CAN THE "GOWN" ACT AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE "TOWN" AND THE SCHOOL?
An Analysis of the Operations of the PEEPS Project in Trinidad

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This paper critically assesses the pilot phase of a project mounted at the School of Education, The University of the West Indies, Trinidad campus, (the "gown"), which was designed to enhance the ability of urban parents of primary school children (the "town") to be involved in their children's education. Using three theoretical lenses—ecological systems theory, social capital, and "knotworking," the paper identifies challenges faced, gains accrued, and lessons learnt in the conduct of workshop sessions with parents/guardians of Standard 3 children (aged 9-10 years) at an urban primary school. While highlighting the potential of the strategy for enhancing the development of urban students, the paper suggests that future work should explore the use of community spaces for such workshop sessions, in the quest for fuller use of parents' social capital.

Introduction

The educational landscape throughout the Caribbean is in a state of flux. The usefulness of old paradigms is being questioned, and the relentless search for different ways of doing things in the attempt to make schooling more attractive for students continues. This is a complex situation and no one course of action is likely to provide all the answers to the challenges at hand.

Parental involvement in schooling is one course of action that has been pursued in some settings in the quest to enhance student interest and performance in school. In referring to a study in the United Kingdom that dealt specifically with reading attainment, Scott et al. (2012) contend that there are conditions necessary for the strategy of parental involvement to work. They state that:

> whilst the longitudinal studies confirm a strong association between parental involvement and child reading attainment, both the general quality of the parent-child relationship (e.g. sensitive responding) *and* the specific way the parent supports intellectual development

> and literacy seem to be important in promoting reading skills, though they do not emerge as major determinants. (p. 4)

Other researchers emphasize that there exists a large body of literature which points to a significant relationship between parental involvement and students' attitudes and achievement (e.g.,6 Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2007; Fan & Chen, 2001; Machen, Wilson, & Notar, 2005). Jeynes (2011, 2012) adds to these mixed findings by suggesting that the most powerful aspects of parental involvement are frequently subtle, and include dispositions such as maintaining high expectations of one's children, communicating openly with children, and having a loving but structured home environment.

Within the Caribbean context, research in this area is somewhat sparse. Munroe (2009) reports on a study in Jamaica that built on a few earlier studies, and which explored factors impacting on parents' involvement in their children's schooling. She indicates that this study was done against the backdrop of the 2004 Education Task Force Report in Jamaica, which concluded that inadequate involvement of parents in the education of their children was one of the factors that was having a negative effect on educational outcomes in the country. Munroe's study identified that:

> parents do want to be involved in the education of their children, both at school and at home; but across school levels, parental involvement varied, resulting in a moderate to low likelihood of positive involvement. This is attributed to: (a) strong parental role construction; (b) weak perceived sense of parent efficacy; and (c) moderate perception of invitation from others which is attributed to frequent general invitation from the school and infrequent specific invitation from the teacher. (Munroe, 2009, p. 12)

In Trinidad and Tobago, the likely importance of parental involvement in schooling was one of the findings of a study using data from the 2006 National Test, which was conducted by a consortium of researchers from the School of Education, The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago; the University of Victoria, Canada; and the Ministry of Education, Trinidad and Tobago. In that study, strong positive relationships were identified between students' perceptions of the engagement of their parents/guardians in school-related activities, and student achievement in both Language Arts and Mathematics at the Standard 3 level (children aged 9-10 years). In addition, high levels of adult engagement with student learning were related to more positive student views about themselves (Anderson, George, & Herbert, 2009). The *Parent Empowerment to Enhance the Performance of Students*

(PEEPS) Project was designed to follow through on these findings by working with parents/guardians of students at the primary school level. This paper reports on the pilot phase of the PEEPS project in one urban primary school in Trinidad.

The PEEPS Project, based at the School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine (the "gown") worked with parents (the "town") in two primary schools in the St. George East Educational District in Trinidad. The terms *gown* and *town* are used here to simply denote obvious identifiers of two of the main groups of participants—university personnel and urban parents. The project was designed on the premise that parental involvement has the potential for impacting on students' holistic development, although the exact nature of the interaction is still not clearly understood. Consequently, the project was designed initially as a pilot project to: (i) determine the expressed needs of parents/guardians of Standard 3 children with respect to their ability to actively support the academic and other school activities of their children/charges, and (ii) mount and evaluate an exploratory research and development activity aimed at helping parents/guardians to be better equipped to participate in their children's education. This paper critically assesses the operations of the PEEPS project during this pilot phase, with particular emphasis on the nature and efficacy of the process of collaboration among the gown, school, and town and the outcomes of that process.

Parental Involvement: What Is It?

A literature search on the term "parental involvement in schools" throws up numerous articles. Typically, the term refers to the various ways in which parents are active in their children's lives, and in their school lives in particular (see, for example, Avvisati, Besbas, & Guyon, 2010; Epstein, 1997; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Spera, 2005). Epstein (2008) recommends strategies that schools can use to enhance parental involvement. She suggests that, "by selecting activities that focus on parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community, schools can help all parents become involved in different ways" (p. 11). These activities for parents include developing child-rearing skills and understanding child and adolescent development; taking part in the academic life of the school (e.g., by giving talks to students); functioning as a member of school committees, and working collaboratively with other members of civil society, all in the attempt to enhance student growth and achievement.

Other classification schemes have been used for the types of parental involvement, and Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack (2007) have sought

to simplify the situation by collapsing the various classifications into two broad categories: (i) involvement based at school, that is, involvement that requires actual contact with the school, for example, Parent Teacher Association meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and so on; and (ii) involvement based at home, that is, school-related activities that occur outside of school, usually at home. The latter include activities such as supervising homework, reading with children, creating study spaces, and so on. This categorization into a binary system bears close resemblance to that proposed by Sheldon (2002).

While the term *parental involvement* has been used widely, there have been some attempts at further refinement. The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2007) points us to the fact that many children do not live with their parents, and that parents are therefore often not the key facilitator of a child's academic progress. This is certainly the case in the Caribbean. The Center is therefore careful to include the term *home* in its discussions and refers to *parent and home involvement*. In this paper, the term *parent* will be used to refer to both parents and guardians who are responsible for the care and upbringing of children.

Calabrese Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004) take the process of refinement even further. They distinguish between *parental involvement* and *parental engagement*. They shun what they perceive to be a deficit model of parenting inherent in the notion of *parental involvement* existing in many studies that have a focus only on what successful parents do, and they contend that such deficit models position parents as "subjects to be manipulated or without power to position themselves in ways they see fit (i.e., here are the things that successful parents do)" (p. 4). They define the preferred term *engagement* to include "parents' orientations to the world and how those orientations frame the things they do" (p. 4). While this concern with foregrounding parental agency is desirable and laudable, we felt that the developing country context in which we work, with a colonial past and a "top down" approach in education, required that parents be called together and the issues ventilated as a first step towards finding out what help they (parents) thought they needed. We were guided by Bolivar and Chrispeels (2011), who report that "when parents from disadvantaged groups receive information and training that increase their social and intellectual capital, they can effect change in the educational system through their individual and collective actions" (p. 33). We therefore did not object to the use of the term *parental involvement*, notwithstanding the fact that our intention was to help parents to transition to the point where their voice was dominant.

Whether the term *involvement* or *engagement* is used, there is general agreement that parents do have a role to play, and the absence of such a role is regarded as a "missing link" (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011) in the education of children. It is not surprising, then, that so much effort has been exerted, and is still being exerted, in facilitating parental involvement in the schooling of children. One such successful venture is seen in the work of Sandra Dean, a Caribbean-born educator working in an inner city public school in Canada. According to Dean (2000), the community was plagued with many social problems and the school was performing at very unacceptable levels. Among the strategies Dean used to effect a turnaround were engaging community members in coaching and mentoring students, and including parents in the decision-making process at the school (two of Epstein's strategies). She also introduced a programme designed to foster respect among all participants in the school community, and the outcomes of this eventually filtered to the homes. To encourage parents to attend parents' meetings at the school, she suggested to teachers that they call the parents of each child to say something good about the child. Over time, the entire community became involved. After three years of dedicated effort, Dean reports that the school became the top school in the district.

Although parental involvement in schooling is thought to be beneficial for students, it is not always easily achieved, especially with respect to lower-income families (see, for example, Bower & Griffin, 2011; Williams & Sanchez, 2013). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) contend that the gap between the "rhetoric" and the "reality" of parental involvement occurs because there are factors at the level of the parent/home, child, teacher, and society that can hinder the process. In a small study on school influences on parents' role beliefs in two middle schools in the USA, Whitaker and Hoover-Dempsey (2013) found that "parents' perceptions of school expectations of involvement, the school climate, and students' invitations to involvement predicted parental role beliefs about their own involvement in their students' education" (p. 90).

These insights from the literature served to alert us to some of the challenges that we were likely to face in engaging in the PEEPS project in an urban school and with many parents falling into the lower socio-economic bracket. We were aware from our work as educators in close contact with schools that some parents, particularly those who did not have the benefit of an extended education, experience some difficulty in helping their children with school work. We were also aware that, in some instances, the areas of challenge extended beyond things academic to motivational and disciplinary issues. Against this backdrop, we set out to ascertain how the parents under study were coping, what they perceived

to be their needs, what they had to offer as individuals and as a group to help meet perceived needs, and how we, the gown, could assist through the PEEPS initiative.

Theoretical Underpinnings

There are different levels at which a theoretical lens was applied in the study of parental involvement in schooling in this study. First, there is the level of the child and the issues pertaining to the child's development with respect to relationships with different layers of his/her environment. Secondly, there is the level of the parents representing the town and their interface with the gown and the school in the exploration of parental involvement. Thirdly, there is the level of the inter-organizational collaborative process between the gown and the school.

Interaction of the Child With the Environment

Ecological systems theory served as the base for situating the study with respect to the interaction of the child with the environment. According to the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1989), children are affected by everything in their environment, from as nearby as the student in the next seat to as far away as the local government and political climate of the time. These layers of seemingly "concentric circles" interact with the individual, and also interact with each other. The greatest influence comes from microsystems with which the child relates directly. According to Bronfenbrenner (1994):

> A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. (p. 39)

These would include the home/family, school, peer group, and church settings. The next layer of influence, the mesosystem, is based in the exchanges between these microsystems. Examples of these would be the Parent Teacher Association, which would involve the interface of the school and home microsystems, or the church youth group, which would bring together the church and peer microsystems. Outside of the mesosystems lie the exosystems with which these children and families may not usually have contact or control, but which can still exert an indirect influence:

> The exosystem comprises the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives. (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40)

For example, the level of infrastructure (like the availability of health services) in a community might support or hinder the academic performance of students from that community. The scarcity of such health services may promote higher levels of absenteeism among pupils because of illness and/or lack of medical treatment.

Like Calabrese Barton et al. (2004), Paquette and Ryan (2001) consider the question of perceived parent deficiency. But unlike Calabrese Barton et al., they seem to accept that parents' roles are sometimes deficient, and raise the question of whether school interventions can "make up" for the changing and often "deficient" roles of parents in modern society with increasing work demands. They suggest that the solution is not in the school assuming these roles, but in helping parents to find ways to maintain and boost their positive interactions with their children. The PEEPS Project is another example of an exosystem with which the students and parents of this group would not usually interact. PEEPS created an avenue of collaboration between the microsystems of the school and home, focusing on and supporting parents, in order to improve the performance of the children of the families involved.

The Town/Gown/School Interface

From very early, it was decided that attempts would be made to avoid the use of a deficit model in the PEEPS project, and to pay attention instead to what parents/guardians were bringing to the table as they participated in the programme mounted to facilitate them. As such, the notion of social capital was cast as a pillar of the study. Defining social capital and its functions presents a challenge, as there are many definitions that have been put forward in the literature. The concepts of *trust* and *networks* are key components of social capital that have been highlighted (Aldrich, 2012). Other terms that have been used in a variety of ways in relation to social capital include *network of relationships, shared understanding, knowledge and interactions,* and *creating connections* (Dasgupta & Serageldin, 1999).

Social capital plays a major role in education and parental involvement contributes to social capital (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). In addition to family income and parental education, James Coleman (1988) suggested that social capital may have an important effect on the well-being and,

specifically, the educational achievement of a child. He defined it as a resource inherent in the relations between and among actors that facilitates the well-being and development of children. He suggested that a connectedness between a child, his/her family, friends, community, and school could translate into higher academic achievement. This connectedness, a product of social relationships and social involvement, generates social capital.

Meier (1999) has reported that researchers using Coleman's approach to social capital have advocated a variety of ways to achieve conceptual clarity while retaining several different dimensions of social capital. She cites Astone et al. (1999) who offer the following dimensions: forms of social capital (e.g., family structure); quality of social capital (e.g., degree of social involvement in relationships); and the resources available via a form of social capital (e.g., advice and information from parents or others).

All the main theorists agree that social capital is embedded in social relationships, but they differ as to their perspectives on the use of social capital. The differing foci include the function of social capital for communities (Scottish Executive, 2003, cited in Smith, 2000-2009); the use of social capital for educational purposes (Mikiewicz, 2011); and the use in business or in the search for jobs and social status (Adler & Kwon, 2002). We felt that a focus on the use of social capital for educational purposes was pertinent to this study, and we tied this to Meier's (1999) account of Astone's (1999) assertion (mentioned earlier) that one dimension of social capital is the degree of social involvement in relationships while another is the resources that it can spawn. Specifically, in the PEEPS context, we considered the social capital that the group of parents (the town) was likely to bring to the table as they functioned as participants in the collaborative effort that PEEPS was designed to be, and the social capital that could be generated from the interactions.

Inter-Organizational Collaboration

While school/university partnerships are prevalent in other parts of the world, particularly with respect to the conduct of teacher preparation programmes, they do not normally form part of the landscape of experiences in Trinidad and Tobago. The PEEPS project presented an arena for a relatively new type of collaboration that extended beyond the university and the school to include the parents as well. Fenwick (2007) opines that, with the increasing tendency of educational organizations to form collaborations, there is the need to examine such collaborations through the lens of organizational learning theory. She points to the work

of Engeström and his practice-based theory of organizational learning, known as "knotworking," as being useful in this regard.

Engeström and other researchers (see, for example, Daniels & Warmington, 2007; Engeström, 2004; Engeström & Kerosuo, 2007) have sought to take the discussion about what happens in inter-organizational collaboration to a focus on what is done and learnt together. Engeström et al. (1999, cited in Fenwick, 2007) use the term *knot* to refer to "a loose network of actors, practices and systems that does not have a center, and in which the only consistency over time is the on-going mix of interaction among contributors, discourses, tasks and tools" (p. 139). In such a context, questions of dominance and power are sidelined. After applying this concept to a case study of a collaborative venture among a Canadian university unit, a school district, and parents sitting on the executive board of a Child Learning Laboratory, Fenwick (2007) advises that:

> those who thrive in the 'knot' of collaboration learn how to be flexibly attuned to shifting elements that emerge in negotiations. Further, these actors appear to develop capacities of mapping, translating, rearticulating and spanning boundaries among the diverse positions of organisations. (p. 138)

We felt that the theory of knotworking and the concept of knots held some promise for the analysis of the interaction among the organizations involved in the PEEPS project.

Summary

The exploration of these three tranches of literature provided us with some sensitizing thoughts and helped us to shape a framework for pursuing this study. We recognized that the act of building social relationships was at the core of our plan to help parents to actively support the academic and other school activities of their children/charges, and were guided in the process by the following:

- That children are affected by everything in their environment, and particularly by interactions in microsystems that include parents/guardians and the school

- That the social capital of a group of parents/guardians, resulting from the pooled resources of the members of such a group, has the potential of facilitating the wellbeing and development of their children/charges

- That since the school and the university are organizations with their own rules, regulations, and modes of operating, inter-organizational interactions were likely to play a significant role in the planned project

Background to the Study

The PEEPS project was initiated through a pilot study involving primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. The full university-based research team consisted of six members of staff of the School of Education, one UWI part-time lecturer, and the President and First Vice President of the Trinidad and Tobago National Council of Parent Teacher Associations. The team prepared for the collaborative process through regular meetings on the campus. Four members of the team agreed to work on the project at the school that is reported on in this paper, while the other members concentrated on work in another primary school.

The pilot was thought to be a necessary first step in order to gain a clear understanding of the issues that are likely to surface in the process of helping parents to be in a better position to facilitate the progress of their children at school. The sampling was basically purposive, with the intention of capturing some variation. The initial aim was to select three low-performing schools while also taking into account school size; location (urban/rural); governance structures (government/ denominational); and gender distributions (male/female/co-ed). The schools were to be located within reasonable distance from UWI. Three schools were selected but, because of difficulties experienced in setting up the project in one school, only two schools were eventually used. This paper reports on the execution of the PEEPS Project with the parents of the Standard 3 classes in the urban school chosen.

This urban school (which we shall call *Legacy*) had a population of 535 male students and 30 teachers. It is located in a setting very close to the hustle and bustle of city life. The school had been experiencing some difficult times with low performance by its students on national examinations, and had consequently been placed on "academic watch" by the Ministry of Education. The students came from varying home backgrounds, with reports from teachers that some parents worked with their children but that many parents did not seem to be able to spend quality time with their children. The male principal had been at the helm for just over a year when the project started, but he was quite keen on trying to restore the school to the prestige it had enjoyed in years past when it had produced several graduates who now occupy prominent positions in the local setting.

Procedure

General Strategies for Data Collection and Analysis

Permission for the execution of the project was sought and obtained from the Ministry of Education, the principal of the school, and the parents who turned up for the meetings. Data collection began with the very first interview held with the principal. This and other interviews and meetings were audiotaped (with permission) while some meetings with parents were also videotaped (also with permission). Field notes were also kept by team members.

All taped materials were transcribed to make the data more accessible for analysis. Transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis in the tradition of the grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The lead author initiated the coding process and the PEEPS team reviewed and finalized themes. The constant comparative technique was used to ensure that there was a good match between themes generated and the data.

Initial Phase of the Project

During the very first meeting that the research team had with the principal, he indicated his openness to new ideas as he declared, "*I am about trying everything that might work hoping that one thing will work.*" He outlined that it was very difficult to get most parents to attend meetings. Similar difficulties have been reported in the literature (see, for example, Colombo, 2006; La Rocque et al., 2011). With reference to the parents, the principal declared that one had to "*sweeten them up*" to get them to collaborate. This theme of the need to entice parents to partner with the school for the benefit of their children was one that he repeated several times during the course of the study.

The research team held a meeting with the entire teaching staff of the school in January, 2011. Before the proposed project was explained to the staff, they were asked to articulate what they thought were some factors that might be affecting learning on the part of their students. Although they did not immediately mention the role played by parents, they eventually suggested that a factor that might be hindering students' learning is that modern-day parents tend to be very young and tend not to have been exposed to classes on good parenting. They felt that good parenting could lead to marked changes in students' behaviour. As one parent put it, "*So you see, you might see a change in behaviour, a change in marks, but there is a very important link between the performance of the student and the time provided by the parent.*" In a follow-up meeting with Standard 3 teachers only, there continued to be a focus on the important role that

parents play, but there was also great emphasis on the skills that they thought parents were lacking.

Finally, in this initial phase of the work, members of the research team met with all Standard 3 boys, their parents, and their teachers. The meeting was organized by the principal on the request of the research team. This meeting had to be held in a nearby church building since the school does not have an appropriate space for a meeting of this capacity. Again, the project was explained and one member of the research team encouraged participants to set and pursue goals by telling her own story of working towards and achieving goals. In addition, she succeeded in getting a grandmother (who acts as a guardian) to share her story of overcoming challenging times and achieving her goals.

Having introduced the project to all significant stakeholders, listened to their initial feedback and sought their cooperation, the research team began in earnest to plan and execute workshop sessions with parents, which were designed to help them to be better prepared for involvement in their children's schooling. By this time, the students had been promoted to Standard 4, and three of the four teachers who had served in Standard 3 were maintained by the principal for the Standard 4 year.

The Collaborative Process

Laying the groundwork for collaboration between gown and school. The procedures for collaborating with the school evolved as the project progressed. The principal was the direct point of contact for the research team, and the communication proceeded through telephone contact in the main. Whenever there were difficulties in establishing telephone contact, a personal visit was made to the school by one of the team members. Soon, a protocol for operating emerged, which consisted of the following:

- The school set dates for meetings with parents on the request of and in collaboration with the team.
- The school provided physical space for meetings.
- The principal informed teachers about meetings.
- The school informed parents about meetings through a circular sent home through their child/charge.
- The team reminded parents about meetings through follow-up telephone calls.
- The team planned and managed the meetings, taking into account needs identified by parents.
- The team provided refreshments for all sessions.

Scrutiny of this protocol would reveal that the teachers were not involved in the planning or execution processes. This was not the initial intention of the research team. This loose network of actors and practices (the knot) seemed unable to accommodate teachers who had possibly never interacted at a professional level with university personnel before, except for the few on staff who had pursued degree programmes. Furthermore, the PEEPS project was operating in a context where teachers' roles were perhaps mainly defined by their duties during the school day, and after-school activity was considered something of an "extra." It should be noted, though, that the principal constantly briefed teachers about upcoming sessions with the team. It should also be noted that, sometimes, a teacher or two would attend the sessions, and there was one teacher who was also a parent who attended practically every session. The overall situation, though, was that there was little interaction between the team and the teachers once the project was in full operation, and thus the teachers did not really function as part of the knot.

On the other hand, interaction with the principal was ongoing. Given that this was an urban school which was trying to stem problems of indiscipline, and which was also trying to enhance the level of achievement of students, the principal's responsibilities were many and his attention was focused mainly in these directions. Thus the collaboration required that the team be flexible in its interactions to achieve the goal of periodic sessions with parents at the school. For example, the team took responsibility early in the game for rearranging the classroom where meetings were held to create a more informal atmosphere, telephoning parents to remind them of meetings, and providing refreshments for each meeting. On one occasion when the session with parents involved a workshop utilizing drama and requiring a fair amount of open space, the team organized to shift the session from the school (which did not have an open space such as a school hall) to a room on the university campus.

Generally, then, the knot between the principal and research team worked because of the willingness of the principal to accommodate the team and the fact that the team was "flexibly attuned to shifting elements" (Fenwick, 2007, p. 138) in the collaborative process. In spite of this, though, there were some challenges. The team experienced difficulty in conveying to the principal (and, consequently, the staff) exactly what the nature of a research and development project was. This was new territory for them and did not easily fit into their conception of what happens in schools. In fact, a few teachers commented negatively about the duration of the project as their expectation was that it would have been completed in short time. In addition, because at times there were long lapses between

sessions due to the difficulty in securing meeting dates when the school's normal calendar of events had to take precedence, a sense of discontinuity surfaced on a couple of occasions, and efforts had to be made to pull the project back on track at the ensuing session. The theory of knotworking did not fully hold, however, with respect to the center of the collaboration. The responsibility for planning the sessions always rested with the PEEPS team. But the process of making sure that the plans were taken to fruition involved collaboration, and the PEEPS team learnt how to "tie" and "untie" and "retie" the knot so that the intervention fitted into the school's calendar and was executed with the cooperation of the principal. As noted before, the teachers remained on the periphery of this process.

Laying the groundwork for collaboration between the gown and parents. Since *Legacy* is an urban school, there is no single neighbourhood community. Families of the students live in various communities throughout or near to the town. This made it difficult for the team to meet with parents outside of the scheduled meetings that were organized by the school. The team made telephone contact with parents to remind them about meetings and these short conversations helped in establishing rapport. These telephone calls also allowed opportunities for developing relationships and the formation of a "functioning community," thereby forging tighter links and helping in the development of trust. These informal conversations also helped to provide information about what parents had to offer and what were some of their needs. Later in the project, some team members organized to meet and chat with a few parents outside of the school setting in order to deepen the levels of communication. It should be noted that most parents (mainly female) worked outside of the home, and the difficulties involved in caring for children, taking public transportation to and from work, and having a regular job were many. It is to their credit that some of them made the extra effort to attend meetings and to be integrally involved in the collaboration among town, gown, and school.

In the first session with parents, the team sought to establish that it was to be a collaborative effort and that the pooling of resources was what was intended:

> *Our big aim is to work with you so that we can work with your children and get them to do better. Some of them might be doing fairly well now. If they're doing well… to get them to do even better. Some might not be doing so well so we want to raise them up. The aim is to work with you to get your children, your boys, to do better. So that is our purpose here. How are we going to do it? All of us*

> *are going to be involved, every one of us is going to be involved.*
> (PEEPS team member, October 18, 2011)

Time was also spent trying to find out from parents what they thought they needed in order to help their children do better. Some parents found it difficult to articulate their needs, but those needs enunciated included developing skills so as to be able to help with reading, creative writing, and mathematical operations; learning how to make homework time more productive; and general support in the process of parenting. In addition, parents were asked to indicate what they were bringing to the table that could assist in empowering all parents to enhance the performance of their children. This information was elicited as part of a session designed around a poem: "Unwrapping the gift" (Jean-Baptiste-Samuel, 2002). Many of the parents present at the session were women who either worked in lower-income jobs or were homemakers. As one female parent put it: "*All my talent is at home.*" The talents they reported included domestic skills such as cooking, sewing, and decorating; artistic skills such as drama, singing, song writing, and art and craft; and athletic skills such as running, swimming, and hiking. Although some parents initially found it difficult to identify a talent, most were eventually able to do so. They seemed to embrace the idea of the PEEPS team that we could work together, utilizing talent in the group, for the betterment of the children, for example:

> *I believe by pooling the type of resources we have in this room right here…. In terms of this school, we have a lot of resources. So what we have to do is pool the ideas and see how best it will work for every individual child and see how best we could help them.* (Male parent, October 18, 2011)

Designing and executing sessions with parents. The needs identified by parents in the early stage of the project (as outlined earlier) provided the team with a starting point. However, as the project progressed, parents identified additional needs, and the PEEPS team had the task of sorting through these needs and planning workshop sessions to address them. It was in the attempt to plan workshop sessions that addressed expressed needs, while drawing on the social capital in the group, that some difficulty surfaced in that there wasn't always a clear match between the domestic, artistic, and athletic skills of parents and the needs that they identified. This was further exacerbated by the fact that parents did not live in one physical community, and meetings between parents and the PEEPS team took place mainly when the school could make the arrangements for same.

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One parent described the isolation by saying, "*I never interact with a parent. Like after the meeting, everybody gone ...*"

A further intervening factor was the degree of match between the skills of the PEEPS members and the needs identified by parents. The PEEPS team was formed, not on the basis of the expertise of its members, but on the basis of the interest that members had in helping parents to become better facilitators of their children's development. Eventually, some sessions were facilitated completely by PEEPS members, but the team sought the assistance of external facilitators for other sessions. After about four sessions, the PEEPS team suggested to parents that they could take full responsibility for the following session. They readily accepted the suggestion and created a small working team amongst themselves to pursue this aim. Unfortunately, the action was never brought to fruition as they experienced logistical problems. This highlighted the peculiar nature of the town setting, with parents not belonging to a single community (as exists in rural settings) and not normally being in contact with each other on a daily basis. Table 1 shows the sessions that were carried out with parents and the facilitators involved. Most sessions were based on a discussion and workshop format, and participation levels were high throughout.

In addition, at the request of the parents, a session was held with the boys only. Parents felt that the boys were more likely to be open about their feelings and concerns with the team than they were with them. Accordingly, we organized a session that consisted of two parts: (i) focus groups with 8-10 boys in each and in which the boys could express themselves freely, and (ii) a motivational talk on setting goals and believing in oneself. Since all the members of the PEEPS team are females, we organized for male facilitators to lead the focus group discussions and also for a male motivational speaker. The session with the boys was a very lively one. Boys expressed their concerns about their ability to handle certain school subjects. One prominent concern was the issue of bullying. It was striking that many boys reported that they confided, not in their parents, but in a good friend or a grandparent or an older sibling.

Table 1. PEEPS Workshop Sessions

Workshop Session	Facilitator
Setting goals and sticking with them	PEEPS team member with assistance from a grandparent and the principal
What do you bring to the table? "Un-wrapping the gift."	PEEPS team member
Motivating your child	PEEPS team members
Maximizing the child's potential	PEEPS team member
Continuous assessment in the primary school	PEEPS team member with dramatic contribution from a parent
Creative writing	Invited dramatic orator and UWI language arts specialist
"Releasing the pressure" – Coping with peer-pressure and other fears and anxieties	UWI dramatic group using participatory techniques
Relaxation techniques	Invited educational psychologist
Self-efficacy	Invited educational psychologist and PEEPS team member
Transitioning from primary to secondary school	Invited clinical psychologist

Parents' and Principal's Reactions to the Workshop Sessions

The first session with parents (and teachers and students) was timetabled by the principal within normal school hours. This was the only session at which there was full attendance. This was likely due to the fact that this was an official "school" meeting. Thereafter, meetings were scheduled after school hours as the fairly rigid school timetable does not easily allow for such meetings during school time. Attendance was much lower at the after-school meetings. Nonetheless, there was a core of parents who maintained interest in the programme throughout.

After the first two sessions, during which time parents were trying to understand and get used to the new experience, workshop sessions tended to be very lively with a great deal of participation from most of the parents who attended. But the sessions that captivated them most were the ones in which some form of dramatic presentation/activity was involved. In the workshop session by the UWI dramatic group using participatory techniques, the eagerness with which parents became totally involved in

sharing and enacting their experiences was particularly striking. The principal was captivated by the whole experience:

> *The session that I liked… I liked the input of the drama. I particularly liked the session with the Arts in Action, I think it was the most "free up" session. It was where I have never seen my parents so open in discussion, and so happy. That's the word I want to use. They were in an environment where they were free to the point that they were able to express (themselves), they were creative in terms of how they could come up with different skills to deal with parents (portrayed) in a whole dramatic presentation. That to me was significant …I enjoyed that session. I, myself came out of that session gleaming* [sic] *a lot. Then I said to myself, it offers me a suggestion to use in my staff. I think I might get more out of them that way. I particularly liked that session and I wish there were more parents involved.* (Principal, February 14, 2013)

The principal expressed disappointment that the PEEPS team had not been able to draw out parents who would not normally come to school functions. He reiterated that some parents needed to be enticed to attend:

> *I wonder if they really understood what is there to be gained from this exercise. Now, I knew some of them articulated that they wanted to know how to deal with their boys but whenever that came up it was always the parents who are always involved in any case. They have a natural inclination to learn or want to better themselves in terms of parenting. But the parents who as a principal I would have liked to see directly involved in the exercise, those parents do not have a priority on issues like these and I feel there needed to be a more creative way to get (them) involved.* (Principal, February, 2013)

It was clear that the principal (and perhaps some parents) did not buy into the notion that parents themselves possessed social capital which could be shared in an environment that would also facilitate the enhancement of social capital.

The perceptions of parents who attended the programme were elicited through one-on-one interviews in some instances, and then in a large-group interview in the final workshop session for the 2012-2013 academic year. Parents indicated that some of the ideas presented in the workshop sessions were new to them, but that they had been embracing others in the parenting act without even realizing that their actions conformed to some official principle or theory. Some themes were discerned in the parents' discourse, as described below.

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Recognizing and developing social capital

As mentioned earlier, many of the parents come from the low-income bracket, with an educational background that is not very extensive. The sessions seemed to help parents to realize that, in spite of gaps in their educational background, they had the ability to help their children in some way:

> *I have no secondary education so I never used to feel comfortable working with my son. His father does his homework with him because he went to St. B's. I go to the meetings..... Since attending the meetings I realize that there is a lot I could do for my son......continue doing what all yuh doing.* (Female parent, March 23, 2013)

Parents were particularly encouraged by the guidelines provided for helping their children with creative writing, for example:

> *There was one person, she was fantastic. She was a lawyer I think from San Fernando. What these sessions have taught me is that everyone is different. You're starting from here and coming down ...By the time that lawyer lady finish, listen to me Dr. I wanted to go home and write a poem! –The impact! ... I said (to my son): 'Remember the sessions Mummy went to? Write a story for Mummy... Do something better for Mummy. They spoke about describing things – all that I want you to put in your essay.' He wrote a story – two to three pages. 'Home Alone' was the title ... If you hear how he described – oogoooood! That's what I want!* (Female parent, April 10, 2013)

Taking corrective action

When some parents learnt of new ways of interacting with their child, they reported that they attempted to take corrective action:

> *After those meetings, I learnt not to compare my son with anyone else.* (Female parent, March 23, 2013)

> *I am involved in everything with my son, from beginning to end, up to eleven o'clock at night. My son gives up easily, he doesn't have patience and that gets me so frustrated and I want to give up. But after that session on relaxation, I know how to deal with that. I will take a break, do the thing, and tackle him another time...It has helped me with communicating with my son.* (Female parent, April 10, 2013)

Continuing feeling of inadequacy

Some parents reported that they continued to feel inadequate when trying to help their sons with homework, particularly in the area of mathematics, for example:

> Researcher: *You mentioned earlier that you don't feel comfortable because you haven't had a good education.*

> Parent: *(There are) challenges trying to help him, that's just it. The fact that sometimes he will come with the Math and I have to tell him, 'Boy, if your father's not home, you have to wait till your father gets here because I really don't understand that.'* (Female parent, March 25, 2013)

Spreading it around

Overall, the parents and two of the teachers who participated were unanimously of the view that the PEEPS Project had been beneficial to them. Indeed, they were so grateful for the insights and skills gained that they clamoured for a wider sphere of influence for the project, for example:

> *I'm tired as hell but we are here and we listen to each other and what these sessions have taught me… I learned to appreciate the mothers that my son has spent time with for the years he has attended the school. The mothers, we see each other and we say, 'Hi, how you going?' And to me, that is special. It is special for you all to come here and teach us things and the session we had in UWI, the arts thing, which was fantastic. I really, really enjoyed the sessions. I will miss it. I wish that you'll continue with other schools; will branch out to other schools because I think parents need you, need this type of teaching this type of help.* (Female parent, June 5, 2013)

> *As a teacher in school I thought this was really good because it provided a forum for parents to come together and realise that it's not me, all of us share the same problems. Although we try to give advice sometimes we don't have the time to give it as detailed as we want. You all were there to give them an ear and the feedback that you gave and the information that you gave really supported some of the parents. In the end we saw the results in some of the children and it built a better relationship with us. A lot of the parents here are willing to help their children but they are looking for ways how to and you provided that. I wish that somehow the other Standards*

(classes) could also benefit from this, even if it's one lecture…
(Female teacher, June 5, 2013)

Summary and Discussion

By all accounts, this venture bore some benefits for those involved, but there were challenges that were faced. One big challenge was that of involving the teachers in a meaningful way. The gown was not successful in meeting this challenge. The project was executed in a context where teachers felt that students' non-performance was attributable, in part, to parental lack of knowledge and interest. The PEEPS project failed to explore these perceptions with teachers, mainly because of time constraints. Consequently, the teachers mostly functioned at the periphery and were never to be found at the centre of the activity.

The principal was of the view that some parents needed to be assured of tangible results in order for them to agree to participate in the schooling of their children. It was also clear that the principal thought that many parents are not intrinsically motivated to see about their children's interests. These challenges persisted throughout the programme and remained largely unresolved at the end of the two-year run. Alongside this, the lack of mechanisms by the research team for wider parent participation persisted. The low level of parental involvement in schools is not unique to this Caribbean context, and mention was made earlier of some of the barriers that researchers in other contexts have found to contribute to this state of affairs. This is an issue that needs to be explored in future studies.

Communicating with the principal was at times challenging, but the team circumvented these challenges when they arose. Throughout, the team exhibited the ability to mobilize at short notice when the principal indicated a possible meeting date for workshops with parents, and team members demonstrated a willingness to work with whatever physical resources were provided by the school, and they attempted to use these resources to create reasonable working spaces for collaborating with parents.

In spite of the challenges, though, there were some successes. The parents who attended were generally very enthusiastic about the project. They embraced the guiding principle that children are affected by their interactions in the microsystems of the home and the school, and were eager to find out how they could make those interactions count for good. At the end of the pilot, they expressed the view that they had benefitted tremendously from all the sessions and wished that the project would continue. Parents became quite animated during the interviews that were conducted to seek their views on the programme, and expressed their deep

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appreciation for the effort by the team. In several instances, they indicated that they had been practising some of what they had learnt. Although the PEEPS team did not find it easy to use the social capital of parents in a direct way, there was evidence that many of the parents were empowered in discovering that they had talents to guide and encourage their sons, and that they had learnt new skills to add to their parenting repertoire. By the end of the pilot, one could detect that levels of trust had been enhanced and that networks were being formed. In other words, this link among the gown, the school, and the town, created through the PEEPS project, produced relationships that generated a resource (fledgling though it was) which helped parents in seeing about the well-being of children, that is, social capital was generated (Coleman, 1988). We are mindful, though, of the assertion by Calabrese Barton et al. (2004) that parents in low-income urban settings can "activate *non-traditional resources* [emphasis added] and leverage relationships…in order to author a place of their own in schools" (p. 11). The PEEPS project did not achieve this level of empowerment. We return to this point later in the paper.

The principal also benefitted from the experience. Although this type of "evolving" project was not what he was used to as an administrator, he continued to give his support by putting PEEPS meetings on the school calendar when asked, and by attending and participating in most of the meetings. Further, through PEEPS and the PEEPS network, he was able to expand his own network of professionals who could assist and support the work of the school.

This pilot project was not designed to measure quantitative gains in students' achievement levels or general well-being. It is however reasonable to suggest that students stood to gain from the enhanced interest and attention of several adults in their immediate and distant environments. Indeed, anecdotal evidence from two teachers and also from the parents attending the workshops would suggest that this was the case.

This was, indeed, "a loose network of actors, practices and systems…" but, somewhat unlike the definition of a "knot" cited earlier (Engeström et al., 1999, cited in Fenwick, 2007, p. 139), it **did** seem to have a centre, shifting though it was. Sometimes, the PEEPS team was the centre as all planning for workshops was done by the team. At other times, the principal seemed to be the centre as nothing could happen until he created a space for a meeting in the school's calendar and sent out the notice to parents. It should be noted again that the teachers were never the centre as their involvement was minimal. But it is safe to say that all activity was focused on empowering parents to enhance the performance of their children.

This pilot project may be described as a work in progress and a learning process. There are not yet any set rules or policies that could be enunciated

for interactions at the level of the mesosystem (town and school) or their respective interactions with the gown, which would be guarantees of success in other situations. There were no prototypes generated that could be applied in any context. But there are some lessons that have been learnt. One key to the viability of such a project is the participants' openness to innovation and their willingness to be flexible in practice. For the PEEPS project, this demonstrated itself in the rescheduling of sessions because of other school business, the outreach to other professionals when the team did not have the expertise, and the moving of sessions to places that could accommodate the activities planned. Most of the time, although the changes were not expected, planned, or invited, sessions were successful for those who participated.

A related lesson learnt was that this urban school setting was not a natural research site. Schools have their own culture and their own momentum, and in an urban Caribbean setting such as this, they do not readily accommodate collaboration with outside personnel for a prolonged period. It is to the credit of the principal that this barrier was overcome, albeit with some effort. But issues of power were always there under the surface. In the education system in Trinidad and Tobago, the principal wields a fair amount of power and a lot of decision making is executed by him/her. Perhaps because of this, parents initially had some difficulty understanding a project being mounted through the school where **they** were being invited to help to set the agenda. Further, the gown found itself in a position of having to be careful of not projecting in any way the societal image of the "bright" people from the university, and trying instead to project its deep desire to be a part of a collaboration. The PEEPS team can take some credit for being sensitive to the local constraints and for "tying," "untying," and "retying" as the need arose.

Parents related best in workshop sessions that incorporated drama in some form. The intensity of their reaction was an eye-opener for both the principal and the PEEPS team. In hindsight, this should not have been, as Caribbean people are noted for their love of the art forms, particularly indigenous ones. Indeed, some of the parents had indicated that they possess some artistic skills.

Perhaps the greatest lesson learnt was that, contrary to the opinion of some teachers, some of these mainly low-income parents had great aspirations for their children and were eager to make sacrifices in order to make full use of what the gown had to offer in helping them to help their children. Particularly in this regard, the gown served as a bridge between the town and the school, as some of the parents felt comfortable working with the gown to enhance their children's school experience and outcomes.

Given the dynamism of 21st century living, traditional models and methods for the education of our children are no longer yielding the kind of positive results needed and, yet, the idea of the gown creating a bridge between the school and the town is not entirely new. The sayings that "it takes a village to raise a child" (Yoruba and Igbo proverb); and "a single hand cannot bring up a child" (Swahili proverb) are among the many mores that promote collective efforts in child rearing. The PEEPS project may be thought of as a revival of these mores, reincarnated to address the contemporary and local context of Trinidad and Tobago.

There is little in the literature that mirrors the type of collaboration outlined in this paper among gown, town, and school. The findings of this pilot project therefore hold some significance for the local setting and possibly for settings with similar characteristics. There still remains the challenge of formulating avenues for interaction among town, gown, and school that would result in maximum use of parents' social capital. Whereas the use of existing structures of a principal, staff, and school building facilitated easy access to parents by the PEEPS team, the downside may have been that such a structure reinforced existing power relationships, with the parents at the bottom of the totem pole. The use of such "school-authored spaces" (Calabrese Barton et al., 2004) may have stymied parents' use of non-traditional resources in the process.

For future work, this issue of space for the collaboration is one that might be focused on. Alongside this, greater use can be made of drama. A shift to a community-based setting for meetings is one possibility for dealing with these issues, even though more than one community setting might be needed for a given urban school. Drawing on extant literature, Lawson and Alameda-Lawson (2012) highlight that low-income parents may be more easily drawn into community-based organizations and may experience social capital development in that space. Also, the very favourable impact of the UWI dramatic group that used participatory techniques suggests that this form of interaction might be exploited further, along with parents' own community-based cultural groups. This pilot project made some small but meaningful steps in bridging the gap between the town and the school. The area is ripe for further investigation in the attempt to facilitate parents' participation in the development of their children.

Acknowledgements

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