathematical literacy.</i>

Li	277 278 279 280 281 282	I don't know, but with all the teachers my child has been with at this school, they were available at one day a week to address specific um... problems in terms of learning of things they didn't understand, maybe every Thursday they are available . But Maths is a ... will be a problem. I think to all the children in this school...I never heard about the parents here that talked that Maths is easy
Ca	283	Sure
Li	284 285 286 287	But I actually never hear it in a mainstream school any more, but what I see, maybe ... is if we get the homework, because we've done Maths years ago , I can't even remember how to do...[laughter from every one]
Ca	288	You know the rules hey...
Li	289 290 291 292 293 294 295 296 297 298	Ja, now you get the handbooks with some examples, but the examples are maybe not clear, then you get to the problem that she referred to. You get home at six o' clock at night, now your child did all her homework at the aftercare except for Maths. Uh and the reason for that is, I think is the individual thing. They can't understand what this person at the aftercare is explaining to them, so they didn't grasp the method. You can't expect it for the aftercare because, because each child learns on a different way. Um in a different way as well. So I think if they can give an example, how to do that specific ...
Za	299	.. homework..
Li	300 301 302 303 304 305 306 307	The method that they explain to the children, because that I see if the teacher tells me how to do the thing I can do it as well. So it is the method that we lacking because if I now explain a different method then it becomes a problem. I confuse her from scratch and she knows that my child will then understand this specific problem in this specific way and the next child will understand it in a different way. So it makes it difficult for the teacher because she will have 15 learning methods in one class room. I you speak to the teacher that

	308 309 310 311 312	is what they do here, we don't see that but it is definitely what they do. Some of the children can't even read and they doing an examination in a different way and some children can read very well and they get tested in a different way. It is really going beyond the call of duty
Ca	313	Yes, I have to agree with that.
Li	314 315	I spoke to a lot of teachers here and I really would tell you they will not do that in mainstream.
Za	316 317	I normally make a note on my child's homework book that they give me an example.
Ca	318	[Excused him and his wife]
Lu	319 320 321 322 323 324 325 326 327 328 329 330	I think that one of the things that lead to ... the sporting, culture and remedial teaching. I mean, for example, the kid with spelling problems that they say will come right. I'm speaking of computerized voice recognition and actually have what, have what they want to express in a test and so on an onto that because what happens is that the marking is only done on the content and sometimes it is unfair, because if I sit at home like and I look at the work. I can read it, because I have learnt to understand the spelling, but the teachers can't you no. I know what he is talking about especially if it is like History or Sociology. He knows what he is talking about and he enjoys it, but the spelling brings him down. If there was a way to use multi-media.
Li	331	Spell check.
Lu	332	Absolutely
Ma	333	We use it at work
Li	334	With assessments
Da	335 336 337 338	They need special concessions at his level at matric, they are there for a reason. Someone who has difficulty writing can get someone to write for him. There are all sorts of concessions, there are maybe some 15 types of concessions and help for learners. Learners get

	339 340 341	extra time somebody can write on behalf of the learners, it is mind boggling, but the issue is if those concessions are not granted to the learners at an earliest stage how is he going to get to matric?
Wi	342	Hm
Lu	343	Exactly
Da	344 345 346 347 348 349 350 351 352 353 354	Now before he gets to that point where he is actually afforded that opportunity to get a concession. so if he is battling in grade 9 or grade 10 and if those concessions are not available, but they will be available when he gets to grade 12, it's hampering him to get to grade 12, so those concessions must be afforded to him and its not like we are spoiling him, he is never going to be able to do that so let's accept that, so why is that keeping him back? Let's give him that concession now. He will get that concession at exit level as well and... and why are we deceiving ourselves? I mean, how much do you write? We hardly write these days because everybody just use computers.
Li	355 356 357 358 359 360 361 362 363 364 365 366 367 368 369	But ... but if you are talking about that, if your child was assessed, my child writes a test every Tuesday. Now if you see that your child got the answer for that specific test questions and the assessment comes back and it says well uh the child didn't perform to all the requirements, but you know your child knew the work as you asked him the questions the previous night, maybe its also part of team work . Ask the teacher what went wrong because at a stage my child was very good in a subject and suddenly this test came back and it was almost all the things was wrong. I went to the teacher and I said, "Why, what happened to her?" because I knew she knew the work. She totally got mind boggled in terms of the information. She forgot she chose the wrong things it was almost like true or false, true or false and that sort of question in that assessment and I think uhm it's also, she knew the answers, but now you given it a different choice to choose and suddenly she can't do it. Uhm, but you must

	370 371 372 373 374 375 376 377 378 379 380 381 382 383 384 385 386 387	make the teacher aware of it, because even if she gets the bad points in that subject for that term, see how you can help her so that it doesn't happen again, because remember your child learn in a certain way. Children with learning disabilities learn in a certain way. They only know the way that you have learnt it. If you ask them now in a different way they will not react the same. That's what happens if you suddenly give them something totally different to do. But that makes it very difficult for their future because when they reach adult life things come to you in a different way. That's also a method that the teacher choose maybe if the can cope with it. Because that is actually what the teacher told me, she actually tested where they are in the place to go to the next level. But you know that your child was not ready and you got to help her to adjust because at the end of the day I have to know to get the answer, true or false, they must be able to write it, if the writing is not clear, they must be able to put it into writing on a computer or... or to use a secretary at the end of the day to type it. I think there must be different ways of communication.
Da	388 389 390 391 392 393 394 395 396	Sometimes with Michael he gets so bogged down with the writing part with the actual writing that maybe he hasn't forgotten, but he is concentrating so hard that he can't get it right. The time has lapsed and he is concentrating so hard that he could have all those answers right but he was so concentrating on that aspect there that perhaps so he is disadvantaging himself, by concentrating so much on like the mechanics of the writing. If we can address that and say right he is coping to type it or put it onto a computer, you would have progressed and he would have completed the task.
An	397 398 399 400	What I have found is where he had a lot of difficulty it was writing the tests, not at school because at school they understands the child and hid disability and all that, but when he was going to the Madressah which is an Islamic class in the afternoons. They would

	401 402 403 404 405 406 407 408 409 410 411 412 413 414 415 416 417	write a two hour test at the end of each class and he would learn it and know it, everything well, you know have this three four pages in front of him and suddenly he has to fill in forms and underline answers, choose from the block and . He had no idea what to do and ... and he would go the next day and the teacher would say that he didn't fill in almost everything and then you have to explain to this unqualified person these are his... This is the way you should teach him. Once you ask him it he can get 100%. So you know they are able to and I think OBE in a very big way caters for the child with learning disabilities, because it now is not only the child who can memorise it well and write it down onto paper that's been tested. He is been given the opportunity to show that he can do things and ... and that he knows things and through projects and assignments and oral presentations and all that. It just make your child feel like I'm achieving something, you know it's to just my battle with the writing so every time I got a test , I write it down and then get ... get all upset about it.
<i>I</i>	418	<i>How much do you help your children with their homework?</i>
An	419 420 421 422 423 424 425 426 427 428 429 430 431	I think with Michael it's a daily thing. There are times that we take his books out and then we say lets see what's not completed, because if you say there is no homework and there is no homework. Maybe, because we know the nature of my son and I know there would be times when he could say there isn't home work and there might be incomplete home work, because that's where he battles and there is other things he would do because he is better at it so we would go through the bag and look for the things and at the same time liaise with the teacher because I said to him, he has to take the time Ms Smith has offered to give him the extra lesson and the one afternoon he decided he is not going to go there and he went up there and played with his friends at the shed so that again you know, liaising with the teacher and she will make sure that she

	432 433	signs his books, so that I know that he has been there for so there is always that communication with the teacher all the time.
<i>I</i>	434 435	<i>Have you always been this much involved if you now think back to when he was in mainstream to now. How would you ...</i>
An	436 437 438 439 440 441 442 443	I think because of his history, he had leukemia so we already picked up that he tend to do this, but when he was five already he couldn't built puzzles and put legos together and he had poor muscle tone, lack of sensation in his fingers. He couldn't hold crayons, he was one who could colour in and things like that so already we identified that there were problems from the preschool stage. So there has always been that support for him, because he will take advantage of it.
<i>I</i>	444	<i>And the other parents? [Looked at parents around the table]</i>
Lu	445 445 446 447 448 449 450 451 452 453	My son just had one year in mainstream before he started school. It was in 2000 and that year we got to realize he had problems. So I just kept him there to finish the year and then he started here with grade one. Well, like she has said, I always basically help with his work, check his homework and things he has to study and read and stuff like that. In fact he is even teaching Sunday school now, with his learning difficulty an all. [laughter] I shudder to think how he reads in the Sunday school class, but he is so confident. He says "Mom, you know what, I'm a grade a student" Because he is all excited ... and I'm so grateful for this school..
Da	454 455 456 457 458 459 460	But being involve in your child facing school here and helping him, I don't think we need to... the reality it's a struggle [Confirming noises from whole group] Its definitely a struggle, its not easy going . It's not like we have a ... like our daughter, you know you don't have to do a thing as far as school is concerned. She goes through the whole thing, does her home work, finishes her home work and that's it.
An	461	[Irrelevant: Mom spoke about daughter in mainstream.] If she needs

	462 463 464	the help she would come to me, but with Michael it is, "Have you got home work? Are you sure? What did you do today? What was on your time table?" You know you are involved.
<i>I</i>	465	<i>Of husband and wife, who is this more?</i>
An	466	[She pointed immediately at the father]
<i>I</i>	467	<i>The dad.</i>
Li	468 469 470 471 472 473 474 475 476 477 478 479 480 481 482 483 484 485 486 487 488 489 490 491 492	We've got... I also got two children. The one is also like your grade 11 daughter, but she is the younger one of the two. And it happened at a stage that she could do almost everything better than the oldest one, who is two years older. So it was very difficult also for the oldest one in terms of self-esteem. But there is one thing that she could have done better and that was because of this school and that was reading. And then I also discovered that the other child had a hearing disability. She is still in a mainstream school, because there was medical help to assist her to rectify the problem, but she always felt that this oldest one gets more attention. Because she saw I sat hours, literally two hours in grade one. It turned down to maybe an hour and a half grade two grade three may be an hour. Now it will take us an half an hour to an hour depending on how difficult her home work is. But now she is now in grade five and now it's even becoming easier because she becomes more independent, she is getting proud of doing her homework at aftercare and then she comes home and I just check on all the home work and so. But the other one felt she gets all this attention because she sees this amount of time and then she says to this other child as well "It's easy, why can't you do this?" Do this and she is two years younger so that was a big issue to deal with. My husband was a lot away from home with work so I split the home work time and we said from this time to this time it is that child and the other one would go and bath and then it would be the other ones turn. We tried to split it up between myself and my husband, the one night he will take the one



	493 494 495 496 497 498 499 500	and the other night I will take the other one which is also difficult if it's only the one parent. Sometimes if you are a single parent it's difficult I know, but to split it up is much better because otherwise its favouritism or if the mother is ill or ... that's become a problem BUT its taking its tall order in the beginning to have a child with disabilities. I think all of us know that we cried ourselves to tears in the evening, cried the whole evening, had sleepless nights, I think we all went through it .
Lu	501 502 503	I actually had to go for therapy because I was such a good student at school, I always got so high marks. It comes down now to learn to cope with learner difficulties.
Ma	504 505 506 507 508 509 510 511 512 513 514 515 516 517 518 519 520 521 522 523	You know I would like to share my story on that. I have three in this school, so I have three children that really need a lot of attention so what was valuable was to teach my children a value system. They needed to learn, "you know what all three of you have a different problem, you are going to learn to respect each other and you are good at this Stuart and you Chris and Johan this is what you are good at and this is how we are going to share the time and get them to build each other up with their own strengths. Having done that, they can now recognise the weakness in ... in each other and help each other and how that has helped them is to recognise the weakness in another child. It does not matter from where or in any situation, and those children will jump in and help because it sounds very cruel because you can sit there and say, you know, look at out circumstances what are we going to do and we talk about doing homework, uhm, and how do we share the load of that homework, it is a value system that we instill in our own children to say, I know you battle with it and because you battle with it let's tackle it in a way that you are going to be able to cope with it. What makes it is easiest for you. And having said all of that, now that my oldest one is in grade seven, I'm starting to battle with him because he needs a

524	lot more time and I'm experiencing a little bit of what you have been
525	talking about just now of this child can't achieve this and he can't do
526	this and I have to stand back as a parent and say, yes I would like
527	the world for him, but that is not who Stuart is and if Stuart is not
528	going to do that, by my stress in total my stress in his life, his whole
529	learning experience, his whole self-esteem and his future, I'm
530	actually the cause of the problem. It's is me and it is possible. So
531	yes and while we have to spend time with their homework and a lot
532	of time with the children, if you actually realise what I have learnt,
533	the value that I have just taught my kids that, if Mommy is
534	determined to help me, how determined am I to try and achieve
535	something on my own. So you instil that determination within your
536	child rather than sit back and say, look what I got here, what am I
537	going to do now. And it is amazing what those kids can do. My
538	middle one, they are actually the same age, but the one is in a
539	higher grade than the other, he can spell a lot better than Stuart.
540	And I was teaching him the other night, Stuart is better with a project
541	Chris, you are really good at that. Fetch Mommy the encyclopedia
542	and show Stuart how this works and he can do that very well. When
543	Stuart is stuck on a project and Chris, he likes to set out the layout,
544	so I would say now you help Christopher with that so I teach them to
545	draw on each other's strengths and to draw on the strength of that
546	child and to share it with the other child. And that way you land up
547	with very good children and what I generally say is, you know what,
548	there is a way out. There are days when I also just wanna sit and
549	cry, but that is more exhaustion and frustration of my own .Having
550	said all of that the one thing I am battling with is and I will share that
551	with you if you don't mind and that is that I keep hearing this word
552	structure and I am starting to hate it. The word structure, and I will
553	share with you why. I have a child who doesn't like structure. He
554	actually functions far better without that structure by virtue of his

	555 556 557 558 559 560 561 562 563 564 565 566 567 568	condition. And I'm watching him now battle with the structure and because he is battling with it I'm getting angry. Now I say, why must my child stand in a line, he doesn't want to. Why must he do this at this time and when he doesn't have to he actually functions much better. Hm, and I'm watching him suffer and I'm saying, how do I teach him or myself to force him to deal with structure. But you know what, in the big wide world when you have to work, you determine your own structure. And I'm battling with the school who now says that he has to do structure and it is not the school's fault, please don't hear me incorrectly. He is just a very different child with a very different need to other special children and this thing about do it this time or do it this way. When the bell rings, he is not coping with it now I don't know what to do. [laughter] So, yes we all have got intelligence.
Da	569 570	What I have noticed is that, although there is more homework, it is getting done quicker.
An	571	He is becoming more functional.
Li	572	Ja, it will pick up.
An	573 574 575 576 577 578 579 580 581 582 583	And he seems to be more motivated and you know he is becoming more independent. I'm also teaching but he usually gets home before I am, but I would find that he is sitting at the table and doing his homework. And I'm teaching him to set little goals and in the last term in the HSS test he got 16 out of 30 so I would say let's work for 18 out of 30 this time. Little steps and he came the other day and said "I'm going to get 29 out of 30". So I say it is wonderful, but if you don't get 29 what will you be happy with, because he must not now suffer if it is too low than what he expected. So we are trying to set little goals, achievable goals to say I got this now so I can take another two steps forward because hopefully that will work.
I	584	<i>W, how involved are you as a dad?</i>
Wi	585	I'll tell you, I am involved to an extent . Maybe it's me who needs

	586 587 588 589 590 591 592 593 594 595 596 597 598	therapy because I... I... Zandi has got ADD and um.. you... you teach them one thing now and suddenly he is disturbed by something else and he's forgotten what what ... he has forgotten what you can teach him. My wife takes over, she is brilliant in that she's got patience. I don't have patience. I want to do things and finish with that ...Maybe I must understand I AM involved, because uhm I have taken him out of, taken her out of the ... what do you call ... the aftercare. I fetch Zandi two o' clock and go to my office and she does her homework while I'm ... you know sitting there and "are you finish?" Yes she is finish and I'll ask one of the people at work to check you know if all the things are done. When she comes home my wife takes over, we do it that way [laughter by group] Then I need to be taken to some therapy..
Lu	599	[laughing] Networking
Wi	600	.. some therapy to understand the situation
I	601 602	<i>But to get back to the team work, what do you regard as your role in the multi-disciplinary team that you have?</i>
Li	603 604 605	I think it's the same as where your child is in the phase of development. Because you want to see that your child develop and I think you still spend the majority of the time with the child
Wi	606	Hm [confirming]
Li	607 608 609 610 611 612 613 614 615 616	They only see the child for four hours if you subtract all the periods that they are busy playing on the playground and maybe not involved in the class room, it's four hours a day. Uhm, four times five is twenty hours a week. You still spend the majority of the time with the child and you see the child in each phase of life. You see your child in the family situation, you see your child in the bathroom, you see your child in the bedroom, you see your child in all phases of life. So I think the parent is still the best witness of a child's life. Uhm, ja, I think the therapist see them only as going to the doctor. You can tell a doctor that according to me, according to what I can

	617 618	see in this next ten minutes, I see you are not so well you know, it is the same situation.
I	619	If you give your input, let's say you go to a feedback, is it valued?
Li	620	Ja, I think so.
I	621 622	<i>Do you feel it's valued, what is your perception if you do give your input? Mavis, you are shaking your head.</i>
Ma	623	No, I don't feel it's valued, I must share this with you.
I	624	<i>Yes, you must share it with us.</i>
Ma	625 626 627 628 629 630 631 632 633 634 635 636 637 638 639 640 641 642 643 644	It's important that the parent is part of that multidisciplinary team, I'm not disputing that at all and based on what you said now ... The educators spend approximately four hours with my child and I come to a feedback session and I sit around a table and I'm given feedback by the various role players within that team and there is very seldom enough time for me to give my input. And when I do want to do it, I'm told that that is not how we see your child. And I'm saying, hear me, I live with this child, I'm telling you how this child reacts and I don't mean this as criticism at all, but I become very frustrated by it because I know that child better than anyone else. So it is as important for me as a parent to hear what I have to say about a child based on the fact that more time is spent with me. So, for me what would be valuable is that in an informal session there should be equal participation. I should be allowed to participate. In fact I even turned down one session previously and I'm saying its not adding value to my life, they are not hearing ME. And they say, "You know he does this at school" and he does this, but in a different environment he doesn't. Help me with that, but because it is not seen that way, there is no assistance in that. So, no I definitely find that ...
An	645 646 647	Maybe, that is an important point, because when our kids come from another school they get all these reports that they go through and then uhm, the decision is made that your child is suitable for our

	648 649 650 651 652 653 654 655 656 657 658 659	school and we will accept the child. But until the feedback session, there isn't a session with the parents to say, what can you tell us about your child, a parent interview so that uhm, we get some idea of these the types of things we can do for your child, these type of things that uhm we would like to know about your child to help us in preparing some type of program to help your child and what can you tell us about your child so that .. You know, it becomes a two way thing from the beginning where they get to know us also and then also what I'm hearing is that WE need therapy. So at some stage the psychologist could get in touch with the parents, especially parents who are bringing their children here for the first time to say, what kind of support is needed by the parents ...
Wi	660	Ja
An	661 662 663 664 665 666 667 668	...to deal with taking their child out of a mainstream environment, what are the repercussions of that in your community and how do the people see you and how do you perceive yourself and how are you going to deal with changing your attitude and expectations of your child, because really, our children are born and you look at this future doctor, or lawyer or president and here they start school and they are not going to become any of that. So, we too have expectations.
Wi	669	Expectations, ja..
An	670 671 672 673	I mean, how do we cope with that and how do we cope with this child and make sure that we build his self-esteem consistently, because all of us don't know how to do that [Confirming noises from the group] We don't know how to ...
Wi	674	Not at all
An	675 676 677 678	Because you know sometimes we look at it and I think we go through these stages that I have done something wrong that my child can't cope. [Ja from W] Then we've got to deal with all those things and we need help to deal with those...

	679	Things.
Wi	680 681	It's all about emotions. You get so clouded with emotions, you know uhm, as you say uhm, your expectations actually are clouded.
An	682 683 684 685 686 687	What I found is that the children with learning difficulties they are much more sensitive in terms of picking up emotions around them than the other children. [Confirming "Ja's" from Linda and Willis] They can sense if you are stressed, if you are anxious if you are worried, if you are afraid, if you.. You know if you ... they can feel the tension.
Li	688 689 690 691 692 693 694 695 696 697 698 699 700 701 702 703 704 705 706 707 708 709	They feel insecure. But I also went through different phases Annemarie, at the feedback sessions. I also experienced in the beginning that they didn't listen to me because we went through a phase of testing my daughter for everything that can be tested. From eyes to ears, to specialist to find the problem and to me it was not such an issue, because I was more scared, and it differs also from parent to parent of what will be that thing that she is actually now ... You know, that thing that we don't know. Is she now a syndrome, is she now this or this or this. ["Hm" from Willis] So, I was more scared of the outcome because I didn't want to deal with that. That was more severe for me to deal with really the truth of the matter than just carrying on like it is. But I also got sick and tired of taking her to doctors and doctors and specialist and specialists. It is costing you a lot of money and you don't get the answer. So I also said to them at a phase that I don't want this child further to be assessed or tested because she is also getting this fear. Every time she must go through testing and testing. So I requested that during one of my feedback sessions. I also criticised an educator at this school during that feed back session and I said I hear what you say, my child suddenly went down while she had problems with the teacher. The teacher resigned, I found out that a therapist hit her, the child ...That therapist is also gone from the school and that I also

	710 711 712 713 714 715 716 717 718 719 720 721 722 723 724 725 726 727 728 729 730 731 732 733 734	<p>took up with Carla because my child and I have a very close relationship and she told me about it and I mean she will never lie, because that's one thing that I know about this child, she will never lie. But I took it up with Carla and the psychologist and she investigate the matter and the teacher's story she evaluated, because I could see the teacher ignores her. I watched her behaviour myself, I came to school early enough to see how the teacher react to her, I came uh.. you know I made special effort to see what's the problem. And then I also had the phase when one of ... the next year, one of the teachers said to the group of specialist, there's nothing wrong with this child. And really give her the support, really give her uhm, the therapy, but I'm telling you there is nothing wrong. And suddenly this child's self- esteem begin to pick up [Hmm from Willis] Suddenly a change in behaviour was seen. But I really, ja, there's a negative phase when you give that negative feedback in.. in a feedback session ... uhm. but I think as a parent you have to do that because you know your child and you will see the change in behaviour first because if you don't do that it's running into a disaster, because what could have happened? She could have been in that therapy, a main issue could have been developed, the same with the teacher, so you have to address it and the head of the school is the last person that will say that she will say there is no teacher that there is no bad teacher in the school. She is the last one that will say it. She would say she will surely hope that that's not like that.</p>
Da	734 735 736 737 738 739	<p>Also the issue of the feedback. For me there is the concern of the disparity between the feedback that we get from the psychologist who is saying, you know what, the school is not right for this youngster and let's try a vocational school or whatever the case might be. Then two weeks after that we had parents' meeting with the usual teachers and then you ask the teacher, "Is he coping in</p>



	740 741 742 743 744 745 746 747 748 749 750 751 752	the school?" and "he's fine , he will cope" he is getting three's, he is getting two's, he struggles in Maths we know that, but no, he will continue. But the feedback we got from the psychologist was completely different [many confirming noises from group].But it put us also in a position of do we listen to the psychologist because they say take him to a Special School. A Special School is not good, because he finishes a task in a couple of minutes. So he is definitely going to be stiff bored there. But psychologists are saying one thing to us, the educators are telling us another story, his assessment report is saying he is coping. We know he has his limitations, but he is going to cope. So it places the parent as a lay person in a difficult position. You listen to psychologists, you listen to educationalists, who do you listen to ...
Li	753	Ok, but I...
Lu	754 755 756 757 758 759	This brings me to my point, you know, my role within the team. I think that it much a personal thing. The school is there as a resource and the educators and therapists. And it's is up to me as a parent to assess my child and to know what is good for my child , because I know they also would like me to take him out to ..uhm . I think they call it.
Li	760	Specialised
Wi	761	Ja, special
Lu	762 763 764 765	Ja, and I went there and I look at the school and I thought, no, this is not my son. I don't see him here at all. Because I know him, he's artistic, he's into music. I can't see him doing welding and woodworking.
	766	[everybody talking at once]
Lu	767 768 769 770	First of all he is my son and I will decide what happens to him [confirming "hms" from the group] And as far as possible I'm going to keep him in the school and he will carry on with his music until such time that I feel, this is it. I will get cues from him when he has

	771 772 773	reached the top. But nothing is going to make me move him, that is how I feel. He is my son and first and foremost, the school is a resource.
Ma	774	Is that not where the team work comes in.
Za	775 776 777 778 779 780 781	The other thing, what I need to add is as a parent you also know your child. You can give your child a book to read and the next day when you come to a feed back, they give you a negative feed back. I get confused. Like they will say my daughter can't read and all these, but you know, she is even excited, she has that ability to read, but when you come to feed backs they tell you stories that your child can't .. you know she can't read.
Da	782 783 784 785 786 787 788 789 790 791	With Michael, when he was in grade one, may be not.. I wouldn't say faint but maybe it manifested. He was complaining of. "My stomach is sore, my head is sore." Maybe it was created, maybe it manifested. Bit not one day at this school has he fainted, or has it manifested where he said my stomach is sore. But, when he was as little as grade one, it already happened and that was when we picked it up that there is something wrong, that he is not coping. But from grade four, he is now in grade seven, there hasn't been a day where he said my stomach is sore, I do not want to go to school. If he doesn't, when he is ill, we say stay at home, you are not well.
Wi	792	So. It's just a reaction. Of..
Da	793	He was just not coping at school.
Wi	794	O. Ja.
Da	795 796 797 798 799	We are not seeing that he is not coping, but in Maths we can see, he is not coping. The teacher said to us he is disruptive, he is hiding his inability behind his behaviour. So, if he is not able to do Maths then the teacher are concentrating on remediating his behaviour, while all he is saying is that I can't do Maths.
I	800 801	<i>Let's just go to what you previously said, Mavis, where you said that in a feedback you don't feel your input is valued. How does it make</i>

	802	<i>you feel?</i>
Ma	803 804 805 806 807 808 809 810 811 812 813 814 815	I...try and find basic coping, that's the first way. I always try that first and I think well let me handle this in a different way and maybe I will get through to them. But there are times when I become so frustrated that and I walk out and I say, they are not even knowing what I am telling them, because they are the educators and this is where the teamwork, the word teamwork and I like it very much, but it needs to be from both sides, that if there is teamwork. Understand, I know this child, it doesn't matter what you tell me. It doesn't mean I'm right about the way what you are doing with him and that I can vouch for, but I know my child. So yes, I find it very, very frustrating. They haven't lived with him. They haven't been there from the day they were borne, so to know where I come from and where they have been at.
Za	816	Absolutely
Ma	817 818 819 820	I very much like what you said. I have also been told ... in fact when my first child , the oldest one came here and was assessed. You were here or were you not here? I don't think so.
I	821	<i>I've been here for ages</i>
Ma	822 823 824 825 826 827 828 829 830 831 832	I was told in the Pick 'n Pay "You are having feedback for your child's ... uhm ... assessment to get him to this school. Let me warn you they are not going to take him, they want him in another school." But I thought, right I'm ready for you". But then I'm parent who will fight for my children. I was ready for this. Your child cannot come here and he is not able to come to school, he has to go to another school. And I just find a different, maybe a different coping skill? And I came and sat in front of them and said, "do me one favour, you don't need to teach him to read or write ever, I will give it to you in writing. Just teach him some social skills. Based on that, just do me that one favour and if you could do that for me I'll be happy. And

	833 834 835 836 837 838 839 840 841 842 843 844 845 846	eventually they agreed to take him and ultimately in grade four he won the cup for the top performer in grade four... uhm... because I spent many hours with him. So, don't write my child off. If you really want to get to me, write my child off, I don't care what the disability is, I can work with it with the right child. I can work with the child. If I'm not prepared to write my child off. Don't you do it. Regardless of what their disability is, So yes, based on this I become very frustrated and as I say, it was this year I refused to come to one feed back session. I just said I'm not coming, because I just didn't want that confrontation again of saying, "Don't just tell me about my child, I'll tell you." And please that doesn't mean the education here is not good, it is excellent! But there are things about our children that we know better than what they are. It..
An	847 848 849 850 851 852 853 854 855	I think also the fact the fact that the feedback sessions in grade four and five. One is very anxious before you get here because you thinking of all the things they are going to tell you that is WRONG with him [Confirming noises from Willis and Linda] And you sit in the feedback session and think, "What is RIGHT with the child?" [Laughter from Lulu] "Is anything right? "Because they told you, they give you this long feedback that he can't do this and he can't do this and he can't do this .eventually you think, "Is there anything he can do?"
Ma	856 857 858 859 860 861 862 863	I must say, I haven't had <i>that</i> experience. In fact I get very good feedback of my children. I came here the other night. For what was I here for? In the hall, that was for Andrew's age. That was grade seven, hey? When we came for feedback. And I sat down in front of the teacher and she said, "I was hoping you were not going to come because I don't know what to tell you. Your child is doing so well" So, I said, "Well, I am here." I know the teacher well and it wasn't meant negatively towards me, because it was, uhm, a nice thing to

	864 865 866 867 868 869 870 871 872 873 874 875 876 877 878 879 880 881	hear. She said, "Mavis, he is doing so well." I sat in front of the next teacher and she said, "What a good child". And I'm saying, "It's all very well, but are you understanding what I'm telling you how I'm battling at home." Hour and hours and hours. Its horse riding, its ice skating, its individual types of therapy to try and get this child to try and conform, because its expected of him to do that and if it's expected of him because he is in a special needs school, because there are very few children like him, then I'm going to do something, because I can't expect all these educators now to take my child, one little situation and to build their whole education system around my son. So that's where my responsibility comes in and I accept it, but then I'm saying, where is the team building? I'm crying out for help and I'm saying he doesn't like it, he is not coping with it and I'm not asking you to do it, but help me with it. You know, we don't experience that here and that is when I just want to pick up and walk out and say, [clap her hands] " That's it, I'm not coming back in again to even hear that because I know he's like that." I think that...
Li	882 883 884 885 886 887	But I think the feed back sessions are too short. [W confirms]. I think it's 15 minutes and it is definitely too short because if you think you've got three specialists and you've got the teacher and I dunno my child is not in the third classes where they already ... uh..ja. So for me, when she reaches that phase I would definitely want to speak to every teacher that's giving her Maths.
An	888	You can
Li	889 890	But, uhm, I think the feed back session are too short and not frequent enough. [ Hm from W]
Ma	891 892	But you know you can't say they are not frequent enough. I also think that as parents, if I have a problem then I pick up the phone.
Li	893	Ja , I also ..
Ma	894	And I say, "Can I see you? I'm having a problem"

Li	895 896	That's also how I address every problem. When I saw there's a ... dip... I address the problem. Uhm..
Ma	897 898 899 900 901 902 903 904 905 906 907 908 909 910 911	Ja, circumstances. [Ja, from Willis} People deal with circumstances and situations differently. Uhm, my experience at this LSEN school, and this is my personal experience, I picked up that phone on many occasions and said, "Come, or Marie when she was here, and said, you know what, I'm battling right now. I'm becoming too exhausted" And I've always been invited in to say, "You need some help, come here let's chat about it and let us help you to cope with it" and I must be fair and say in that respect I haven't ever been turned away. But we also need to recognize that they can't see who need help. Sometimes are we big enough to say, "Please swop. I as a parent am now battling, can you assist me, [Uhm from Linda and Willis] There is no ways that you can expect them to identify that... It's actually to call for that kind of help and I have never been denied that. I must say that part quite even to the extent someone mentioned earlier, very often parents need therapy as a result of ...
Li	912 913 914 915 916 917	Maybe on that point Annemarie, don't the teachers get exhausted? Emotionally exhausted to teach these children? Do we do enough to support them in terms of, maybe have flexible situations in terms of... one day a month they are allowed not to be at school and not to be contacted [Laughter from W] Do something else to just release the stress in terms of that.
I	918 919 920 921 922	<i>This is my next point. If you want to become involved in the school, in what ways do you think as a parent could you become more involved, would you like to become more involved? How can you support the educator in the class? What would you like to do? [ Long silence from group]</i>
Lu	923 924 925	You know, I've got a single child that is my only son. One thing that I feel would assist a great deal is if the learner could visit different families and see how they work. I know I tend to spoil my child,

	926 927 928 929 930 931 932 933 934 935 936	because I was quite old when I got him, 37 [laugh] and I'm constantly accused that I'm spoiling him a bit and I know that and I would like him to see other families. Perhaps, you know, if other parents could invite the children over in the afternoon for a play session and you know just assist the child that day with homework and the child could see how other families work in contrast with our own family. For me that sort of thing would be very valuable for Leon. And assisting the teacher, I think is the same thing, you know once a month have the parents take the kids out, to the SABC to see how it is done, that sort of thing.
Da	937	I think it's good that what Cheryl..
Li	938	No, it's Linda
Da	939 940 941	[He mentioned irrelevant things about sport and Apartheid] Now, I'm not saying these kids are abnormal, let's just accept that [Hm from Willis] But they are different ...
Li	942	Hm, they're different..
Da	943 944 945 946 947 948 949 950 951 952 953 954 955 956	But why then are they applying the same rules to the teachers who are teaching these different kids to teachers who are teaching other type of kids. And I think we need to consider that perhaps these teachers who are having only twelve, thirteen or fifteen kids in a class are physically, mentally exhausted to such an extent that they need to be treated differently. And I know the principal won't be able to attest to this, but perhaps part of her research, whatever. So that somebody at least is perhaps starting to think that in special schools isn't there a time, or hasn't the time now come that there is special dispensation for educators who are teaching in special schools? I mean, we are treating these kids differently because they are special needs no why can't the educators who are teaching these kids be treated differently [Ja , from Willis] from mainstream people, because it's a different issue.

An	957 958 959 960 961 962 963 964	Ja, you know the teachers definitely go the extra mile, I mean I have contact numbers of teachers after hours and school hours. They don't have to do that, but they do that. They know the child personally. Uhm, there was a problem the one day and the teacher phoned from the classroom on her cell phone to me, you know, so there it's not, oh it's going to cost me extra, I'm not going to contact the parents [Confirming "hm" from Willis] They go the extra mile, they are <i>doing</i> the extra for our children and uhm... to recognize that
Da	965	.. to recognise the situations
Li	966 967 968	Ja, the remuneration packages, the ...all those things should be taken into account. There must be something like cell phone allowances. There must definitely be thing like flexible working hours
An	969 970	.. and they who are having fifteen and sixteen kids feel like they are having fifty and sixty kids at the end of the day.
Li	971	No, it's taking three times more time than normal child. [Ja, from W]
I	972 973	<i>Would you be prepared to come into class if there's time to assist with something? Like to read a story to the class on a Friday?</i>
Ma	974 975	I would love to do it. I would spend the day doing it if I wasn't at work if I wasn't a working mother.
I	976 977	<i>Say there is something like a roster. One day in the year or in the term.</i>
Ma	978	Oh, most definitely
Wi	979	Hm [confirming]
I	980 981 982	You will get a turn and you will get a turn and when it's your turn on that Friday, the last period, you come in at story time and as a parent you read the story.
Da	983 984 985 986	Or even if you know nothing about education, then relief the teacher of some of the admin work that the teachers are overwhelmed with. And I can relieve the educator from <i>that</i> so it give him more time to do what he or she is good at. I don't know what work the teacher is



	987 988 989 990 991 992	doing in the classroom, but at least like we have in the community policing forum. [Irrelevant: section Spoke about the police] So relieve the educator of things which you and I can do because we are not educationalists. So I would not know how to deal with 32 or 20 kids in a class, but I would know how to at least ad up marks or deal with some of the admin at least.
Lu	993 994 995 996 997	Lulu, in relation to what you have said earlier with regard to the children mixing with other kids, is maybe at the beginning of each year have a kind of a social thing on a Sunday or a Saturday where that particular class all the parents and the teachers get together, so we also know the teacher as a person not just Ms So and So
L	998 999 1000	We've got a... I don't know how safe it is next door but uh.. The Park... Ja, but previously they had the picnics there but I dunno, but we still have the school grounds so we can still have a picnic
An	1001 1002 1003 1004 1005	So that we can get to know each other, the parents of the children in the same class. Some of those kids have been together since grade four and they are going to be together until they get to matric. Uhm, you know it makes it a lot easier if we know each other and know the teacher..
Lu	1006	Absolutely
An	1007 1008 1009 1010	You know understand the person and when we communicate we have an idea of the personality and how to approach the person. Sometimes we don't know the person and we don't approach the person in the right way. We come across as ...
Lu	1011 1012 1013	For me the assistance would be in the form of class researching, you know, to take the kids out, take them to the zoo or something like that. I...I would love to do that.
I	1014	<i>Who else would be prepared to assist on an outing?</i>
Wi	1015	Uh.. Uh.. I would like that
Li	1016 1017	The dads would definitely like the outings more. My husband doesn't always know how to assist my daughter in this school with her home

	1018	work. He would rather walk around the block with the dog.
Da	1019 1020 1021 1022 1023 1024	Certainly on government's side is this lacking of what is core business and non-core business. So I can't give you more than the core business. I don't know how to deal with educator things, but give me something to do where I don't need to go away with kids and I can take away non-core business from educators. I would be more than willing. If the teachers give me marking...
Ma	1025 1026 1027 1028 1029 1030 1031	The other thing is one comes across here and saying here is my chance, you are not qualified, you are not going out with my child. If we work on the basis that we have done it here before of a funday on the property where parents will not feeling threatened by <i>me</i> as a parent taking <i>your</i> child on an outing, we can overcome it from that basis. Where parents could spend the day together on the fun day or something which relieve teaching.
<i>I</i>	1032	<i>Ok, let's give Zandile a chance.</i>
Za	1033 1034 1035 1036 1037	Also what I need to tell you that I think as parents we need to get involved in ... Sometimes there are the competition of Omo and to enter that competition and to get the school gets something. Or in the form of sports, you know as parents we can help I can teach netball.
<i>I</i>	1038 1039 1040 1041	<i>Right you have given me extremely valuable information. Just to wrap up, what practices can the school implement to have a welcoming atmosphere, to make it a welcoming place for parents. What... What suggestions can you give?</i>
Da	1042 1043	I think the reception area make me <i>very</i> welcome. I mean I have never felt this comfortable and I must compliment it.
Lu	1044	Absolutely
Li	1045 1046 1047 1048	Because of the security problems that there was at schools, they had to change some of the things, but I think that was necessary. And I'm also glad that we sorted out the bullying and those sort of things, but, it was quickly sorted out here. In mainstream it is

	1049	actually never sorted out.
Wi	1050	You mean the building...
Ma	1051 1052 1053 1054 1055 1056	You know what is very important, is consistency. There is one teacher who sings, the very thin one, she fascinates me, I can watch her for hours. [laughter from group] She came through and she greeted everybody and you will get somebody else who walk through and right pass me and ignore every one. And this is my message, consistency amongst the ...
Li	1057	Ja, maybe .. [I can't hear what she was saying]
Lu	1058 1059 1060	In terms of welcoming, I find the school very welcoming, I don't have a problem with that, I think it's one of the best things that this school is <i>extremely</i> welcoming.
I	1061 1062 1063	<i>And how do you feel about us... that the school is informing you what's going on? How do you feel about that? You spoke about that Angie?</i>
An	1064 1065 1066 1067 1068 1069 1070 1071 1072 1073	The newsletters are coming regularly, and sometimes I get a few important things on my cell phone via sms, the talks by... you know the talk last term... uhm... So there is communicating coming through. So we are informed. I think the one newsletter last term gave a whole list of dates and activities that was going to happen this term and so it's a good idea. What ..uhm ... another school does, they actually give us a kind of a year plan with everything for the year. So you know what's happening on 13 January and June. We need this thing and...November it's this and... You know at a glance, so, you are kind of prepared for the whole year.
DI	1074	Any criticism regarding the communication?
DLi	1075 1076 1077 1078	No, I think the homework book is a communication method. If I have a problem I always write it in the homework book and something that the child shouldn't see I would rather phone the teacher. I know my child, my child would want to see what I wrote.
I	1079	<i>So what support do you think should the school give you as a</i>

	1080 1081	<i>parent? You mentioned here a lot of support, but what do you want us to give you?</i>
Lu	1082 1083 1084 1085 1086 1087 1088 1089 1090	For me, you know, Leon's writing is not very good, and his spelling is not very good either. Sometimes he write the things himself in his home work diary or homework book and sometimes I don't quite understand and it would help me a great deal if I could receive a directive from the teacher, maybe electronically or something like that, like their could be an electronic bulletin of some sort. I'm not sure if that is possible, but all the parents got email or whatever. I have often thought about this. I would love to help out, but it may not be feasible.
I	1091	<i>I think this is it, we had a very nice chat and I want to say to thank you so much.</i>

