

# HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PHASE

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Close contact and regular communication between the home and the school in Early Childhood programmes improve the way parents and educators work towards the goal of child development. Moreover, parent identification with parent involvement programmes is enhanced, which increases parents' satisfaction and children's success. Communication plays a key role in all parent involvement programmes. In the light of this, a qualitative investigation was conducted in the Reception Year (Grade R) of three primary schools in diverse socioeconomic communities in South Africa to determine the type and extent of school-to-home and home-to-school communication in the Early Childhood Development phase. Findings suggest that most communication is school-directed and general in nature although communication concerning the individual child also takes place. Fewer opportunities are offered to parents to initiate communication. Reasons for this are discussed and recommendations to improve communication are made.

## INTRODUCTION

Effective two-way communication is the most important but least measurable factor in developing successful home-school relationships. Where effective communication is established and sustained in a comprehensive parent involvement programme, there are many positive outcomes for early childhood learners as well as learners in higher grades (Christenson, Rounds & Gorney 1992:178-206). Moreover, where parent involvement programmes are established in early childhood programmes, the benefits are apparent throughout the child's school career (Henderson 1989:38). These benefits include higher learner achievement (Davies 1999:7; Epstein 2001:221); lower dropout rates (Keith TZ, Keith PB, Troutman, Bickley, Trivette & Singh

1993:474-496); a decline in behaviour problems (Comer 1984:323-337) and academic initiative and persistence (Estrada, Arsenio, Hess & Holloway 1987:210-215). Moreover, parent involvement has the potential to decrease the gap in achievement between children from high and low-income families (Milne 1989:32-65). Thus, Schleicher (1992:29) concludes that strong parent involvement and parent collaboration are indispensable conditions for educational progress and success. To realise this partnership, two-way communication between the school and the home is essential. This article examines the practices of home-school communication in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) phase in South Africa. Generally, ECD programmes are the type of services provided for children from birth to age nine (Gor-

don & Browne 1993:37) and may refer to any series of activities aimed at promoting the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, moral and social development of the young child (Department of Education (DE) 2001:8). The Reception Year (Grade R), which was introduced in South Africa in 1996 as a pilot project, forms part of the ECD phase and refers to the five to six year old child (DE 2001:18). In KwaZulu Natal, where this research was conducted, the policy is to locate all Grade R classes in primary (elementary) schools (with the exception of independent preschools) (Bridgemohan 2001:58). The aims of the research were to determine the nature and effectiveness of home-school communication practices and to make recommendations on how communication can be improved to facilitate better home-school partnerships.

### COMMUNICATION

The term communication covers a multitude of meanings ranging from, for example, Shannon and Weaver's (1949) linear model of communication depicting the recipient as passively accepting the message, to Cherry's (1957) view that communication is not merely the response but essentially the relationship determined by the transmission of stimuli and the evocation of responses. Berlson and Steiner (1964) describe communication as the act or process of transmission of information, ideas and skills by use of symbols. Communication may be verbal or non-verbal. The emphasis of this paper is, however, on verbal communication and written communication. In both the issue of language is of utmost importance as language is used

as the primary means to transmit beliefs, values, norms and world views (Samovar & Potter 1997:18). Language develops in the context of a particular culture and therefore reflects that culture. Language also transmits meaning and moulds patterns of thought (Parry 2000:67). In a multicultural country such as South Africa the understanding of language may differ. Asuncion-Lande (1990:213) agrees stating that language is often the biggest cultural barrier in inter cultural communication. This can be problematic when educators and parents need to communicate on matters relating to a child's education.

### COMMUNICATION AS AN ASPECT OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMMES

Various studies have suggested that different types of parent involvement should form part of a comprehensive school programme (Gordon, 1977; Comer, 1984; Swap, 1993 & Epstein, 1995). In all these programmes, school-to-home and home-to-school communication are indispensable. Moreover, the extent to which the school communicates with parents determines their involvement in other activities in the school (Stein & Thorkildsen 1999:40). One model of family-school and community relationships which acknowledges the importance of communication is that of Epstein (1987, 1995, 1996 & 2001). The *external structure* of the Epstein model consists of three overlapping spheres representing the family, school and community (Epstein 2001:27). In this article the emphasis will be on the two spheres representing the family and

the school. The degree of overlap of these two spheres is controlled by three factors: *time*, *experience* and *practices* of educators and parents. *Time* refers to the age and grade level of the child. Epstein (2001:29) argues that the greatest overlap of family and school occurs during the preschool and early elementary grades. This is a compelling reason why all aspects of parent-school relationships, including communication, should be firmly established during the ECD phase. The *experiences* and *practices* of families and schools also affect the amount of overlap between the spheres of the school and the family. When parents maintain or increase interest and involvement in their children's schooling and educators make parents part of the child's education, greater overlap of the two spheres is created and an effective partnership between the school and the home can be established. The *internal structure* of the Epstein model depicts interactions taking place among the various role players. Two *types* of interactions and influence are included, namely interaction *within* organisations and *between* organisations (Epstein 2001:30). Interactions *within* organisations refers to interactions taking place within the home between family members. It also includes interactions taking place between principals, educators and other staff within the school. Interactions *between* organisations are those taking place between the school and the home and the home and the school. These are the types of interactions which were researched in this project. In addition to *types* of interaction, Epstein (2001:30) also differentiates between two *levels* of interaction taking place between

schools and families, namely (i) standard, organisationally directed communication, and (ii) unique, individually directed communications. Both levels of interaction are dealt with in this research. Epstein's model of family-school relations explains the increase and decrease in parent involvement under certain circumstances. However, it does not explain the types of involvement. Epstein (1995:704) does this in her well-known *typology of parent involvement* in which six areas of home-school-community involvement are listed. One of the areas is communication, which is broadly defined as "two-way, three-way and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, learners and the community" (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon 1997:9). Communication, thus defined, includes both verbal and written communication. In short, it is clear that Epstein places a high premium on communication between the school and the home and the home and school, making it central to the internal structure of her theoretical model as well as including it as one of the six types of involvement in her typology of parent involvement. Although Swap's approach to parent involvement (1992:57) differs from that of Epstein, she also emphasises the importance of communication in her different models of parent involvement. Swap (1992:69) asserts that the key to effective communication is based on a relationship between parents and educators in which each respects the other's contribution and expertise; boundaries are clear; conflicts are dealt with openly and respectfully; and contacts are rewarding. Since the most obvious reason for parents and

educators to communicate is to nurture the growth and learning of individual children by sharing information, insights and concerns, parent communication must be viewed as a necessity and not an extra. Swap (1992:70) acknowledges that when differences of language, class or background exist, problems of communicating comfortably and unambiguously are usually intensified. This is of particular relevance within the context of the South African community. Wanat (1994:637) extends the discussion on communication by distinguishing between formal and informal communication. Formal communication informs parents of school activities and their children's academic progress whereas informal communication is more responsive to personal needs. Likewise, Katz, Aidman, Reese and Clark (1996:2) emphasise the importance of a two-way channel of communication, stating that "the foundation for good home-school relationships is frequent and open communication." Eccles and Harold (1996:26) add that an effective system of communication between the school and the home, depends on accommodating the variety of persons who today constitute learners' families. This means that schools must be able to work with different forms of families and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Benefits of improved communication between the school and the home, include the strengthening of social networks; access to information and materials; greater appreciation by parents of their own important roles and personal efficacy and motivation to continue their own education (Davies 1993:206). Likewise, the contact with other

parents experiencing comparable problems often has very positive results. Leitch and Tangri (1988:72) add that educators report more positive feelings about teaching and about the school where there is effective communication, whereas Swap (1992:58) observes that when parents and educators get to know each other through informal communication, shared projects or volunteering in the classroom, children's behaviour and learning problems tend to decrease. Although Epstein (1995; 2001) endorses the many benefits associated with frequent communication between the school and the home, she warns that research indicates low parent ratings of schools where communication from the school relates mainly to problems concerning their children.

#### **PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND COMMUNICATION IN THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT PHASE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In South Africa legislation since 1994 has introduced important education reforms, which aim to improve the partnership between the school and the family. The South Africa Schools Act (SASA) No 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996) defines the concept of parent; describes basic parental duties; sets requirements for schools related to parents' rights to information; and provides for parent representation in mandatory School Governing Bodies. Moreover, recognition of increased parent involvement in Early Childhood education has received attention in recent legislation and policy documents, such as the Education White Paper 5: Early Childhood Development

(DoE 2001); The National ECD Pilot Project Draft Qualifications Framework and Interim Unit Standards (DoE 1998b: 13); Assessment Policy in General Education and Training Phase Grade R to 9 and ABET (DoE 1998a: 13) and the Language in Education Policy (DoE 1997:7). All these policy documents explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that parents play an important role in the education of children and that partnerships should be forged between the home and the school. In realising these aims, communication plays a central role.

### METHODOLOGY

The primary aim of the qualitative investigation reported in this article is to describe communication as an aspect of home-school relationships in the ECD phase. The research was designed to be exploratory and descriptive and thus no attempts were made to establish cause and effect relationships under experimental conditions. Because two of the researchers' in this study are involved in the training of educators for the Reception year a decision was taken to conduct the research on home-school and school-home communication in the ECD phase within Grade R classes attached to primary schools. The research was conducted during a three month period in three multi-cultural public primary schools (which include Grade R classes) in an urban area in KwaZulu-Natal. Methods of data gathering included observation and in-depth interviews with the principals of the three schools, as well as three focus group interviews with educators and three with parents. In total three principals, nine educators and nine parents were interviewed. The small sample is

common in qualitative research where the aim is depth not breadth. Likewise, although the findings cannot be generalised, they do alert one to the practice of home-to-school and school-to-home communication within the ECD phase in a small sample of South African schools. All interviews were recorded on audiotape and the tapes later transcribed for closer examination. The data were analysed by repeated examination of the interview transcripts and field notes and identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data. In the final report, extracts from the raw data were selected and paraphrased or quoted to illustrate patterns.

#### *The context of the research*

The three primary schools included in the study differ in the types of communities they serve and the facilities available to learners attending the Grade R classes. School A is situated in a lower middle class community, which in the past was a designated residential area for Indian families. Most parents in this community are employed and live in small council houses and flats. The school is neat, the buildings and grounds are in good condition and a security guard was present at the entrance of the school. Approximately 80% of the learners attending the school are Indian. The 20% black pupils mostly come from families who have recently moved into the area. All educators at the school are Indian. The language of instruction is English. School B is located in a poor socio-economic community, also within an area previously reserved for Indians. About 60% of the learners attending the school are Indian, while 40% of are

black, most of whom live in a township about 30 kilometres from the school and are transported to school by bus or taxi. The school building is very old and dilapidated and often vandalized by youths in the community. The school is not fenced. All the educators at the school are Indian. The language of instruction is English. In contrast to the other schools, School C serves a more affluent community and is situated in an urban area which in the past was a white residential area. The school buildings are in an excellent condition, the grounds and gardens are well kept and various sporting facilities are available in the school. The school is attended by children from all racial groups. With the exception of one black educator all staff are white.

#### **COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES OF GRADE R LEARNERS**

The findings of the research are discussed under four main headings: (1) general communication about the school; (2) school-initiated communication about the individual child; (3) parent-initiated communication about the individual child and (4) barriers to effective communication. Thus, section (1) coincides with Epstein's *standard organisational communication* while (2) and (3) deal with *specific, individual communication* (Epstein 2001:30).

#### **GENERAL COMMUNICATION ABOUT SCHOOL MATTERS**

Hallgarten (2000:34) contends that what schools call communication often stretches no further than the transmission of

information. In many cases this was found to be the case in the three schools included in the research. A variety of methods were used to inform parents.

#### *Written communication*

Although all three schools mentioned various forms of written communication, the quality and the frequency of the communication varied from school to school. Schools A and B send out newsletters once a quarter, whereas school C, serving a more affluent community, distributes newsletters once a month. The newsletters cover or highlight the most important events in the school and generally deal with issues affecting all grades. However, no specific effort seems to have been made to accommodate learners in Grade R and the newsletters viewed included mainly issues relevant to older learners, which makes it difficult for younger learners and their parents to enjoy 'ownership' of newsletters. Schools B and C also send out an official letter or brochure at the beginning of each year to remind parents of their roles and responsibilities. As the principal of school B explains:

*In the general letter... I remind the parents ... that they should send their child neatly dressed to school, that they come with lunch, that they develop a sense of responsibility in their children, give them tasks at home and check out their homework.*

In addition, all schools frequently send circulars which provide information to parents on general issues such as forthcoming meetings, reminders of outstanding fees or planned field trips. In addition, each

child in Grade R in school C has a message book, which parents sign whenever a message is sent home (almost daily) to indicate that they have read it. On rare occasions the teacher will write personalised messages in the book, for example that the child complained of feeling unwell or was reprimanded for pushing another child. In very few cases did teachers write positive messages concerning the child in the book. One innovative Grade R educator observed used a system of flags in the message book to indicate that there was a message and encouraged parents to make use of the same system when sending a message to the educator. This was one of the infrequent practices of two-way written communication between the school and the home. Educators interviewed, particularly those in school C, had reservations about the number of notices which were sent to parents. This clearly irritated one teacher who complained about "... all sorts of little notices going around" and the problem presented to the younger learners who had to remember to give these notices to parents. In spite of this acknowledgement, educators often complained to the researchers that children "*forget*". All messages sent home by schools are in English and no attempt has been made to accommodate other language groups. Although written messages are an accepted way of bridging the gap between the school and the home, and conveys a sense of authority and permanence when issued by the school (Hanhan 1998:45), the effectiveness of its distribution depends on the learner as a reliable 'messenger' (Stein & Thorkildsen 1999:41). However, when the learner is five to six years old, schools

should consider more innovative ways of ensuring that written communication reaches the homes of the learners.

#### *Formal meetings*

In all the participating schools parent meetings are an important means of communicating with parents. The agenda and the frequency of the meetings differ from school to school. The principals, educators and parents of school C indicated that they hold a general meeting once a year and a meeting to discuss school fees at the end of every year. In addition they have special meetings once a term. In schools A and B meetings were less frequent and used mostly to illuminate issues the schools wished the parents to take note of. As the principal of school B explained: "*We have parents' meetings ... if we know that parents would need to ask questions and will need clarifications, a letter or circular won't suffice then we will call the parents.*" This is commendable as it can assist caregivers who are illiterate. The principal of school A explained that meetings at that school are based on the needs of the school, such as school fees and other school policies. The principals and educators of all three schools complained of poor attendance at most meetings regardless of the topic of discussion. Moreover, many parents who they felt should attend meetings do not do so. An educator explained: "*We get only those that are interested, you know those children that are doing well. But the ones who are abused, there are problems at home, broken homes; we need to see them, they never come.*" However, other than trying to change the time of meetings to accommodate parents, no other steps

were taken to determine why certain parents did not attend school meetings. Moreover, the principal of school B claimed that meetings which are held on Saturdays to accommodate working parents are still poorly attended and concluded that this was because parents are "disinterested". In school C attendance seems to be related to the issue to be discussed. The principal commented: "*When we have a meeting, which has something to do directly with the children then we have excellent attendance...*" She explained that this did not apply when school governance or any other administrative matter are discussed. A parent agreed stating "*Sometimes parents look at the topic and then decide whether to attend or not*". In an attempt to address some of the reasons parents give for not attending meetings, School C is now providing child care facilities for parents during school meetings. This is greatly appreciated by parents:

*They often have baby sitters for important meetings when they want parents to come. One of the teachers or one of the teacher's older kids watches over the children. They are in the media center and generally there is a movie for the kids. And we have car guards when there is a meeting in the evenings.*

In contrast, no assistance was available to parents of schools A and B to make their attendance at meetings easier. Parents from these schools admitted that although they are invited to meetings and given the opportunity to participate, they do not do so. As one explained, "*Some (parents) are shy, some are illiterate.*" Another parent whose

child attends school B claims that parents are not allowed to attend all meetings, but when invited, it is always the same parents who are present. She said, "*if you look at the register for the parents who signed, you will find that the same parents come all the time.*" The reason offered by educators is that parents from low socio economic grouping tend not to be involved in school activities. However, no attempt has been made to determine if this is true or whether there are other contributing factors. Moreover this attitude ignores the fact that communication is of particularly importance where children come from homes which differ culturally and socially from those of the educator (Konzal 2001:113). Parents in the same school also seem to be ill-informed regarding the purpose of meetings and claim that if one abides by the school rules, there is no need to participate in meetings. A parent explained, "*They ask you at the meeting who wants to talk, and you are free to talk about anything ... But you see we do our things right so we don't have to talk.*" Communicating with the family is considered a developmentally appropriate practice in Early Childhood Programmes (Bredekamp 1992:65). The findings show that the schools employed a variety of methods to communicate with parents. However, the communication is based mostly on the needs of the school. Cochran and Dean (1991:267) warn that schools tend to involve parents in one-way communication rather than in a partnership "where each partner is truly respected as having something valuable to contribute." Likewise, if parent meetings are always based



on routine matters, parents may not be sufficiently interested to attend. Hamby (1992:65) advises schools to alternate meetings and workshops between topics parents have identified and those considered important by schools.

### SCHOOL-INITIATED COMMUNICATION ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD

Verbal communication with parents builds relationships and can be more effective than written communication. It allows, in theory at least, a greater opportunity for educators to listen to parents' views. The fact that this did not take place in all schools included in this research is cause for concern.

#### *Parent evenings and orientation meetings*

Parent meetings during which the school formally reports on the child's progress are held twice a year at school C. An educator in school C explains that parents are given the option of choosing a time most suitable for them. The principal emphasises the value of these meetings: "*A lot of things that come out of those interviews are not necessarily school related but they have a huge impact on the child's development and how they are coping at school.*" Parent-teacher interviews as a method of home-school communicating are not new, especially in Grade R. Thus it is surprising that just one school uses this type of communication. Setting up the interview requires planning and effort by educators. Reporting on the child's progress during an interview is a useful way to encourage parents to visit schools and to establish a parent-school

partnership. Orientation meetings for new parents are also initiated by school C and are valuable in establishing two-way communication. An educator explains: "*The principal interviews all parents ... and they have a tour of the school, she introduces them to the prospective teachers, gives the child a sticker, and asks the child to draw a picture. We then explain everything to the parents.*" Although schools A and B complain about illiterate parents and caregivers, neither have devised ways of explaining school procedures to the children's care-givers at the beginning of the year.

#### *Contact regarding problems*

When educators were asked how often they contact individual parents, the general response was "*when there is a problem*". As one educator explained: "*If there is a problem we send for them, we phone them or send a note or a message.*" Parents also tend to contact the school about problems, as the principal of school A explained: "*But let there be complaints! ...each parent is concerned with his or her own child, the teacher must make sure their child is comfortable, another child cannot touch him or do anything*". The principal explained that should anything go amiss, "*we will get a call or the parents will come.*" An educator in school B added that parents were often reluctant when called upon to come to school to resolve a problem, "*yet if there is a problem with the teacher, they are too ready to come and complain.*" The principal in school B made the same observation and concluded that parents show concern only when they have cause to complain about something. Prob-

lem-oriented contact with parents is not limited to these schools. Epstein (1996:226) warns that the good intentions of educators may not produce positive results, if the only communication between the school and the home concerns problems. Educators should conduct positive communication to establish a basis for good relationship which they can draw on if they need families to help learners solve learning or behaviour problems.

#### *Home-visits*

None of the schools included in the inquiry mentioned visiting the homes of children. This is in spite of the fact that the literature suggests that parent involvement programmes offering home visits are more successful in involving disadvantaged parents than programmes requiring parents to visit schools (Henderson 1987:60-61). In school A educators indicated that they drop the children off at home when they have not been fetched by their parents by late afternoon but did not visit the parents when they did so.

### **PARENT-INITIATED COMMUNICATION ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD**

Parents in the participating schools do have opportunities to initiate contact with the school, although not as frequently as opportunities for school-to-home communication.

#### *Informal meetings with educators*

Many occasions of informal discussion with parents when they come to drop off their children or pick them up in the after-

noon were observed in all three schools. Parents seem to find early mornings a convenient time to ask educators about the child's progress or discuss problems. Although some educators find this dialogue time-consuming, they endeavor to accommodate parents. As one educators observed: "*Parents come in every day, so there is discussion every morning; normally this follows like half an hour in the morning.*" She admits that this infringes on the time used for class preparation, but considers it worthwhile. In particular, fathers, who tend to be less involved in school activities, consult educators when dropping off their children. The educator elaborated, "*there are dads, who actually want to talk to me and they are thrilled that they can have a conversation with me, otherwise you actually miss those parents.*" Although all educators agreed that it is important for parents to be interested in the child's progress, most indicated that parents could, at times, be unreasonable. An educator in school B explained:

*Then, as we said, there is no fence they (mostly mothers) just walk in whenever they feel like. Because it is so open they can come in from any side they want to. They are in and out the whole day, they walk around and there is no privacy.*

In contrast, parents of school B view their visits as beneficial to educators as it helped them understand what was happening at school. As one parent put it: "... if you sit at home all day you wouldn't know what's going on", while another claimed: "*We are free to come to school whenever we feel like*". However, these

sentiments are not shared by educators and many feel that parents come to school to see whether they are doing their work. Furthermore, they contend that frequent visits by parents disrupt their day's work. Parents seem unaware of this problem and continue the practice. This is mainly because none of the schools have a policy on parent-teacher contact time which could possibly resolve current problems.

#### *Meetings with the school principal*

Two tiers of communication are found in the three schools. Firstly, parents communicate with educators; secondly, they communicate with the principal. The discussion with educators focuses on the child and problems concerning the child, whereas the communication with the principal focuses on the parents' problems as individuals, which may or may not be school related. The principals of all three schools indicated that they make time to listen to and assist parents. In the case of school A the principal claims solving problems and assisting parents takes up much of her time. She elaborates:

*We have good communication at school. I think it is because of my attitude, I know every parent, I have been here, this is my seventh year, and I think I have this relationship with them ... I know about the parents' problems. I counsel them and help them.*

The principal of school B states that he often has to cope with parents who "are cross and upset about something". He feels that he then needs to make a special effort to deal with them, adding "So I listen to them and then I try to encourage

them." The principal in School C, which serves a more affluent community, is less occupied with problems of parents. Possibly, the more affluent and well-educated parents of that school are more able to access a variety of support structures when they have problems. However, the principal stressed that she considered meeting parents an important aspect of her work, adding: "*I try to be available to parents as often as I am able to. If they need to see me I will fit them in*". Although all three principals have the greater responsibility of managing the school, they all consider assisting parents as one of their essential functions. There also seems to be an acceptance that both the parents and the school have a vital role to play in the education of the child. As one principal stated: "*We cannot do it alone, the parents cannot do it alone, it is a joint venture*". However, in spite of this claim none of the schools have an official policy of parent involvement.

#### *Recording meetings with parents*

Only school C records all contact with the parents. These records are kept up to date until the child leaves the school. The principal explained the rationale:

*They have a green card in which the teacher notes every time she has contact with the parent - just a brief summary of what was said, because you know what happens at the end of the year, when you recommend they (the children) need more time, then the parents say they have never heard this before, it's the first time this is being told to them. The teacher then brings out the green card and says "actually we had an*

*interview in April, then in June".*

Although the practice of recording communication between the school and parent appears to be motivated by preventing problems with parents, it is commendable and acknowledges the important role of communication between the school and the parents.

### **BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

While admitting the importance of a two-way communication between the school and the home, many participants mentioned factors which serve as obstacles to effective communication.

#### *Distance between home and school*

In school B approximately 40 % of the learners attending the school travel to school by bus or taxi. According to the principal, parents chose to send their children to this school as it has a good reputation and uses English as the medium of instruction. However, the fact that children do not live in the vicinity presents problems for home-school relationships. Likewise, communication is cited as a grave problem. An educator at the school commented: *"I suppose with our black parents they work and stay far away and our messages don't get home, so parents do not come to school. The problem is a lack of communication."* This school has, however, made no attempt to accommodate parents who have to travel long distances to attend meetings such as holding some meetings in the vicinity of the children's homes.

#### *Negative perceptions of parents*

Educators and principals feel that some parents are not interested in the education of their children. One educator at school B remarked that parents see the school as a creche: they leave their children with the knowledge that they will be taken care of. In the words of an educator: *"...they (parents) don't even try, like when you give them something they either bring it back or they don't. They don't attend meetings, they don't collect resources."* An educator in the same school stressed that: *"Especially with my black parents, we have to phone them to say look your child is still in school. Those are the ones who come to school without consent forms".* School A links the parents' disinterest with their economic status, arguing that parents from low socioeconomic groupings are generally not involved in their children's education and *"don't care"*. The principal in school B agrees: *"This is largely a low socio-economic environment and I don't want to generalise or come to any conclusions, but from my experience it seems that people living in that kind of area generally seem to be disinterested."* Such attitudes or stereotyping can have negative consequences for the child and his/her family. As Parry (2000:68) rightly points out, beliefs or generalisations about people *"ignore or give insufficient attention to individual differences"*, rather accepting that all people belonging to a specific group (in this case a low socioeconomic grouping) will behave in a certain way. The principal of school A feels that *"it is apathy and some of them just don't care, they know their children*

*are bad and they just don't want to do anything about it*". To deduce that parents are disinterested because they are poor is an incorrect assumption and characteristic of stereotyping that exists in schools. Likewise, the assumption that parents belonging to a specific racial group tend not to be interested in their children's education is most upsetting and needs further investigation. As Epstein (1995:703) rightly points out that irrespective of parents' socio-economic status, all parents want their children to succeed.

#### *Dual career and female-headed families*

In all three schools the educators and principals indicate that where both parents are working, or in female-headed households, communicating with parents and establishing effective parent involvement is difficult. Often parents do not have the time to assist their children with school-related activities. The principal in school C, which serves an affluent community, explains: "... *there are very few mothers who are not working any more and parents are under huge stress just to support their families, you know just to keep them financially supported. I think that it is just another stress when they have to come to school.*" An educator at the same school adds that working parents generally only get involved "*via a phone call*". A colleague supports this, but shows compassion for the dual role played by mothers. She said, "*It must be quite difficult, especially when they come home, they bath their children, and not everybody has a family support system where their grannies are involved.*" Jackson and Cooper (1989:31) concur that time and circumstances may

prevent even interested and concerned parents from participating in school activities. Konzal (2001:113) agrees adding: "When educators really listen to parents they can learn much to help shape what goes on in their schools in ways that meet the needs of parents and children."

#### *Parents' fear and negative perceptions of school*

According to the educators in schools A and B some parents do not interact with the school or become involved because they are afraid. The principal of the school A concurs: "*Some of them could be scared, they have to come and talk to the principal, some of them are very simple, they are afraid*". A parent agreed adding, "*Also some parents are poor and are embarrassed and they don't have transport, they are not well educated and don't come forward to help because they are afraid*". This is supported by research conducted by Strauss and Burger (2000:41) in eighty four primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, where it was found that more than 45% of parents had not completed primary education. Likewise, Carger (1993:38) points out that parents who have had limited schooling themselves will generally have difficulty helping their children with their homework. However, in spite of acknowledging this problem, neither schools A or B have strategies to address the problem.

#### *Grandparents as care givers*

In schools A and B many parents leave their children with grandparents. An educator in School B describes the situation: "*The children are dropped off at the grandparents in the morning and they go back*

*to their homes in the afternoons or they are dropped off on a Monday and picked up on a Friday."* The principal of school A identified similar circumstances, adding that many parents "*depend on their parents for help and support.*" Although the grandparents are willing to care for these children, their own background and age often prevents them from playing a more active role at school or even informing the school of problems children may be experiencing. Moreover, the illiteracy level among older people is high. As one educator complained: "*The grandparents cannot read the notices we send home.*"

*Lack of teacher training for home-school communication*

When asked if teacher training had helped educators cope with parent involvement, educators remarked laughingly "*Oh, that was a long time ago*". Where aspects of parent involvement were dealt with in pre-service teacher training, the emphasis was, according to the educators, on theory. As one educator complained: "*I was trained through a correspondence college, we did the course but there is nothing you can use and apply in your classroom. The work done was just a piece of paper.*" Although this criticism may not be well-founded it does illustrate that many educators feel that their training has not fully prepared them to work with parents. This was supported by educators in school C who felt that they had learnt to deal with parents mostly through "*maturity and experience*" and not through their training.

*Differences in language and culture impedes effective communication*

South Africa has a long history of cultural separateness and many people tend to categorise themselves in their religious, cultural and language domains (Malan 1992:1). This is also true of parents and educators which makes communication between these groups difficult. None of the schools visited made allowance for this. No newsletters or circulars are translated and no translators are available during meetings and parent evenings. Underlying this practice may be the fact that English is often seen as being of upmost importance to all who want their children to succeed later in life and that this language should be used exclusively in all communication. This is not necessarily true and needs to be considered by schools when communicating with parents.

**GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION**

A review of the literature shows that many useful ways in which schools can improve written and verbal communication with parents have been recorded. While this may be useful, long term improvement are best served by a more strategic approach.

- (1) *Working with parents should be seen as part of an educator's training*

There is a dichotomy between theory and the practical situation with regard to parent involvement. According to Davies (1999:5) teacher development programmes need to provide educators

with skills that will assist them in working with parents if educators are to break the traditional separation of schools from the families and communities they serve. Cochran and Dean (1991:264) suggest that in-service training programmes should also be given in communication so that educators know how to empathise with parents and recognise their strengths, make the most of parent-teacher conferences and find creative ways of involving parents in school activities.

(2) *Educators' attitudes need to change*

Educators' negative attitudes towards low socio-economic backgrounds prevent effective parent involvement programmes and effective communication between the school and the home (Chrispeels 1992:367). In addition, educators need to be taught not to view parents of learners belonging to different racial groups as incapable of assisting in school related matters. Swap (1993:16) agrees, adding that children who are racially, linguistically or culturally different from their educators may experience discontinuities in values between home and school or may lose self-esteem as they see little of their own culture in the curriculum. This means that educators should not only view all parents as important partners in the education of their children, but should create opportunities for such parents to communicate their customs and values to the school so that there is a greater continuity between the home

and the school. In short, teachers need to be made aware of their negative perceptions of certain categories of parents and trained to communicate and involve parents from different language, socio-economic and racial groupings. This is important as Epstein (1987: 131) maintains that regardless of their family arrangements or characteristics, most parents care about their children's progress in school and want to know how to assist them.

(3) *Schools should have a policy for involving and assisting parents*

Epstein (1993: 61) found that a policy on parent involvement as well as school and teacher practice, are strong predictors of parent involvement in school and at home. This policy needs to be communicated to parents. Likewise, schools need to plan how to assist parents in their parenting tasks. For example, schools should endeavour to link families in need to the relevant support services like social welfare, rehabilitation centres and employment agencies and to communicate this information to parents. Moreover, schools should develop a repertoire of parent involvement activities that emphasise personalised attention and interaction with parents rather than relying exclusively on traditional outreach methods that have proven effective for only a limited number of families (Moles 1999).

(4) *Strategies for communicating with parents*

In ECD programmes personal interviews between educators and parents are considered crucial communication strategies. Thus, there is a need for schools to develop strategies of communicating with parents. Such strategies should be tailored to suit the needs of parents they serve. This means that schools should familiarise themselves with the cultures represented in their schools and frame how these differences might affect communication with children's parents. Moreover, educators should be reminded that personal communication creates an openness between educator and parent. If parents and teachers do not talk to or do not know each other, they may wrongfully see each other as uncompromising and not even try to engage in a dialogue to discover mutually beneficially options (Mc Dermott 1997: 33). In addition, it should be emphasised that culturally based differences in communication styles, expectations for educators, parents and children, and views on the best ways to raise and educate children can create discontinuities between families and schools (Moles 1999: 33). This should be addressed in training courses to improve school-to-home and home-to-school communication. Finally, schools should heed the advice of Stein and Thorkildsen (1999:51) namely that: 'Communication is most effective when it is positive.'

## CONCLUSION

Good school-home communication is critical to good school-home relationships. Moreover, parents make inferences about the extent to which schools want parents to be involved by the ways in which they reach out to families and parents in the community (Scott Stein & Thorkildsen 1999:39). Catron and Allen (1993:51) and Kostelnik, Soderman and Whiren (1993:375) agree and argue that in Early Childhood programmes, close contact and regular communication between the home and the school improve the consistency with which parents and educators work towards the desired goal of promoting the child's development. In addition, it promotes parent identification with the learning programme, which increases parents' satisfaction and children's success. This success should be available to all children irrespective of the racial group or socio economic grouping they belong to.

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