

**EXPLORING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SUPPORTING PLAY BASED  
LEARNING IN SELECTED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTRES IN  
KITWE - ZAMBIA**

**BY**

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the Award of the Degree of Masters in Early Childhood Care, Development and Education.*

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## DECLARATION

I, Muyangali Muyangali, do hereby declare that this is my own work which has never been previously submitted for degree at this university or any other universities. However, all the work of other persons has been properly acknowledged

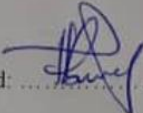
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## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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This thesis by Muyangali Muyangali is approved as a fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Master of Education in Early Childhood Care, Development and Education of the University of Zambia.


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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my parents, late Mr. Muyangali Mooya and Mrs. Florence Malambo Muyangali, your motivation continues guiding me throughout my life, to my wife Tamara Mphaka Muyangali; you cooperatively encouraged and supported me throughout the studies. Lastly, to my beloved sons Buumba and Mba, thanks for enduring my absence during the study period.

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## ACRONYMS

CPD	Continuous Profession Development
DEBS	District Education Board Secretary
DIY	Do it Yourself
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EOF	Educating Our Future
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
MOGE	Ministry of General Education
PBL	Play-Based Learning
PI	Parental Involvement
UNCRC	United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation
ZECF	Zambia Educational Curriculum Framework.

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## ABSTRACT

Parental involvement is positively associated with greater wellbeing of children in their earlier ages for the sake of educational success. The aim of this study was to explore the nature of parental involvement in supporting Play Based Learning (PBL) in Early Childhood Education. The study was guided by the following objectives, to establish the nature of parental involvement in supporting PBL, examine the perceptions of parents regarding their involvement in PBL and to establish strategies used to strengthen PI in supporting PBL in ECE settings. The study implored a qualitative approach and used case study design to have an insight on PI in supporting PBL. Data for the study was collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 parents whose children are in ECE and 3 focus group discussions with teachers teaching at ECE in Kitwe District. Particularly Zonal schools were purposefully selected for the study. Parents were selected from the same schools whose children attended ECE in the Zonal schools. The data collected was analysed thematically. Findings revealed that parents predominantly engaged with their children in PBL activities at home rather than at school. Parental activities at home include providing resources such as building blocks, toys, and engaging in games. While many parents actively support their children's play and learning, challenges were observed, including limited knowledge of play-based learning (PBL) practices, such as how to effectively engage children and selecting activities that align with school-based learning as well as cultural dynamics, such as discomfort with a male parent engaging in play with a daughter. In contrast, school engagement by parents was minimal, often limited to obligatory activities such as attending meetings and open days. The study emphasises on the transformative impact of parental involvement in PBL, fostering holistic child development, strengthening family bonds, and creating a nurturing learning environment that bridges the home and school. It highlights the importance of strengthening communication, providing educational resources, and addressing systemic challenges to foster effective parental involvement in PBL. Recommendations included capacity-building workshops, home-school activity alignment, and increased investments in PBL resources.

**Key words:** Early Childhood Education, Play based learning, Parental involvement, Learning environment, Child development, Zambia

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the background to the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, objectives of the study, research questions, and significance of the study, the chapter further explains the limitations, delimitations of the study, and lists the operational definitions of terms.

### 1.2 Background

Investment in early childhood development serves as the cornerstone of human development and establishes long-term socio-economic sustainability (UNICEF, 2018). The impact of such investments is particularly profound as they raise awareness among impoverished and underprivileged families regarding the importance of education (Gorski, 2017). Consequently, early childhood development programmes can mitigate educational disparities resulting from socio-economic factors (World Health Organization, 2018). A child's environment and experiences significantly influence their future happiness, health, and cognitive abilities, necessitating a multifaceted approach to ensure optimal development (WHO, 2023). Various stakeholders including the governments, programme advocates, partners and families play distinct roles in establishing a strong foundation for early childhood, with parents serving as the initial source of a child's interactions and experiences (Barratt-Pugh, et al., 2022).

Given that children spend a substantial amount of time in their home environments and that parents are the primary influencers of a child's interactions, it is crucial for parents to be actively involved in their children's learning (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2018) emphasizes that home environments and communities must offer ample opportunities for play-based learning during the early years, from pre-primary to primary education. Parents are described as the "first teachers" who provide essential support for their children's learning and play (Barratt-Pugh, et al., 2022). Engaging and empowering parents in shaping their children's learning and development, as well as facilitating playful learning at home, ensures a seamless connection between in-school activities and the home environment, making learning more meaningful for children (Ngarukiye, 2024).

The Government of Zambia acknowledges the pivotal role of parents in their children's education, as evidenced by the Education Act of 2011, which establishes parent-teacher

committees as governance structures in public schools. However, it is important to note that this Act primarily focuses on the structural aspects of quality education provision. The desire to involve parents in their children's education can be traced back to the Education Reforms of 1977, which recognized the importance of Early Childhood Education (ECE) and emphasized that early childhood learning primarily occurs through play. The reforms also underscored the significance of establishing Pre-school committees to effectively coordinate and manage ECE centres. Furthermore, the Focus on Learning policy of 1992 emphasizes strengthening the partnership between schools and families. This policy advocates for schools to tap into the skills and resources available within the community for educational activities, fostering a connection between school and community. It also recommends engaging local experts for activities such as crafts and cultural expressions, reinforcing the idea that parents and schools should interact continually. Similarly, the education policy, *Educating Our Future* (1996) emphasizes that the initial responsibility for a child's education lies with the family and the surrounding community, with families being made aware of their children's learning. While the policy emphasizes play at this level, it does not provide specific guidance on how parents can contribute to supporting play-based learning.

The Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (2013) underscores the active role parents should play in the teaching and learning process. It highlights that parents can contribute to their children's education by telling stories, singing, playing games, and participating in literacy programmes. The *Emergency Literacy Manual* (2020) lists the benefits of parental involvement, including parents' ability to facilitate low-cost activities such as storytelling, singing, and using household objects for early development and learning. Numerous studies such as Hedges & Cooper, (2018), Pyle, & Danniels, (2017), Tandon, et al. (2012), Weisleder, et al. (2016) and Zosh, et al. (2018) affirm the significance of play-based learning for children, further emphasizing the importance of examining how parental involvement can support such learning.

The Ministry of General Education (2016) further reinforces the idea that families bear the primary responsibility for providing care and education to children. Consequently, parents' awareness of their child's education is of utmost importance, extending beyond educational provision to encompass school improvement. Collaborative efforts between parents and teachers should focus on enhancing process quality in educational settings, ensuring that families complement teachers' efforts to create environments that offer optimal learning and developmental opportunities (Winthrop, Barton, Ershadi, & Ziegler, 2021). This study

specifically examines parental involvement during early education, driven by the assumption that parents are the primary stakeholders in their children's environments. They determine whether and how their children are exposed to positive and enriching learning opportunities that promote cognitive, social-emotional, and executive functioning skills development (Fay-Stammbach, et al., 2014).

The Emergency Literacy Manual (2020) underscores the pragmatic approach of empowering parents with appropriate ECE knowledge and skills to ensure children's rights to early childhood education (ECE) are upheld. Effective parental involvement is critical for child safety and well-being and creates a supportive school environment that addresses children's rights to ECE. Given the significance of parental involvement in a child's education, the Emergency Literacy Manual (2020) provides guidelines on how parents can engage in ECE, ensuring children's development and well-being align with the expected trajectory of learning.

This study underscores the necessity of exploring parental involvement in their children's development and learning within ECE, with a specific focus on how such involvement can support learning through play both at school and out of school.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

The study addresses the lack of adequate empirical research on parental involvement in supporting play-based learning for young children in early schooling (Sichula et al., 2021). There is a significant gap in understanding how parents perceive their roles in their children's learning and development within this context, as well as how parent-teacher relationships influence children's learning experiences, particularly in relation to play-based pedagogy. Despite recognition of the importance of both parental involvement and play in education policy documents such as Education Reforms of 1977, Focus on Learning of 1992, and Educating Our Future of 1996, these policies fail to explicitly connect the two concepts. This disconnect highlights an opportunity to strengthen parental engagement in supporting play-based learning.

Although research has explored play-based learning (PBL) in children's education in Zambia, it has largely focused on play within school settings. For instance, Lungu and Matafwali (2020) examined the nature of play-based teaching and learning in early childhood education (ECE) centres focusing on the teachers' perspective. In another study, the same authors explored parental perceptions of PBL, again with a focus on ECE centres. Similarly, Sichula et al., (2024), and Phiri (2021) investigated stakeholders' perceptions focusing on the implementation

of PBL. However, limited attention has been given to the role of parental involvement in ECE both within and outside school settings, particularly in relation to play-based pedagogy. Although the Ministry of Education's *Emergency Literacy Manual* (2020) provides guidelines for parental involvement, there is a noticeable lack of studies assessing the implementation of these guidelines in ECE contexts.

Given the well-documented benefits of parental involvement in early education (Babuc, 2015) and the recognized value of play in fostering children's development (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012), it is concerning that limited research has focused on how parents support play-based learning. Consequently, this study aimed to exploring the level of parental involvement in ECE settings and its impact on play-based pedagogy in ECE centres in Kitwe district.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore parental involvement practices in supporting play-based learning within the Early Childhood Education (ECE) context in Kitwe district.

#### **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study were;

- i. To establish the nature of parental involvement that supports PBL in the ECE centres.
- ii. To examine the perception of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning in ECE settings.
- iii. To establish strategies used to strengthen PI in supporting PBL in ECE settings

#### **1.6 Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following questions;

- i. What forms of parental involvement support PBL in the ECE?
- ii. What is the perception of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings?
- iii. What strategies are used to strengthen parental involvement in supporting play-based learning during early childhood?

#### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

The findings of the study have the potential to significantly impact policy and practice in early childhood education (ECE). For policymakers, the findings may offer valuable insights into the current level of parental participation in ECE and how play-based learning is supported through parental involvement. This understanding could inform strategies to enhance parental

engagement and support the implementation of play-based approaches more effectively. Additionally, the results may highlight the consequences of limited parental involvement, thereby justifying increased resource allocation and support for play-based pedagogy. Parents will gain valuable insights into the significance of play in early childhood development, helping them recognize play as a vital educational tool rather than mere recreation. Parents may feel more confident in their ability to support their child's learning through play and to engage in meaningful play activities, fostering a greater sense of competence and involvement. By equipping parents with the necessary tools and knowledge to support play-based learning, the study will empower them to engage their children more meaningfully in developmental activities. The study may help uncover simple, accessible play-based learning strategies that parents can integrate into everyday routines, making educational support at home more feasible and effective.

For schools, the findings of the study could facilitate improvements in parent-teacher collaboration, fostering stronger partnerships that promote optimal child development. This enhanced parental involvement is likely to benefit children by ensuring they receive appropriate support for playful learning, which is critical for their growth and development. Furthermore, teachers and schools stand to benefit through strengthened parent-teacher resource-sharing initiatives. As families become more engaged, they may contribute to the provision of play materials and other resources, thereby enriching the learning environment for children. Overall, the study's findings could promote a more holistic approach to education, benefiting all stakeholders involved in early childhood development.

### **1.8 Operational definition of key terms**

**Parental involvement:** the active participation of parents or caregivers in their children's education and development.

**Play-Based Learning (PBL):** an educational approach where children learn through play and exploration.

**Learning environment:** the physical, social, and emotional setting in which learning takes place.

**Home engagement:** the active involvement of parents or caregivers in their child's learning and development at home.

**School engagement:** the active participation of parents, caregivers, or guardians in their child's educational experience within the school setting.

**Parent:** The significant caregiver, one who has primary responsibility for, and lives with the child. This can be a family member or guardian to the child.

**Zone:** An area in the district made of a cluster of schools.

## **1.9 Theoretical framework**

The study adopts the Epstein's theory of Family involvement also called School-Family-Community Partnership Model (2010). The theory is based on the principle of overlapping spheres of influence. She states the six types of involvement of parents in the learning of the child including parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community (Grant & Ray (Eds.)2018). The theory highlights the importance of collaboration between families and schools to support child's learning and development. The six areas of involvement, offer a comprehensive approach to building meaningful connections, the framework emphasizes creating a partnership where all stakeholders actively contribute to the child's learning, fostering an inclusive and supportive educational ecosystem (Winthrop, et al., 2021). Further the theory emphasises the need for schools to assist families in creating a supportive home environment for children's education and that schools should support families in reinforcing learning outside the classroom with families being included in school governance and decision-making processes (Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

Epstein and Salinas (2004) urges that implementing activities for all six types of involvement in ECE centre can help parents become engaged in school and at home in different forms that meet children's needs and family requisites. Lehl, Evangelou and Sammons (2020) agree that a welcoming environment can be fostered by implementing activities for all six types of family involvement. Parental involvement is crucial in shaping children's early learning experiences. Grant & Ray (Eds.) (2018) emphasizes the interconnectedness of home and school environments, underscoring the significance of parents as active collaborators in their children's education. Studies have consistently shown that when parents actively engage in play-based learning activities, children exhibit improved language development, problem-solving skills, and social competence (Sheridan et al., 2009; Pyle et al., 2017).

The study also used Vygotsky's theory on culture and social interaction as the basis for play. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in a child's development, offering several key lessons about parental involvement in play-based learning (Barratt-Pugh, et al., 2022). Vygotsky identifies play as a primary context for learning and development, where parents act as scaffolds, providing the right level of support to extend their child's abilities during play (Mermelshtine, 2017). Parents viewing themselves as co-participants and guides in their child's play, whilst recognizing play as a dynamic space for developing cognitive, emotional, and social skills (Barratt-Pugh, et al., 2022). If these principles are incorporated, parents can enrich their children's play-based learning, foster holistic development, create a safe, stimulating play environment where children feel free to experiment, make mistakes, and explore their interests (Mermelshtine, 2017). The theory encourages peer interactions during play to foster social skills and expose children to diverse perspectives. Parents have a critical role to provide an environment that will provide these aspects.

Tucker (2014) points out that Vygotsky emphasised the significance of social interaction, through which children can make sense of the world and create meaning from shared experiences. Children can achieve better learning outcomes when they work with others and interact with different cultural tools and social settings. With scaffolding from parents, children can imagine and explore further (Colliver & Veraksa, 2022). Play-based learning, characterized by child-directed and exploratory activities, aligns well with parental roles in scaffolding and co-playing. For instance, Hedges and Cooper (2018) found that parents who participate in imaginative play with their children enhance the latter's creativity and narrative skills. Similarly, joint involvement in outdoor play has been linked to physical and emotional well-being (Tandon et al., 2012).

The two theories have underpinned the study to connect parental involvement and play-based learning. Epstein's theory of family involvement and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory both emphasize the critical role of parental involvement in a child's development and learning. When applied to play-based learning in early childhood, several linkages can be drawn between these theories which include, firstly is shared responsibility for learning, that is both theories putting emphasis on the importance of parents acting as active partners in their child's learning, especially during play (Sadownik, 2023). Parents can collaborate with teachers to create structured yet flexible play opportunities that enhance learning and development (Loizou & Loizou, 2022). Secondly is the importance of communication considering that schools can

guide parents in using intentional communication during play. Consistent communication between parents and teachers ensures alignment in supporting play-based learning (Jevtić, 2023). Thirdly is supporting learning at home as parents can integrate culturally meaningful materials and practices into play at home, as guided by teachers, creating a bridge between home, culture, and formal learning environments (Loizou & Loizou, 2022). Fourthly is scaffolding through play, in this case parents, as co-teachers, can scaffold play by modelling problem-solving, engaging in role-play, or introducing challenges that stimulate critical thinking and creativity (LaForett & Mendez, 2016).

Both theories underscore the value of active, intentional, and collaborative parental involvement in early childhood learning. Epstein provides a framework for structuring involvement (Sadownik, 2023a), while Vygotsky offers a deeper understanding of the mechanisms such as scaffolding, social interaction, and cultural tools that drive learning through play (Sadownik, 2023b). Together, these theories support the idea that when parents and the school collaborate, play-based learning can thrive as a holistic and developmentally enriching experience for children.

Tucker (2014) says that differences in parental involvement have a greater impact on child's outcomes than differences linked to variations in quality of ECE centre a child attends, and that what parents do with their children at home has greater significance. Applying Epstein's focus on parental involvement and Vygotsky's view on play gives the hint on the significant role parents have on enhancing play for optimal development of the child.

### **1.10 Delimitation of the Study**

The study was confined to the 11 Zonal schools offering ECE in Kitwe District because zonal schools are often the first adopters of any new method or approach. This study is delimited to parents and teachers of children enrolled in both public and private early childhood education (ECE) centres in Kitwe District. The study was further delimited to the period between May and September 2024, during which data was collected through qualitative methods including interviews and focus group discussions. Only participants who were available and consented during this time frame were included in the study.

### **1.11 Limitation of the study**

The study only covered Zonal schools offering ECE in Kitwe district comprising of 11 schools. Therefore, generalisation of the research findings cannot be guaranteed beyond the immediate

study sites and population because the sample was small with regards to the population, but the results can be used for reference with other comparable studies.

Meeting parents posed a challenge as some parents were not readily available due to other commitments. Expectation by participants in respect to monetary gain, some participants wanted to be paid to be involved in the study.

### **1.12 Summary**

The chapter sets the foundation for examining parental involvement in ECE, with a specific focus on its role in enhancing play-based pedagogy. It underscores the significance of aligning home and school efforts to create cohesive learning experiences for young children. This comprehensive study aims to contribute to the discourse on ECE by highlighting the interconnectedness of parental engagement and play-based learning as critical components of early development.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Chapter Overview**

This section gives a review of the literature that is relevant to the study with a view to putting it into the context of similar works done, thereby providing justification for the study. The review includes parental involvement in early childhood education, what forms of involvement are practised and further explore how parental involvement can support learning through play, it further looks at some of the obstacles to the involvement of parents in the school programmes and activities.

### **2.2 Parental involvement in early childhood education.**

Parental involvement in early childhood education (ECE) encompasses diverse practices aimed at fostering children's learning and development. Parental involvement is defined as parents and teachers working together to support children's education (Gross, Bettencourt, Finch, Plesko, Paulson & Singleton, 2022). It encompasses activities at school, community and home that address educational needs of the learners (Munsaka & Kalinde, 2017). The active engagement of parents in all educational processes and experiences of their children including social, emotional, and academic development (Hornby & Witte, 2010). Parental involvement in early childhood education is essential because it lays the foundation for a child's holistic development by bridging the gap between home and school learning environments. From this, it is noted that involvement is not limited to school attendance or academic support, but includes emotional nurturing, communication with teachers, and creating stimulating home environments. Parental involvement in early childhood education is not only beneficial, it is fundamental to the holistic development and long-term success of young learners. As demonstrated by scholars such as Gross et al. (2022) and Bartz & Karnes (2018), when parents actively engage in their children's learning experiences, they lay a foundation for positive cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes. This involvement must be viewed as a shared responsibility between the home and school environments, fostering continuity in the child's developmental journey. This can encompass a wide range of activities, firstly as direct engagement by parents participating in play-based learning activities, reading with children, or engaging in creative and exploratory tasks. Secondly is by communication with educators which includes building strong partnerships with teachers to align home and school learning practices (Epstein, 2014). Consistent communication and partnership between parents and educators ensure that learning is aligned, consistent, and tailored to meet each child's unique

needs. For instance, when parents reinforce reading habits or support play-based learning at home, they solidify what is introduced in the classroom, making education a cohesive and meaningful experience. Thirdly is by providing resources such as offering toys, books, and materials that support developmental goals. This enhances learning opportunities beyond the classroom, this support not only stimulates intellectual growth but also signals to children that their education is valued, thus promoting motivation and confidence. The fourth aspect is creating enabling environments that ensures children have access to safe, stimulating spaces for play and learning (Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, 2012), including attending school events where parent can be engaged in workshops, parent-teacher conferences, and classroom activities to stay involved in the child educational journey (Mak, Keung, and Cheung, 2018). Despite its importance, however, the level and quality of parental involvement can vary based on socioeconomic, cultural, and contextual factors. Therefore, it is crucial for schools and policymakers to implement strategies that educate, empower, and include all parents, ensuring they understand the value of their role and are supported in fulfilling it. Therefore, it can be argued that fostering strong parent-teacher partnerships from the early years is crucial in promoting sustainable educational success and well-rounded development in young children.

Epstein's (2010) school-family-community partnership model provides a structured framework for understanding the nature of parental involvement, highlighting activities such as parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration. These activities form the foundation for creating cohesive partnerships between families and schools to support play-based learning (Grant & Ray, 2018). Studies suggest that the forms of parental involvement vary across cultural and socio-economic contexts. For example, Sheridan et al. (2009) found that parents actively engaging in storytelling, singing, and shared play activities significantly enhanced their children's language development and social skills. Similarly, Pyle and Danniels (2017) emphasize the importance of home-based activities like role-playing, games, and imaginative play in promoting cognitive and emotional growth. Tandon et al. (2012) and Weisleder et al. (2016) highlight the role of low-cost activities that leverage available resources to stimulate creative and exploratory play. Despite these strengths, a key limitation arises in the practical application of the model. The literature acknowledges that parental involvement varies across socio-economic and cultural contexts. However, it does not sufficiently address the feasibility of systematically implementing these practices in ECE centres. Many parents may lack awareness, time, or confidence in their ability to contribute effectively to their child's education. Additionally, disparities in parental

education levels can influence engagement, meaning that schools need to provide guidance and support rather than assuming all parents can participate equally.

Another issue with Epstein's framework is the implicit expectation that parents should play an active role in their child's education, sometimes without equal emphasis on institutional responsibility. While family involvement is crucial, schools and ECE centres must ensure they are fostering environments where parental engagement is facilitated rather than assumed. This includes offering flexible involvement opportunities, culturally sensitive engagement strategies, and support programs for parents facing barriers to participation.

The United Nations (UN)-declaration of human rights article 26 part 3 gives parents freedom to choose the form of education their child should receive, it is on this basis that parents and the community have an impetus to participate in the education of their children, whilst the government provides support. One aspect identified to foster Early Childhood Education (ECE) is playful learning (UNICEF, 2018). United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 31 outlines the right to play for all children (United Nations, 1989). It is widely recognised that if learners are to maximise their potential from schooling, they will need a full stimulating home environment and the full support of their parents (Gertler, Heckman, Pinto, Zanolini, Vermeersch, Walker, & Grantham-McGregor, 2014). It is assumed that parents should play a role not only in the promotion of their own children's achievements but more broadly in school improvement and the democratisation of school governance (Aly et al, 2022). For instance, The European Commission, view that the depth of parental participation is a significant indicator of the quality of learning (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003)

It is crucial to note that parents and communities are not just supporters of children's education, they are co-creators of meaningful learning experiences, particularly in early childhood. The UN declarations provide a rights-based justification for this involvement, and research consistently shows that when parents are engaged, especially in play-based approaches, children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Therefore, any effective ECE model must treat parental involvement not as optional, but as essential.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) bring out some of the factors that can influence parental involvement, and these include language, parental educational levels, attitudes of the school staff, cultural influences and other family issues. Gross et al. (2022) have revealed that work patterns and economic factors may affect involvement at the school, income as well as the socioeconomical status of parents influences the degree of involvement in the child's learning.

Teachers cannot still engage families and similarly parents still can't participate citing the nature of school environments which discourage parents from getting involved (Willemse, Thompson, Vanderlinde, & Mutton, 2018), with most living in extreme poverty, these children start disadvantaged, have poor levels of parental investment, and throughout their lives fall further behind the advantaged (Gertler et al., 2014). If parents are not engaged in their children's learning during these early years, they are unlikely to become so in later years when negative interactions with schools may have become entrenched and children are more influenced by peers than parents (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007). Teachers carry an important dimension in encouraging parents to be involved in their children's education. Parent-teacher communication, teaching strategies and practices, and teacher invitations have been identified as powerful motivators for parents to be involved at home and at school (Yulianti, Denessen, Droop & Veerman, 2022).

While numerous factors such as socio-economic status, language barriers, work demands, and school culture can hinder parental involvement in early childhood education, these challenges are not insurmountable. In fact, the actions of teachers and schools are pivotal in either reinforcing or dismantling these barriers. When educators actively foster inclusive, respectful, and communicative relationships with families, they can significantly motivate and empower parents to engage, regardless of their background or circumstances. Therefore, parental involvement should not be seen solely as a parental responsibility, but rather as a shared partnership where schools and teachers hold a proactive role in creating supportive conditions for that involvement to flourish.

### **2.3 Types of parental involvement**

There are several types of parental involvement in early childhood education, each playing a distinct role in supporting children's development and learning. The role of parental involvement in supporting child development and learning has garnered significant attention in educational research. Epstein (2010) identifies the following;

#### **2.3.1 Parenting**

Schools can provide support to parents to ensure that parents are able to establish positive home environments that will allow children to thrive and survive as learners (Epstein, 2010). For instance, teachers can encourage parents to promote family literacy by giving time to reading activities with their children, playing games and possibly tell stories would in turn inspire a love of reading among children. Chansa-Kabali (2016) acknowledges that home-school

relations and partnerships require utmost attention. Further the study considers that the school has a significant role to give expert information to parents on how to help their children at home as a possible way that learners can benefit from a stronger partnership.

A school learning community welcomes all families (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Many schools serve a diverse range of students. These children, like all students, do better when their parents and teachers are partners (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). In a welcoming school, educators appreciate differences and involve all families in many ways throughout the school year. (Sabol et al, 2018) cite an example of a school that held an evening discussion about adolescence to help parents share effective parenting strategies and network with one another on important topics, a monthly morning activity during which parents have the opportunity to meet with teachers, administrators, and other parents and discuss such school activities as testing, homework, and reading programs (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Parenting classes are designed to improve knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about child development and enhance positive parenting practices including play. And these can be provided by home visit courses, case management, or possibly family workshops (Sabol et al, 2018). Sabol et al (2018) give an example of one child, who would have hours long tantrums. The father attended parenting skills the centre offered, and the child started regularly changing its attitude, and sometime later the child was totally different. It is therefore unquestionable that schools must move beyond traditional roles and become hubs of family engagement, offering practical guidance and inclusive programs that support parenting, literacy, and emotional development to ensure every child thrives.

### **2.3.2 Communication**

Design effective ways of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Parents would be able to monitor that children's developmental milestones are on track and can have room to communicate concerns and issues with the teacher. Effective communication ensures that everyone understands school policies and decisions, therefore new innovations and approach will never be received with mixed feelings among parents. The school can organise and motivate parents to open days exhibitions where children are able to display what they are able to do, teachers being able to hold regular informal chats at the school, in school events (Emergency literacy manual, 2020).

### **2.3.3 Encourage Volunteerism**

Parents can be a gold mine of talents and skills, which can help educators significantly in the process of teaching children. Parents can be recruited and organised to provide help and give support such as making learning and teaching aids (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005) and in turn will understand how to use them. By providing information and ideas to families on how to assist children at home with work and ensuring parents are aware about learning at home and how the child can be monitored as the child carries out these activities (Waters, et al., 2022). It may enable families to share their talents and time to support their children as well as the educators. Parents can be a rich resource for play based learning activities as shown by Matafwali and Mofu (2023) that upon exposure to indigenous games and play activities in the ECE settings and at home, teachers and children began to embrace play-based learning and show that engagement of the parents led to strengthened home-school partnerships and the revival of indigenous games.

Yulianti, Denessen, Droop and Veerman (2022) as cited in Yamamoto, Holloway, and Suzuki (2016) identified that when mothers viewed their children's teachers as more inviting, they were likely to volunteer in classroom, initiate, engage with teachers, and communicate with teachers. They also point out that there are a variety of examples of parental involvement practices particularly in urban schools though not consistent across schools. Families can facilitate educational visits for children such as visiting museums and attend cultural programs. And if schools are working with the community, parents would be more willing to assist when they know that their investments contribute to student learning and success in school (Gross, et al., 2022). Generally, it is shown that when schools implement the policy that allows parents' regular volunteer opportunities, more parents tend to get involved in school (LaForett, & Mendez, 2016). It is noted from the discussion that parents are an underutilized yet powerful resource in enhancing children's learning, particularly in early childhood settings where play-based learning thrives on creativity, culture, and community engagement. One fear raised by teachers on parent's regular voluntary teaching was that parents would interfere if they were to be allowed to voluntarily teach in a classroom (Yulianti, Denessen, Droop & Veerman, 2022). LaRocque, Kleiman and Darling (2011) observes that teachers should view parents as a valuable resource that would be crucial to collaborate with.

### **2.3.4 Foster Home Learning**

Students need a positive environment for home learning. Educators can help parents learn how to supervise homework, set up an effective place for learners to work, communicate

expectations for homework and support the children as they work on schoolwork at home. Teachers need to help all families establish stimulating home environments to support children as learners by suggesting conditions that are necessary for learning at home, aspects of child nurturing and transitioning (Lehrl, Evangelou & Sammons, 2020). Sheldon (2002) describes parent involvement at home as the parent-child interactions about school related or other learning activities and represents the direct investment of a parent's resources in the child's education. Home visits provide educators with a better understanding of the learners and their families from historical and cultural perspectives (Roopnarine, 2012). The visits allow educators have a cross-cultural learning experience. Implying that teachers develop an appreciation that learning about a child is learning about its family and community contexts as well as what is apparent in the classroom. This enables educators to create a more multicultural learning environment and lesson plans for their children (Lin & Bates, 2010).

Similarly, parent involvement at school are ways parents interact with teachers and other school personnel (Sheldon, 2002). This form of engagement provides parents with first-hand information about the school environment, allows parents to interact with and observe teachers as they teach and enables parents observe their children interacting with other children. Ultimately, these experiences may bring parents to a better perception to support their children's learning. On the other hand, research has shown the significance of a stimulating home environment for the development of the child which is key to early learning (LaForett, & Mendez, 2016). Strong parental engagement is central to promoting children's healthy development and wellness, preparation for school and seamlessly transitioning to primary classes. Lehrl, et al (2020) say that home learning environment is an important predictor of differences in children's academic and social development. It follows that a stimulating and supportive home environment, fostered through strategic parental engagement, is essential for enhancing children's learning especially in early childhood education (ECE). This entails the need to link what happens at home to what happens at school in the life of the child. How can we build ways of engaging parents to ECE centres to strengthen Learning through Play for young ones?

### **2.3.5 Decision Making**

Parents' voices should be integrated in decision making processes. Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and parent organizations (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). Having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders on school

committees. The model of the parental involvement process under consideration here suggests that parents' involvement decisions and choices are based on several constructs drawn from their own ideas and experiences as well as on other constructs growing out of environmental demands and opportunities (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). This clearly qualifies inclusion of parents in school decision-making processes as a fundamental component of effective and meaningful parental involvement, it follows that when families are invited to participate in leadership and decision-making roles, schools benefit from a richer, more inclusive understanding of learners' needs, community values, and culturally responsive practices.

### **2.3.6 Collaborating with the Community**

The environment or community surrounding children has a significant impact on their learning, well-being, and development (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). Communities may support and encourage cooperation between families, school and community groups. Coordinate resources and services for families, children, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations (Domina, 2005). Children receive expanded exposure to different experiences and opportunities, which could assist with choices in future education and careers, ensuring integrating community practices that can strengthen school programmes. Henderson and Mapp (2002) suggest that to improve parent involvement, schools have to ensure that parents are welcomed, this provides an opportunity to feel free and be able to express themselves, the need to adjust in terms of attitudes of school staff so that they realise that it is advantageous for teachers to work with parents, the other aspect is on the need to plan and organise parent activities considering parents' interest and needs (Emergency literacy manual, 2020). And it is also important that parents are provided with knowledge about what takes place in the school life of their children.

Matafwali and Mofu (2023) observed that parents and grandparents shared their memories of games and kind of play during their youth and acknowledged how developmental outcomes are stimulated by engaging children in indigenous outdoor activities. This reflects how parents can be involved to develop the play-based learning that typically mirrors children's culture. Community participants showed pride in the continuation and revival of indigenous activities they were engaged during their childhood and celebrated their participation in the implementation process (Matafwali & Mofu, 2023). Just as School leaders can encourage parental involvement directly by reaching out to parents themselves, such as inviting parents to attend school activities and events for instance 'lunch with the headteacher'. This can

provide a platform where they can communicate a clear and consistent message to parents and families regarding their beliefs that the school is stronger when parents and teachers work together (Heinrichs, 2018).

A school learning community works with many partners to increase students' learning opportunities and experiences. Activities to enrich students' skills and talents may be conducted during lunch, after school, and at other times by school, family, and community partners (Lin, & Bates, 2010). Senior citizens can become part of the community partnership by engaging them in different ways where they can share their talents and participate as guest readers, oral historians, and volunteers at school. Studies indicate that enriched learning activities help children do better in school (Gross et al, 2022). Local medical volunteers would provide children and families with health care information and medical testing, giving presentations on careers and hobbies, science activities, and supplying nutritious treats. To enhance the partnership, a school can organise a cultural day to help students, teachers, and families learn about and appreciate cultural diversity represented in their learning community. Families and community volunteers contributed cultural items and worked with learners on costumes, skits, poems, songs, and dances (Roopnarine, 2012). The activities helped students develop language skills and other talents and involved diverse families in their children's learning.

Sabol et al. (2018) records of a centre that provided a variety of opportunities for families to meet at different times to accommodate parents' scheduling needs (morning, day, and evening) and with high frequency (a minimum of three to four activities per month). The parent meetings were activity-centred where books could be made, and social activities which could include parties (Bartolome, Mamat & Masnan, 2017). These meetings on the other hand helped promote social connection with other parents and sharing of information. Participation in these meetings provided parents with other further opportunities to become acquainted, support each other, and pursue educational goals together (Atmore, 2012).

Each of these types of involvement can have an impact on a child's development and learning, particularly in early childhood when foundational skills are being built. A combination of these approaches helps create a supportive learning environment both at home and at school, leading to more successful developmental outcomes for children. It is worth acknowledging that parental involvement in early childhood education is multi-dimensional and deeply influential in shaping a child's developmental and educational outcomes. However, effective involvement requires intentional strategies from schools to create inclusive, flexible, and culturally

responsive environments. The discussion reveals that while various forms of involvement such as parenting, communication, volunteering, decision-making, home learning, and community collaboration are beneficial, their success hinges on schools actively removing participation barriers. Therefore, it can be stated that schools must not only invite but also empower parents through sustained efforts such as teacher training in family engagement, inclusive school policies, culturally rooted learning practices and scheduling flexibility. This approach would shift parental involvement from being an optional support to a shared responsibility and essential component of quality early childhood education.

#### **2.4 Importance of parental involvement in Early Childhood Education**

Parental involvement has long been believed to be associated with a range of enhanced developmental and learning outcomes for elementary learners (Yasmin et al, 2020), including varied indicators of achievement and the development of children's attributes that support achievement, such as self-efficacy for learning, perceptions of personal control, and self-regulatory skills and knowledge. Munsaka and Kalinde (2017) emphasise that the partnership is not a single event but a process that is progressive over a range. Lareau (1996) has shown that family-school partnership raises the prospect of equal power, minimises conflicts that exist in child rearing. It is widely understood that parents play a pivotal role in a child's education, research suggests that parental involvement in a child's education boosts well-being and confidence and is important for academic progression (Epstein, 2018). Targeting parental engagement in early education is cost-effective, as evidenced by parent-focused early interventions designed to promote foundational skills, which can have a lasting impact (Bierman et al., 2017; Jeynes, 2012; Reynolds et al., 2018).

There is a strong view that parents are essential partners in supporting children's school readiness and academic success (Hiniker, Lee, Kientz & Radesky, 2018). However, Gross, et al., (2022) share that there still remains little agreement on how parental involvement in early learning should be defined and promoted, and how schools should measure it. Most schools do not systematically evaluate parental engagement beyond parent attendance at school-based functions (Gross et al. 2022). Even with adequate evidence of the positive effects of family involvement, it's potential is still largely ignored in schools (Sabol, Sommer, Sanchez, and Busby, 2018). Incorporating indigenous activities in children's play is significant for establishing home school partnerships and encouraging parental involvement (Matafwali & Mofu, 2023).

There are varied benefits which include academic, personal and social, were families take part in their children's education. It has been shown that on comparative terms such families experience better attendance, higher graduation rates, less grade retention, increased levels of school satisfaction and many others (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) put it that PI creates an opportunity for schools to enrich school activities by bringing parents into the educational process, increased learner success, enhanced parent and teacher satisfaction, and improved school climate. When parents and teachers work together, they will with the children live, think, decide and do things together (Emergency literacy manual, 2020). Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) share that when children see their parents involved in the classroom, they feel more comfortable and become focused in the school activities. Henderson and Mapp (2002) say that parental involvement provides for better transitions between home and school environments. Parent- school engagements empower parents, and develops collaboration, this creates a strong and positive teacher-family relationship (Jung & Sheldon, 2020). Outcomes including better attendance, increased levels of school satisfaction, reduced cases of negative behaviour have yielded among children whose families participate fully in the children's education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Guide (2017) acknowledges that parental involvement can help parents understand the performance and growth of their children and therefore establish reasonable expectations of their children. Parental involvement in early childhood education is not merely a supportive element, it is a critical determinant of a child's holistic development and academic success. The discussion emphasizes that when parents are actively engaged, children experience improved cognitive, emotional, and behavioural outcomes Some of the benefits of parental involvement identified include improved teacher parent relationship enabling them talk about the learning and development of the child, parental involvement enhances teacher morale and school climate where a parent can freely see school authority and seek assistance about how the child is learning and this can in turn improve school attendance among the learners (Tucker, 2014). However, despite the wealth of evidence supporting these benefits, schools often fail to strategically define, measure, or implement effective parental involvement frameworks, treating participation as a one-time event rather than a continuous partnership. Attitudes, behaviour and mental health of children is taken care off resulting in increased parental confidence, satisfaction and interest in their children's education. It is therefore, arguable that early childhood institutions must move from passive to intentional engagement models, actively cultivating long-term partnerships with families. When this happens, parental

involvement evolves into a powerful, collaborative process that nurtures not only the child's success but also strengthens the school climate.

## **2.5 Parent Perception towards Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education.**

One notable aspect by Dempsey et al. (1997) is that, literature in the area has generally focused on the involvement of mothers, observers have noted that mothers are the parents most closely involved in children's education, a pattern that appears related to traditional beliefs about gender roles, sociocultural prescriptions, and gender-linked patterns of power distribution in society (Gertler, 2015, Opondo, Redshaw, Savage-McGlynn, Quigley, 2016). Epstein and Sanders (2000) have revealed in the study carried in USA that families with more formal education and higher income are likely to be partners with their children's schools, but those with less formal education and lower incomes become involved if schools successfully implement programmes of partnership. Further the study shows that if schools invest in practices to involve parents, then parents respond by conducting those practices including parents with less formal education or having lower incomes.

Parker and Thomson (2019) argue that caregivers' support for pedagogies and programs can be enhanced through school-community partnerships. For instance, in a study by Smith (2015) on enhancing learner and teacher engagement in a low socio-economic status school in Australia in mathematics and science using play-based learning, established a parent stakeholder group to bring the school and community together, increase engagement, and involvement of parents in their children's learning. She found out that most parents held negative views of play and learning in the initial stage, and later parents' perception changed through their engagement with the program and they eventually were able to articulate the skills learners gained through the program including problem solving, fine and gross motor skills, imagination, and engagement. Smith (2015) in his study invited parents into the classroom and their involvement progressed from initial observers to active participants and advocates for the approach (Parker & Thomson, 2019).

Parental perception plays a pivotal role in shaping the level and quality of involvement in early childhood education, yet it is often influenced by socioeconomic status, educational background, and traditional gender roles. The discussion highlights that mothers remain the predominant participants in children's education due to entrenched cultural norms, while fathers and other caregivers are frequently underrepresented. However, research (Epstein & Sanders, 2000) suggests that when schools take initiative to actively and inclusively engage all families regardless of income or education level parents respond positively and become

involved. Parental perceptions toward involvement are not fixed but can be reshaped through intentional, inclusive, and culturally sensitive school practices. As demonstrated by Smith (2015), even initially skeptical parents can evolve into advocates when they are meaningfully included in pedagogical processes and witness their children's growth firsthand. Schools must not only invite but also empower parents by dismantling stereotypes, offering flexible opportunities for involvement, and fostering community partnerships that build trust and shared purpose. This transformation in perception is essential for equitable and sustainable parental engagement in early education.

## **2.6 Challenges to effective parental involvement in early childhood education**

Despite its importance, several barriers hinder parental involvement. Time constraints, cultural differences, and socioeconomic factors often limit parents' ability to engage meaningfully. Research by Barnett et al, (2019) highlights that low-income families may lack access to resources, such as educational toys or safe play spaces, affecting their capacity to support play-based activities.

The common evident challenge in parental involvement from the study by Yulianti, Denessen, Droop and Veerman (2022) included lack of written school policies on the involvement of parents, minimal use of home visits and lack of capacity development for the teachers on home-school partnership and working with parents. Parental education organised by the school was lacking (Nathans, & Brown, 2021). The minimal use of the rare home visits by teachers showed one aspect of parental involvement not fully used (Waters, et al, 2022). Home visits provide a window for teachers to fully understand children and families so that it can enable build rapport with families (Hornby & Witte 2010; Johnson, 2014; Lin and Bates, 2010).

Teacher preparation programmes across the globe have taken note of the importance of incorporating more course activities focusing on strong preparation of pre-service teachers for family engagement (Nathans & Brown, 2021). Teachers have been compelled to continue with the traditional approaches to teaching ECE learners as a way of succumbing to pressure from parents whose focus is an academic approach with emphasis on teacher directed activities. Parents want to see the academic component (Woolnough, 2017). Parents can at times feel put off from involvement by the way teachers treat them or they may feel they lack the skills to make a difference in the success of their child (Tezel-Sahim et al 2011), and wished they could be supported with resources at home to promote and enhance the learning that take place at school as a way of closing the gap between home and school.

Perceptions by parents can act as barrier to effective parental involvement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). For instance, the manner parents may view their role in their child's education. Parents who consider their role as simply taking children to school, which then takes over responsibility may not willingly involve themselves in other activities that provide support to the child. Bridging this gap requires targeted parent education programs and collaborative communication strategies. For some parents lack of confidence in helping their children may be because the language of instruction is not their first language and they feel they cannot communicate effectively with teachers (Đurišić, & Bunijevac, 2017). On one side if parents notice that parental involvement is not valued by teachers or the school, they are less likely to get involved, that parents are usually very effective when teachers actively encourage parental involvement (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Đurišić, and Bunijevac (2017) say that life context of parents can also act as a barrier. For example, the level of education of parents can have an effect on the level of involvement, that is whether they have adequate skills and knowledge to delve in different aspects of parental involvement. Work status of parents, in case where parents are unemployed with less income, they may prioritise household needs than school needs of the child, whilst on the other hand a working parent may have less time to look at the school needs of a child. (Green et al., 2007).

While parental involvement in early childhood education is widely recognized as critical for positive learning and developmental outcomes, the reality is that numerous systemic, social, and individual challenges significantly hinder its effectiveness. Parental involvement is too often treated as an optional addition rather than a foundational element of early childhood education. Schools frequently fail to build inclusive structures that accommodate diverse parental circumstances, especially those of low-income families, working parents, and those facing linguistic or cultural barriers.

## **2.7 Play based learning in early childhood**

Play-based learning is a pedagogical approach that harnesses the power of play, allowing children to explore, discover, and learn in a natural, enjoyable setting (Kalinde et al., 2024; Kaluba et al., 2024; Mambwe, R.; 2024; Cowan, 2020, Danniels & Pyle, 2018). It is child-focused and dwells on children's development, interests and abilities by engaging children in developmentally appropriate activities that bring out academic learning experiences (Pyle & DeLuca 2017). The key argument of PBL is for children to learn while playing. Play-based learning in early childhood education refers to an approach where children engage in play activities that are both enjoyable and educational, allowing them to explore, discover, and learn

in an organic and active way (Kalinde et al., 2024; Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, Moore, Boyd, Moore, Edwards, & Boyd, 2014). The approach is based on the idea that children learn well when they are actively engaged in activities that are meaningful, motivating, and relevant to their needs. It focuses on the developmental needs of the whole child that is including cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language skills, and is often seen as a natural way for children to learn about the world around them (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014). The key principles of play based learning include active learning, child centredness, exploration and discovery, social interaction as well as creativity and imagination.

Play-based learning has been described as a teaching approach involving playful, child-directed elements along with some degree of adult guidance and scaffolded learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). While a number of parents have valued play for their children, they still remain reluctant about play which is not tilted towards pre-academic skills (Singh and Ngadni, 2023). Xunyi and Hui (2018) affirmed that parents valued play that enhanced intellectual abilities and academic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic). Xunyi and Hui (2018) show that most Chinese parents in their study put emphasis on play as being important for children's development, but not for academic preparation, viewing learning as a serious, rather than playful activity.

Play-based learning in early childhood is a holistic and powerful approach to fostering children's development (O'Connor et al., 2017). By giving children, the opportunity to learn through play, educators and parents help them develop essential skills across all domains (Ramanlingam & Maniam, 2020). It creates an engaging and supportive environment where children are motivated to explore, create, problem-solve, and develop a love of learning that lasts throughout their lives (Keung & Cheung, 2019).

Guide (2017) says that play is an effective mode of learning that best suits the developmental characteristics of children. It is described an ideal way that facilitates children's physical and psychological development (Ali, Constantino, Hussain, & Akhtar, 2018). During play children use language, senses and prior experiences, and various concepts are acquired in the process (Parker & Thomson, 2019). Children learn to understand themselves, others and the environment, it develops creativity, problem-solving skills and versatility. Play helps children express emotions, build confidence and develop social skills (Cowan, 2020). Play-based learning provides a rich environment where children can explore various concepts and ideas at

their own pace. It fosters creativity and problem-solving skills and offers a safe space for risk taking and experimentation (Hewes, 2006).

Children acquire foundational numeracy, literacy and science skills through play-based activities. For instance, playing with blocks can introduce basic geometry and spatial reasoning, while storytelling games can boost language and literacy skills (Hewes, 2006). The self-directed nature of play also fosters critical thinking and independence (Ali, Constantino, Hussain, & Akhtar, 2018). Play-based learning provides an excellent platform for developing social skills. Group play activities encourage children to cooperate, share, and resolve conflicts (Pistorova & Slutsky, 2020). It also allows them to understand different perspectives and build empathy (Parker & Thomson, 2019). Furthermore, play can be instrumental in boosting self-esteem and emotional regulation. O'Connor et al (2017) shares that play is the essence of childhood learning and the richer the play, the richer the learning outcomes for the child.

Despite this evidence, a major challenge to widespread adoption of play-based learning is parental scepticisms, especially among those who view academic success as rooted in rote learning or structured instruction. Studies like those by Xunyi & Hui (2018) highlight that many parents still believe real learning begins only when children sit still, read, write, and memorize. This perception underscores a cultural and communication gap between educators and families. In sum, play-based learning is not just a method, it's a mindset that prioritizes the whole child.

## **2.8 Parenting and play in early childhood education**

Parental involvement in a child's world of play is crucial to the parent as well, since playing with children establishes and strengthens bonds which is key for the child's safety and security (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey,2010). Parent-child play provides an opportunity for sharing of values, increasing communication, allowing for teaching moments whilst helping to solve problems (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Play with the child gives chance for both to confront and resolve individual differences, as well as family related concerns and issues of security (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey,2010). This ultimately gives a parent a chance to view the world through the lens of a child. Hiniker et al., (2018) back parent-child play in that it supports parent-child bonding, communication and connectedness are fostered, and promoting learning and emotional development. They further argue that parent-child engagement during play predicts children's social relations with peers, and that children learn more when playing with an adult who can scaffold their engagement with materials that is providing support that permits the child to try new activities that the child could not accomplish on their own. While the

discussion highlights the importance of parental engagement in play, it does not fully address the disparities caused by socioeconomic factors. Low-income families may face barriers such as time constraints, lack of access to educational resources, and limited literacy skills, which hinder their ability to support their child's development and learning effectively.

Gertler et al. (2014) as cited by Yasmin et al. (2020) state that studies have given evidence backing a causal influence of parent-child play on child developmental outcomes. Such as encouraging parents and caregivers to engage in positive playful interactions with children found long-term associations with cognitive, social and internalising outcomes. Just like some clinical parenting programmes focusing on providing positive parent-child interactions through child-led play such as allowing the children to choose toys and the parent/caregiver following the child have been found to promote positive attachment and reduce child problem behaviours (Kaehler, Jacobs, & Jones, 2016). Parents are by default a primary source of influence on child play, especially during early development since children at this stage are dependent on their parents and use play to learn about their environment (Garner & Bergen, 2015). It follows that parent involvement in play has an important role in child development. Attitudes and behaviours of parents towards play vary across cultures and communities, parents may also differ in how much time they spend engaging with child play, the types of play activities they engage with and the quality of their contribution to child-led play. According to Adamson, Rouse, and Emmett (2021), parents who actively engage in their child's play by providing support, asking open-ended questions, and modelling behaviour, can extend the play experience, leading to deeper learning. For example, parents who participate in pretend play or narrative play with their children can enhance language development, problem-solving skills, and creativity.

Adamson et al (2021) further indicate that parents can foster a supportive play environment by providing appropriate toys, materials, and space for imaginative play. Simple materials like building blocks, art supplies, or outdoor equipment can stimulate creativity and learning (Olsen & Smith, 2020). Studies such as Linberg, Lehl, and Weinert (2020) argue that the availability of rich, open-ended materials in the home environment is linked to enhanced cognitive and social outcomes. Olsen and Smith (2020) have a view that parental encouragement of independent play while being available for support contributes to child development, further showing that when children have time and space for free play, especially outdoors or in unstructured settings, they develop stronger problem-solving and self-regulation skills.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. Play, particularly guided play by a parent, provides an opportunity for children to practice social roles, cooperate with others, and manage emotions. The literature also notes that parents are a child's first and most influential play partners, especially in early years when children are most reliant on their caregivers (Garner & Bergen, 2015). However, parental attitudes and engagement in play differ across cultures and communities, affecting the quality and frequency of these interactions.

## **2.9 Parental view about play based learning in early childhood**

Parental views on the value of play in early childhood education (ECE) vary significantly. It is important to understand that the meaning and value of play vary across cultures and context. Parents provide a pivotal and crucial role on how play is defined, valued and practiced (Xunyi & Hui, 2018). Children's early play experiences in their immediate environment with parents as primary caregivers remains key in ensuring that they facilitate and initiate activities of play in nature in a home (Roopnarine, 2011 in Lungu and Matafwali, 2020). It follows that parents are provided with possible means to support school efforts. The literature reveals that parental views on play-based learning (PBL) in early childhood education are both diverse and culturally influenced, reflecting a dynamic interplay between traditional beliefs, societal expectations, and increasing awareness of child development principles.

Babuc (2015) says that most parents see play as essential for developing foundational skills like problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking. Parents often recognize that activities such as building with blocks, drawing, or playing educational games promote cognitive skills in ways that feel natural and enjoyable for their children (Olsen & Smith, 2020). A core strength identified here is that many parents recognize the developmental benefits of play beyond mere amusement. These activities can lay the groundwork for more formal learning later on. Basnyat (2023) shares that parents frequently emphasize the role of play in fostering emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills. Through play, children learn how to navigate relationships, share, cooperate, and manage conflict, which are crucial for their emotional growth and social interactions (Pramling, et al, 2019).

Guide (2017) found that parents view play as an enjoyable, low-pressure way for children to learn. They often understand that when children are engaged in playful activities, they are more motivated to participate and absorb new concepts. Some parents believe that play-based learning reduces stress (Cowan, 2020) compared to more traditional academic tasks, especially

for younger children. Nardo (2021) pinpoints that some parents recognize that their involvement in their child's play whether by providing materials, participating directly, or simply supporting their exploration enhances the educational value of play. They often see their role as providing a safe, stimulating environment that encourages their child's curiosity and creativity (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010). However, some parents still undervalue the role of play in learning, viewing it as less important than more academic pursuits like reading, writing, or math (Bipath et al., 2022). This can stem from cultural or societal pressures that prioritize academic achievement over creative or free play. Parents with this mindset might need more education and guidance on how play contributes to learning and development (Lungu and Matafwali, 2020).

Xunyi and Hui (2018) observes that parents may support play-based learning but might also express a preference for more structured or guided play, particularly when they can see direct links to learning objectives. Parents may be more comfortable with play when it clearly aligns with measurable learning outcomes suggesting that parental acceptance of PBL increases when its academic relevance is visible. For example, parents may appreciate educational games or activities that focus on specific skills, such as learning the alphabet or practicing math, even within the context of play (Arnott, & Yelland, 2020).

## **2.10 Obstacles to parental involvement in play-based learning in early childhood**

Despite the documented benefits of parental involvement in play-based learning, other studies have also highlighted various obstacles that may impede parental involvement in supporting play-based learning. Some of these include Cooper-Kahn and Dietzel (2024) who pointed out on time constraints that busy schedules and competing priorities can limit the amount of time parents have to engage in meaningful play with their children. Daniels and Pyle (2018) agree that many parents, especially those who work full-time or have other commitments, find it difficult to dedicate time to support their children's learning. Duncan, Kalil, Mogstad, and Rege (2023), argue that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face additional challenges, such as limited access to resources or fewer opportunities for enriching play. For instance, the availability of materials for creative or educational play may be restricted due to financial constraints, affecting the types of play experiences parents can provide. Bipath et al. (2022) says that working parents, hurried lifestyles, instant entertainment on smart phones, and increased emphasis on academics, all reduce play time. Considering the current trends in this competitive world where the emphasis is on individual success, play-based learning continues to be challenged by education authorities and parents alike (Bipath et al. 2022). Parents' lack

of understanding of their roles in children's play, lack of leisure, lack of space and use of media and digital toys for children have affected and reduced children's free play. This reduces not only the quantity but also the quality of playtime, where meaningful interaction with children becomes a rare occurrence. Added to this is the influence of digital media, where children are increasingly engaged with screens rather than interactive or imaginative play

On one hand some parents may lack knowledge about the benefits of play-based learning or how to engage in it effectively (Singh & Ngadni, 2023). Xunyi and Hui (2018) found that parents may not always recognize the educational value of play, leading them to prioritize more traditional, academic forms of learning. O'Gorman and Ailwood (2012) as shown in Dockett (2011) report that teachers view parental attitudes towards play creates a barrier to play in early childhood and that parents seemed not to value play, seeking instead a focus on what was considered work. Additionally, discrepancies between parents' and educators' perceptions of play-based learning can create challenges. While educators may prioritize the developmental benefits of unstructured play, parents often view structured academic activities as more valuable (Lin et al., 2013). The prevailing obstacles indicate a disconnect between educators' intentions and parents' perceptions, suggesting the urgent need for targeted communication, education, and collaboration between early childhood education (ECE) centres and families. They also indicate that indigenous Australian parents placed high value on play generally, especially play that featured indigenous content. Roopnarine (2011) shares that workshops, programs, or guidance from early childhood educators may be needed to help parents feel confident in supporting play-based activities.

One other obstacle to playful learning as observed by UNICEF (2018) is misconception of play by parents and caregivers, who view play as not important and that the time is spent on play at the expense of true learning. A study in Malaysia by Singh and Ngadni (2023) show that teachers are not able to integrate play successfully because parents strongly view that only traditional methods of teaching can help develop their child to succeed and further put pressure on schools for high rankings through learners' excellent academic achievement and primary level ready learners. Singh and Ngadni (2023) indicate that schools needed to inform parents on how teachers are using play in what they teach. From this study it is clear that parents' focus is on the child's readiness to have a place and show excellency in their primary education, with playful learning restricted to those in nursery. These findings are a clear manifestation that schools have not provided enough information about learning through play activities and on how it should be conducted. This reflects a broader systemic issue that is the gap in

communication between schools and families. If parents are unaware of how PBL supports foundational skills like language, problem-solving, and emotional regulation, they will naturally default to more visible, testable academic outcomes. Policies and school initiatives must bridge this gap by providing accessible support systems for parents. This could be an indication of lack of school and parent interaction. Despite the increasing recognition of the importance of play in early learning, there is still little consensus on parents' understanding of play and their engagement in supporting their young children through playful interactions.

Playful learning has been a controversial issue among most parents who perceive ECE as platform for children to learn to speak English with proficiency and do some mathematical concepts of counting, addition and subtraction. Okitsu, Edwards Jr, Mwanza, and Miller (2023) observes that parents have a strong preference to centres that offer highly academic oriented curriculum and taught in English. Parents are clamouring and pressuring the centres to use English Language instead of the mother tongue, that most communities and societies are heterogeneous (Kalinde, 2016; Kalinde, 2017; Kalinde, 2023; Okewole, Abuovbo & Abosede, 2015). The tension is further exacerbated by cultural expectations, where academic success is closely tied to social mobility, especially in multilingual or post-colonial societies that value English fluency. This has created an enormous challenge to enhance play-based pedagogy.

## **2.11 Summary**

The literature on parental involvement in play-based learning highlights the significant impact that parents can have on supporting their children's development in the early years. By engaging in play, providing enriching materials, and fostering environments that encourage exploration and creativity, parents contribute to their children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth. However, barriers such as time constraints, socioeconomic factors, and lack of knowledge may hinder parents from fully supporting play-based learning. Therefore, it is essential for early childhood educators to develop strategies that engage parents and empower them with the knowledge and tools necessary to support their children's learning through play. Through these efforts, we can ensure that children can develop essential skills that will benefit them throughout their lives.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter presents the research methodology that was used in the study. It describes the research approach, design, target population, sample size, sampling procedure and instruments for data collection. Furthermore, the procedure that was used for data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations has been presented.

### **3.2 Research Approach**

Qualitative research focuses on understanding people's experiences, perceptions, and meanings they attach to phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In this case, it allowed the researcher to explore how parents perceive, interpret, and engage in play-based learning, which is very tilted towards their personal values, beliefs, and cultural contexts. The study adopted a qualitative approach to ensure a more in-depth and complete understanding of practices, experiences and perceptions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) in parental involvement and how these factors can support playful learning in Early Childhood Education. The approach enabled the collection of rich, descriptive data that revealed the complexity of parental involvement. It necessitated the researcher to dig deeper into how and why parents support or do not support play-based learning, which would not be possible with a purely quantitative approach. Tomaszewski, Zarestky and Gonzalez, (2020) show that qualitative approach seeks to deeply understand a research subject by building knowledge through individuals' unique viewpoints and the meanings they attach to those experiences. This gave the study a richer and more reliable understanding about parental involvement and how learning through play can be supported.

### **3.3 Research Design**

The study used a case study design to understand how parents can support play-based learning in early childhood. Parental involvement can vary significantly across different contexts, influenced by factors such as culture, socioeconomic status, school policies, and community engagement. Therefore, the use of a case study design enabled the collection of detailed data on how parental involvement is practiced in specific settings, providing rich and descriptive insights. Given the study's focus on understanding parental perceptions, which require qualitative exploration of personal experiences, attitudes, and beliefs, the case study approach

was appropriate, as it supported the use of interviews and focus groups. These methods were ideal for capturing in-depth perceptions.

Furthermore, recognizing that effective strategies to enhance parental involvement are often context-specific and embedded within unique institutional settings, the case study design allowed for an in-depth examination of real-life interventions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and strategies as they are implemented and experienced in particular ECE centres. Considering that both parental involvement and play-based learning are shaped by the social, cultural, and institutional environments in which they occur, the case study design allowed the research to investigate these phenomena within their natural settings. This preserved contextual relevance and provided a holistic understanding.

The study included parents or guardians of children attending selected Early Childhood Centres in Kitwe. Secondly, were ECE teachers in the respective selected centres who provided an insight from the educators' perspective through a focus group discussion (Yin, 2017). It enabled the researcher to explore complex, context-dependent experiences and behaviours by focusing on actual practices, perceptions (Tomaszewski et al., 2020), and challenges faced by parents and educators, moreover the subject of study is contemporary.

### **3.4 Study population**

The study population comprised parents who have children in the various ECE centres that is, in all the ECE centres in Kitwe district as well as the ECE teachers in the district.

### **3.5 Sampling technique**

The study composed of 20 schools including 10 public and 10 private schools which were selected purposively. Ten (10) teachers from public schools and ten (10) from private ECE centres were selected purposively for the focus group discussions by virtue of them being the teachers for the group of interest, but nine (9) teachers from the public schools and seven (7) from private schools took part in the study. Twelve (12) parents were conveniently selected from each school, with the help of the teacher.

### **3.6 Sample size**

A sample size of 20 parents whose children are attending Early Childhood Education from 20 ECE centres. The 20 parents were conveniently selected from among the parents whose children attend ECE in a purposively selected school, but only 12 parents (3 males and 9 females) including 6 (1 male and 5 females) from public schools and 6 (2 males and 4 females)

from private schools participated in the study. Three focus group discussions were used to collect data from 26 teachers (all females) on their experiences about parental involvement in supporting learning through play in their respective schools.

### **3.7 Data collection instruments and data collection methods**

Data collection in a qualitative study refers to the process designed to capture rich non-numerical, in-depth information to understand people's experiences, behaviours, emotions, and social contexts, it aims to explore meaning and interpretation (Howitt & Cramer, 2020). The semi-structured interview guides were used to collect data from parents and the focus group discussion guide was used to collect data from the ECE teachers.

#### **a. Semi-structured interview**

A semi-structured interview guide is a tool used in qualitative research to conduct interviews that are flexible yet focused. It consists of a list of open-ended questions or topics that the interviewer plans to cover, but it allows for spontaneity and deeper probing based on the participant's responses (Howitt & Cramer, 2020). The guide includes core questions aligned with the study's objectives. Encourages detailed, thoughtful responses rather than simple yes or no answers. Interviewers can ask follow-up questions, rephrase questions, or explore new topics that emerge during the conversation. Allows for richer, more nuanced data because it captures participants' perspectives in their own words. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview guide format allowed the researcher to explore participants' unique perspectives while maintaining consistency across interviews (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were administered to parents to explore their involvement in supporting play-based learning of their children in ECE on a face-to-face basis as well as on phone. Interviews were conducted to examine the in-depth of specific issues identified in the data collected to better understand the data. Interviews were conducted to provide a basis for gaining views and opinions (Creswell, 2009) from the parents on issues to do with parental involvement. Face-to-face interviews allowed for the observation of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language, offering deeper insight into participants' emotions and attitudes. These subtle details enriched the data beyond what written or phone interviews could provide. Where physical meetings were not possible, phone interviews were conducted as an alternative.

## **b. Focus group discussion.**

A focus group discussion (FGD) guide is a structured tool used in qualitative research to facilitate and manage group interviews (Cohen et al., 2018). It outlines the key topics, questions, and prompts that a researcher uses to direct the discussion among participants, typically around a central research theme (Rabiee, 2004). A FGD ensures consistency across different group discussions, it helps the researcher stay focused on the research questions.

Focus group discussion guide provides a platform where participants can share and compare experiences, perceptions, and strategies in a collective setting, which is particularly valuable in exploring shared professional practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that teachers regularly interact with both children and parents, they are in a unique position to observe the dynamics of parental involvement and its impact on children's learning through play. The group arrangement allowed teachers to reflect on their own practices, while also responding to and building upon the ideas of their peers. This kind of collaborative dialogue often leads to deeper insights than individual interviews might uncover. They also allow the researcher to observe consensus or diversity of opinions on key issues, including how schools can improve partnerships with parents (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The focus group has a uniqueness in its ability to bring out data based on the synergy of the group interaction, can provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that teachers have about parental involvement as well as illuminating the differences in perspective among the individuals in a group (Rabiee, 2004). Three (3) focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. The first FGD consisted of 10 female teachers, 5 from private ECE centres and 5 from public ECE centres. The second FGD included 9 female teachers from public ECE centres, while the third FGD comprised 6 female teachers from private ECE centres. All participants across the three FGDs were female.

## **3.8 Data analysis**

Data analysis in a qualitative study involves examining, interpreting, and making sense of non-numerical data to understand underlying meanings, patterns, themes, and relationships (Roseveare, 2023). It involves systematically organizing and synthesizing qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, observation notes, or textual documents to derive insights and address the research questions.

### **3.8.1 Qualitative data**

On qualitative data, the study implored themes to analyse the data. Valsiner and Branco (2006) explains that thematic analysis of data involves asking broad and in-depth questions and collecting word data from the participants then the researcher observes related themes and categorises the data and identifies recurring patterns related to parental involvement and play based learning. In this way data was grouped into observed themes and classes. This provided a basis for discussion and interpretation. Data analysis majorly delves into classifying things, persons, and events and the properties and characteristics they have (Creswell, 2013). Data from the interviews and focus group discussion was transcribed and coded and analysed to identify and explore themes, patterns and relationships. Any patterns that emerged were of particular interest and value and represented the key themes.

### **3.9 Trustworthiness of the data**

Triangulation of multiple data sources and methods to cross-validate findings and enhance the credibility of the study. Detailed descriptions of the research context, data collection processes, and analytical techniques was provided to allow readers to assess the credibility of the study. Triangulation of data and methods was done by involving different groups of people that is parents (multiple socioeconomical background) and teachers from schools of different status to enhance the study's reliability. Interviews and focus group discussions were employed to explore the participants' in-depth feeling and experience about how parental involvement can support play-based learning. A detailed record of the research process, including data collection instruments, raw data, and data analysis procedures was maintained to ensure that the research can be replicated or verified by others. Comprehensive descriptions of the research context, participants, and methods to allow readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings or populations was provided. Findings of the study were compared with existing literature and similar studies in different contexts to highlight potential commonalities and differences.

### **3.10 Ethical considerations**

During the main study, before administering any instrument, clearance from the University of Zambia research ethical committee and permission was sought. Further, the researcher got permission from the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS), head teachers in schools that were involved in the study to collect data. Thereafter, participants' informed consent was obtained as well. All participants were assured of total confidentiality. It was made clear from

the data collection instruments that the information provided was to be used for academic purposes only. The names of all the participants in the study remained anonymous and instead pseudonyms were applied for instance P1 for Parent 1 and F1T1 for teacher 1 in the focus group 1, P2 to P7 have their children in private schools, whilst P1, P8 to P12 have children in public schools. Further, the participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time if they so wished without any form of penalty.

### **3.11 Summary**

This chapter has provided a description of the methodology that was used to collect the necessary data. It has also highlighted the study design, target population, sample size and sampling procedure, instruments for data collection and the procedure used, how data analysis was conducted to help the reader understand how the findings of the study were arrived at. The chapter ends with an account of the ethical considerations that were made in relation to the study. The next chapter presents the findings of the study.

## CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

### 4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the research findings on the exploration of parental involvement in supporting play-based learning (PBL) with focus on selected schools in Kitwe District, Zambia. The findings of the study are organized according to the research questions as presented below:

- i. What forms of parental involvement are practised to support PBL in the ECE
- ii. What is the perception of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings?
- iii. What strategies are used to strengthen parental involvement in supporting play-based learning during early childhood?

### 4.2 Forms of parental involvement practiced supporting PBL in the ECE centres.

Teachers play a vital role in facilitating PBL within schools, parents' involvement at home and in school settings can enhance its impact. This section gives the findings on the forms of parental involvement in PBL within ECE, organized into three main themes including, parental engagement in play-based learning, parental support through provision of resources and materials, benefits of parental involvement in PBL.

#### 4.2.1 Parental engagement in play-based learning

The theme on parents' engagement in supporting and participation in their children's learning through play is discussed with a focus on the frequency of their engagement as well as forms of activities applied to reinforce learning, also the findings on the parental engagement at home and at school are presented.

##### 4.2.1.1 Nature of parental activities practised to support PBL

On the kind of activities and materials parents engage their children with, the responses varied from one parent to the other, with most of them expressing that they provide children with building blocks, dolls, toys and games involving shapes, colours and numbers as well as singing with the children. Some parents role play with their children as well, for example Parent 8 mentioned that;

*I am involved in play with the child at home, I have got the child the building blocks, and letters. We play hide and seek with the letters in the home, the child is made to*

*identify the letters. At home I engage my child in some games such as kwampa and these helps the child know how to count.*

Most parents shared that there were no activities for parental engagement in the school, as parents were only invited for obligatory activities. Parent 3 said *No activities I do at her school and I teach songs to children at home.*

Parents were asked how often they were involved in their children's play-based learning activities both at the ECE centre and at home and most of the parents responded that they were involved with child's play at home and not at school, further the findings show variation on the frequency of their engagement in play with their children at home with most stating that they do so on daily basis after work.

*We usually do this, for me it's on a daily basis when I get home (P4).*

*Almost always, immediately I arrive home she will be all over me as we chat..... do you remember the song I taught you, she will sing it back to me and I will say what numbers did you hear in the song (P6)*

*I am involved but not so much because I come back home late. Eeee, but not nshita itali njisa chungulo(not for a long time, I come in the evening) (P10)*

Generally, parents from both the public and private school engage their children in play at home after work. There is limited parental engagement on both groups.

Parents in private schools, who tend to belong to middle or higher-income households, have resources to be able to engage in their children's playful learning. They may provide educational toys, support home-based play, and attend school events that reinforce the home-school connection. Besides they have the means to create play-rich environments at home that complement what is learned in school. As parent 2 shared;

*I ensure I provide material for my child to use whilst at home such as toys*

*I have to make sure that she has all the toys, I have to make sure that she is safe, she is okay, if she is in the mood yees. I have to make sure this is the time, ... I have to make sure that she has all the resources that are needed into that. I buy whatever toys I find necessary*

On the other hand, public school parents often face economic hardships that limit their ability to purchase play materials or spend time engaging in play, though some are able to engage their children in DIY resources as shared by parent 11;

*efyompangila kung'anda ine ni motoka, twaputula utu twa shake and sip twabika na tuma lids (what I make at home are toy cars from used bottles and we fix bottle lids as wheels) (P3)*

*At home we make dolls and other toys, ...ma toys, sometimes tulapanga fyakupangapanga. (we at times make various items) (P8)*

Notably their socioeconomic status affects their level and quality of support that children receive at home for play-based learning activities initiated at school.

#### **4.2.1.2 Home-Based Engagement**

The study brought out three aspect of home-based engagement which include play at home, home learning environment and parent-child play interaction.

Extension of play beyond classroom include allowing children to play freely with friends, at homes and in the neighbourhood. The study explored how parents engaged their children at home and the parents revealed that, they engage their children in various ways ranging from providing resources for play, in some instances playing with the parents. On one hand, some parents expressed the importance of allowing children to interact and play with friends in the neighbourhood. Parent 11 commented that;

*At home yes and not at school, I buy the toys for the child at home. (P3)*

*I bought a bicycle and I am teaching her how to ride it, play the ball with my child, role plays cooking(P5)*

*I have ever gone to her class and share with the children about my career(P2)*

*Ine palwandi eflyo njafwilisha kung'anda nga ainuka, ndabikako ka cartoon, naikamo ka kusukulu tulya umwaba tunyimbo, tum letters.....baleimba filya fine(In my case in help my child at home after he knocks off, I play cartoons with songs such as those with letters)(P9)*

*I ensure that toys, books, and other things that should be of help for learning are available, and I engage her in games. You also let the child sing songs and play certain*

*games with other children. ... As parents even at home you let them go out and play with their friends.(P12)*

Teachers shared that parents are advised on ensuring that they get their children playful resources, encouraging parents to allow their children to mould so as to develop fine motors and also share with parents the jolly phonics app so that they can engage the children at home.

*Yes, we do advise parents on what kind of material to have or to buy for their children to play with at home. We encourage parents to have building blocks, puzzles, balls, number and letter charts and story pictures (F1T8).*

*Parents are asked to have time to see and observe what activities children do at school, this will help the parents understand how play-based learning is conducted. (F1T3)*

*Parents are encouraged to support activities such as fruit day, ... in a week just a make up a day, parents are allowed to pass through the school.....play with the children just for some minutes(F3T2)*

*Parents can also acquire playful material for children such as toys and encourage them to play with the children(F3T5)*

Parents recognised the need to have an environment that is safe with adequate resources and play material, besides they indicated that they watch over the children's play to ensure the children play rightfully.

*From my observation on the classroom set up during the open day I realised that children are involved in play, this helped me know how to engage my child at home ensuring there is enough material for the child to use as well as at times playing together (P8).*

*Conducive environment with a carpet were children play from, ...having adequate toys, this is to avoid possessiveness of toys. (P2)*

To ensure a rich learning environment teachers reacted too, that it is the role of families to establish home environments that support children for PBL, and as such a teacher indicated that parents are usually encouraged to ensure that children are allowed to play at home. Apart from that parents are advised to spare time and chat with their children. Some teachers said that as schools we often call parents to observe the different PBL activities done in class.

*Parents to have time to see and observe what activities children are engaged in at school as well as at home. (FIT4)*

*Some homes are very restrictive such that children are never free to play, and therefore parents need to make home environments play friendly. (FIT2)*

The study further explored the parent-child relationship to find out how nurturing and responsive the parents are in facilitating play. Most parents showed that they find time to play with their children most especially during weekends.

Parent 4 re-emphasised the importance of parent-child interaction as way of ensuring that you understand the child and as way of guiding on wanted behaviour.

*I don't believe in raising voices to kids because it lowers their self-esteem, so the responsibility of the parent is to listen to the child first even if he/she is wrong and try to find a way of correcting it in a way that does not shatter down the child's confidence.*

*Yes, as a parent its important because it helps to identify strength and weakness of the child. (P8)*

Parent 7 shared that it's difficult to play with the child because of sex orientation;

*As a father, I have a challenge playing with my daughter because of sex difference, though I buy her materials to use at home such as crayons.*

#### **4.2.1.3 Parental engagement with the school.**

In this case the study seeks to examine the connections parents have over their children's educational settings. This part deduced four areas of school engagement which include school visits and class observation, secondly is attending meetings and open days, thirdly is collaborative relationships with teachers, and fourthly having opportunities for engagement provided by schools.

The finding in this case was that parents do not visit schools nor do they go to observe classes.

*No activities for parental engagement in the school, as parents we are only involved through obligatory activities(P3).*

Teachers were also asked whether parents visit the school or do they take time to observe classes, responses were of varied perspective for instance most teachers indicated that parents at her school only visit the school during open days and when there is special event in the

school. One parent stated that parents only come to pick children, they never have time to go into the child's class and observe the learning process.

*Most parent allege that they are busy to spare time for play with their children(F1T4)*

*Not able to meet the parents as they send other caregivers/siblings to bring/pick them from school(F2T5) as such we don't meet the parents*

From the discussion with the teachers, it was noted that most parents manage to attend to such activities because it is an obligation. These meeting are generally for the welfare of the school and not the play- based learning. Parent 6 affirmed that;

*Yes, I would say that parents are participating because they turn up in very large numbers when we are doing sports and other extracurricular activities.*

Teachers were asked about their view on how they could enhance collaborative relationship with parents, one teacher quickly brought the aspect of guest teachers, which she said was a welcome idea and gave an example at her school where a parent was asked to teach some aspect of painting and art, in turn motivating the children more particularly his children. One teacher further shared that;

*...you engage parents in making games and ask that they play with their children at home. (F3T3)*

*We involve parents when it comes to traditional music, we approach parents who have knowledge about this. Parents at (name of school) provide traditional music to children, they make dolls as well. (F2T1)*

The study delved into finding out from teachers whether there were any opportunities for engagement by parents created by the school. One teacher pointed out that during orientation, the school has deliberately put it that parents are taken around the classrooms and explain the features in the early childhood classrooms. An important aspect raised was that when parents are aware of the play-based learning they can fully contribute to the play for children. Some parents were of the view that opportunities for their engagement are available and parent emphasised that it just calls for innovation on part of the teachers and the schools.

*We support the teachers by coming to the meetings, discussing with the teacher, come for sensitization and follow what the guidelines are saying, help the child coming to school every day and allowing them play at home (P11).*

On the contrary, a teacher from a private school shared that;

*We don't have an opportunity to talk to parents, school owners are focused on ensuring that the emphasis is on reading and writing, therefore play is not much used. (FIT9)*

*Parents are usually busy, they only bring and take children, making it difficult to share about the child's learning(FIT5).*

#### **4.2.2 Parental support through provision of resources and materials**

In this section parental support through provision of resources and materials in early childhood education (ECE) which involves parents providing the tools, materials, and resources needed to enhance play-based learning (PBL) and promote developmental growth is presented. This theme will be discussed by looking into the aspect of parental provision of play material and resources that support PBL, how it is ensured that material is available at home and at school and lastly the discussion will navigate on the guidance and knowledge about PBL.

##### **4.2.2.1 Providing play resources and materials for PBL at home and school**

Asked what sort of play material parents would expect in their child's class to use for play, most of the parents shared that they expect a variety of material that would include bottle tops, dolls, toy cars, balls, skipping ropes, drums shakers, including building blocks with three letter words-as they build children to be able to read in the class, other toys with numbers and letters as well as shapes, parents shared that they would want to see materials that would help their child become creative and imaginative, as Parent 4 put it that;

*I should expect material that help them develop their brains into being creative, ...may be objects, toys that help her identify shapes, colours.*

*Expect blocks with three letter words-as they build children are able to read in the class, other toys with numbers and letters. (P3)*

*Twapusanapusana tuma toys, tudoli, twakubumbabumba twamaloba shani (different type of toys and moulding toys) (P10)*

*ku ECE banaikako maningi nzelu in term of vosebenzesa kutandizila apunzisi...kuli tudoli, tuma ma number tuliko, ubwino wakaena vofunikila vambili viliko, sometimes*

*kuli naka nema (effort has been put at ECE in terms of material to use to help teachers...there are toys, number cards, the goodness is that most of the needed materials are available) (P7)*

The teachers were asked if they engage parents on the kind of play material to use at home, most teachers agreed that they advise parents on what kind of material to get for children's play at home. And parents are encouraged to have building blocks, puzzles, balls, number and letter charts as well as story pictures. Parents are guided on what kind of resources they can have for their children.

*Some parents come to ask what kind of material to buy for their learners (F3T3).*

In sourcing play material, the teachers shared that often they receive good support from parents as teachers commented that some parents help the school with material such bottle tops and empty bottles, also was the construction of a playground of which parents contributed material such poles and tyres. Another teacher shared also that parents were invited in school and made a variety of dolls and took some extra toys home for their children's play.

*I requested for material such as tyres from parents, and parents donated and painted the tyres and fixed them. They went further to cut trees and fixed swings for children... (FIT1).*

*Allow some parents do some demonstrations to learners in form of learning through play. (F2T7)*

Teachers shared that they encourage parents to acquire toys and any other play material including making from locally available resources for children's play at home. In other cases, teachers explained that they ask parents to get material (e.g. manilla paper) and then make play material and then they share with parents for home play.

*we can make puzzle, funny activities such as running lotto, flash cards for parents and ask them to play with their children at home (F3T6).*

*Once in a while we advise parents what kind of games/activities they can engage children(F2T8)*

*We encourage parents to engage their children in some of the house chores as way of learning through play(F2T5).*

#### 4.2.2.3 Guidance and knowledge about play based learning.

This section will be discussed under the following subthemes which include orientation of parents on PBL, how parents encourage each other on engaging their children in PBL and lastly will address sharing play resources and knowledge with parents.

Parents were asked whether they have any specialized workshops, training sessions, or informational resources provided to them as parents to support their involvement in PBL, the parents provided mixed responses, as one parent agreed that they often have meetings at school with the ECE teachers, on another hand most parents disagreed that they never have meeting that focus on how parents can support PBL and Parent 2 emphasised that;

*Apart from the orientation meeting we had; no specialised meeting has ever been offered to parents.*

*Need some orientation to parents to ensure parents know how to help the children at home(P3)*

*No no no no as parents we have never been called upon to participate in that way you have mentioned, but during open days parents interact with both teachers and learners.....parents come into the classroom, whilst a teacher is attending to one parent, the other parents would be moving around the classroom to see what learners do..... is this what children are doing , how can I help, they interact in that way.(P6)*

On whether parents encourage each other on how integrate PBL into their interactions with children at home, one agreed that she encourages other parents to ensure they engage their children in chores at home involving the children in small chores example when cooking, washing. *As parents we need to enlighten each other on the care and learning of children (P7).*

Teachers were asked how they encourage parents to participate in their child's play-based learning activities at the centre as well as at home. Teachers agreed that they share with parents the benefits of play based learning as well as giving examples of successful stories.

Teacher F2T9 observed that;

*Engaging parents in the production of teaching resources can enhance parental engagement in their children's play.*

*Some parents have come to school to find out about appropriate material that children can use for play, we have shared with some parents on how to some of the education apps such as the jolly phonics app(F3T2)*

*Involving children with a lot of projects has shown how parents are involved for example picking bottle tops for a particular activity. (F3T7)*

Teachers were further asked to find out what types of support or resources they think would help parents be more actively engaged in supporting play-based learning. Most teachers pointed out the importance of parents having time to see and observe what activities children do at school, this will help the parents understand how play-based learning is conducted. Engaging parents to ensure they avoid excessive restrictiveness in homes and making home environment safe and play friendly. Asked whether the teachers do chat with parents about the need for them to play with their children at home, in response some teachers agreed that they encourage parents to engage their children in activities such as start, *waida*, *masapo*, *ciyenga* and *insolo*

*At times when they come to pick children...we engage in playing waida (hopscotch), water packing and we ask parents to join (F2T3).*

Teachers were further asked what resources or support they thought would help parents better understand and participate in play-based learning initiatives, they mentioned the importance of meeting parents in form of workshops were information on PBL can be shared.

*Show casing activities done by children, parents become motivated when they see the strength of their children. (F2T6)*

*Share with parents the benefits of play based learning as well as giving examples of successful stories(F3T2)*

*Parents are often invited to class to see how their children learn and asked to do so at home with the children. (F3T1)*

#### **4.3 Perception of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings.**

Parents' perceptions of their involvement in supporting play-based learning in early childhood education reflect a range of beliefs, practices, and expectations. These perceptions are shaped by their understanding of play's value, school involvement opportunities, and their own experiences with learning. The subject will be discussed based on the themes parental

understanding of PBL, parental involvement in PBL, their perception of PBL, creating a supportive learning environment and challenges in PI for PBL.

#### **4.3.1 Parental understanding of play based learning**

The findings show that parents have a mixed view of what PBL is and can be noted from their responses when asked what they understood about the concept. The findings are discussed by looking at their level of awareness and possible knowledge gaps, ways through parents are informed about PBL and their communication preference.

Parents were asked to explain what they understood about play based learning (PBL), most parents expressed limited understanding of the concept, but after a brief review some related to what they do at home with their children.

*Not aware about PBL, but from your explanation I am able to relate with the kind of activities children do at home (P2).*

*Learners playing freely with minimum supervision(P1)*

*Playing with toys-cars, kulaba kwangala ma games apusanapusana (P8)*

*It's something that has to do with the children, they are playing, as they are playing they are learning, so they grasp some points where they put it as a real life situation. (P11)*

Most of the parents expressed their understanding by giving examples of what children do at home as well as the kind of tasks given by their teachers as explained by Parent 7 who shared that;

*...after school my child informs me about the activities done at school such as painting/shading /colouring mentioning the objects coloured.*

Enquiring on how parents can be informed about play, some teachers said that they do not have an opportunity to talk to parents, because school owners are focused on ensuring that the emphasis is on reading and writing, therefore play is not much used.

Teachers from public schools said that most learners, come to school with their older siblings making it difficult for the teachers to meet the parents and possibly share about the play based learning. Most teachers indicated that during the orientation they have chats with teachers, and it is during these meetings that some teachers tend to share on play as an approach to teaching the children. The teachers said that parents are invited to observe children's learning process

for example painting/moulding this gives teachers time and opportunity to have conversations with parents about their child.

*...during orientation what we do us, we explain what PBL is...(F2T1).*

Most parents agreed that during open days teachers take advantage to share some few things about learning through play.

Asked about how the parents prefer to communicate with the teachers regarding children's play-based learning progress and activities, parents shared that communication means should be by having meetings or creating platforms where parents can have an opportunity to express themselves freely with respective teachers or schools.

*We can chat on whatsapp, give a direct call or possibly visit the school and have a one-on-one discussion (P2).*

Some parents shared that the teachers write on small pieces of paper to communicate to the parents whenever they want to inform or call parents. Whilst another parent said that teachers communicate to parents through the children.

Parents from both private and public early childhood centres are generally limited on the understanding of PBL. Because of the limited awareness about PBL both public and private early childhood centres, many parents still associate education with formal, teacher-led instruction and may undervalue play as a learning tool. Some of the responses from the participants are;

*I just heard about it that there is this LTP that has been introduced, I have just been trying to understand play based learning.(P3)*

*I have heard, but not on a deeper level, the little knowledge I have about it is more like the way I usually do it with my daughter where you have a field of games... things which have shapes, colours it can be toys but she will be having something(P4)*

*Not aware of learning through play as a mode of teaching, not at all(P5)*

*Playing with toys-cars, kulaba kwangala ma games apusanapusana(they play different type of games) (P8)*

*Kulaba ififine limbi nganabesa kuno, kalesa mukulondolola ba teacher bacitupela twa kwangasha shani, bacitwimbisha tumanyimbo...nefyapusanapusana (when my child*

*comes home, she explains that the teacher had given items to play with, made us sing and other things.) (P10)*

*It's something that has to do with the children, they are playing, as they are playing they are learning, so there they grasp some points where they put it as a real-life situation. (P11)*

Both type of schools provides orientation meetings, workshops, and irregular updates that educate parents on children's activities at school, but rarely about learning through play.

*apart from the orientation meeting we have, no specialised meeting has ever been offered to parents(P2)*

*Only during open day, is the only time teachers tell us about the child. (P5)*

*Limolimo balatwitako ma teachers (sometimes teachers call us... nga lulya tuleleta abana ukutampa sukulu balatweba ifisangwa ku ECE (at the beginning during enrolment they share with us what things are found in ECE). (P12)*

*Tatwakwatapo (we have never had). (P10)*

*balitwitilepo balitwitile iya meeting twakwete baisesa tulondwelelapo eflyo bangala, play nabana, namasambililo onse eflyo basambilila balitwitapo. (at one point we invited for a meeting where they explained to how children play and how they learn) (P8)*

#### **4.3.2 Parental involvement in Play-Based Learning**

This section looks at parents' view on how they can effectively be involved in PBL, this theme will be dealt based on parents' belief of engagement in their child's playful learning.

Parents were asked to share their view on the role they are supposed to play in supporting their children's play-based learning at the centre as well as at home, most parents indicated that their role is to ensure children interact and play with other children in the neighbourhood, this is from the background that parents want to choose who their child would play with. Most of the parent asked, mentioned that they are supposed to ensure availability of material and resources for play such as toys, building blocks, dolls, books and other things that could be of help for the child to learn. Other parents emphasised for the;

*...need to create an enabling environment for children and providing certain toys that would help to create a rich learning environment (P6).*

Parent 4 had this to say;

*I think my role...at home, I have to make sure that she has all the toys, I have to make sure that she is safe, she is okay.*

*My current role as a parent is letting the child interact and play with other children in the neighbourhood. (P1)*

Parent 7 brought out an aspect of morals and said that he feels his role is to ‘*work together with the teacher, insisting on teaching discipline and values.*’ Another parent pointed out that in situations where they can’t afford to buy, they should make play material from used material such as cartoon boxes empty tins and bottles.

*...kupanga no kushita ma toys akwangasha mwana. (P9)*

*I think my role...at home, I have to make sure in one week at least once or twice I have to make sure that she has to do one or two things through the same PBL. I have to make sure that she has all the toys, I have to make sure that she is safe, she is okay, if she is in the mood yees. I have to make sure this is the time, I have to know what time to do that, I have to make sure that she has all the resources that are needed into that. (P3)*

#### **4.3.3. Parental perception of parental involvement in Play Based Learning**

Parents were asked to find out how they felt their involvement impacted their child's play-based learning experience. Parents shared similar sentiments that when they engage themselves with their children, they tend to understand the children more and, become very close to them and as such one tends to take responsibility in any form of the child's behaviour. Some parents shared that their involvement has impacted their children in that they have built self-confidence, the children tend to learn things faster and have become independent and free with the parents that is they are able to ask the parents whenever they needed clarity.

*... my kid has become so free with me that she expresses herself with confidence, it has helped my daughter to be open and wanting to learn (P4).*

*That we are beginning to understand PBL, I think if we are to involve ourselves children will learn more and will further enhance the relationship with our children. (P2)*

*The child gets motivated when she sees my interest in what she doing, she develops the desire to do more. (P5)*

*Yes, it does, it does, the child feels appreciated... you can see they get motivated even to do better. (P6)*

*nga filya nacilanda pali bond...nabana balomfwa bwino(P12)*

The parents shared that they are beginning to learn and understand PBL, went further to suggest that if they are to involve themselves, children will learn more and will further enhance the relationship with their children.

*It will mean a lot and it will be helpful to the child and encourage her to do more than she is doing right now, I think she will do a lot (P3).*

Some parents had different views;

*I have not had an opportunity to reflect on this as I said earlier that PBL is a new idea to most of us parents. (P2)*

*Not taken interest considering that this is a new idea in the curriculum (P6)*

#### **4.3.4 Creating a supportive learning environment for parental involvement in PBL**

Parents were asked what resources or support would be helpful for them to better understand and participate in play-based learning. Some parents shared that there is need for resources and support to parents which would include providing material that has information about PBL in ECE and general ECE activities, as this will empower the parents with how to engage their children beyond the classroom. Parents were also of the view that if workshops can be organised occasionally to share with parents about play based learning and how the parents can play their part. Parent 5 mentioned that;

*Workshops and information sessions, organise such activities to explain the benefits of PBL activities. Offer parents guides with activities that they can easily do at home.*

*Resources or support to parents can include providing materials that has information about PBL in ECE and general ECE activities. (P1)*

*We need some handouts as parents yees...handouts, pamphlets, we need books, we need also programmes like others, there are other people who can't read, so at least some videos whereby someone is teaching in both languages... will help each and every parent to understand and learn about it so that even when the school invites them, they know what they will do there. (P3)*

*Batupelako tuma buku, nangu nabalemba pama paper batupela kuti naifwe kung'anda tuleishiba pakwambila filya fine nangu ma points kwangala nifi so na so (P8)*

The parents were asked as to what strategies or activities they thought would be effective for parents to be engaged in supporting play-based learning in collaboration with ECE professionals. One parent boldly stated;

*Teachers have to take an initiative to see how best parents can be fully involved(P2)*

*...organise meetings and any other activities to explain the benefits of pbl to parents as well as offer parents guides with activities that they can easily do at home with the children. (P7)*

*...school has to come up with days that parents can attend school activities-each and every parent can show case one way or another that can help the children...by giving us the chance by the teachers that will help the parents to be more involved and help the kids, you know we are blessed with different gifts...each and every person can at least help in one way or another help the children learn with the same activities they will show case(P3)*

*Nakabilafye baletu trainer naifwe twaishiba bwino bwino kuibimbamo mumyangalo yabana ( I would rather we also trained so that we can understand well how to engage in play with children)(P12)*

The study revealed that parents can contribute effectively when there is good communication with the teachers and if oriented or trained through specialised workshops and other training sessions to ascertain grounded understanding of PBL, this will in turn help parents provide environment that can enhance play be at home or school.

#### 4.3.5 Benefits of parental involvement in Play-Based Learning

In this section the discussion looks at what parents viewed as benefit for their involvement in play-based learning. The subthemes include child development, parent-child interaction as well as wellbeing and enjoyment.

Parents were asked whether they understood the importance of PBL to child development, importantly most parents showed good understanding about the concept this was after the meaning of PBL was discussed.

Parent 3 explained that

*It's very much important, helps to see how energetic the child is, how health the child is and...at least even those slow learners when you introduce that PBL unto them, they are likely to participate...everyone gets involved because it's fun and entertaining at the same time they are learning.*

On the benefits of a parental involvement in play-based learning, one parent commented that having parents actively participate, makes parents feel part of the child's learning and development.

*It's actually very important for child development because it will also give you a chance to teach and study the child on how smart the kid is and which direction you think she is going and how you can help to develop or change that (P4).*

The parent's involvement in the child's play enables the parents to understand the child and this will in turn ensure that parents support the children's play, moreover it helps a child develop a positive bond with their parents. One parent added that as a parent its important because it helps to identify strength and weakness of the child.

*I tend to understand the child more and we become very close to each other and as a parent you tend to take responsibility in any form child's behaviour (P7).*

One parent shared her observation that when parents are engaged the child gets motivated, when the child sees the mother's interest in what she is doing, she develops the desire to do more, beside it strengthens parent-child relationship.

*If parents get involved in this, children's performance will be elevated ...whereby they see you mum is here we are playing together, like she wants to show you her best, it's very much encouraging (P3).*

All the teachers overwhelmingly agreed that parents are partners in educating their children and pointed out that engaging parents helps them to know what is expected of the child so that the parent is able to provide necessary support to the child. Another teacher further mentioned

that a strong bond created between the child and the parents makes the child develop the openness with the parent. Further parents commented that;

*Children feel proud and motivated when their parents are asked demonstrate to them. (F2T7)*

*...parents will be able to know what children can do and therefore provide necessary requirements. (FIT10)*

*A strong bond is created which allows children to freely express their needs. (FIT2)*

Teachers observed that the impact of engaging parents helps teachers derive crucial information necessary for children and in turn ensure teachers provide appropriate support and further says that children are given an opportunity to learn at both ends, that is consolidating each other, making the work easy for the teacher.

#### **4.3.5. Challenges of parental involvement in PBL**

Parent were asked about the challenges they face in supporting play-based learning at home as well as at school. One parent shared the barriers faced included work commitments, lack of awareness, lack of communication. The other parent observed that lack of understanding of the value of play as parents, whilst the other parents observed that lack of resources is one other major setback we face as parents. They said,

*Resources and time demands...limited understanding of play based learning by most parents (P6).*

*there are no many challenges, it's only that we didn't know about this PBL, that now we are learning we try to support the children. (P3)*

*...us parents don't have time to play with our children and lack of material that can be used at home(P11)*

Teachers were asked if there are any challenges or barriers that they thought hinder parents from getting more involved in supporting PBL, the teachers' observation was lack of commitment from both the teacher and or the parents. As a teacher would call for the parent, but they would respond that they were busy,

*If we stick home, we won't have money to pay, these are your children (F3T1).*

*Lack of good relationship between the parent and the teacher, ba parent nga cakuba ati tamumfwana bwino nabena, bali kupata (F1T7)*

*Some parents have gone out of the life of the children, some children remain in school close to 16:00 because parents never immediately come to pick them up. (F2T4)*

*Type of parenting is different, they just leave the child with a gadget and move away, busy doing other things so in the end we lose them on track because we are not with them guiding, watching them what they are doing. (F3T1)*

Some teachers also noted the lack of good relationship between some parents and some teachers. Teachers shared that there is still misconception about safety regarding playful way of learning by most parents, rather they prefer keeping the learners in door.

In both public and private schools, academic performance is highly valued by parents. However, this pressure is more pronounced in private schools, where parents pay higher fees and expect measurable academic outcomes. As a result, some private centres, compromise on free play in favour of academic drills to meet parent expectations. Nevertheless, some of the well-informed private schools balance academics with play by integrating guided play into formal learning.

*Parents are still focused on academic excellence all they want to see in the child is reading and writing. (F1T5)*

*We don't have an opportunity to talk to parents, school owners are focused on ensuring that the emphasis is on reading and writing, therefore play is not much used. (F1T9)*

Both Public and private schools still adhere to more traditional and rigid instructional models, with limited emphasis on child-led play.

*Most parents still view formal traditional mode teaching as important. (P5)*

*Some parents feel uncomfortable to play with children, Parent perception that children do not learn and are just playing. (P8)*

*Parents discourage children with play that does not directly seem to support learning(F1T3)*

Traditional views that equate learning with formality, discipline, and academic achievement still influence many parents both in public and private school settings. These parents see play as recreational and separate from learning, and thus not worth prioritizing, especially in homes where success is equated with passing exams.

#### **4.4 Strategies used to strengthen parental involvement in supporting play-based learning in ECE**

Teachers in early childhood education (ECE) often see parental involvement as an asset to supporting play-based learning (PBL) because of the strong role that family engagement plays in enhancing children's learning, growth, and motivation. Strategies to enhance PI include parent-teacher communication, collaborative relationship between teachers and parents, parent's understanding and support for PBL as well as leadership and support to enhance PBL. The themes are discussed as follows:

##### **4.4.1 Parent-Teacher communication and engagement to enhance PBL**

Parent-teacher communication and engagement are essential to enhancing play-based learning (PBL) in early childhood education (ECE). This relationship not only strengthens the partnership between families and educators but also aligns expectations and creates a cohesive learning environment that supports a child's growth. When parents and teachers actively collaborate, they establish a shared understanding of learning goals, create continuity between home and school, and foster a community that encourages the child's development. The theme is discussed based on the following sub-themes.

Frequent engagement with parents is vital for the sake of sharing current trends in play-based learning with parents as well as updating parents on various school programs. Contrary to this, teachers lamented that they don't have opportunities to talk to parents as they always excuse themselves to be busy.

*Parents are usually busy, they only bring and take the children, making it difficult to share about the child's learning (FIT5).*

*From public schools, most learners come with their older siblings making it difficult for the teacher to meet the parent. (FIT2)*

A good number of teachers said that schools often use circulars to communicate general information to parents and not about play-based learning, alleging that PBL has not grounded

in most schools. Quick feedback between parents and teachers is important as it helps in finding areas of interest and possible support.

*We communicate using circulars but these are used for the information and not PBL because in our school learning through play is not official. (F3T5)*

*Use of social media though it is not applicable to all parents(F2T5)*

*others through whatsapp, and or direct calls. (F3T2)*

Parents and teachers shouldn't only interact on open days. Consulting teachers regularly helps the parent understand the growth of the child. Some parents agreed that some teachers encourage parents to always allow children to play in the neighbourhood with other children, find material for children to play with and to find time for the children. As some parents shared that;

*...the teachers encourage us by inviting us to attend lessons to see how the children learn, observe lessons and have short discussion thereafter(P1).*

*We invite parents to observe children's learning process for example painting/moulding this gives us time to have conversations with parents. (F2T3)*

Parents agreed that they need to be involved in the planning, implementation and reflection of the different PBL activities in the school this will help the parents understand the concept broadly and will own the activities.

Success of parental involvement is dependent on how much the parents understand about the concept, it is shown that some few parents contributed material and resources for play based learning to the respective schools, one parent was involved in teaching traditional dances and songs, including exhibition such as on a culture day, while another parent shared about her child demonstrated how to write the number using an action song. While the two parents gave these situations, the rest of the parents expressed their inability because PBL is a new concept to them. The following are some of the comments by the parents;

*It's difficult to mention any because we have not known this idea until this discussion and I think from now that we have learnt about PBL we will try to see what we do to support the children's learning (P6).*

Private schools typically prioritize parent engagement through consistent communication, open days and structured parent-teacher conferences, though all these have not addressed the aspect of play on the basis of parental demands.

*We can chat on whatsapp, give a direct call or possibly visit the school and have a one-on-one discussion(P2)*

In contrast, public schools often struggle with parental engagement due inability by parents to meet educators, that in most cases other caregivers attend to any meetings if at all the school calls for parental engagement. This undermines continuity in play-based learning.

*From public schools, most learners come with their older siblings making it difficult for the teacher to meet the parent(FIT2)*

*The teacher writes on small pieces of paper to communicate to the parents whenever they want to inform or call parents. (P8)*

*...balatwishibisha kupitila mu bana (they inform us through the children) (P9)*

*Bakafundisha balefwaika batwita kusukulu no kucita discuss mibombele ya bana. (teachers need to invite us at school so that we discuss how children fair) (P12)*

Private early childhood institutions often have more robust systems of parental communication, such as newsletters, meetings, WhatsApp groups, and parent days. These tools help parents understand how their child is involved in school, what kind of support is needed at home, and how to actively participate in their child's educational journey, but they lack the aspect of PBL

#### **4.4.2 Collaborative relationships between teachers and parents to enhance PBL**

Collaborative relationships between teachers and parents are critical to supporting play-based learning (PBL) in early childhood education (ECE). When parents and teachers partner effectively, they create a supportive environment that enriches the child's learning experience both in and outside the classroom. The subthemes derived from this theme include shared responsibility and creating parent-friendly schools.

##### **4.4.2.1 Shared responsibility in supporting play-based learning**

Assigning parents specific tasks to support children's learning is key as it brings parents on board appreciating play-based learning. Asking the teachers what strategies or approach they

thought would be effective in fostering parental involvement in play-based learning, teachers responded that they need to share regularly, suggestions on how play can be incorporated into everyday routines at home. They were also of the view that home visits should be encouraged as well as guiding parents the kind of activities or games to engage the children at home.

*Need to encourage parents to share their observations and experiences regarding children's play at home so that appropriate action can be taken depending on what has been observed. (F3T3)*

*Share with parents on how they can create a play friendly environment at home(F3T7)*

*Offer parents guides with activities that they can easily do at home. (F3T6)*

Teachers further shared that to enhance shared responsibility parents need to be given room to decide on certain matters, and where possible allow parents demonstrate some activities through play at school as guest teachers. Collaboration in planning play-based learning activities, joint responsibility between parents and teachers to support both ends of the child's education Parent 6 put it that;

*Children only spend part of their time at school during the day, the other half is at home, so if what was happening in play time at school is beneficial to them, then even at home it can be beneficial.*

*You engage parents in making games and ask that they play with their children at home. (F3T3)*

*Ensuring that children's activities are practical and observing that we have more of projects to engage the children with parents taking time to see what the children are doing.(F3T7)*

When parents and teachers work together the child receive support from both ends, this will help the child learn well.

Asked whether the parent would volunteer to share or teach something to the class, from the twelve parents interviewed, only one parent agreed to have volunteered to do some play-based activities at school, whilst others were of the view that they have never volunteered because

they didn't know about PBL. Whilst parents volunteer during special school days or events may seem a positive activity, Parent 4 had some reservation about it and indicated that;

*I don't think it is okay because sometimes may be the presence of the parent might make kids emotional; some kids may not really be comfortable, or they will not really pay attention...other parents may feel offended why the teacher talks to the child like that. I don't think it's a good thing for parents to sit and observe.*

Parent 3 reacted that;

*Volunteering no no, I am very busy*

*Tatwaeshapo tulatina (We have never tried, we are afraid) (P10)*

Shared responsibility can be enhanced by teachers inviting parents to participate in play-based learning sessions so that they become aware of PBL, and parents can be providing material for learning and play activities and offering donations for resources. Only one teacher was pessimistic about allowing a parent to volunteer to teach her class, otherwise majority see it as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship.

*I wouldn't allow a parent to teach my class unless merely to observe (F1T2).*

*It feels good, it shows learning, we allow them, sometimes we ask them to come and do it.(F2T8).*

*Yaah, I would, if that would help the kids, I would volunteer to go and give a lesson to teach them(P5)*

#### **4.4.2.3 Creating parent-friendly schools**

Schools creating welcoming environments for parents was noted as important in enhancing parental involvement, encouraging parent-teacher interaction beyond formal settings as some parent recommended that they need to be engaged more often to see how they can help using their various skills and experience. Parent 3 observed that;

*Schools need to implement a rule giving room to the parents also to participate...*

*...ensuring that school are parent friendly places(P2).*

*Create special days where parents can be invited to participate with the children for example parent day and engage the parents in the same kind of play children do.(P11)*

Another parent suggested that there is need for teachers to share the recommended material such as books, creating an open communication channel between parents and teachers. Sharing information with parents about the school calendar and termly school activities to keep parents aware of the school play activities. Parent-parent interaction being facilitated during school events that is if schools could have been inviting parents so that they share with each other about PBL. This becomes an opportunity for parents to work together with other parents, Parent 1 observed that;

*There is need to promote the idea of family playtime were parents and children engage in play together, Fun challenges competitions, creating play-friendly environments, then encourage parents to share their observations and experiences with the teachers regarding children's play.*

*We have never volunteered because we didn't about this. (P7)*

*We also learn...parents who know how to knit...will allow that parent to execute it (F2T9)*

#### **4.4.3 Parental understanding and support for Play-Based Learning**

Teachers often view parental understanding and support as crucial to the success of play-based learning in early childhood education. They recognize that when parents appreciate and engage with the thinking and purpose of PBL, children receive a more holistic learning experience.

Teachers were asked to give their view on understanding of PBL amongst parents, some teachers shared that most parents are not familiar with this concept, they still focus on academic achievement. Contrary, some teachers explained that they held a meeting with parents in an ECE classroom and showcased the resources in the classes, explained that parents are bit by bit appreciating what is happening in the classes.

*We are getting there, we are trying to involve the parents... a good number of the parents are responding, they are seeing the importance of being involved in the child's learning, they have even stopped bothering us to say where are the books what (F2T3).*

*Like at my school, parents are still not familiar with this method of learning, they still want position, apashile number shani.....tailaba bwino bwino kuma parents. (parents still demand for ranking of children) (F2T6)*

To enhance involvement of parent in PBL, parents need support and encouragement, and teachers were asked what form of support and encouragement they provide to parents to ensure parents understand the concept. Teachers mentioned that they advise parents to allow children have time for play that is;

*When they see children playing, they shouldn't be stopping them...observe that the games are safe, that activities are meaningful(F2T3).*

*We at times guide parents on what kind of resource they can source for their children. (F2T9)*

*During orientation some schools deliberate take parents around the classroom and explain the features in the classrooms. (F2T1)*

The teachers emphasised that parents should avoid locking up children in homes, but allow them to interact with their surroundings provide and support a free play environment, whilst they promote family playtime where parents and children engage in play together, beside engaging children in house chores;

*Involving them in what I am doing, like let's set the table you guys or let's sort the clothes, who is going to cut tomatoes... these are some of the activities that can help also at home (F3T1).*

It is ideal that parents feel free to get into class and see the kind of activities their children are involved in, such as sand play, water play because most parents have viewed these as dirty.

#### **4.4.4 Leadership and school support to enhance PBL**

Teachers view strong leadership and robust school support as essential to implementing and enhancing play-based learning (PBL) in early childhood education. Their experience emphasizes the need for both administrative backing and a supportive school culture that promotes the values and practices of PBL.

School leaders' involvement is key in enhancing parental involvement in PBL, School leaders fostering a supportive environment for parental involvement in play-based learning will allow a free and full participation of parents. The teachers suggested orientation of school leaders in

PBL and parental involvement so that they would be able support teachers' initiatives on parental engagement.

*Some administrators lack knowledge about ECE. (FIT8)*

*Mass education on ECE targeting administrators and parents including radio programmes(FIT2)*

Schools providing incentives or recognition for parents who actively participate in play-based learning activities.

Home-school activities need to be linked to easy parental involvement in play-based learning. Teacher added that they need to ensure that there is a relationship of activities done at school and those which children are engaged whilst at home such as cleaning of teeth and the general body cleaning and in some cases, the games and songs used when teaching are same ones they use when the children are at home for example *waida* (hopscotch) also played outside school.

*When they are at school, we teach them how to make things...teaching folding paper of different shapes...when at home we have seen them making ma balls (small balls), tuman ndeke (toy planes), tuma kites (small kites) (F2T2).*

*In times when we call parents, we explain to them that PBL te kwangala changaleangale chipantepante (playing aimlessly) playing filya, children learn from that such that when they go home they will also practice and implement what they saw(F2T1)*

*Yes, we do, we encourage them to do start, waida, masapo, ciyenga insolo. A parent even suggested that egg trays can be used to play insolo. At time when they come to pick children...we engage in playing waida, water packing and we ask parents to join...a child came to report that we played waida with mum at home elo batuwina... this indicate that things are working. (F2T3)*

#### **4.4.5 Investment and resource provision to support in PBL**

Investment and resource provision in play-based learning (PBL) by parents involves dedicating time, materials, and support to enrich the play experiences of young children. When parents actively provide resources and invest in play-based learning, they create a stimulating and supportive home environment that complements early childhood education efforts.

Parents should invest time, resources, and effort to support their child's play-based learning at home. The teachers were asked to suggest on ways for improving and maximizing parental involvement in play-based learning within ECE settings. And most of the teachers pointed out that improving funding to the sector is one key area that requires urgent attention, improving funding will enhance provision of material and resources needed for child's play. Parent 5 mentioned the importance of mass education on ECE targeting school leaders and parents.

*Workshops and information sessions; organise such activities to explain to the parents benefits of PBL.*

*Use local broadcasting stations to educate the masses about play in Early childhood, even use of local language to ensure most parents are reached.(F3T6)*

*Improve funding to ensure more equipment is acquired to allow play for ECE children.(FIT1)*

The teachers pointed out the need for orientation activities to parents to keep them aware of PBL for them to provide full support. One teacher stated that a deliberate exercise should be put in place to ensure that all schools have play provisions including playparks. Another observation was the significance of encouraging parents to share their observations and experiences regarding children's play at home so that appropriate action can be taken depending on what has been observed.

Some parents have been contributing material resources or donations to support play-based activities at school. To ensure children have enough play material for play, teachers suggested that parents should be involved in material production sometimes, this will allow parents make resources for their children at home. One aspect noted was the possibility of encouraging parents to donate material for use in ECE centres.

*...encouraging parents to donate material for use in ECE centres.(FIT5)*

*...offer parents guides with activities that they can easily do at home.(F3T6)*

*...schools to provide play resources to parents to ensure there is play learning at home such as lending library material including educational toys, games, online apps.(F3T7)*

#### **4.5 Summary**

This chapter has presented the findings of the study on exploring parental involvement in supporting PBL in Early childhood Education. The findings are based on the themes derived from the objectives of the study. The findings of the study have indicated that generally the parents are involved in supporting child's play more particularly at home. Overall, the findings show a general willingness among parents to support PBL, but engagement is hindered by constraints like lack of time, resources, or understanding of PBL's role in education. Teachers proposed solutions, including better communication strategies, resource provision, and opportunities for parent involvement in school activities, aiming to empower parents to support children's learning through play effectively. Strengthening leadership, supporting teacher guidance, linking home and school activities, investing in resources, and fostering parental contributions all would contribute to improved parental involvement in PBL in ECE settings.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **5.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter discusses the findings on teachers' and parents' perceptions of parental involvement in supporting play-based learning (PBL) in early childhood education (ECE). The discussion of the study is organized according to the research questions as presented below:

- i. What forms of parental involvement are practised to support PBL in the ECE
- ii. What is the perception of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings?
- iii. What strategies are used to strengthen parental involvement in supporting play-based learning during early childhood?

### **5.2 Forms of parental involvement practiced supporting PBL in the ECE centres.**

The study reveals the varied ways in which parents engage in PBL, classified into three main themes that is parental engagement in play-based learning activities, Parental support through provision of resources and materials and benefits of parental involvement in play-based learning.

Parental engagement is essential for the success of PBL in ECE. Findings from the study indicate that parents engage in play-based learning activities with their children, primarily at home. Roksa and Kinsley (2019) shares that the value attached to parent engagement by teachers and schools influences the involvement by parents. Parents noted a variety of play-based activities they practice with their children, which range from structured activities involving educational toys to unstructured play that fosters creativity and social interaction. However, parents highlighted limited engagement opportunities at school, agreeing with Sichula et al. (2021) that there wasn't enough evidence to show that parents are engaged in PBL. Parental involvement at school provides one way that parents can interact with teachers and other school staff (Sheldon, 2002).

The frequency of parental engagement in PBL was found to vary widely, with most parents engaging in play-based activities with their children daily at home after work. The frequency of parent-teacher contact in these activities affects the child's learning (Kurtulmus, 2016). This frequent involvement is likely due to the accessibility of the home environment and the flexibility it offers. This disparity between home and school engagement suggests that while parents are willing to support PBL at home, they may benefit from additional opportunities to

engage with play-based learning in the school setting. Sapungan and Sapungan (2014) insists that regular school attendance by a parent reinforces the child's perception that home and school are linked and as such school is an integral part of family life.

At home, parents employ a range of play-based activities to support their children's learning, such as using building blocks, engaging in educational games involving shapes, colours, numbers, and role-playing. Lungu and Matafwali (2020) affirm that parents encouraged play-based learning at home by providing toys for their children. These activities not only provide cognitive benefits but also enhance motor skills and social abilities. Teachers acknowledged that although parents were advised on materials and resources for supporting PBL, more structured school-based activities that actively involve parents in play are needed. The findings underscore the importance of encouraging parents to participate in structured activities at school, as these interactions can enhance the continuity of PBL experiences across home and school environments (UNICEF, 2018).

Home-based engagement emerged as a critical aspect of parental involvement in PBL, with parents actively providing resources and creating a supportive learning environment. Chowdhury and Obaydullah, (2019) underscore that supporting play at home is one-way parents can enhance learning considering that parents are the first educators in the child's life. This aligns with Epstein's parenting component, which focuses on helping families establish home environments that support children as students. Parents acknowledged the significance of play in their children's development, allowing them freedom to play with friends in the neighbourhood and access to various play materials at home. This reflects Epstein's learning at home category, where families are encouraged to be involved in learning activities outside of school. Teachers reinforced this by advising parents on suitable play resources such as building blocks, puzzles, and educational charts. Parents reported prioritizing a safe and resource-rich environment that encourages learning through play. They also monitored their children's play to ensure it was safe. Emerson, Fear, Fox and Sanders, (2012) hint that a stimulating home learning environment which consists of a variety of educational materials and positive reinforcement of the value of education by parents is integral to intellectual and social development in children. Teachers supported this by encouraging parents to replicate aspects of the classroom play environment at home, thus ensuring continuity in the child's learning experience. Teachers reinforced this through communication and encouragement as elements that tie into Epstein's communicating and collaborating with families types of involvement. These findings emphasize the role of the home environment in providing children

with consistent and nurturing opportunities to engage in PBL. Siu and Keung (2022) emphasise that the play environment provides children's opportunities to interact in a naturalised outdoor setting.

Parent-child interactions in play foster not only cognitive growth but also emotional bonding. Evidence shows the cause effect of parent child interaction on child developmental outcomes Gertler et al, (2014) in Yasmin et al, (2020). These interactions are vital for creating nurturing home environments that support learning, which is central to Epstein's parenting component, helping families build conditions that promote children's academic and developmental success. Parents reported using educational materials like letter blocks and participating in games like hide-and-seek, which enhances learning and nurtures positive behaviours. Mak, Keung, and Cheung, (2018) strongly advocate that to help the children develop good habits and a sense of responsibility, as well as to strengthen the parent-child relationship, ECE centres should encourage learners to be engaged in learning tasks which are relaxing and fun, for example, reading picture books, collecting objects, and passing on message. Sapungan and Sapungan (2014) share that the most effective forms of parent involvement are those, which engage parents in working directly with their children on learning activities at home.

Four main areas of school engagement were examined that is school visits and class observation, attending meetings and open days, collaborative relationships with teachers, and opportunities for engagement provided by schools. These areas correspond to Epstein's types of parental involvement, particularly volunteering and collaborating with the community," which emphasize creating meaningful opportunities for families to contribute to school life and educational experiences. Findings reveal that parents were minimally involved in PBL activities at school and were only present during required events. Teachers reported that while parents initially showed enthusiasm when PBL was introduced, this support has since dwindled. This decline may be attributed to a lack of structured engagement opportunities within the school, highlighting a shortfall in the school's implementation of Epstein's volunteering type, which encourages schools to actively recruit and train families to help in classrooms and school programs. Meetings and open days saw significant parental attendance, but these events often focused on general school welfare rather than PBL. Epstein (1994) in Boit (2020) affirms that parents are ever interested in knowing what goes on in the child's classroom, this illustrates a missed opportunity in the communicating aspect of Epstein's framework, which calls for clear, two-way channels of communication about learners' programs and learning practices. This demonstrates a missed opportunity to engage parents in

PBL specific discussions and activities, which could strengthen their understanding and support of PBL. Teachers expressed a desire for stronger collaborative relationships with parents, suggesting practices such as inviting parents to act as guest teachers or involving them in classroom activities related to play. Some teachers noted that such interactions have helped parents appreciate the value of learning through play. By fostering these partnerships, teachers can enhance parental support for PBL and deepen their understanding of its educational benefits. Emerson, et al. (2012) view that when parents learn that collaboration is within their role as parents, they can positively influence their child's learning and more especially when they notice that the school want them involved.

The findings indicate that schools could do more to create opportunities for parental engagement in PBL. This aligns with Epstein's volunteering category, which emphasizes the importance of schools designing and promoting opportunities for families to assist in school settings such as classroom activities and field trips. Gross et al. (2020) agrees with the finding that school-based parent engagement activities are an important component of parent engagement mostly characterised with volunteering in the classroom or on field trips. Orientation programmes that introduce parents to classroom setups and PBL activities were noted as beneficial, allowing parents to better understand the learning process and potentially replicate similar activities at home. These initiatives align with Epstein's parenting and communicating components, which call for schools to support families in understanding child development and learning expectations, and to maintain clear, ongoing communication. Schools should take the responsibility to orient parents on their role on how the support should be provided to their children, for the parents to know exactly what is required of them regarding their children's play based learning (Sichula et al., 2024 and Lungu & Matafwali, 2020).

The study's findings underscore the importance of bridging home and school environments in PBL, advocating for policies and practices that foster parent-teacher collaboration and empower parents to participate more fully in their children's early learning experiences. This reflects Epstein's communicating type of involvement, which promotes two-way channels that keep parents informed and involved in their children's education. The discussion examines how parents contribute to PBL through resource provision, creating supportive play environments both at home and school, and gaining guidance and knowledge about PBL practices. The findings are organized into three main areas: the types of play resources parents provide, the availability of these resources at home and school, and the knowledge-sharing efforts between parents and teachers to foster parental engagement in PBL.

Parents recognize the importance of various play resources and are invested in ensuring their children have access to materials that foster creativity, imagination, and foundational skills. The findings show that parents prioritize diverse play materials, such as building blocks, number and letter toys, and items that help with colour and shape recognition. To support this Gross et al. (2020) gives examples of the forms of support by parents which included making cut-outs for class activities, reading to other children in class and helping to feed children.

Teachers play a crucial role in guiding parents on the selection of appropriate play materials, emphasizing resources that can stimulate children's cognitive and motor skills. The study also aligns with findings by Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013), who observed that parents often lack understanding of how to make home environments play-friendly. For example, during orientation sessions, teachers introduce parents to essential items in ECE classrooms, helping them understand the purpose of each resource and encouraging them to provide similar materials at home. This guidance is fundamental to ensuring continuity between school and home learning environments, allowing parents to reinforce PBL practices outside the classroom. Lehl et al (2020) explains the role of bridging the two environments to promote child development adequately.

The study highlights the cooperative role between parents and schools in sourcing and providing play materials. Teachers acknowledge parental contributions to school resources, particularly through donations of locally available items like bottle tops, empty bottles, poles, and used car tyres, which have been repurposed for outdoor playgrounds and indoor play materials. Mak et al. (2018) advises that teachers could use material and resources from the community when demonstrating areas of concern. This collaborative approach not only reduces resource constraints for schools but also builds a sense of shared responsibility and community ownership of ECE initiatives.

Parents also actively support their children's PBL activities at home by providing additional toys and engaging in creative (do-it-yourself) DIY projects to create play materials. Some teachers encourage parents to use easily available household items to make puzzles, flashcards, and other play tools, promoting cost-effective ways to support PBL. Selepe, Nhase and Okeke, (2024) attest to this in their study where they found that parents as stakeholders may depend on improvisation of community resources and re-purposing existing materials to meet the unique learning needs of all children. This aligns with Epstein's type of PI on collaborating with the community which encourages the use of community resources to strengthen programs

and student learning. By advising parents to incorporate locally available resources, teachers empower families to create meaningful learning experiences at home without incurring significant expenses. This initiative fosters inclusivity, as it allows parents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to actively support their children's PBL.

Rahman, Tang and Chew, (2024) agree that socioeconomic status is a clear differentiator in the level of home-based support for PBL. Parents in private schools, with greater financial capacity, were more likely to purchase educational toys and materials and create play-rich environments at home. In contrast, many public schools' parents faced economic constraints, relying on DIY toys and improvisation to support their children's play (Oloo, Elsey, Abboah-Offei, Kiyeng, Amboka, Okelo & Nampijja, 2023), as shown by their resourceful use of household items. This contrast aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, where the microsystem (home environment) and exosystem (economic context) influence a child's development. It is evident that while public school parents demonstrate creativity and commitment, economic challenges limit their ability to consistently support PBL (Oloo, et al., 2023). This theme directly correlates with the study's finding that parents engage in play-based learning activities at home, such as using educational materials, games, and DIY projects to reinforce what children learn at school. Epstein identifies this as a crucial area where parents contribute by helping their children with homework, reinforcing learning from school, and providing educational materials and activities at home (Goodall, 2022). Teachers in the study emphasize that a key aspect of parental involvement in PBL is ensuring that learning continues outside of the classroom. This is aligned with Epstein's fourth type of involvement, where parents support learning at home through a variety of activities.

The study also sheds light on how teachers and schools provide guidance to parents to enhance their involvement in PBL. This guidance includes orientation sessions on PBL, parents' mutual encouragement to integrate PBL into home activities, and structured opportunities for knowledge-sharing between teachers and parents. Orientation sessions provide a formal introduction to the principles of PBL, helping parents understand its objectives and methods. Petrou and Panaoura, (2022) underscore that parents need guidance and training on how their involvement can be productive and creative through play-based activities. Although parents generally appreciate these orientations, the findings indicate that parents desire more targeted and frequent workshops or training sessions to deepen their understanding of PBL. Petrou and Panaoura (2022) affirms that parents appreciate the critical role teachers play and as such often asked for guidance and support. Currently, parents feel that the limited orientation provided at

the start of the school year is insufficient to fully equip them for supporting PBL, indicating a need for schools to establish ongoing PBL-focused discussions and workshops.

Teachers recognize the need to share both physical resources and knowledge with parents to enhance their involvement in PBL. Sapungan and Sapungan (2014) share that the likelihood of parents helping when requested by a teacher is more when parents are aware of what their children are learning. Suggestions from teachers include holding parent workshops where PBL activities and techniques are demonstrated, allowing parents to observe and replicate these practices at home. These sessions also serve to address any concerns parents may have about PBL and equip them with strategies to balance safety with play freedom. This aligns with Singh and Ngadni (2023) who observes that parents want to know how play is applied in class.

Parents' understanding of the importance of PBL is a key factor in supporting child development. The findings suggest that most parents, once introduced to the concept of PBL, appreciate its value in promoting active participation, even among children who may struggle in more traditional classroom-based learning settings. Panaoura and Nitsiou (2023) underscores that PI has always been an essential component of every teacher and that it is critical to the success of children, he further indicates that learners with supportive parents tend to show high proficiency as well as having a positive attitude.

Mak et al. (2020) ascertain that positive parental involvement helps children develop good habits and a sense of responsibility. Parents recognize that PBL offers an inclusive environment where children can learn through play, reducing the pressure and anxiety that can come with conventional learning methods. One parent noted how PBL allows even "slow learners" to participate fully because the focus is on engaging hands-on activities that foster participation and joy in learning. The awareness helps parents assess and support their child's developmental trajectory, noting specific strengths and areas for improvement. Parents' insights align with teachers' perspectives, who regard parental involvement as essential to tracking and supporting developmental milestones, thereby reinforcing a holistic approach to child development. McLean et al. (2018) have shown that regular engagement by families has increased social connections, and enhance understanding of PBL.

Parental involvement in PBL has a transformative effect on the parent-child relationship. Becker (2014) aligns with the finding that what parents do' with their children in terms of parenting behaviour and stimulating activities strongly affects children's development. Through play, parents and children can establish a stronger emotional bond and develop a

positive, open line of communication. Parents who actively participate in PBL gain a deeper understanding of their children's personalities, strengths, and challenges, fostering a positive bond that is rooted in shared experiences and mutual understanding. One parent noted that by engaging in PBL, they became "very close" with their child, taking greater responsibility for guiding their child's development and supporting their learning journey.

Applying Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and in the context of PBL, the study emphasizes that parental involvement is essential for helping children navigate this developmental zone (Ahmed, 2024). Teachers and parents collaborate to support the child's growth within the ZPD. For instance, when parents actively engage in their child's play-based activities, they provide scaffolding, guiding the child through learning tasks that are just beyond their current capabilities. This interaction between the child and the parent helps the child reach higher cognitive levels (Basnyat, 2023). The study points out that teachers encourage parents to attend lessons and observe how PBL facilitates learning, which is a way of helping parents understand how to offer appropriate scaffolding at home.

Teachers also emphasized the role of PBL in fostering a positive parent-child bond, noting that when parents are involved, they are better equipped to provide the support their children need at home. Emerson, et al (2012) gives evidence that parenting style which is supportive of the child and encourages conversation and exchange between the parent and child is more conducive to emotional wellbeing during the early years. This strong bond encourages openness between parents and children, which is instrumental for social-emotional development. Children are more likely to communicate openly with parents who engage in play, as they feel understood and valued. Moreover, teachers observed that when parents are involved in PBL, they become better partners in educating their children, gaining a clearer understanding of what is expected of the child, and effectively aligning with the school's educational goals.

The study highlights how parents create a learning-rich environment at home by providing materials such as educational toys, building blocks, and games. This reflects Epstein's first type, where parents are involved in ensuring that their home environments are conducive to their children's development (Geduld, 2024). However, the study also points to the challenge that many parents lack formal understanding of PBL, limiting their ability to fully engage in purposeful and intentional support. This gap in knowledge suggests that schools should provide resources and training to help parents better understand how to optimize their home

environments for PBL, aligning with Epstein's emphasis on the role of parenting in supporting children's learning (Geduld, 2024). Teachers recognize the importance of parents creating a play-friendly environment at home, which is a central component of Epstein's first type of family involvement. The findings emphasize that when parents understand the value of PBL, they are more likely to create environments that support creative, safe, and engaging play.

Parental involvement in PBL also enhances the child's overall wellbeing and enjoyment of the learning process. The findings indicate that when parents actively participate in play activities, children feel motivated and encouraged to perform at their best, creating a positive learning atmosphere that is supportive and fun. Dighe and Seiden (2020) conforms with the findings when they explain that parental involvement in their children's school experience and the home learning environment can result into a range of positive social and emotional outcomes and other long terms advantages such as self-esteem and aspirations. One parent observed that their child felt motivated by their presence, wanting to "show you her best," which highlights the self-confidence that can come from shared play experiences. This involvement also strengthens the parent-child bond, allowing children to feel comfortable expressing themselves and seeking guidance from their parents. Emerson et al. (2012) comments that parental involvement is a highly significant leverage point for enhancing a sense of wellbeing and foster positive attitudes in children towards their learning. By consolidating learning efforts between home and school, teachers find that their workload is lightened, as parents take on a more active role in their children's education. Parents who engage in PBL activities with their children gain valuable insights into their development, strengthen emotional bonds, and foster a love for learning. Parents benefit from playing with children as they can also be a stress reducer when they are overworked. (Anderson-McNamee & Bailey, 2010).

Vygotsky believed that learning occurs in specific cultural contexts (Nardo, 2021). The study stresses the importance of creating a supportive home environment that reinforces learning through play and ensuring continuity between home and school. The bridging of home and school environments reflects the cultural context in which children learn (Smith, 2020). Parents engaging in play at home with their children create an environment rich in cultural tools that foster cognitive and social development. Vygotsky's view aligns with the study's suggestion that schools should encourage parental involvement through structured activities, ensuring that both home and school provide similar cultural tools and resources to support PBL. Parents who engage in play-based activities at home contribute to the development of their children's skills

(Rahmatirad, 2020), reinforcing what is learned at school and ensuring that children experience consistent cultural and learning contexts.

### **5.3 Perceptions of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning in ECE.**

This section explores the perceptions of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning in early childhood education. The findings are analysed under five main themes: parents' understanding of PBL, their perceptions of involvement in PBL, the role of creating a supportive learning environment, challenges in parental involvement (PI), and ways parents believe they can contribute to their children's learning.

The findings show that parents generally hold mixed views about the concept, reflecting varying levels of awareness and understanding. Most parents initially expressed limited familiarity with PBL but were able to relate it to activities they observe at home, such as drawing, colouring, and simple crafts. This suggests that while parents may be engaging in PBL-like activities with their children, they often lack a formal understanding of its educational purpose and benefits. Dhas et al. (2022) argue that it's not guaranteed that being aware and knowledgeable about play and its benefits makes the parent competent to effectively play with children, they need training on how to play with children. Siu and Keung, (2022a; 2022d) share that providing first-hand experience to parents through participation becomes a means of motivating them to appreciate the essence of play in child development. Siu and Keung (2022a; 2022d) further comment that if parents take part in play-based lessons, they are more likely to agree with the value of play for children's development. Parents commonly referenced activities like painting or colouring, often describing them as tasks assigned by teachers rather than intentional learning methods. One parent noted that although they had been unaware of PBL, they could recognize its value after learning about it. These findings indicate a significant knowledge gap that limits parents' ability to fully support PBL. Keung and Cheung (2023) align with the finding of this study that when parents take part in play lessons and obtained such information from teachers, they are more likely to agree with the value of play for children's development and further translate those ideas into play at home. When parents have limited awareness, they may overlook opportunities to engage with their children's play in meaningful ways. Bridging this knowledge gap could enhance parental understanding and lead to more intentional involvement in supporting PBL at home. The Emergency literacy manual (2020) emphasises the significance of ensuring that parents understand the learning life of their child.

A significant finding of the study is the general lack of understanding of PBL among parents in both private and public ECE centres. Many parents equate learning with traditional, teacher-led instruction and are unfamiliar with the concept of children learning through play. This is consistent with findings by Fler (2010), who highlights that parents' limited conceptualization of play often hinders their active involvement in play-based educational approaches.

While some parents showed rudimentary awareness often describing play in terms of physical toys or singing there is a gap in comprehension of structured, guided play as a pedagogical strategy. Despite orientation meetings and open days, discussions rarely touch on the educational value of play, suggesting a missed opportunity by schools to build parental understanding of PBL. This finding supports Epstein's (2010) view that schools must intentionally offer parents expert knowledge to build strong home-school partnerships

Parents shared diverse preferences for communication methods with teachers regarding PBL activities. Many expressed a preference for face-to-face meetings or direct communication channels, such as WhatsApp or phone calls, allowing for open dialogue with teachers. Some parents also mentioned receiving written notes, while others indicated that communication sometimes happens through their children. This varied communication landscape underscores the need for flexible and consistent communication strategies that accommodate parents' preferences and make information about PBL accessible (Višnjić-Jevtić, 2021).

Parents perceive their role in PBL as multifaceted, encompassing various responsibilities, from ensuring their child has access to play materials to actively engaging in play activities with them (Bipath et al., 2022). This theme explores parents' beliefs about their engagement in PBL and the actions they take to support their children's playful learning. Many parents believe that their role in PBL extends to facilitating social interactions with other children and selecting age-appropriate play materials (O'Connor, 2017). Parents acknowledged that providing toys, books, and games is crucial for creating an engaging environment where learning can occur through play. Additionally, some parents emphasized the importance of creating an enabling environment that fosters children's curiosity, creativity, and self-expression (Xunyi & Hui 2018).

One parent highlighted the need to engage children in PBL activities at least once or twice a week, ensuring that necessary resources are available and that children feel safe and supported. Another parent raised the aspect of imparting values and discipline through PBL, suggesting that play could be used to instil good habits and moral values. Furthermore, some parents

showed resourcefulness by creating play materials from recycled items, highlighting their willingness to adapt to resource limitations by making toys from available materials like boxes and bottles (Lungu & Matafwali, 2020).

Parents generally feel that their involvement positively impacts their children's PBL experience, with some noting improvements in the children's self-confidence, social skills, and independence. By actively participating in PBL, parents believe they better understand their children's personalities and learning preferences. Parents play beliefs are an important determinant of the type of learning experiences that children can access (LaForett & Mendez, 2016). One parent noted that their involvement has helped their child become more expressive and confident, adding that the child "wants to learn." This increased openness enhances both the child's motivation to learn and their overall educational experience. Parents further suggested that more engagement in PBL would encourage children to perform better, contributing to a positive cycle of reinforcement and relationship-building.

The study reveals that parents desire more resources and support to effectively participate in PBL. It is acknowledged that more engaged teachers with respect to providing advice and support to parents on how to promote the child at home produces positive results (Lehr et al., 2020). Most teachers suggested that the provision of information materials, such as activity guides, and workshops for parents could empower them to better engage with their children's learning. The study also aligns with findings by Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013), who observed that parents often lack understanding of how to make home environments play-friendly. Workshops would allow parents to learn directly from teachers, gaining insights into PBL methods and discussing best practices. Additionally, some parents suggested that schools should initiate more structured communication strategies, such as regular meetings with teachers, sharing successful stories, and providing practical guides for at-home PBL activities. By making home-school connections, teachers can incorporate children's interests into classroom activities, which would help parents build a supportive environment that seamlessly integrates play and learning across both settings. Parents ensure they provide an environment that facilitate with day-to-day activities at home such as cooking, sharing things, estimating, this in turn helps children make meaning to what they learn in class (Panaoura & Nitsiou, 2023).

Several challenges impact parents' ability to support PBL effectively, including time constraints, limited awareness of PBL's value, and financial constraints. In the findings by

Okeke (2014) the issue of time constraints pops out regardless of the numerous benefits associated with effective PI. For some parents, work commitments make it difficult to be as involved as they would like, while others face a lack of resources and adequate communication with teachers. Limited awareness of the importance of play over more traditional academic achievements also poses a challenge, as many parents prioritize academic learning over play-based approaches.

Some teachers also pointed out that a lack of commitment from both teachers and parents is a barrier. For example, parents sometimes prioritize work over attending school meetings. Teachers further observed that some parents rely heavily on technology (e.g. tablets or phones) as a means of entertaining their children, leading to limited direct parental engagement in play. Additionally, certain misconceptions about the safety of PBL activities remain, with some parents preferring to keep their children indoors rather than encouraging active, playful learning outside. Siu and Keung (2022) add that influence on children's play has resulted from parents' concern over their children's personal safety related to potential dangers, such as strangers, traffic, and accidents. This protective instinct is understandable but may limit opportunities for children to develop independence and social skills through interaction with their peers. By addressing knowledge gaps, enhancing communication, and providing supportive resources, schools can help parents become more engaged and effective in supporting their children's learning through play.

The findings also reveal deep-rooted cultural beliefs that associate learning with formal instruction, discipline, and academic performance especially in private schools where parental expectations are higher due to financial investment. Consequently, some schools compromise play in favour of drills and academic tasks, mirroring the pressure to show immediate, measurable results.

Both private and public school parents continue to undervalue play, often seeing it as a distraction from "serious learning." This perception leads to resistance toward home-based play activities and contributes to the marginalization of play in the learning process. This echoes Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson's (2008) findings that cultural attitudes strongly shape how play is perceived and practiced in educational settings.

#### **5.4 Strategies used to strengthen parental involvement in supporting play-based learning during early childhood**

The findings reveal that early childhood education (ECE) teachers perceive parental involvement as instrumental in supporting play-based learning (PBL). The section discusses these perceptions through the lens of several key themes: parent-teacher communication, collaborative relationships between teachers and parents, parental understanding and support for PBL, barriers to parental involvement, and leadership and school support to enhance PBL. Teachers believe that by fostering a partnership with parents, children's learning can be enriched both at school and at home.

Parent-teacher communication emerges as essential in reinforcing the continuity and effectiveness of play-based learning (PBL). Consistent and structured communication allows teachers and parents to align expectations, share learning goals, and create a unified approach to supporting children's growth. Gibson et al. (2015) in Keung and Cheung (2023) agree with this finding that parent's understanding of PBL is enhanced through intense levels of communication which helps parent to have close linkage with children in the parent-child activities.

Findings indicate that frequent and varied communication channels facilitate effective engagement, yet teachers struggle to maintain ongoing dialogue with parents. This challenge is attributed to parents' busy schedules, as many are only able to interact briefly during drop-off and pick-up times. Teachers report that communication is often limited to general information shared through circulars, which seldom address PBL due to its limited integration in schools. Teachers make use of open days to discuss the value of learning through play with parents, highlighting the significance of PBL in a child's holistic development. The data underscores that timely feedback is vital for identifying children's needs and aligning parental support with learning goals.

In the study, there is an emphasis on parent-teacher communication, especially during parent-teacher meetings, orientations, and workshops. Epstein stresses the importance of two-way communication between families and schools, which enhances parents' understanding of what their children are learning and how they can support their development (Ramanlingam & Maniam, 2020). The study notes that while parents attend meetings and open days, there is a need for more school-based activities specifically focused on PBL to improve this communication. In line with Epstein's framework, increased engagement in school-based PBL

activities can help parents feel more informed and connected to their children's learning (Metaferia et al, 2021).

Teachers encourage parents to engage beyond open days by consulting teachers regularly to understand children's developmental progress. Findings reveal that parents appreciate the opportunity to attend and observe lessons, gaining insights into how PBL facilitates learning. Parents agree that involvement in planning and reflecting on PBL activities fosters a comprehensive understanding of the approach, enhancing their capacity to reinforce similar activities at home (Bipath et al., 2022).

The success of parental involvement in PBL is tied to parents' understanding of its principles (Metaferia et al., 2021). A few parents contribute resources for play and cultural knowledge, such as traditional songs and dances, enhancing the richness of PBL. However, the findings reveal a general lack of awareness about PBL among many parents, with some indicating a willingness to become more involved once they understand its benefits.

Another critical aspect is the role of school communication in facilitating parental involvement. Private schools appear to have more structured communication channels, such as WhatsApp groups and parent days. However, the communication still tends to focus on academic progress rather than play-based learning strategies. Public schools, on the other hand, face logistical challenges such as indirect communication through children or difficulty in reaching parents directly due to caregiver dynamics. The lack of targeted communication about PBL reinforces parents' traditional views about education. As Epstein and Salinas (2004) suggest, effective two-way communication is key to encouraging parental engagement. Schools must therefore reframe their engagement strategies to actively involve parents in play-based methodologies.

Teachers view collaboration as crucial for supporting children's learning at school and home. Communication is a critical issue when cultivating relationships with families and the way it is conveyed (Boit, 2020). Shared responsibility and active participation from parents can help reinforce the learning environment in a way that aligns school and home experiences. Teachers suggest involving parents in specific tasks to help them understand their role in PBL. Strategies like sharing ideas for integrating play at home and conducting home visits could strengthen this shared responsibility. Teachers also propose that inviting parents to school as guest teachers for play activities would encourage parent engagement and help parents recognize their contribution to their child's learning.

The findings reveal mixed responses regarding parent volunteering in PBL activities. Some parents expressed willingness to contribute by sharing their knowledge or cultural practices. However, others expressed concerns about potentially disrupting the learning environment or feeling uncomfortable in a classroom setting. Although some teachers are hesitant about parental involvement in teaching, most recognize the benefits of fostering a welcoming environment (Višnjić-Jevtić, 2021) that encourages parents to support learning in various ways.

Epstein emphasizes that parental involvement in school-based activities, such as volunteering or attending school events, is critical (Epstein, 1994). In the study, although parental engagement in PBL activities at school is minimal, there is a desire from teachers to increase this involvement and teachers mentioning that parents would benefit from more structured support, such as workshops and activity guides. Teachers suggest opportunities like inviting parents to act as guest teachers or participate in classroom activities. This supports Epstein's idea of creating volunteer opportunities where parents can actively participate in their children's learning (Bipath et al., 2022).

Establishing a welcoming school environment that encourages informal interactions is seen as essential to building a strong parent-teacher partnership. Gross, et al. (2020) put great emphasis on the importance of building a community where parents and teachers feel honoured, appreciated, and respected, a structure where parents feel empowered to actively participate in school decision-making and working as a team to support children's learning. Suggestions include open channels for ongoing communication and regular invitations to parents for involvement in PBL activities. Parent-parent interactions during school events are also identified as beneficial, allowing parents to share their experiences and learn from each other's perspectives on PBL (Pope, 2023). While the study does not explicitly discuss decision making as a form of involvement, it can be inferred that when parents are actively engaged in PBL and provided with opportunities to participate in decision-making processes such as in meetings, workshops, and orientation sessions, they are better able to advocate for their children's learning and contribute to shaping the educational experience. Epstein's fifth type involves including parents in school decision-making, and this could be enhanced by offering more opportunities for parents to engage in discussions about PBL at the school. Teachers could actively involve parents in decisions about the types of play-based activities or materials that are provided and solicit their input in how to improve engagement with PBL (Goodall, 2022).

Teachers believe that parental understanding of PBL is fundamental to its success, as parents with greater knowledge of PBL concepts are more likely to support its application at home. Findings indicate that parental understanding of PBL is often limited, with some parents emphasizing academic success over play. These findings are consistent with Babuc (2015) finding where parents expressed that they don't have adequate knowledge to play in an effective way with their children and have worries about high risk of accidents. Teachers have begun to address this gap by showcasing resources in the classroom and explaining the developmental benefits of PBL during meetings. As more parents understand these benefits, they become more supportive of PBL and contribute resources to facilitate it.

Teachers encourage parents to create play-friendly environments at home by allowing children to engage in safe and meaningful play. Suggestions include family playtime, engaging children in household chores, and promoting play activities that stimulate creativity. Teachers also stress the importance of involving parents in classroom activities to observe and understand the diverse forms of play, including activities that may be unfamiliar to them, such as sand or water play. Teachers suggest that schools could use technology and local media to raise awareness of PBL, potentially reaching a wider audience. They also propose lending play resources to parents, enabling them to create supportive play environments at home. This finding is in affirmation with Lungu and Matafwali, (2020) who in their study pointed out that parents were of the view that to enhance school learning, families need to be supported with resources for use at home as this will ensure the gap between home and school is closed.

Several barriers prevent effective parental involvement in PBL. These include time constraints, limited resources, and missed opportunities for engagement, all of which inhibit parents' ability to participate fully. Teachers cite parents' demanding work schedules as a significant barrier to parental involvement, with many parents only available for obligatory events such as open days. This often limits their understanding of PBL, as they prioritize traditional academic outcomes over play. Bunijevac (2017) outlines that current parents are often preoccupied with work and other demands of daily life, coupled with low-income, inflexible work hours and language barriers, as such some parents fail to attend to school activities or participate in the schooling of their children on a regular basis. Anderson-McNamee and Bailey (2010) agree that the aspect of balancing work and home schedules, makes it difficult for parents to have quality time with their children.

The lack of resources and limited understanding of PBL among parents and some teachers' further limits engagement. As agreed by Flynn (2007) and Greenwood and Hickman (1991) in Bunijevac (2017) that some school administrators and teachers may not know how to involve parents, beside they may not fully understand the importance of parental involvement and its effect, they therefore suggest need for orientation on techniques for involving parents and creating of partnerships. Teachers expressed concern that limited pre-service training does not prepare them to engage parents in PBL, Nathans and Brown (2021) affirm this assertion and points out the need to incorporate programmes and activities on family engagement in the pre-service teachers training. This aligns with what Boit (2020) highlights that legislation mandates clearly spells out the importance of teachers promoting parental participation in early school experiences and this emphasis hints why inclusion of this component in the teacher preparation programme. The lack of ongoing professional development also prevents teachers from fully supporting parents in PBL.

Schools sometimes miss opportunities to educate parents about PBL. Teachers note that a lack of clear communication and selective engagement may alienate certain parents. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) in Bunijevac (2017) clearly point out that parents' level of involvement is likely to be affected by the school itself that is if teachers appear to care about the welfare of the child, communicate with respect for parents, and develop effective means of communicating with families, parents are more willing and able to become involved in their children's play and learning. Furthermore, the absence of positive language when discussing children's play limits parental engagement, as some parents feel undervalued or excluded from the learning process. Okeke (2014) acknowledges the fact that some situations exist where parents would feel unwelcome, a feeling of not being valued, or intimidated by the school authorities, could constitute serious constraints to the way parents may desire to involve themselves in their child's education. Bunijevac (2017), suggests that one way to overcome the barriers preventing parental involvement, schools need to provide a welcoming climate where the school leaders and teachers are respectful and responsive to parents.

Teachers believe that school leaders can enhance parental involvement in PBL by fostering a culture that values parental engagement. Emerson et al. (2012) strongly points out that parental engagement strategies for PBL are more likely to be successful if teachers know how to communicate effectively with parents, where dedicated teachers work with parents, and with strong support from the school leadership for this work. Incentives for parental involvement, such as recognition or rewards, could encourage active participation and support.

Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating parental involvement by fostering positive relationships with parents and providing guidance on incorporating play into home activities. Some parents actively seek advice on educational resources and activities, highlighting the potential for deeper parent-teacher partnerships. Linking home and school activities supports parental involvement in PBL (Arnott & Yelland, 2020). Findings suggest that teachers should align classroom activities with home practices to make learning more relevant and accessible, as parents could replicate school activities at home to reinforce learning. The findings suggest that financial investment in PBL is crucial to providing the necessary materials and resources. Teachers recommend that schools should create opportunities for parents to contribute resources or donations for PBL, fostering a shared commitment to enhancing early childhood education (O'Connor, 2017).

#### **5.4 Summary**

The findings of this study on parental involvement in supporting play-based learning (PBL) in early childhood education (ECE) provide valuable insights into the existing dynamics, challenges, and opportunities for engagement between parents, teachers, and school environments. The study reveals a general willingness among parents to support PBL, especially at home. Many parents recognize that play-based approaches foster important developmental skills in children, such as cognitive, social, and emotional growth. However, teachers report that while parents are supportive, they often lack sufficient understanding of PBL's educational value, which can reduce the effectiveness of their involvement.

Despite their willingness, parents face several challenges to full engagement in PBL. Constraints such as time limitations, lack of resources, limited understanding of the pedagogical value of play, and cultural perceptions of play versus traditional learning contribute to a gap in effective parental involvement. These findings underscore the need for clearer communication and awareness-raising initiatives to help parents see the holistic benefits of play in early education. Keung and Cheung (2019) point out that when parents acquire such information from teachers, they were more likely to translate those ideas into the play at home, therefore parents can be regarded as an essential component to deliver play experience for children.

The findings suggest that increased collaboration between parents, teachers, and school leadership is crucial to building an inclusive environment for PBL. Improved communication systems, parent-friendly school policies, and the encouragement of shared responsibility in the

child's learning journey are essential. The study touches on how schools and parents collaborate by using community resources for play materials, such as repurposing local items for educational use. This aligns with Epstein's sixth type of involvement, where schools encourage parents to use community resources to support learning. The collaborative approach not only helps mitigate resource constraints but also fosters a shared responsibility for children's learning (Gross, 2020), which can enhance the overall educational experience.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also emphasizes collaboration between children and the more knowledgeable adults who provide the necessary guidance and support (Basnyat, 2023). In the study, teachers encourage parents to engage with their children's learning and to participate in school-based activities related to PBL. Vygotsky would argue that such collaboration is essential, as it helps children bridge the gap between their current abilities and potential development (Nardo, 2021). Parents and teachers working together to guide children through play-based activities provide a strong framework for children's growth. When teachers provide guidance to parents on how to replicate PBL at home, they enable parents to scaffold learning, which in turn enhances the child's cognitive development (Nardo, 2021).

The role of school leadership emerged as a critical factor in supporting parental engagement in PBL. Teachers believe that when school leaders actively promote and support PBL, parents feel more confident and motivated to participate. Leadership can further enhance PBL by providing the necessary resources, investing in training programmes for both teachers and parents, and implementing policies that recognize and value parental contributions. The findings indicate that effective strategies to engage parents in PBL require both structural and cultural shifts, where schools provide ongoing support, parents feel valued as partners in their children's education, and the benefits of PBL are widely understood and embraced.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **6.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter provides the conclusions and recommendation of the findings of the study based on how parental involvement can support PBL in ECE specifically from selected schools in Kitwe district. The study was guided by the following questions;

- i. What forms of parental involvement are practised to support PBL in the ECE?
- ii. What is the perception of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings?
- iii. What strategies are used to strengthen parental involvement in supporting play-based learning during early childhood?

### **6.2 CONCLUSION**

The findings highlight a mix of enthusiasm and uncertainty among parents regarding PBL. While many parents understand the basics of learning through play and show interest in supporting their children's development, others remain unfamiliar with or unconvinced of the approach. (Lungu, & Matafwali, 2020).

The findings show that parents recognize the value of PBL and actively engage in various ways to support their children's learning through play (Mak et al., 2020). This involvement reflects parents' understanding of PBL's multifaceted benefits, from fostering self-confidence to enhancing parent-child relationships and promoting foundational academic and social skills. Parental engagement, whether through the provision of materials, emotional support, or active participation in play activities, enriches the child's PBL experience and lays a strong foundation for future learning. The findings suggest that empowering parents with more information and resources on PBL can further strengthen their involvement and, consequently, enhance children's learning outcomes.

The findings reveal that parents see value in being active partners in their child's PBL experiences and are eager for resources, training, and communication to better support this learning approach (Keung & Cheung, 2019a). Parents expressed a clear need for accessible resources, including written materials, resources, and workshops that provide practical guidance for implementing it at home. Additionally, enhanced communication with teachers emerged as a priority, as parents seek regular updates on their child's progress and alignment with classroom activities.

The study has revealed that parents recognize the importance of play materials and a conducive learning environment but lack structured guidance on how to support PBL effectively. The findings emphasize the need for structured, school-led initiatives that help parents understand and integrate PBL into their children's daily lives. By addressing the gaps in parental training and enhancing collaboration between parents and teachers, schools and policymakers can support the holistic development of young children through play-based learning (Boit, 2020). This research contributes to the growing understanding of the critical role of parental involvement in ECE and offers practical recommendations for enhancing parent support in PBL.

By fostering collaborative events, offering observational opportunities, and creating platforms for parents to share cultural resources, schools can build a community-oriented learning environment that values parental contributions. These strategies not only enhance PBL at home but also deepen the parent-teacher relationship, creating a consistent, supportive environment for children. Furthermore, by integrating parents into the PBL process, schools enable them to become advocates of play as a meaningful, holistic educational tool, contributing to the broader development of early childhood education practices. The findings highlight the complex challenges that hinder parental involvement in play-based learning, ranging from time constraints and limited resources to misconceptions about the value of play (Okeke, 2014). Work commitments and lack of understanding remain primary barriers, compounded by societal beliefs that prioritize academic achievement over experiential learning.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. By tackling these barriers, schools and communities can create a supportive environment where parents are better equipped and motivated to participate in their children's play-based learning, ultimately contributing to their child's holistic development. Schools can support working parents by offering flexible communication channels and organizing workshops to enhance parental understanding of PBL. Initiatives to bridge the resource gap, such as community donations of play materials or shared resources, may help address financial constraints. Encouraging open communication and nurturing positive relationships between teachers and parents can foster a collaborative environment where both parties feel valued (Bunijevac, 2017). Despite some hesitations and challenges, teachers and parents have expressed a strong interest in working together to support PBL. Schools can build on this foundation by providing structured, parent-friendly opportunities that encourage active participation and facilitate a community-oriented culture.

### 6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. The Ministry of Education should leverage the benefits of parental involvement to advocate for policy changes by encouraging the integration of structured parental engagement strategies into national ECE curriculums to standardize and amplify the benefits of PBL.
- ii. The Ministry of Education and school authorities should ensure they develop and implement orientation and training programs by organizing ongoing orientation programs that introduce parents to PBL principles.
- iii. The school authorities should establish structured parental engagement in PBL such that schools can provide parents with detailed guidance and resources to enhance home-based PBL activities.
- iv. The school authorities create avenues for communication and collaboration between parents and teachers by establishing regular parent-teacher dialogue on PBL methods and benefits to reinforce the continuity of PBL practices across home and school settings.
- v. The school authorities should facilitate parent-teacher resource-sharing initiatives, encouraging families to contribute to school play materials while providing guidance to parents on creating similar environments at home.
- vi. The school authorities and parents to establish collaborative programs where teachers and parents co-create play-based learning activities, fostering mutual understanding and shared responsibility.
- vii. The school authorities and parents should foster inclusive and sustainable resource-sharing practices by promoting the use of community and locally available materials to address resource gaps and ensure that PBL is inclusive for families from various socioeconomic backgrounds.
- viii. The ECE professionals to provide parental guidance to parents of babies, toddlers and infants, to ensure that play remains fun and that children experience the joys and wonder of free play.

#### **6.4 Suggestion for further study**

Research to examine the impact of cultural and socioeconomic factors on the nature and effectiveness of parental involvement in PBL to design culturally responsive engagement strategies.

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**APPENDIX I: AN INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE PARENTS.**

Dear Parent,

I am a postgraduate student at the University of Zambia currently pursuing a Master of Education Degree in Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE). I am researching on the topic, ‘Assessing Parental involvement in Supporting Play Based Learning in Selected Early Childhood Education Centres’. A mixed study of selected Early Childhood Education Centres in Kitwe. You are kindly requested to participate in this research by responding to the questions during an interview. All the responses recorded will be taken as strictly classified. This study is purely for academic purposes and not meant to cause you any harm. Hence, I encourage you to be free when providing your responses.

Are you willing to participate in the study? Yes  No

SECTION A

Parent ID..... Sign.....Phone Number.....Date.....

Gender: Male  Female

Age 20- 29

30 – 39

40- 49

50 and above

Question 1: What forms of parental involvement are practised to support PBL in the ECE

- a. What do you understand about Play-Based Learning?
- b. How often are you involved in your child's play-based learning activities at their ECE centre as well as at home? Explain
- c. Are you involved in any activities at ECE that engage your child in play? Explain the kind of activities you are engaged in
- d. What types of activities or roles do you typically engage in to support play-based learning at your child's ECE centre?
- e. What kind of material do you expect to find in your child’s class to use for play?
- f. Are there any benefits for you being involved in the child’s play at school and at home?  
If any explain

- g. What is your responsibility as a parent to ensure children learn through play at the centre or at home?
- h. Can you describe the various ways parents are currently involved in supporting play-based learning in your ECE setting?
- i. What specific roles do you as parents play in facilitating or enhancing PBL activities?
- j. How do you contribute to the planning and implementation of play-based learning experiences?
- k. Are there opportunities for parents to participate directly in PBL activities within the classroom or learning environment?
- l. In what ways do you as parents engage in extending play-based learning experiences beyond the classroom setting?
- m. How do you encourage other parents to integrate play-based learning principles into their interactions with their children at home?
- n. Are there any specialized workshops, training sessions, or informational resources provided to you as parents to support your involvement in PBL?
- o. Can you share examples of successful parental involvement initiatives that have significantly contributed to PBL outcomes?
- p. How do you address barriers or challenges that may inhibit your participation in supporting PBL?

Question 2: What is the perception of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings?

- a. Do you chat/share with your child's teacher about your child's play at school and home?
- b. How do you feel your involvement impacts your child's play-based learning experience? Please explain.
- c. Do you ever have meetings with other parents to discuss how you can support PBL at centre? Explain.
- d. What factors, if any, have influenced your level of involvement in play-based learning activities at the ECE centre? (e.g., work commitments, communication with teachers, awareness of the importance of PBL)
- e. How important do you believe play-based learning is for your child's development?
- f. What role do you currently play in supporting your child's play-based learning at home?
- g. In what ways do you think parents can actively contribute to play-based learning within ECE settings?

- h. What strategies or activities do you think would be effective for parents to engage in supporting play-based learning in collaboration with ECE professionals?
- i. How do you prefer to communicate with ECE educators regarding your child's play-based learning progress and activities?
- j. What resources or support do you think would be helpful for parents to better understand and participate in play-based learning?
- k. Can you share any experiences or examples of successful parent involvement in play-based learning within ECE settings?
- l. What barriers or challenges do you face in supporting play-based learning at home as well as at school?
- m. How do you envision the ideal partnership between parents and ECE professionals in supporting play-based learning for children?

Question 3: What strategies are used to strengthen parental involvement in supporting play-based learning during early childhood?

- a. What is your view about teachers on your involvement in your child's playful learning in the ECE centre and at home?
- b. Are there any recommendations or strategies you would suggest that schools can establish to enhance parental involvement in play-based learning in ECE centres and home?
- c. Describe your relationship with the teachers when you visit the school to help out with PBL?
- d. How do teachers encourage you as parents to participate in their child's play-based learning activities at the centre?
- e. Is it important for teachers and parents to work together in play activities of the learners? (Explain)
- f. Explain the attitude of your child's teacher when you volunteer to do some playful activities in school.
- g. From your experience, how do you currently involve parents in supporting play-based learning activities?
- h. What benefits do you see in having parents actively participate in play-based learning initiatives?
- i. What challenges or barriers do you encounter when trying to engage other parents in play-based learning activities?

- j. In your opinion, what strategies or approaches are effective in fostering parental involvement in play-based learning?
- k. Can you share any successful examples of parental involvement in play-based learning that you have witnessed?
- l. What resources or support do you believe would help enhance parental involvement in play-based learning?
- m. How do you collaborate with other parents to align play-based learning experiences between home and school environments?

## **APPENDIX II: A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR TEACHERS.**

Dear Teacher,

I am a postgraduate student at the University of Zambia currently pursuing a Master of Education Degree in Early Childhood Care, Development and Education (ECCDE). I am researching on the topic, 'Assessing Parental involvement in Supporting Play Based Learning in Early Childhood Education': A mixed study of selected Early Childhood Education Centres in Kitwe'. You are kindly requested to participate in this research by responding to the questions during the focus group discussion. All the responses recorded will be taken as strictly classified. This study is purely for academic purposes and not meant to cause you any harm. Hence, I encourage you to be free during the discussion.

Question 1: What forms of parental involvement are practised to support PBL in the ECE

- a. From your experience as a teacher, would you tell me some of the common ways parents get involved in children's education to support play in your school?
- b. Can you describe the types of parental involvement practices that your ECE centre currently uses to support play-based learning?
- c. How are parents typically informed or educated about the importance of play-based learning in ECE?
- d. What kinds of resources or materials are provided to parents to facilitate their involvement in PBL activities at home?
- e. Are there specific events or activities where parents are actively engaged in supporting play-based learning within the centre? Please describe them.
- f. How do you encourage parents to participate in their child's play-based learning activities at the centre as well as at home?
- g. What types of support or resources do you feel would help parents be more actively engaged in supporting play-based learning?
- h. What barriers or challenges have you faced in parents being involved in play-based learning initiatives at your child's ECE centre?
- i. Are there any specific areas or aspects of play-based learning where you feel you parents could contribute more effectively?

Question 2: What is the perception of parents regarding their involvement in supporting play-based learning within Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings?

- a. What does play-based learning mean to you, and how do you believe it benefits your child's development?
- b. From your perspective as teachers, what is the level of parental involvement in play-based learning activities, and how does it vary among parents?
- c. Do you engage parents on what kind of toys/books/any material to use at home?
- d. Are there any specific strategies or initiatives your centre has implemented to increase parental involvement in supporting PBL?
- e. How do you help families establish home environments that support children for play-based learning?
- f. Do you chat with parents about the need for them to play with their children at home?
- g. Are there any success stories or examples where parental involvement has significantly enhanced the PBL experience for children in your centre?
- h. What opportunities do you feel exist for parents to actively participate in supporting play-based learning within your child's ECE setting and at home?
- i. What specific activities or initiatives would you like to see implemented to encourage parental involvement in play-based learning?
- j. Can you describe any successful collaborations or partnerships between parents and ECE professionals in supporting play-based learning?
- k. What resources or support do you think would help parents better understand and participate in play-based learning initiatives?
- l. How can ECE centers facilitate and encourage parent engagement in play-based learning activities?
- m. Have you noticed any challenges or barriers that hinder parents from getting more involved in supporting PBL? If so, what are they?

Question 3: What strategies are used to strengthen parental involvement in supporting play-based learning during early childhood?

- a. In your opinion, what are the key benefits or advantages of having parents actively involved in supporting PBL in ECE?
- b. From your experience, how do you currently involve parents in supporting play-based learning activities?
- c. How do you communicate with parents about the importance of play-based learning and their role in supporting it?
- d. What is your view as a teacher, allowing parents to volunteer to do playful tasks in your class?
- e. Is it possible to identify children who seemingly get engaged in play at home in your class?
- f. Is there any relationship between the kind of play at school and the ones children engage out of school? (Share)
- g. Are there any recommendations or strategies you would suggest to further enhance parental involvement in play-based learning in ECE centres?
- h. In your opinion, what strategies or approaches are most effective in fostering parental involvement in play-based learning?
- i. What resources or support do you believe would help enhance parental involvement in play-based learning?
- j. How do you currently involve parents in supporting play-based learning activities in your ECE setting?
- k. What barriers or challenges do you encounter when trying to engage parents in play-based learning initiatives?
- l. What suggestions do you have for improving and maximizing parental involvement in play-based learning within ECE settings?