Family–teacher partnerships: families’ and teachers’ experiences of working together to support learners with disabilities in South Africa

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Family and teacher partnerships have an important role to play in the education of learners with disabilities. The South African Schools Act of 1996 has made provision for families to play a pivotal role in the school governing body, whether their child has a disability or not. National and international research shows that strong family–teacher partnerships improve children’s academic performance as well as the family’s quality of life. This study explores families’ and teachers’ co-operative experiences of supporting learners with disabilities in special and full-service schools in South Africa. Data were drawn from 39 individual interviews with teachers and five focus group discussions with 27 family members of learners with disabilities. The findings show both positive and negative interactive experiences regarding communication, extending learning from school to home, power dynamics and advocacy, and commitment. Consideration of these aspects will contribute to improving education for learners with disabilities.

Key words: families, teachers, partnerships, disability, South Africa
Introduction
Families are widely recognised as critical players in education (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2013; Duman et al., 2018; Field & Hoffman, 1999; Francis et al., 2018), and can be important in supporting the education of students with exceptionalities (Hirano & Rowe, 2016; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2002; Turnbull et al., 2015). In spite of the importance of family engagement in the education system, misalignment of perceptions between families and teachers in working together to support learners with exceptionalities continues to hinder meaningful, positive engagement (O’Donnell & Kirkner, 2014; Miller et al., 2016; LaRocque et al., 2011; Mapp & Hong, 2010). Considerations of family partnerships with professionals have proved to be fruitful areas of study (Turnbull et al., 2015) but research in this area is limited in low- and middle-income countries (McKenzie, Kelly & Shanda, 2018). We outline the results of a study that sought to understand family–teacher engagement with the education of students with disabilities in South Africa. Specifically, our research aims were to better understand the roles and relationships between family members and teachers, and to explore how these relationships affect the education of children with severe to profound disabilities in South Africa.

The findings of this study will potentially identify strengths and gaps in family–teacher partnerships in South African schools and a pathway to strengthening these partnerships to improve learner outcomes.

Literature review
Partnerships among families, school personnel and community members are critical to ensuring the success of all learners (Haines et al., 2015). We draw on Turnbull et al. (2015, p. 161) in understanding the term ‘partnerships’ to mean the relationships that exist when families and teachers:

‘agree to build on each other’s expertise and resources, as appropriate, for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly benefit students and indirectly benefit other family members and [teachers]’.

In an educational setting, all stakeholders, but particularly learners, benefit from trusting family–professional partnerships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Turnbull et al., 2015). Partnerships with schools entail the recognition of the family’s role in the education of their children, a respect for the rights and responsibilities of families and a joint commitment to the well-being of the child whose education is a shared responsibility.
(de Waal & Serfontein, 2015). Family members should be seen as individuals who come from different backgrounds and whose ability to participate in their child’s education may be influenced in multiple ways, such as by their financial security and their roles in the community (McKenzie, Loebenstein & Taylor, 2018).

With high incidences of poverty and social inequality in South Africa, barriers are faced by families in partnering with teachers. Low levels of education mean that family members may struggle to understand new curricula and feel disempowered with regard to participation in the governing bodies of schools (Mncube, 2009; Msila, 2012). Families living in poverty are often unable to provide optimally for their children’s material needs and this has a negative impact on how parents and other family members engage with schools (Ward et al., 2015). Simultaneously, teachers often feel overwhelmed by multiple challenges in the school community, resulting in a situation of ‘an intergenerational cycle of poverty where children inherit the social standing of their parents or caregivers, irrespective of their own abilities or effort’ (Spaull, 2015). Inadequate communication can result in differing expectations from various stakeholders, with family members with lower levels of education expecting schools to take responsibility for education (de Waal & Serfontein, 2015). However, teachers may feel overloaded, unsupported and unable to meet family expectations (Singh et al., 2004).

Further considerations in South Africa include the HIV and AIDS pandemic; it has been estimated that over five million children in South Africa have lost one or both parents to AIDS, resulting in an increase in orphans and child-headed households (Ward et al., 2015). Many children are reared in single parent families where it is usually the mother who is the caregiver, and up to 8% of children in South Africa, for example, are reared in ‘skip generation’ households with grandparents or great-uncles or -aunts (Eddy & Holborn, 2011; Richter & Desmond, 2008). It is widely noted that children raised in ‘skip generation’ households are likely to be socio-economically disadvantaged (Glaser et al., 2018; Dunifon et al., 2014; Luo et al., 2012). As a result, this negatively impacts on these children’s access to quality education (Burkholder, 2019; Mturi, 2012). In this context, exploring family–teacher partnerships (rather than parent–teacher partnerships) is most appropriate in order to capture the diversity of family structures in South Africa.

Given the difficulties of family–teacher partnerships in the South African context in general, it can be assumed that the experiences of South African
family members of children with disabilities might be even more fraught. Despite the policy of inclusive education, there is general anxiety about admitting children who may appear difficult to educate within existing systems (McKenzie, Kelly & Shanda, 2018). Many mainstream schools refer children with disabilities to special schools (Kelly et al., 2018). Teachers fear that they will be held accountable for the child’s lack of progress and they are not sufficiently trained to deal with difference (Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

With high levels of exclusion from the mainstream school system, many children with disabilities are placed in special schools in South Africa – in 2016 approximately 120,000 children with disabilities were placed in 455 special schools (DBE, 2018). Over 60% of special schools had hostels in 2011, indicating that many children with disabilities do not live with their family unit while attending special schools (Philpott & McLaren, 2011). This clearly poses a challenge for family involvement in the education of children with disabilities. Given the importance of family–teacher partnerships and the challenges faced to date in achieving these partnerships in South Africa, this has been identified as a necessary element of teacher education. In this article, we analyse data from a study on the education of learners with severe to profound disabilities in South Africa and focus on the implications of this study for family and teacher education for improved, trusting partnerships.

Research design and methods
This study was a secondary analysis using the data of a broader research project conducted by Teacher Empowerment for Disability Inclusion (TEDI), a partnership between the University of Cape Town and Christoffel Blinden Mission (CBM), and co-funded by CBM and the European Union. The broader project collected data from six special schools and two full-service schools across three provinces in South Africa (McKenzie, Kelly & Shanda, 2018). Special schools are ‘schools equipped to deliver education to learners requiring high-intensive education and other support on either a full-time or part-time basis’ (DBE, 2018), while full-service schools are ‘mainstream schools which are equipped to provide for the full range of learning needs of all learners’ (DoE, 2001).

The aim of the broader project was to develop an understanding of the educational needs of learners with severe to profound sensory or intellectual impairment (SPSII). According to the broader project, learners with SPSII fell into the following groups:
low vision: a person who has difficulty performing ordinary tasks with sight even with the highest-strength glasses or contact lenses; blindness: a person who has to use a range of alternative techniques for tasks that require the use of sight (Iowa Department for the Blind, 2020);

(b) severe intellectual disability: the person requires daily assistance with self-care activities and safety supervision; profound intellectual disability: the person requires pervasive support for all activities and routines of daily living (APA, 2013);

(c) severe hearing loss: a loss of 61–80 decibels; profound hearing loss: a loss of more than 81 decibels. Severe to profound hearing loss: use of assistive technologies (hearing aids and cochlear implants); follows an oral–aural approach to developing spoken language (lip-reading and speech production); or follows a manual approach (sign language is the primary means of communication) (McKenzie, Kelly & Shanda, 2018).

Participants in the broader project included learners with SPSII, teachers, school management team members, family members, and district and provincial education officials. Data were collected in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng, representing a range of better-resourced (Western Cape and Gauteng) and lower-resourced (Eastern Cape) provinces. Eight schools (six special schools and two full-service schools) were selected, ensuring representation of province, impairment category, resourced and under-resourced, rural and urban schools. For the study detailed here, we conducted a secondary analysis of the data sourced from interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with family members to explore their experiences of the education of learners with SPSII. This article reports on the relationships between families and teachers as we sought to understand:

(a) How do family members and teachers perceive their respective roles and relationships in the education of children with severe to profound visual and intellectual disabilities in South Africa?
(b) To what extent do these perceptions contribute to the development of constructive partnerships between family members and teachers?

Research design
This study used a qualitative descriptive research design which guides researchers in providing a comprehensive summary of the topic, an accurate description of events with which most people who observe the event would concur, and an explanation of the subjective meanings that participants
attribute to those events (Sandelowski, 2000). This design was appropriate, given the exploratory nature of our work, and our desire to produce insights that would be quickly actionable in schools.

Overview of data and participants
The data for the secondary analysis included transcripts from five family member focus group discussions that were conducted in five schools, with a total of 27 family members. Of these, 24 were female and three were male. Nine family members had children learning in schools for the blind, eight in schools for the intellectually impaired, five in schools for the D/deaf\(^1\) and hard of hearing and five in full-service schools.

Individual interviews with 39 teachers were conducted in eight schools. Thirty-one teachers were female and eight were male. Eleven teachers taught in schools for children who are blind, nine in schools for children with intellectual impairment, 10 in schools for children who are D/deaf and hard of hearing, and nine in full-service schools. The individual interview for teachers was chosen because they could not meet together while school was ongoing. For family members, we chose focus groups, to encourage discussion and co-creation of meaning on the topic (Wilkinson, 2004).

Focus group discussions with family members concentrated on their experiences of having a child with a disability, including challenges they believe their child faces; the support they received (or would like to receive) from the schooling environment; and what training and other resources they think teachers need in order to improve the learning environment. Interviews with teachers explored their experiences of teaching learners with disabilities; the challenges they face in providing an optimal learning environment; the support they receive or would like to receive; and training they have received. While focus group discussions are semi-informal platforms where participants openly share their views about a topic on social issues (Smithson, 2008; Wilkinson, 2004), power dynamics among participants may exist (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The power differences may compromise participants’ interaction and data quality (Bloor et al., 2001; Carey & Asbury, 2012). In order to counter these challenges, selection of participants who shared similar experiences and the facilitators’ skills in exercising focus group control strategies helped to minimise the dynamics of power (Carey & Asbury, 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2015).
In this study, focus group discussions ranged from 45 to 60 minutes and interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. All focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in English and digitally audio-recorded and transcribed.

**Data analysis**

To answer our research questions, we conducted a secondary analysis of the data, using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, which included: (a) familiarising ourselves with the data; (b) generating initial codes; (c) searching for themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) defining and naming themes; and (f) producing the report. We organised our data using Dedoose (Lieber et al., 2011), an online application to support analysis of qualitative and mixed-methods research data. One primary coder coded all the data; then a secondary coder coded a selection of the data and verified the classifications of the first coder. All authors discussed and reached consensus on the definition and naming of themes, based on the data coded.

Identifiers that were used for participants for this article are explained in Table 1.

**Ethical considerations**

The University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this study (HREC REF: 151/2017) with ministerial approval to conduct research with children under the age of 18 years. In addition, approval was received from the relevant departments of education in each province, along with a letter of endorsement from the Department of Higher Education and Training.

**Findings**

The results of the study will be presented according to the four themes that emerged: (a) communication, (b) extending learning from school to home, (c) improving family and teacher capacity to support learning at home, (d) power dynamics and advocacy and (e) commitment. When participants use the term ‘parent’ in most instances this encompassed all those filling a primary caregiver role (such as a grandmother or aunt).

**Communication**

Participants described many positive experiences of communication between school and home. For instance: ‘The teachers are fine. I cannot complain because every time I speak my mind they are always there’ (IIFM1).
Participants believed that positive communication between families and teachers would ultimately benefit the child and enable them jointly to help the learners effectively:

‘I think if there is more positive communication between the teacher and the parent, then the parent can take it back positively to the child, to help manage the child.’

(DHHFM2)

One teacher commended some families:

‘With the parents and that they also do support with discipline and all of that, if you have an issue you bring it up to the parents some of them.’

(FSST2)

However, both family members and teachers indicated that there was poor communication between the home and the classroom. Family members highlighted a lack of information about their child’s progress in the classroom:

‘she [the child] doesn’t understand simple sentence constructs, the most basic thing that you begin with a capital letter and a full stop. She doesn’t know how to use punctuation … I really don’t understand …’

(DHHFM3)
Teachers believed family members were unwilling to share information:

‘These are the challenges of which the parents are not open. They are not open to tell us that their child has a hearing problem.’ (FSST5)

Family members reacted with strong emotions to the reality of their child’s disability, and did not feel acknowledged by teachers and professionals, as this mother stated:

‘And when at school [they] tell you the child is not doing well and that he needs special attention and must go to special school, that just hits you, as a parent and … it’s a feeling that is unexplainable. When you come here they tell you there are phases your child can not go to grade 12 and that your child must do knitting and hand work … it’s, it hits … it hurts.’ (IIFM1)

One teacher identified poverty as preventing good communication:

‘[Communication with] the broader community is limited because we have learners that are socio challenged so we do not get a lot of support from our parent community and from the general community.’ (VIT9)

In a multi-lingual society such as South Africa, language can also constitute a barrier to communication, as this mother explained:

‘She learns very well here. At the other school, it was Afrikaans, but here is only English. I once attended a meeting here and then the teacher asked me, Ms, do you speak English with your daughter at home … then I said no, Afrikaans.’ (VIFM7)

This is compounded when family members do not understand their child’s sign language, creating a situation where the family member is dependent on the teacher to communicate with their child:

‘What is she saying to me; so what am I? What will she think of me? It’s putting me as a parent in a difficult situation and now I have to ask the teacher all the time, what does that mean, what does that mean?’ (DHHFM2)

A child with poor communication skills cannot convey information about activities that take place at school:
'It’s very difficult to know what to do, and how he is feeling, because he also has a speech problem and he doesn’t communicate clearly …’

(IIFM4)

The findings presented in this section highlight the importance of open, fluent and positive communication between families and teachers. This communication enhances the quality of education for learners with disabilities.

Extending learning from school to home

Teachers expressed their expectation that family members be involved in the education of their children at home: ‘a learner who is having difficulty in reading, I need to involve the parents so that they practice reading at home’ (FSST3). However, family members indicated that this expectation is difficult to fulfil with inadequate information:

‘My reasoning to the teachers was we need to know what teaching style you are using … where we need to work and emphasise attention [at home].’

(IIFM4)

Family members were of the view that teachers are not giving them guidance on how to assist their children with homework:

‘They get homework, you open the book, what must you do here? Because there is no direct indications … so me at home I don’t know what he has to do with his homework.’

(DHHFM2)

Family members lack confidence in their own levels of education to support their child’s learning:

‘And often there are things they’re doing now that we cannot really assist them ’coz we don’t know what’s going on. You know it’s like putting us back in school basically because often now we’ve got to go back and research also in order to assist them.’

(FSSFM5)

This teacher felt that family members are not skilled enough to help their children with schoolwork at home:

‘I am a Maths teacher, for example, I have given them the homework; they cannot communicate with their parents. I think that is the main
problem. Even if you can give them homework, they cannot help them at home because they do not know how to help them.'

(DHHT6)

However, some teachers perceived these struggles as family members’ lack of interest in their children’s schoolwork:

‘I think the biggest challenge these days is … we can’t generalise, but … parents are not interested anymore. They think that the school will wave a magic wand and sort things out but … you as a teacher cannot do it on your own. Your work at school … has to be carried through at home.’

(IIT4)

In other cases it appears that family members are willing to assist if given opportunities to do so:

‘they are willing to give that support, in terms of homework and things like that, some parents are willing to do that and parents that are willing to come in, if there is that space for them to do that.’

(FSST2)

Family members expressed their lack of confidence in the way teachers are teaching their children and whether it is appropriate to expect family members to teach the child in the home:

‘I think the biggest sort of problem a lot of the learners are having is the amount of homework they get for one day. It’s far too much and then again, I have actually seen where they will get homework right up to the point of the exams starting.’

(FSSFM5)

Another family member saw teachers’ expectations of extension of learning as infringing on their family time:

‘I think if they can teach the children according to their textbooks it will be very much easy for the kids. Not for them to wait until it’s before the exams and then they start to do Saturday classes and morning classes and during the holidays there is … You can’t go for holidays. You have to be in school so that you can catch up with the work that is behind. I think we need to have proper planning.’

(VIFM6)

The implication here is that teaching is not taking place at an adequate level in the classroom because the teachers are not sufficiently skilled in
communicating the content of the textbooks. This results in the learners having to do more work at home and spending increasing time preparing for exams.

Findings thus indicate the importance of acquiring skills and knowledge to facilitate learning from school to home.

Improving family and teacher capacity to support learning at home

This theme concerns the skills that are needed by both families and teachers for building partnerships. One teacher said:

‘we need to teach teachers to be in a position to work with the parents and to have maybe quarterly meetings with the parents to check on them how they are coping.’

(IIT10)

Given the concerns mentioned above about homework, the need for the education of families was discussed:

‘So I think informal programmes could be valuable for our parents so that what we teach here could be done at home. Because everything ends here. So our children come here blank knowing nothing, they’ve got no vocabulary, they don’t know any knowledge … I think our parents if they could also be capacitated.’

(DHHT7)

Family members expressed the need for workshops:

‘I think you can also try to organise some workshops for all parents as well just to equip us with how to help the kids.’

(VIFM7)

Similarly, specific training in communication skills, especially sign language, was suggested:

‘If there can be classes for their parents also for sign language because now, they get at home, the children can’t communicate, they are bored at home because parents can’t talk to them.’

(DHHFM2)

Family members expressed an eagerness to learn more about supporting learning in school:
'There is very limited support coming from the school side for our children, to give us guidance how to deal with them at home and also to improving the learning environment. What we are doing at home, we don't know if that is what is needed at school.' (IIFM4)

This teacher expressed a similar view: 'So I think informal programmes could be valuable for our parents so that what we teach here could be done at home' (DHHT4).

These findings indicate that formal and informal training, workshops and support from the school would greatly assist families and teachers in acquiring the knowledge and skills to better help learners with schoolwork at home.

**Power dynamics and advocacy**

Findings from this study show that the power dynamics between families and teachers can be complex. This family member shared her view:

> ‘Here they prefer positive parents, the yes mam type of people. Because you are not a teacher and you cannot know as much as I do. You are a housewife. You know those kinds of things.’ (DHHFM3)

Some family members were extremely angry: ‘We don’t have rights, we don’t have choices, so what must we do with children with cochlear [implants], what must we do?’ (DHHFM2). One participant further elaborated that, unlike other families, the family of a disabled child has limited choice:

> ‘It’s just a point that I want to speak up about, is that, give parents of children with disability the same rights, the same choices of schools and education that the normal children have.’ (DHHFM2)

Families also stated that they often feel compelled to assert the rights of their children despite this being difficult given the power imbalance favouring the teacher. One mother shared that, in her view, teachers are not standing up for learners’ rights to education, as espoused in the South African inclusive education policy:

> ‘I went to her teacher and I said mam my child cannot even write a sentence. Not even one sentence … her book is full of sentences … how does that happen? The teacher said No … we will write sentences on the board and we would ask them to fill in the missing words. So I asked her
don't you do creative writing as a subject? She said no we don't. We omit that … it’s excluded from the curriculum. And I asked why is that so? That the way it’s always been done here and so when I came here in the school that’s what I continued doing and I didn’t really ask any questions. That makes one ask what white paper [South African inclusive education policy] exists.’

(DHHFM3)

A family member indicated that parents were reluctant to voice their concerns: ‘parents discuss things amongst themselves and when given the opportunity or platform to talk no one says anything’ (DHHFM3). This family member suggested that such docility might arise because family members are:

‘grateful to have someone who will take their child … that happens with special schools … parents are scared … if this school does not take your child where are they going to go or do and that can be a real problem.’

(DHHFM3)

It appears that it is up to individual family members to fight for the child’s rights:

‘I came to her teacher to talk to her and she was like … she wasn't there. I mean, where were you? You are supposed to be with the children, right? A week after that she was ok and I could talk to her.’

(VIFM7)

This kind of advocacy for their children creates the risk of family members being labelled as ‘difficult’, as this mother suggested: ‘even after I complained I thought something would happen but it hasn't, but I have just been seen as a problem parent’ (DHHFM3).

These findings indicate how challenging it is for families to work in a system where power dynamics prevail.

Commitment

This theme looks at family members and teachers caring for the learners, showing respect for the learners, keeping them safe and taking care of their health. Family members were extremely appreciative of the commitment to their children’s education that some teachers demonstrated:

‘Understanding, there are teachers that you can walk a road with, they will take any rock out of your road, they really try to accommodate you,
they really try to support you, that’s why I am saying I am taking my hat off for this school, the support that they are giving emotionally, that makes a difference.’

(DHHFM2)

Furthermore, there are teachers who express their commitment to families:

‘I’m in service of the parents and the learners, and I feel as though I don’t give them 100 percent, that I’m short changing them, and I don’t want to feel like that …’

(FSST1)

Teachers also shared experiences of the great lengths they go to in order to ensure communication with families with regard to addressing student issues:

‘the parents if they have a problem we send out a vehicle to come and bring the parent to school or we give the driver instructions to pick up the parent, bring the parent to school so … if all that is not working then I send out my psychologist and my nursing assistant and the driver to house facilitation [facilitate a response from the home].’

(VIT1)

Despite these positive examples, family members felt discouraged by how some teachers did not care enough to see potential in their children:

‘the first day when I brought her into the school, the principal at the time said, “Don’t have high expectations, most of these kids don’t do well academically. She probably won’t even go to high school or have matric.” For me that was the worst thing that anyone have said to me.’

(DHHFM3)

Some families stated that they feel abandoned and blamed when their child does not meet expectations:

‘At the end of the day when the child is not coming together, the parent feels they have failed and there is nobody that can help you, when you are feeling you have failed. Your child doesn’t make it, he is not speaking, he is not on the road, but let us just carry on. Why am I here, nobody is taking my feelings into consideration, what am I here for?’

(DHHFM2)

On the other hand, teachers doubt the extent to which families are committed to the school and what it offers:
‘They [families] will also come, and some are in denial also about the condition of their children. They hope their children can still shift over to the mainstream system.’

(VIT9)

Some family members believed that teachers do not always exercise enough care towards their children at school:

‘The only thing I have a problem with is when there was a month ago, when one of the children pushed my daughter off from the swing; and if you know that you are working with children with disabilities … then I think it is better for someone to be there during intervals, because she bumped her head. And I asked where was the teacher, she wasn’t there.’

(VIFM7)

Teachers described their feelings of frustration towards family members for not following up when teachers make referrals for the learners to get health checks:

‘It is frustrating if parents cannot cooperate especially with these kids. That was the worst part of me that was frustrating me whereby you find you will make appointments with the doctor or with someone that will help the child but the parent does not cooperate.’

(IIT8)

There is also a perception that families are negligent in their care and want to hand over responsibilities to the school: ‘The parent will send the child to school sick and then expect sister [nursing sister] to take the child to hospital’ (VIT1). In its extreme form some respondents saw families as not wanting to care for their children at all:

‘From the parents’ side, I think it is because we have these intellectually impaired children, there is no support … none. They seem to think the school as being a dumping ground.’

(IIFM1)

The quotations above show the level of frustration and lack of confidence families and teachers feel towards each other for not carrying out their responsibilities efficiently. This in turn becomes a barrier for learners to acquiring the best education families and teachers can give them.
Discussion
This secondary analysis of family and teacher roles and relationships in supporting learners with severe to profound disabilities in South Africa reveals that family members and teachers have a range of positive and negative experiences related to communication, extending learning from school to home, power dynamics and advocacy, and commitment.

These findings, overall, reveal that both families and teachers are keen to develop and nurture positive, trusting partnerships with one another; however, they encounter challenges in achieving this. Turnbull et al. (2015) advocate that positive communication requires that both parties listen, are friendly, clear and honest, and provide and co-ordinate information, and they suggest that teachers should get to know each family’s story to better identify and respect family preferences. Communication may be hampered by the school’s lack of sensitivity to the specifics of the family social and cultural context in a one-size-fits-all approach (Crozier & Davies, 2007). With more understanding of the family’s history, needs and preferences, teachers will be better able to support communication in a way that makes most sense for the family. This might involve communicating in person, via text message, over email or in written documents, and in group meetings, home visits or individual meetings at school.

The family members in this study complained about excess homework. The data suggest that both family members and teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach children with disabilities and appear to shift responsibility to each other rather than collaborate. Ndebele (2015) notes that capacity to support learning at home is influenced to a large degree by socio-economic background, related to long work and travel times, and recommends developing special provisions for learners such as supervised afternoon homework sessions. This should be accompanied by encouragement of families to take responsibility for home learning, including making alternative arrangements where they are unable to assist for some reason (Ndebele, 2015). It is clear from the experience of families in this study that taking more responsibility for homework would entail empowering parents with knowledge about their children’s disability and the specific teaching strategies that are used to address the specific barriers to learning that their children experience. This adds another layer of complexity since, unlike the family members of typically developing children, families of children with disabilities may not have experienced learning in the same way when they were at school. Knowledge of braille, South African Sign Language and assistive technology are just some
of the areas that could present challenges to families which the school could support them in addressing (McKenzie, Kelly & Shanda, 2018).

As regards commitment, when teachers communicate low expectations for learners, it can show a lack of care for the child and can have emotional consequences for the family. In the South African context, the difficulty of getting their family member with a disability into school, and the perceived threat of the child being excluded from school, both place families in a precarious position where, in order to build trusting partnerships, they need to know that the teacher is committed to the education of their child (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). For this reason a fundamental aspect of family–professional partnerships would be the assumption that the child belongs in school and that this partnership is to ensure that schooling is effective and beneficial.

Furthermore, low expectations might also mean that teachers lack the necessary skills to identify and develop learners’ academic strengths. There is extremely limited teacher education for teaching children with SPSII in South Africa (Kelly & McKenzie, 2018). This might necessitate a more collaborative approach to identifying and meeting learner needs, requiring a problem-solving orientation in which families work in partnership with professionals to discuss and provide solutions for difficulties that learners experience at home and at school. The training of families and professionals in collaborative problem-solving might be an effective strategy in building the capacity of both families and teachers (Azad et al., 2016). The fault lines in communication discussed above have been laid bare during the Covid-19 pandemic, during which families have had to take on much more of an educational role, but have been ill-prepared for this. A partnership in which information is shared and problems solved together would offer greater support to families than was evident in our study.

In terms of power and advocacy, family members were conscious that the way they communicated their needs could lead to the teacher labelling the family as problematic.

Family members in this study indicated that they need to advocate for their children in schools, a dynamic not unique to South Africa. A recent review conducted in Canada identified family members’ need to advocate both for their child’s right to an inclusive education and for the family members to be included as members of the educational team and call for improved partnership practices (Chatenoud et al., 2019). However, in the context of South
Africa where the right to education is not fully implemented for children with SPSII, families’ first advocacy need is for access to education, whether it is inclusive or not (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Supporting their children in schools is the next step which requires commitment from teachers to ensure their children’s rights. Regarding the limitations of this study, we spoke to many families, but the majority of respondents were parents, which might have skewed responses. We were also unable to contact families of children living in hostels to get their views on family–teacher partnerships. This should be a focus for further research.

Conclusion
This study explored family–professional partnership experiences for learners with disabilities in South Africa. It revealed that families and teachers need to engage with each other to support learners – some participants had positive experiences of this engagement, but many had negative experiences, indicating that more work could be done in South Africa to support trusting and mutually beneficial family–professional partnerships. Future research may also explore education and capacity development interventions – both for families and for teachers – as a concrete way to support partnership development between both parties. A problem-solving orientation in these partnerships, that acknowledges and supports the child’s right to quality education, may be an effective approach to improving educational outcomes for children with SPSII. This should be accompanied by the education of teachers in teaching children with impairments, as well as in building collaborative relationships. Families need to be empowered to advocate for their children and to be capacitated with collaborative and educational skills if they are to be able to support their children’s learning at home.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding acknowledgement
This work was co-funded by the European Commission under Grant EuropeAid/150345/DD/ACT/ZA, proposal number DCI-AFS/2015/150345-3/3 and CBM Germany under grant 3394-EU-MYP.

Note
1 The term D/deaf is used to describe learners who are Deaf (sign language users) and deaf (who are hard of hearing but who have an oral first language
and may lipread and/or use hearing aids) (see https://www.gre.ac.uk/study/support/disability/staar/ddeaf).

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Article submitted: 10 March 2020
Accepted for publication: 23 September 2020