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What parents say about children's inequality of opportunities: a study in Mauritius

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ABSTRACT

Longitudinal studies showing the beneficial impact of early childhood education on later academic achievement have contributed to persuading policy-makers and academia that early childhood is the best time to address inequalities. However, the voice of parents is often absent from these debates. We investigated the perspectives of parents on children's inequalities of opportunities and on the role of education and early childhood care in equalising life chances. The study specifically explored the views of 26 parents in the sub-Saharan African country of Mauritius through focus group discussions. Findings of the study suggested that parents tend to adhere to the discourse of parental responsibility as a key factor in children's inequalities. Yet they also showed that parents have potential to criticise and deconstruct this narrative, as they experience structural circumstances, such as poverty or discrimination, shaping their life opportunities and those of their children.

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Inequality; fairness; childhood; education; parents; responsibility; Mauritius

Introduction

Aims of the study

The debate on inequality has been inspired by the work of egalitarian scholars (Dworkin 1981; Rawls 2001; Roemer 1998; Sen 2009). Although they belong to diverse schools of thought, they share an idea that discussions about equity should embed discourses of individual responsibility. In this respect, they have contributed to shifting the focus of what to equalize from 'outcomes' to 'opportunities', meaning those goods (Rawls), capabilities (Sen) and preferences (Dworkin) that every individual has to have in order to responsibly choose and pursue his or her life plans. Equalising opportunities then means neutralising the influence of inheritance so that differences in life ends or outcomes would be solely ascribed to differences in choice, effort (Roemer) or, as outlined by Sen (2009), substantial freedom. Yet divergent views emerge on how to operationalise equality of opportunity through policies. The tension between individual responsibility and circumstances is particularly reflected in the ways in which (early) childhood policies are constructed as equalising policies (Morabito and Vandebroek 2014). From this perspective, public investments in preschool education are considered as the greatest equalisers and preferred over income redistribution among

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adults, the latter seen as potentially unfair and less effective (e.g. Allen 2011; Field 2010). These policies have been criticised for how they consider poor parenting as a cause, rather than a result, of poverty (Connolly and Harms 2012; Furedi 2014). The emphasis on individualising problems and policy responses is contested by scholars who underline the importance of structural or systemic circumstances which affect opportunities throughout life and also influence individual responsibility (Bunting, Webb, and Shannon 2015; Burchardt 2004; Rigg and Sefton 2006). Recent studies have also nuanced the strengths of redistribution which focuses only on education in early childhood (Burger 2010).

Despite the focus on parental responsibilities in matters of inequality, there are few studies in which the voice of parents is present, particularly in developing countries. Researchers have increasingly pointed to the absence of these voices as seriously impeding the fairness of academia (Mutua and Swadener 2004). Parents are reduced to objects of policy, just as they are reduced to objects of research, rather than participants or subjects. In so doing, research reduces parents to being spectators of their alleged problems, although they are targeted to solve these problems (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, and Bradt 2010). We explored the perspective of Mauritian parents who have experienced different life trajectories and who thus belong to diverse socio-economic and ethnic groups. In particular, we analysed the perspectives of Mauritian parents on (1) children's inequalities in Mauritius and factors contributing to differences in life achievements; (2) the role of (preschool) education in equalising children's opportunities; (3) fairness and the tension between individual responsibility and structural circumstances in shaping equal opportunities.

The context of Mauritius

Mauritius is an African country located in the Indian Ocean. According to the 2012 census, its population is 1.3 million (Government of Mauritius and UNDP 2013). It gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1968. Mauritius offers an interesting context to explore these issues, as it has a long history of inequality, where social class runs along ethnic lines (MES 1991; Mehta and Mehta 2010; Salverda 2010). The country presents a complex social organisation shaped by French and English colonialism and immigration from Asian countries (Carosin 2013). The Creole ethnic group, descendants of slaves brought from mainland Africa and Madagascar during French and British colonial rule (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) composes around 30% of the population and is the most marginalised group (Asgarally 1997; Carosin 2013). They suffer from negative stereotypes that have been transmitted from one generation to another since slavery (Palmyre 2007; Romaine and Ng Tat Chung 2010). These stereotypes have remained prominent after independence, under the new government dominated by the Indo-Mauritian majority, and are also present in the school system (Asgarally 1997; Palmyre 2007).

Two-thirds of the population consists of descendants of the indentured labourers, originally from India, who were brought to Mauritius under British colonial rule in the nineteenth century, including people belonging to the Hindu (38%), Muslim (17%) and Tamoul religions (10%) (Addison and Hazareesingh 1984). The Indo-Mauritians benefited from the economic and social development during the 1970s and 1980s, most of them moving from poverty to middle-class status (Salverda 2010). A minority, consisting of descendants of European colonialists (2%) and Chinese immigrants, is also present (3%). The descendants of European

colonial rulers are a small minority of the Mauritian population, yet constitute an economic élite, concentrating wealth as a result of land derived from the colonial rule (Salverda 2010).

Since independence, stable and democratically elected governments have characterised Mauritius, extending the welfare state and establishing free and universal basic health care and education (Dommen and Dommen 1997). Mauritius is one of the few countries in the African region that has placed early childhood education and care (ECEC) at the centre of its national agenda since the mid-1980s, including preschools for three- to five-year-olds, professionalisation of educators, immunisation and nutrition policies (Parsuramen 2006). This has resulted in the expansion of pre-school coverage to 98% in 2012, albeit with a private, market-oriented provision, enrolling 80% of children with monthly vouchers provided by the government (Ministry of Education 2009). Mainstream policy in Mauritius identifies education as a 'social lift' and as a result favours investments in education, parenting programmes, lifelong learning for employability, the provision of food and clothing, transportation and pedagogical materials for children over income redistribution (Government of Mauritius 2015).

The Mauritian educational system is highly competitive and tends to polarise learning outcomes. The distribution of scores of the primary school examination is 'U-shaped' instead of the expected normal 'bell-shaped' distribution (MOEHR 2009). In 2006, 32% of pupils did not pass the primary school examination, whilst only 28% of those passing finished secondary education (MOEHR 2009). Inequalities in school achievements are strongly related to socio-economic and ethnic status of families (Chinapah 1983; MES 1991).

Methodology

Because the present study aimed to reveal the tacit knowledge of parents, allowing them to speak up beyond the taken-for-granted assumptions, we chose to use focus groups. Focus groups have been widely used in qualitative research in the areas of poverty, inequality and social exclusion (Madriz 1998; Morgan 1996). This method has also gained momentum in research on relationships between family and children (Rodriguez et al. 2011). Focus groups are particularly relevant for studies exploring tacit, uncodified and experiential knowledge, as well as the opinions and meanings held by participants (Hopkins 2007). Interactions are especially important when we are not only investigating parents' views, but also the reasons behind their thinking (Kitzinger 1995; Morgan 1996). Furthermore, focus groups enhance participation from parents who might usually be reluctant to discuss something (Kitzinger 1995), given the Mauritian context in which communication 'blocage' can be frequent in multicultural groups (Carpooran 2011). With respect to the warnings of Spivak (1988) and considering that we wished to give voice to underprivileged parents, focus groups are to be preferred over individual interviews as parents can mutually reinforce each other in the face of the interviewers and this means there is less chance that the researcher will impose his or her views on the participants (Howitt 2011). The downside of this is that the group dynamics of focus groups give less control to the researcher and there is a risk that the group dynamics may make less socially competent participants less able to participate fully (Howitt 2011). Therefore, we always ensured that two facilitators were present, one fully skilled and competent in the research questions (the first author) and one fully knowledgeable about the local dynamics (the second author).

The selection of participants was based on previous studies conducted in Mauritius regarding factors that determine inequalities of opportunity (Chinapah 1983; MES 1991). These factors include ethnicity, parents' educational levels and socio-economic status. Diversity in gender was added to obtain opinions from both fathers and mothers. In total, four focus groups were arranged, each with five to eight participants – all parents with children between 1 and 11 years old. A total of 26 parents participated. *Focus group 1* consisted of two fathers and four mothers from higher socio-economic status (SES): one Sino-Mauritian (a mother) and five Franco-Mauritian (three mothers and two fathers); *Focus group 2* consisted of five Creole fathers with low SES; *Focus group 3* consisted of eight Indo-Mauritian mothers with low SES: one Muslim, one Tamoul, and six Hindus; *Focus group 4* consisted of seven Creole mothers with low SES. Higher socio-economic status was defined by a parent having earned a secondary or tertiary education certificate (Degree or Master's), or having a monthly disposable family income of at least 100,000 Mauritian rupees (around 2500 euros) after taxation and social transfers. All parents with high SES (except one Sino-Mauritian mother in Focus Group 1) are 'Franco-Mauritian', thus descendants of European colonialists. Lower socio-economic status was defined by a parent having only a primary education certificate (CPE), or a disposable family income of 10,000–15,000 Mauritian rupees (around 250–400 euro per month) after taxation and excluding social transfers. Monthly GDP per capita in Mauritius is around 18,500 Mauritian rupees (around 500 euro) (World Bank 2014). We separated Creoles and Indo-Mauritian parents into different groups based on the historical trajectories of social mobility that have characterised the two ethnic groups. The Indo-Mauritian mothers selected for the study may be situated in a lower SES category, but they tend to have higher educational levels and income than Creole parents.

Participants were recruited with the assistance of the association Terrain for Interactive Pedagogy through Arts (TIPA). The focus groups with Creole participants took place at a community centre in Abercrombie and Cité La Cure: two suburban areas of the capital, Port Louis, where a majority of Creole inhabitants are from low socio-economic status. For the Indo-Mauritian parents, a community centre was used in Terre Rouge: a suburban area of Port Louis characterised by a high concentration of Indo-Mauritian inhabitants from low socio-economic background and diverse religious backgrounds (Hindus, Tamouls and Muslims). The focus group with high socio-economic status took place in the office of TIPA. All focus groups except the last were conducted in Creole, the Mauritian native language. The first and second authors were present at all focus groups, assisted by a third facilitator, a local person matching the ethnicity of the participants. All local facilitators were experienced group discussion leaders, through previous training with the TIPA organisation, and received additional training by the third author in conducting focus groups.

The focus group discussions started with explaining the aims of the focus group, as well as issues of confidentiality and ethics, followed by the signing of informed consent forms. The first question was an open question to parents about their aspirations for their children's future lives. Subsequently, parents were asked to reflect on barriers which potentially prevent children from reaching their aspirational goals and which are major sources of inequality. Parents were also prompted to provide their views about fairness. Then participants were invited to discuss the role of education, in particular during early childhood. In doing so, parents were asked to specify conditions by which education may effectively equalise opportunities in Mauritius, taking stock of the findings of previous studies conducted in the country. In particular, parents were asked to give their opinion about previous findings that

Sino-Mauritian children have better results on the primary education examination compared to Creole children, whilst no differences in cognitive levels have been found. In addition, information was also shared about this previous study in Mauritius showing higher primary school examination results (CPE) for children having less educated fathers and more educated mothers.

The focus groups all followed the same protocol and consisted of four parts, starting with general questions on parents' aspirations for their children's future (e.g. what would be a good life for your child? What barriers do you expect?). The second part was about the role of education in general and early childhood education in particular (e.g. what role does education play in realising the future of your child? Do you think this has changed, compared to your own experience of education?). The third part dealt with inequalities in the particular Mauritian context (e.g. what do you think about the chances of your children, as compared to other children in Mauritius? Do you think all children receive fair chances in Mauritius?). The focus groups ended by confronting the parents with findings from a previous quantitative study (e.g. we analysed some results of children in CPE in the 1970s. We found that children from low socio-economic status performed less well than those from more well-off families. We found that children with highly educated mothers, who enrolled in high-quality pre-school, had better results in CPE. But we also found this for children with less well educated fathers. Why could that be?)

The focus groups were audio-taped with the consent of the parents. Audio recordings were transcribed in full and the Creole and French transcripts were then translated into English. Subsequently, the English transcripts were coded for an axial, thematic analysis (Breen 2006; Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). The thematic analysis, conducted by the first author, was subsequently discussed with the two other authors to come to a more phenomenological analysis (Massey 2011; Smith 2008). The framing of themes of a higher order was theory-driven and based on the discussion about individual responsibility versus structural inequalities in contemporary egalitarian literature. Both sides of the coin were analysed in terms of general living conditions (and concepts of the good life), as well as in the role of education. This resulted in the following meta-themes: parental aspirations for children's life outcomes; inequality of opportunity versus structural discrimination; the role of education in equalising opportunities; and judgements about fairness. Permission was obtained from the Ethical Commission of the faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at Ghent University.

Results

Parental aspirations

Parental aspirations for their children referred to the tension between responsibility and socially determined conditions. Parents used their language of choice when discussing these aspirations, somewhat assuming the absence of structural barriers to this choice. The language of choice is intrinsically related to that of responsibility and meritocracy.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Father 1:

Discover himself, and strengthen his potential, being ready, mature, emotionally, to stand up and say this is what I want in my life, this is how I want my life to be.

Low SES Creole Father 1:

He can stand on his feet.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Mother 1:

We know that the world is tougher, and less safe, there are risks, but there are also so many more opportunities for everyone to realize himself, according to his individual specificities and without having to do something just because there is no choice.

Freedom to choose was, however, also affected by other individuals' behaviour, referring to personal safety and protection from violence.

Low SES Indo-Mauritian Mother 1:

We always wish there were no more violence. Even more now with all the things that are happening, because every day we hear the same thing (referring to rape cases reported in the news).

Parents who experienced fewer opportunities in their life pointed at 'material' aspirations for their children, such as employment, earnings and basic needs like a proper house.

Low SES Creole Father 2:

If they (children) ought to have a house, a job, a family and everything is ok (...). Let's say, they should go forward, not go backwards (implying staying in the same status as their parents or worse).

Inequality of opportunities, responsibility and structural circumstances

The discourse of individualising disadvantage was well present among the participants, who named negative parental attitudes and lack of responsibility as a potential source of children's inequality of opportunities. Conversely, parental support and care as well as parents being 'role models' were named as factors that overcome structural discrimination and inequality.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Mother 2:

When people are in poverty, it is not just lack of financial means, it is to live in the same place and you have no 'role models' (...) I think that in Mauritius, somebody that comes from a disadvantaged milieu, can have chances to succeed, with much will.

Low SES Creole Mother 2:

Some children do not get any follow-up at home, some do not know anything (in school) and in addition when they go home there are no parents to sit with them, and follow their progress. Well, these children, they are left behind, because they do not get any support (parental).

Parents also identified structural circumstances shaping inequalities: income and ethnicity. Parents with low socio-economic status tended to focus more on income as a prominent feature. Without sufficient money, parents testified, they could not afford to enrol their children in higher education.

Low SES Creole Father 1:

Time will come that we will not be able to 'push' forward, you understand, now we are pushing (our children) but in the future we will need financial means to help them jump, for example, if they want to study, we won't be able to ensure that, because we don't have a regular job.

Low SES Indo-Mauritian Mother 2:

But like I'm saying, if the family is wealthy, they let their child succeed, because they are financing everything. They have the financial means. Since they have means, they can pay for everything,

open doors everywhere. But if a family is not wealthy, even if their child is intelligent, they will not get this 'luck'. Well then, the child feels discouraged.

In addition, parents across the focus groups acknowledged the existence of discrimination, based on ethnicity, which is widespread in Mauritian society and in the educational system. Some participants testified that teachers undermined the aspirations of Creole children.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Mother 1:

Inequality is at the level of the colour of the skin.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Father 1:

Creoles are highly discriminated.

Low SES Creole Mother 3:

In Mauritius, there is a lot of racism, especially if you have 'tiny' hair (afro-textured hair) like me.

Low SES Creole Father 2:

It (discrimination) is everywhere, at work, at school, at the police station, everywhere.

Low SES Creole Father 1:

Now if he (a Chinese child) has a Chinese teacher in school, he will teach the Chinese (pupil) better than the other one (...) He will make him sit at the front to teach him (better).

A 'culturalization' of structural differences could also be noted. As an example, Creoles were described as irresponsible, having a negative attitude towards life compared to other ethnicities, and this was labelled as 'innate' in their culture. Remarkably, the stereotype seemed to be co-constructed by Creole parents.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Mother 2:

I think that there is a cultural aspect as well. I think that there is a culture of poverty among Mauritians with African background (Creoles), that results from their history.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Father 1:

There is very profound ambition among the Chinese population that we can't find among Creoles. The Creole is 'very short listed' (thinks in the short-term). He knows that he needs 300 rupees per day. If he gains 600 rupees one day, the day after he will not go to work.

Low SES Creole Mother 2:

Some Creoles do not want to make sacrifices, Hindu and Muslims they all make sacrifices.

Low SES Creole Mother 1:

Now they (Creoles) are changing. Some use their intelligence. Little by little they start to realize they are taking the wrong path.

Education as a social lift

Participants, in particular Franco-Mauritians from high SES and Creole from low SES, trust that education is a social lift, despite studies showing that structural disadvantage influences school results in Mauritius.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Mother 2:

I would like to cite the case of a son of a messenger at the Mauritius Commercial Bank who became a manager (...) the son has been upgraded in the institution, whilst the father continues to be a messenger. It might be an exception but I think that our system still offers the possibility for people who have the will to achieve something (...) The father was someone

who had a lot of love for his job and he transmitted that to his son (...) Parental means, school means, those (disadvantaged children) who found good teachers, people who pushed them, they have succeeded in obtaining scholarships and being laureates, I think that sometimes, we see that there are opportunities.

Low SES Creole Father 1:

For example, our former prime minister was a labourer himself, and his dad was also a labourer. There are a lot of politicians that have succeeded although they came from very poor families. Our president as well has told the same story about his life. I hope it always happens this way, that if you learn, you succeed.

Low SES Creole Mother 4:

We will tell our children: Learn and you'll succeed as well (...) even if we are poor. We will find ways to make him succeed. Although we did not succeed, you can become a doctor one day. Because many poor people are increasingly arising, nowadays they are getting better (status).

Education and individual responsibilities

Participants also reproduced the same thinking patterns observed in relation to discussions on inequality of opportunity and pointed at individual deficits of the families when children did not achieve the desired educational outcomes. They stated that the school should complement the parental role in preparing children for a competitive and hard, meritocratic society by raising their moral and emotional stability, care and self-confidence.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Father 1:

Education has to raise our children, to make them be self-responsible, make them happy, that they receive an academic background but also social values, really people stand up (empowered), leaders, hard workers who have no fears.

Low SES Creole Father 1:

The (wealthy) parents will be serious with him (their child), he will get this good education, put his child in the same path. This also plays a role, what he has learnt he share it (with his children).

Low SES Indo-Mauritian Mother 3:

I'm not so smart, but my kid is perfect, he always brings back A's and B's (grades). For me it was hard, I had C's, D's, E's. Yesterday he showed me his results, it was like I won a battle when I saw how my kid succeeded, and I struggle, I sit and look after him until 11 p.m. I sit with him. My second kid as well. But we have a vision, where we couldn't succeed, we would like our children to.

In addition, the individualisation of inequality was also expressed when the participants were confronted with results of a previous study showing differences in primary school results between Creole and Chinese children, favouring the latter. In spite of data suggesting potential discrimination in school, parents outlined their own responsibility.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Father 2:

Children are all equal. They (parents) imagine that there are advantages (...) but it is not the case, everyone is (treated) on equal basis. Inequality is a perception (...) I observe cases in school of parents thinking that a teacher who is from a specific community treats more favourably people of his community. Nothing to do. I don't agree (...) Parents think that because maybe their children are a bit trouble-makers.

Low SES Creole Father 1:

This (differences in school results between Creole and Chinese pupils) depends on the seriousness of the child, it favours the one who is more serious. Because the Creole is distracted (...) well he has his distractions whilst the Chinese, when he is back home, his family is probably

more strict (...) Now if we find both of them have the same intelligence, then we have to be more responsible, both of them can be equal, we are not allowed to do that (discrimination). As from childhood we should raise them as equal.

Individual responsibility was also suggested when parents were confronted with study results showing that early childhood education reduced the gap associated with the educational levels of fathers, yet increased the gap associated with the educational levels of mothers.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Mother 2:

The mother says to her child do as I do, whilst father says don't do as I did, be better than me. And in addition, the fact of being in a quality preschool pushes aspirations. There is an emulation effect and an empowerment effect.

Low SES Creole Mother 2:

Maybe the parent (low educated father) encourages him. He who did not succeed encouraged his child 'you must succeed', then the kid puts his mind to it.

Education and structural circumstances

Although parents pointed at individualised factors as main contributors to the potential equalising effects of ECEC, they also indicated the unequal quality of educational provision as a structural barrier. Parents associated inequity in the quality of education provision with the dichotomy of public vs. private education, beginning in early childhood. They claimed that children enrolled in private settings are privileged, as paying for a private service was perceived as a 'warranty' of quality of teaching and learning materials.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Father 1:

I don't see today someone who can send his child to a private school and who sends him instead to a public school. Because everyone is aware that in private education you pay and you know you will get a quality teacher.

Low SES Creole Father 3:

Yes it (quality) is not the same. Let's say you don't pay, the teacher won't take care sometimes. I don't say she won't take care at 100% but she won't take care like if you had paid.

Low SES Creole Father 3:

Yes (government should provide) technology, because our children are poor. We are daily paid workers, we have ZEP children (children in educational priority areas) (...) in underprivileged areas they should get better education. Like, they should get some help.

Parents were convinced that public kindergarten and pre-schools in Mauritius focus too much on play, whilst when they were children, the pre-school prepared pupils for primary school through teaching of maths, reading and writing. As a result, the common perception was that children who frequent private settings are privileged, because they do actually learn rather than play. Several parents expressed their criticisms of child-centred, play-based pedagogies.

Low SES Indo-Mauritian Mother 3:

Before we recited the alphabet, now it is not like this.

Low SES Indo-Mauritian Mother 5:

Concerning kindergarten, it was better before, we were writing, we knew how to write, they would teach us how to write our name, teach us A to Z in order, nowadays No. Nowadays children do not know how to properly write.

Fairness and the inevitability of inequalities

Parents did point at unfairness of inequalities, when these are determined by structural factors unrelated to individual responsibility, such as historical discrimination or stereotypes. Yet they also called such inequalities natural and unchangeable.

Low SES Creole Father 1:

It's like this because we are a multiracial society. There is always a group having the power and another one at the bottom. Because it's like this, it is normal that the majority is ahead, and the minority comes after. Education, everything follows the same rule (...) I think it's the same all around the world, the majority is ahead and the minority behind.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Father 2:

I don't think that this (discrimination) is made on purpose. I think that this is so complex; it is an entire social system that needs to be supported in order to have everyone equal, it is almost impossible in my view. There is no country in the world where there are not private schools, every child goes to school, all children are in school, and they can do their homework, and their parents can take care of them.

High SES Franco-Mauritian Mother 2:

It is not fair, but we need it to preserve a status quo (...) The status quo is convenient for many people. We have found social peace, economic independence, which is fine, nobody wants to change.

It should be noted that not all parents adhered to the narrative of individualised solutions within a meritocratic system, and the narrative of education as a 'natural social lift'. This was illustrated by Indo-Mauritian mothers, who had recently experienced social mobility and were remarkably critical about unfairness. Indo-Mauritians can be considered the 'winners' of the move to independence, as they have had increased opportunities since the 1970s and 1980s. They now interact more frequently with relatives and friends who are teachers, civil servants and graduates of secondary schools. As a result, they have a clear understanding also of the limits of the narrative of education as 'social lift'.

Low SES Indo-Mauritian Mother 3:

Why does the government tell you to get an education, education is important, get a diploma, to do what? Our children aren't getting any jobs.

Low SES Creole Mother 5:

Some people don't get a job even though they went to school.

The adherence to the discourse of individualised responsibilities did not prevent the participants, in particular those from low socio-economic status, from advocating for income redistribution. Adequate income was considered a means to ensure good nutrition and housing and thus a proper environment for children to grow up and learn in. It was also labelled as necessary for buying the required learning materials (i.e. tablets) and, more importantly, to pay for private tuitions to compensate for the lack of quality in the public education system.

Low SES Creole Father 3:

Because education does not stop at the beginning. It's like building a house, from the ground to the top, when you reach the top, you have to be able to finish it, it all depends (on income).

Low SES Creole Mother 2:

Take for example my daughter (...) She told me, 'Mum you know I'm weak in English and maths.' So I have to give her two private tuitions. But now I have to work a bit hard to get that money to pay for the private tuitions.

Several parents in the focus groups, notably Indo-Mauritian mothers, denounced the current Mauritian socio-economic system as lacking solidarity, and they advocated for solidarity.

Low SES Indo-Mauritian Mother 3 (talking to a Muslim mother):

Really you (Muslims) are perfect. I admire you because you help your community (people), you know how to support each other.

Low SES Indo-Mauritian Mother 3:

Those who have financial means, why don't they participate (share)? Help them a little. He (the high income status) doesn't have to give (to the poor) all his money 100,000 rupees, but if he gives just 5,000 rupees every month.

Discussion

Scholars have described how individualising concepts of responsibilities and fairness tend to prevail in the neoliberal era and how this influences social policies and social work (e.g. Kunneman 2005). This is particularly salient in the emphasis on childhood education and parent support as a means of poverty reduction and greater equality (Schiettecat, Roets, and Vandebroek 2015). Despite the focus on parents and parenting, the voice of parents is all too often absent from research and, as a result, parents are reduced to being spectators of their alleged problems. This is particularly problematic when research is conducted in developing countries, where studies that give voice to parents are all too scarce. Through focus groups, we looked at parental opinions on these matters in the context of Mauritius, a particularly salient context, considering the historical division in socio-economic groups that runs along ethnic lines. Parents across the focus groups had multi-layered opinions about equal opportunities, about individual versus collective responsibilities and about fairness. Therefore, some caution is needed when drawing conclusions.

Many participants adhered to the meritocratic narrative of free choice, of education as a key driver for equal opportunities, as well as of the predominant role of parental responsibility as role models and educators. The trust in education as a social lift is nourished by examples of persons who have indeed successfully climbed the social ladder. The quality of the education system that can enable this social mobility is both deemed important and criticised, especially when it comes to public education. Participants from low socio-economic backgrounds in particular questioned the pedagogical practices in public pre-schools as being too child-centred and play-based. They assumed that more teacher-centred approaches, with a more formal learning style, focusing on early reading, writing and counting, would benefit their child better. Similar findings have been reported in studies conducted in developed countries among immigrant parents (Adair, Tobin, and Arzubigaga 2012; Tobin, Arzubigaga, and Adair 2013) and they highlight a very difficult dilemma. Whilst scholars

who position themselves as progressive are generally in favour of experiential and holistic ways of learning through play (Bennett 2005; Samuelsson, Sheridan, and Williams 2006), they are also in favour of democratic and participative curricula that take into account parents' voices. In some cases this may lead to strong disagreements (Vandenbroeck 2009) or the question of whether experiential learning is favouring the already privileged (Tobin 1995).

The *culturalization* or *ethnicization* of inequalities is another feature of the narrative of individualised inequalities and is used by some parents to explain structural or systemic circumstances such as discrimination against Creole children. Remarkably, Creole parents also shared this narrative and, in general, parents from low socio-economic backgrounds did not often challenge discourses that explain inequality through biased stereotypes attributed to specific ethnic groups. As Freire (1970) explained, marginalised groups tend to 'internalize oppression' or adhere to the dominant discourse of marginalisation. The system of values, along with the language that presents structural circumstances as individualised issues, has been perpetrated since colonial times in developing countries. As a result, the cultural and political alienation of the 'oppressed' has brought them to assimilate the dominant discourse (Freire 1970). Parents are in a status that can be understood, according to Freire (1970), as naïve consciousness: although they recognise the existence of discrimination, they are unable to overcome the status quo, which is presented as natural and immutable. Similarly, in Mauritius, Creoles may have integrated this deprecatory image of themselves and therefore are unable to project themselves as potential partners in equity (Palmyre 2007).

Adherence to the individualising discourse is only one aspect of the parents' multi-layered narratives. Several participants, in particular those with low socio-economic status, were also aware and critical of the influence of structural causes for the unequal distribution of opportunities. This was most salient when they discussed education and pointed to the structural differences in terms of the distribution of quality, and the role of teachers who were believed to undermine the aspirations of disadvantaged children. Although parents concurred on the importance of individual parental responsibility, they also advocated for more public support, in the form of income (re)distribution. Income remains a *sine qua non* condition for education to effectively equalise children's opportunities. The parents in the focus groups were very aware that the privatisation of education comes at an important societal cost and the unequal distribution of educational quality should, according to them, therefore be compensated by more equal incomes in order to ensure social justice or to be considered as fair.

In sum, the parents in our study cannot be labelled as simply adhering to the dominant discourse, nor as criticising it, as they do both in various ways. It is clear that there are significant aspects present of what Freire (1970) has labelled the culture of silence that instils a negative, silenced and suppressed image into the oppressed. It can be argued that privatised forms of education (in contrast with the conception of education as a public good) in essence lack that capacity to emancipate (Moss 2009) or to 'conscienticize' (Freire 1970) and our study can be considered as illustrating this in the case of Mauritius. Our study can also be seen as adding to the argument that education can only fulfil its emancipatory role and its mission of social lift in contexts of sufficient equality and thus when accompanied by fair and redistributive policies. In that sense, the shift from a focus on redistributing income to pursuing equality of opportunity by investing in child and family social work may be based on a too

simple conception of fairness. This may be illustrated by the critical position of Indo-Mauritian mothers: being in the 'social lift' makes them more aware of the limits of the dominant narrative as espoused by economic and political leaders.

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