

Understanding the dynamics of parent involvement in schooling within the poverty context

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A qualitative study was undertaken to understand the realities and dynamics facing parents when attempting to be involved in their child's schooling. The focus was on parents in an extreme poverty context in Cape Town, South Africa. Results indicated that mainstream schools themselves pose barriers for both children and parents in the schooling system. Furthermore, results highlighted the central role that schools can play in increasing the degree of parental support, as well as ways in which to understand the support needed by these parents. The stress on parents and their relationships with their children, as a result of pressures placed on them by the schooling system, are also illustrated, because the realities of these communities are seldom considered by school staff.

Introduction

Literature (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991:20; Macbeth, 1990:1; Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995:273) has highlighted the importance of both teachers and families in providing children with safety, security and social support. Furthermore, the impact of environments in which psychological trauma is incurred as a result of negative parental behaviour, abuse, participation in crime, incarceration, injury or school failure has been well documented (Bowen & Chapman, 1996:642; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991:21; St Pierre, Mark, Kaltreider & Aikin, 1997; Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, 1995:19; 39). These conditions are most likely to prevail in sub-economic communities where children are especially likely to experience associated challenges and difficulties (Bowen & Chapman, 1996:644).

Research (Smit & Liebenberg, 2002a; 2002b; Vigil, 1999; Walker *et al.*, 1995) has highlighted the central role that schools can and often do play in exasperating such circumstances. Children — especially those from troubled backgrounds — tend to leave school prematurely as a result of an unawareness and insensitivity to their needs and contexts on the part of their teachers. Teachers, in turn, often believe that behavioural and discipline problems are due to home factors and therefore the responsibility of parents (Croll & Moses in Miller, 1999:77; Walker *et al.*, 1995:273). As a result, parents are blamed and children do not receive the support they require (Walker *et al.*, 1995:19-21). Delgado-Gaitan (1991:21) highlights the role that schools play in the exclusion of parents from involvement in their child's schooling via both practices and policy formation (see also Smit & Liebenberg, 2002b). Delgado-Gaitan (1991) believes, however, that if parents are knowledgeable about the school and its operations, they may be able to act in a congruent fashion, thereby contributing to the ultimate success of children. Parents need to be involved in the schooling of their children in a pro-active manner (Atkeson & Forehand, 1979; Chavin & Williams, 1989; Macbeth, 1989; Walker *et al.*, 1995). This is substantiated by Atkin, Bastiani and Goode (1988:104) who highlight research showing that development and change within individual schools is most likely to be achieved or to fail as a result of constructive teacher, parent and pupil interaction. It is also at this point where the needs and experiences of all concerned are most likely to be established and addressed. Furthermore, Chavkin and Williams (1989:20; 22) report on the existing parental desire to be actively involved in the schooling of children, but that many experience the educational system as inaccessible and intimidating and are therefore unable to make the necessary connections (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Davies, 1988; Monareng, 1995; Viljoen, 1994).

Research would suggest that such high-risk environments can be effectively alleviated by schools (Cummins, 2001; Vigil, 1999) and the reality-based involvement of parents in schooling (Atkin *et al.*, 1988; Bronfenbrenner, 1979:21; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Duncan, 1995:81; 83; Macbeth, 1990; McCaleb, 1994; Walker *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, family-school relations should be an important focus area for schools. This also highlights the importance of research and programmatic efforts for promoting children's adjustment and competences.

Research relating to parent involvement in schooling especially within South Africa is limited, as well as highly restricted to wealthier social groups. As such, the following study was undertaken in an effort to gain a preliminary understanding of how parents from poor communities experience schools and their child's education, as well as the current dynamics existing between parents and schools.

Methodology

Data for this study were gathered in two ways:

1. Questionnaires administered to parents of children in community-based support units¹ during 1999, were studied, and used to formulate guidelines for focus group interviews. Interviews were then conducted with six parents of two community-based support units located in poor, disadvantaged urban communities in the Western Cape province of South Africa.
2. Focus group interviews were conducted with one social worker, four community-based support units workers and two street workers based in the afore mentioned communities. These interviews were based on routine discussions held with staff on a weekly basis.

It was decided to utilise focus groups due to the exploratory nature of this study. Morgan (1997:3) highlights the three central uses of focus group interviews, the first being the basis for a complete study. With focus group interviews, the researcher relies on interaction within the group interaction that is based on topics supplied by the researcher (Morgan, 1997:2). Focus group interviews make it easier to conduct less structured interviews, allowing the group control over the direction in which the interview will move (Morgan, 1997:11), allowing the participants to respond to each other, and providing the researcher with their insights (Morgan, 1997:20). Furthermore, focus group interviews provide the researcher with the ability to obtain direct evidence about similarities and differences in the participant's experiences and opinions. As Morgan (1997:21) states, "this observation of consensus and diversity is something that can happen quite powerfully through group interaction".

Selection of participants

Two community-based support units were selected for participation in the study, from which the support units workers established two groups of parents to participate in the study. It was decided to use parents of children in community-based support units as they could offer a perspective on two systems: one which their children left voluntarily (i.e. main-stream schools), and one in which they remained voluntarily (i.e. community-based informal schooling support units). This would then allow for the development of constructive suggestions regarding parent involvement in schools.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were then

1 Community-based support units are informal educational support units for early school drop-outs and street children

analysed on ATLAS.ti, using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 1990).

Results and discussion

Analysis of the data revealed the following categories:

- Main stream schools themselves pose barriers for parents living in poor communities to be involved in the education of their children
- Parents experience school staff as being out of touch with the realities of sub-economic living conditions. As a result, schools place unprecedented demands on them. This has two consequences:
 - The stress of meeting these demands reduces parental ability for active involvement in their child's schooling
 - This stress also strains parent-child relationships
- The central role that schools could play in increasing parental involvement, by providing parents from high-risk communities with practical support, is highlighted in the different levels of support that parents identify:
 - Teachers should take into consideration and even provide for the fundamental needs of learners
 - Teachers should accept responsibility for learners when they are in school
 - Teachers should be better in touch with the realities of the communities in which they work
 - Parents and their children should be treated with empathy and respect as well as offered the opportunity for empowerment
 - Parents need to be assisted on an emotional level

Before proceeding with a discussion of the findings, it may be prudent to state that all interview quotations used in the following discussion serve only as examples, and are in no way presented as 'proof' of the findings below.

Interviews with support unit staff support findings in the literature (Atkeson & Forehand, 1979; Atkin *et al.*, 1988; Chavin & Williams, 1989; Macbeth, 1989; Walker *et al.*, 1995) that parents should be involved constructively and actively in their children's education. Children appear at school daily with issues and problems that stem from their home and community environment. Many teachers fail to understand this, and then respond in ways that increase alienation and stress for children. This is illustrated in the stories community-based support unit staff relate of school drop-outs:

Then the other things were like they were embarrassed because sometimes they were dirty; sometimes they were hungry or most times dirty and hungry. And then, uniform was a big issue — and school fees: they were embarrassed about school fees, they were sent home about school fees. But beatings I think was a, was a big thing for children. Even if they were not beaten, their friends were beaten. It was, it was nerve wrecking to know, 'when is my turn?'. And also shouting and ridicule — embarrassing things like um, "doesn't your mother have food?" or "what is wrong with you?", or "do you always look like this?" — it's embarrassing for a child, never mind how you say it — it's still embarrassing. Especially when the reference is made to their parents.

(Support Unit staff member)

Of great significance in this extract is the centrality of parents in the self-respect and pride of these children. The fact, that references to their parents embarrass them, points to the fact that they not only have self-respect and a sense of loyalty, but that this self-respect and loyalty is very much informed by their parents and community context. This fact not only needs to be respected by teaching staff in mainstream schools, but they should also use this to the advantage of children's education. By increasing teacher awareness of the community realities confronting the parents of their learners, parents in turn can be more realistically involved in the educational system.

Schools as barriers to parents

As in the case of Chavkin and Williams' (1989) study, results indicate that although there appears to be a substantial amount of parental involvement on the part of mothers, it seems as if this involvement is limited or restricted. Similarly to results found in the literature (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Monareng, 1995; Viljoen, 1994), parents approach schools, they make queries regarding their children's behaviour at school, but the response seems to leave them on the peripheries of the educational system, or even 'shut-down'. As one parent in the study recounted:

In the end I asked, "Why don't you want to go to school?" Then she said, "Mommy, we could go to school there, but the children in the class stab us with pens." That's why she doesn't want to go to school. And I went to see the principal about this and the principal did nothing about the matter.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

The data show that parents in these communities are extremely disempowered. They feel they have little if any say in the education of their children. As a result, they rely heavily upon those who occupy positions of power around them, such as school staff to assist in their lives. However, this reliance usually remains not only unmet, but is also often simply ignored. The preceding quote possibly shows the principal's unwillingness to respond to what the parent says as well as to issues regarding learner safety. Such attitudes usually contribute to the disempowerment of the parent and the child. When professionals send a message of not caring and that community concerns have no value, future attempts at involvement by the parent as well as school attendance by the child is often hampered. In doing so, the parents' position of hopelessness is also maintained. As a support unit staff member said:

Teachers and principles are intimidating for these people. Because they feel they've got to be on par or on standard, and if their kids are not good enough then they are not going to be accepted — especially when a child is sent home, and a parent is not asked to come to school to discuss certain issues. So I just feel the whole method must be changed.

(Support Unit staff member)

By disregarding concerns of these people, school staff heighten levels of intimidation and decrease parental confidence parents feel they are being judged. Even their role as parents is judged when they are not included in important issues regarding the education of their children. This in turn heightens the sense of intimidation for parents regarding teachers.

School staff as being out-of-touch with community realities

It would appear that teachers lack understanding regarding the power dynamics of which they are a part (see Schools as barriers to parents). This points to their lack of understanding regarding the realities facing these communities (Monareng, 1995; Walker *et al.*, 1995). As parents in the study reported:

Every day he comes home and says, "Come look mommy, we received a letter again". We just can't keep up. We have to give them food, we can't afford to pay the fees.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

The principal was very friendly to me and gave me another chance until later ... And then after Easter, then I went to him, then I said, I am rather going to take the child out of the school, because it does not benefit him if I get the money and I bring the child, then he has already missed half the year.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

By not being in touch with the realities of the communities in which they function, school staff give priority to factors that simply don't make sense in these communities. For example, school fees take precedence over basics such as food. Even in instances where staff are aware of the problems and limitations confronting these families, they seldom assist in a constructive manner. In most instances, this results

in staff placing unprecedented demands on parents where the end result is humiliation of the entire family regarding their poverty status. Support unit staff members understand this dynamic:

Very embarrassing — embarrassing in the sense that they don't have money to pay fees, they don't have money for bread every day, let alone school fees — which I feel is such a priority these days with principles and for a child it doesn't understand why it is a priority its mother doesn't understand why it is a priority.

(Support Unit staff member)

The priorities of school staff stand in direct contrast to the real needs experienced by learners and their families. Aitkin *et al.* (1988) highlight authoritarian teaching styles and approaches to parents as barriers to parent involvement in schooling as well as motivation for children to abandon the educational system.

Stress results in reduced parental involvement and strained parent-child relationships

For many parents in these communities, attaining an education for their children is important (Chavkin & Williams, 1989; Davies, 1988). Consequently, the ultimatums set by the schooling system and its staff, due to their disregard and lack of understanding of the realities of these communities, force parents into a situation that begins to detract from their ability to be involved actively with their children. As parents themselves point out, this eventually also detracts from their ability to be involved with their child's schooling:

I have two children at high school, and I am so concerned about school fees that my nerves are finished, because I am unemployed and my husband is unemployed now. And if the child can't pay then the child can't learn. And my daughter has said, "Mommy, they say that if we cannot pay the fees, then we cannot write our exams". And that's a concern for us parents, I mean they learn the whole year and now at the end to not be able to learn, that is not right. Now my nerves are so finished because of struggling to pay that money.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

Ultimatums such as these take their toll on family interactions and functioning. They not only place extreme strain on parents, but also on their children, often resulting in conflict and even alienation in parent-child relationships:

I mean the pressure [our daughter] puts on us! She says, 'Yes, I am only going to learn until the end of the year, and then I am going because I can see that you are not going to manage to buy my clothes [i.e. school uniform]. I say, 'but the Lord will provide!' and she says, 'I will lend the money and then you can pay it back!'. And so that is how it goes.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

It becomes evident that teachers and school principals wield a degree of power in sub-economic communities that they are perhaps unaware of. This, combined with an apparent disregard for the communities in which they are working, often results in the alienation of both learners and their parents (Aitkin *et al.*, 1988; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Monareng, 1995; Viljoen, 1994). Parent involvement in schools then becomes ineffective, parent-child relations may be strained, and many children abandon school as a result. More importantly, however, is the contribution this makes to the "poverty cycle". The treatment parents and their children receive from school staff may very well be sending them the message that they are no better than their context of poverty, thereby maintaining low levels of morale and initiative. This centrality and power that schools have in these communities can and indeed should be used in a positive manner (Monareng, 1995; Viljoen, 1994). In order to understand the potential of such dynamics however, we need to first appreciate that education is important for these parents and that it therefore makes sense that they would like to be involved. Having assessed why parents are not involved (i.e. intimidation, fear of being judged, threats made by schools, ridicule, etc.) one needs to consider what schools can do to increase such involvement.

Practical support that schools could provide

An analysis of the data reveals several levels on which one can understand such involvement and how it can be increased.

Consideration and provision of fundamental needs

Parents feel that the school system should provide for, or at the very least take into consideration, the fundamental needs of their children, as regards food, clothing (especially relating to school uniform) and money (with regard to school fees) (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Mpahlaza, 1993). As can be deduced from the barriers to constructive parent involvement, by accounting for these needs, schools may allow parents to focus on the child's education, as opposed to focusing on attaining access to education. Parents in the study pinpointed many of their children's educational needs:

They have a box that they put all that stuff in and then at the end of the year, then they have a jumble sale, and then if you are interested in a jersey or so, then they will sell that stuff to you.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

If they [i.e. the government] don't want to give money to the children, then surely they can give some food like food packages to the children. Understand? That would already be a big help, seeing that the children's grants have been taken away like this now. Then at least there is something for them to eat every day.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

Statements such as these highlight the complexity of the situation. For example, the government provides for the inability to pay school fees in the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996), with the exemption of parents from the payment of school fees regulations (1998). Exemption can only be obtained, however, by means of formal application on the relevant form. For parents in these communities to be able to then apply, they firstly need to be informed of the possibility of exemption, and secondly, need to be provided with the necessary forms both of which would appear not to be happening. Finally, many of these parents will need to be assisted in the completion of the relevant documentation, due to high levels of illiteracy. Consequently, power dynamics exist in particularly sub-economic communities where illiteracy levels are high. This situation needs to be considered holistically, highlighting the need for interventions at both school and community level.

Teacher responsibility for learners

Parents feel that teachers should at the very least — accept responsibility for their children when they are at school (Le Roux, 1994). Parents report their desire for teachers to be concerned about their children, and to care about them:

But now I feel, if that child has not been at school for a week, then that should be a concern for the class teacher — why is that child not in school — and then the teacher must at least try and contact the parent, or ask if one of the class mates, that is friends with that specific child, ask if he has seen the child, or what is the problem, is he sick, what is the reason that the child is not in school.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

If a child is in school, then the teacher is that child's parent for the period that he is away from home. He is responsible for that child, and he must look after that child.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

Look, many of the principals don't know the children. I'm not saying he must know every child, but he should at least know who hasn't been in the school for a week or two!

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

Realisation of community realities

Parents express the need for teachers to be better in touch with the communities in which they are working:

Look, they should visit the parents and make contact with the parents and look where they live and where they sleep, what clothes

do they have and what food they get.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

A child's education extends beyond school premises and school hours. The context in which the rest of their day is spent will have a fundamental impact on their official schooling (Kadar Asmal, Health and Safety in Schools conference, 2000). When the children they are dealing with do not come from 'conventional' homes, teachers should make an effort to come to grips with the realities of these children. Teachers will not be able to do this if they are not cognizant of domestic practicalities — many parents do not have phones, or are illiterate and so would not be able to read letters from school staff. So, by going into the communities and taking account of where the child lives and sleeps, teachers will hopefully be able to better understand the real needs of the children they are working with, as well as provide for parental needs of greater support, empathy and understanding. By making this contact with parents, teachers will be forced to go out into the communities in which they work and experience the poverty first hand.

The need for empathy and respect

These parents believe that their children do count and that they do matter. Consequently, teachers should be committed to the community in which they work (Davies, 1988; Le Roux, 1994; South African Department of Education, 1990; Theron & Bothma, 1988). The responsibility for children in their classes implies that teachers need to work in co-operation with parents (Atkin *et al.*, 1988; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Macbeth, 1990; McCaleb, 1994) empathising with them and respecting them (Chavkin & Garza-Lubeck, 1990:25-30; Chavkin & Williams, 1989:22; McCaleb, 1994:184-9; Walker *et al.*, 1995:266-305). They should therefore provide opportunities to increase parent involvement in a constructive and proactive manner. As one parent reported:

I remember, my kid also bunked school like that, and it was about the fourth day when the teacher phoned me to say she is worried because the child has not been in school for the past few days and the previous week he was also not at school for two days, and what is the problem. I was so surprised, because I send my child to school everyday! Then the child was hanging around the shops with other friends! And so then I could ensure that he got to school every morning.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

Parents need to be provided with opportunities for empowerment (Cummins, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991:30; Duncan, 1995:82; 85; Macbeth, 1989:4; Monareng, 1995). Currently, the way people in positions of power treat them contributes substantially to their levels of disempowerment and maintaining their position of poverty (Cummins, 2001). By contrast, however, those with a modicum of power in these communities could serve these people much better, by interacting with them in ways that are empowering.

Emotional support

In providing for the needs of these children and their parents, it is important for teachers to realise that parents need to be assisted on an emotional level, in addition to the fundamental level previously addressed. Social systems, within which these people function, such as schools, expect a 'type of behaviour' and an approach towards aspects of life, of which these parents have no notion or concept. Many of these parents do not know how to interact with their children, as they have never received nurturing themselves. By increasing opportunities for parent involvement in schools (Chavkin & Garza-Lubeck, 1990:27; Walker *et al.*, 1995) teachers may inadvertently be providing for the emotional needs of these parents, which include needs of greater support, empathy and understanding — they want to be treated as equals:

But the English children get more advantages than the Afrikaans children. That is what usually happens and I was always unhappy about that. I don't know why, because I mean, we pay the same school fees, and I feel we are all coloureds, and we are all from

the same generation, but why, just because they speak English, they get privileged? As if those who speak English are a better type of person.

(Direct translation from Afrikaans: Parent)

Conclusion

Narratives of parents seem rich in stories relating to the barrier schools pose for children in the attainment of an education, as well as the barrier they pose to parental involvement in a child's education. The data highlight the central role that schools could play in increasing the degree of parental involvement, by providing parents from high-risk communities with support. Finally, ways in which to understand 'support to parents' in these communities is suggested in the interviews.

Results gleaned from the data indicate a substantial rift between parents and teachers and learners/children are floundering in the middle. Learners/children do not gain any of the support they may require as a result of the existing cleft. Findings of this study support existing literature in that it is schools and teachers that bar parents from being actively involved in their child's schooling. Considering theories and research findings available in the literature, results from this study seem to indicate that schools and their functioning within these communities are cemented in counter-productive operations. Findings of this study also support literature that points to the desire of parents to be actively involved in their child's schooling, but that they experience the schooling system as intimidating and inaccessible. Parents in this study clearly highlighted not only their frustrations, but also their needs and requirements in order to contribute meaningfully to their child's education. As a result, one can deduce that the arduous task confronting the education department, to bridge existing discrepancies, should benefit from the candor of parents.

From the above, it would appear that schools are in a position to increase the degree of parent involvement. In order to achieve this however, the barriers that schools pose at present to parent involvement need to be identified and removed. As such, schools need to gain greater understanding of the communities in which they function — the realities confronting these people. They then need to identify ways in which they can work with parents to overcome certain legislative barriers inherent in the school system, relative to the social realities of the community. In doing so, schools may be able to provide support to parents that is relevant to them. This support should in turn provide parents with the window currently required to actively engage in their child's education.

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