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HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION IN A RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN VILLAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND TEACHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

"We naturally associate…democracy with freedom of action, but freedom of action without freed capacity for thought behind it is only chaos" (Dewey, 1903/2005).

"Education is the great engine of personal development…it is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another" (Mandela, 1994, p. 166).

Since the new government's inception in 1994, South Africans have been searching for ways to begin to heal their nation's many wounds left by three hundred years of more or less bloody colonialism, crowned by 46 years of apartheid rule (Sparks, 2003). Prior to 1994, education in South Africa was sharply divided along racial lines. White South Africans enjoyed first world quality education, while "Coloureds" (a term still used to describe people of Asian, Indian, Malaysian, or mixed heritage) received mediocre education, and Black Africans were taught only the barest basics (Sparks, 2003).

During this time, the Bantu educational system was implemented to "train and fit" the African population for what was seen as their role in society. Under the Bantu Education Act of 1953, education was separated from churches and other local authorities, and all races were separated within educational institutions. No science or mathematics was taught under this act because it was believed that Black people had no place in the community other than to engage in certain forms of labor (Bantu Education, retrieved from http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/june16/education. htm). After many years of Bantu education, the South African government realized the majority of the adult population was illiterate. In the years since the democratic revolution of 1994, South Africa's new government has struggled to make up deficits in many areas, including education (Hopfer, 1997).

Family-School Collaboration and Achievement

Educators in many countries are beginning to examine students' cultural and familial contexts in order to understand how to best relate to all students, especially those in minority groups. Researchers in the United States have shown a strong relationship between effective parent involvement in education and student success (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). Support from parents seems to buffer negative effects of poverty and disadvantage (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Edin & Lein, 1997). Children whose families support their efforts at school and encourage their learning appear to have better long-term academic success than their peers who lack such support regardless of income or social class (Edin & Lein, 1997; Swap, 1995).

Although some parents have innate communication skills and readily form strong relationships with educators, others may need to be coaxed. In particular, low income parents may feel unwelcome at school and may need explicit encouragement to communicate with teachers (Bridgemohan, van Wyk, & van Staden, 2005; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Lawson, 2003). These feelings may stem from the parents' own negative experiences with school (Finders & Lewis, 1994), feelings of embarrassment about lack of nice clothing (Bridgemohan et al., 2005), or feeling that they are looked down on or judged by teachers (Finders & Lewis, 1994). In South Africa, the history of racial separation may add to Black and Coloured parents' feelings of alienation from White, Asiatic, or Coloured educators.

In order to help all parents feel welcome at school, teachers and administrators need to purposefully create welcoming environments that facilitate open, consistent, two-way communication (Amatea, in press; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Lawson, 2003).

Training Teachers to Access Family Resources

In the United States, very few teacher education programs outside of special education and early childhood offer a specific course in school-family collaboration (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). Thus, many new teachers do not have the training they need to begin developing collaborative relationships with the families of their students. The lack of training in how to communicate with parents persists in spite of evidence that parent involvement raises academic achievement and that new teachers need specific training in order to be effective collaborators (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Jacobson, 2002).

In South Africa, the lack of teacher training in parent involvement is compounded by the teacher shortage in general and the overall shortfall

of qualified teachers (Department of Education, 2006). During the era of apartheid, teachers of children of color were not highly skilled, and many continue to lag behind their peers in terms of content area knowledge (DOE, 2006). However, the South African Department of Education has begun reform efforts aimed at bringing teacher education standards up for both preservice and current teachers. Although South Africa is already facing many issues in teacher education, it seems plausible that while in the midst of transition, they should add a parent involvement strand.

Within the context of this project, one of the objectives was to enhance students' knowledge of and comfort with parent involvement. The majority of the students (11 out of 12) had already completed a one-semester course specifically focused on how to collaborate with diverse families. This study abroad experience, including both the research piece and the daily work in the local schools and communities, was designed to engage students in collaboration with parents from cultures and contexts very different from those we are accustomed to in the United States. Although not specifically addressed here, the growth experiences of the teachers will be examined in a later article.

METHODS

We went into rural South Africa with many questions. How do parents view their children's education in comparison to their own? How do they feel about schooling now as compared to their own schooling? How would they like to be approached by teachers? Do they feel welcome at school? What kinds of communication do they have with the school staff? In order to get rich, full responses for these questions, we chose to use qualitative research methods (Glesne, 1999).

In approaching research with participants from a very different culture, assuming oneself to be "objective" and absent from the realities of the lived experience is unrealistic and perhaps impossible. Instead of trying to completely remove ourselves from the lives of the participants, or claiming to have omniscient powers of insight into their lives, we acknowledge our role as curious, compassionate, and interested outsiders. We have chosen to locate ourselves inside the interview situation, not outside of it. This declaration of place and context squarely places our epistemological view in the camp of constructionist theory, and within constructionist methods, we have chosen to use grounded theory to analyze our findings (Charmaz, 2005). The steps of analysis will be described later in the article.

SETTING

The site for this project was a small village in the Western Cape Province. It is situated near the national highway between the coast and a mountain range. An affluent tourist area is about a 15-minute drive by car from the village, but very few residents of the village have private cars. The approximate population of the village is 4400. Residents are primarily Coloured and Afrikaans speaking, with a substantial Black Xhosa-speaking minority group.

Facts and figures about the population of the village are difficult to obtain due to lack of technological infrastructure in the area, such as telephones and mailboxes, and the highly transient nature of the more recently arrived residents, many of whom are fleeing even worse economic conditions in the northwestern areas of South Africa, as well as the impoverished Eastern Cape Province. However, the village's municipal manager estimates that about three quarters of able-bodied adults are chronically under- or unemployed. This figure is far higher than the current national unemployment rate of 25.6% (retrieved October 24, 2006, from www.stats-sa.gov.za). Poverty is crushing in the village. There is no indoor plumbing and only intermittent electricity. Although there are some "formal" homes made from brick or boards, many residents live in "informal" shack-like structures made from scraps of plywood, discarded boards, and plastic sheeting. The government is building more "formal" homes and hopes to move all of the village's families into improved structures by 2012. However, construction on the new homes is slow due to lack of consistent funding and supplies from the government, so the majority of residents still live in substandard housing.

Health care is another major challenge in the village. Among all South Africans, the estimated prevalence of HIV infection is somewhere between 15.6% and 25% of adults (retrieved October 24, 2006, from www.statssa.gov.za). The municipal manager estimates that about one in three or four homes in the village contain at least one AIDS sufferer. The national and provincial governments, along with private organizations, are attempting to get antiretroviral drugs to those who are already infected, but the process is slow due to ingrained stigma against AIDS in the Coloured and Black communities.

The village has a primary school and a "crèche" or preschool. Both are in "formal" structures but are hopelessly understaffed. While we were working there, the crèche served about 60 children each day and had one full-time teacher and a cook. The primary school, which serves children in grades K-9 (in American terms; in South African terms, it is grades R-

9), has an average class size of 40, which is lower than many comparable schools in the area due to volunteer teachers from Europe and the United States and funding from local volunteer organizations.

The village has a large and continuous stream of foreign volunteers and financial support, mostly due to the efforts of two local grassroots organizations. These two groups, Born in African and Willing Workers in South Africa, provide volunteer labor and support to local people who are trying to build businesses and improve the services to children and families in the village. We worked with leaders of both groups in order to gain access to participants in this study.

PARTICIPANTS

We completed interviews with 16 parents: 1 man and 15 women. Seven identified their race as "Black" and nine identified their race as "Coloured." Three reported Xhosa as their primary language, and the rest spoke Afrikaans. All of the participants were parents or guardians of children from the primary school who were enrolled in the Born in Africa after school program. We initially needed only 12 participants, but the response to our request for volunteers was so strong that we were able to recruit 20 caregivers, of whom 16 were able to come the night of the interviews. Interviews were conducted at the town meeting hall, which is accessible by walking to all residents of the village, on a school night after most parents returned home from work.

We initially invited participation during a monthly Born in Africa parents' meeting. We provided BIA staff members with consent forms in English and Afrikaans, which they orally translated into Xhosa for those three women who did not read or speak English or Afrikaans. The staff members then returned signed forms to the research team. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were given small thank-you gifts of school supplies after the interviews. We did not tell people in advance that we would distribute gifts.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

In order to situate the interviewers in the research setting, the reader should know that the interviewers were White and Hispanic college students from the United States. Eleven of the students were female, and one was male. The professor, a White American woman, also conducted one interview. Six of the students had been working at the village's crèche and primary school for several weeks and were acquainted with the participants' children. The other six students were working at a neighboring village school. The professor has been involved with the village for several

years as a volunteer teacher and consultant to the school and local volunteer agencies. She also supports a local student through Born in Africa and has long-standing friendships with many local families.

The college students were taking part in a university-sponsored study abroad course. Eleven of them were training to be elementary school teachers, and one was an English major. The primary focus of the study abroad experience, as conceptualized by the professor, was to educate the students about how families and schools interact in a culture very different from their own. Also, the newness of the democracy in South Africa, the natural beauty of the area, and the desperate need for teachers in the rural areas made the location ideal for helping college students learn first hand about social justice, multiculturalism, and teaching practices. In spite of obvious cultural differences, the research participants and other local residents were very open and warm with the students.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to situate the interviewers within the context of the research, and because of an interest in attending to "ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, equality, democratic process, status, hierarchy, and individual and collective rights and obligations" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 510), we chose to analyze data using constructivist grounded theory.

The first step in analyzing the data was to transcribe the interviews. Since we did not have recording equipment, we were forced to take notes during the interviews and rely on interviewer recall and note taking to accurately record responses. Although this method was far from ideal, we were able to capture many direct quotes from participants and were able to record their responses with fair accuracy. Interviewers were encouraged to review the notes with the participants at the conclusion of the interview in order to insure accuracy.

Once interviews were transcribed, a team of four student researchers applied initial codes to the data. Each discrete meaning unit was broken out of the raw data and given a code. In the beginning, coding was done by topic (Morse & Richards, 2002) or open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), but once the data began to yield deeper information, we could start to look at the coding more analytically for categories, or themes of information (Morse & Richards, 2002) that allow for comparison. Once the initial analytical coding was completed, we could begin to organize codes into larger, conceptual, "axial" categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The axial categories were then examined and compared to each other between and among participants to create the final set of codes, called "selective" by Strauss and Corbin.

During the process of reflecting on the raw data and coding it, the researchers wrote memos to themselves about their thoughts and feelings regarding the construction of the codes and possible relationships among them (McLeod, 2001; Morse & Richards, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The memos help the researchers think through possible meanings of data, find relationships between open and then axial codes, and create selective codes, and ultimately, build a theory about the possible meanings of the data.

Once the open, axial, and selective codes were applied, the lead researcher began to build a theory of parent involvement in the village by comparing selective codes to each other and referring back to the raw data and researcher memos for confirmation (McLeod, 2001). The theory was built gradually, using constant comparison between and among codes, transcripts, and reflective memos. Since an essential element of grounded theory is to build a theory to explain the data, not impose one's previous conceptions on it (McLeod), the data were viewed as fresh and new and were not assumed to have any set outcome prior to conducting the analysis. Our constructivist framework required that we always keep the context of the interviews and data in mind when creating the grounded theory.

FINDINGS

The interviews with parents yielded fascinating and sometimes surprising insights into their perceptions of schooling. The findings fall into three basic categories: struggles to learn, current problems in education, and wishes for the future.

Struggles to Learn

Early in the interview, we asked the parents a short series of questions about their own experiences with schooling. The original purpose of these questions was to learn about the life context of the participants and also to determine if their own experiences as students influenced how they now interact with their child's school (Finders & Lewis, 1994).

What emerged was a riveting portrait of the struggles of Black parents to attend school under the apartheid system. Many shared wrenching stories of hardship, such as Jeanette: "My schooling was horrific. I would walk to school at 5 a.m. and get there at 8 a.m. Most of the children walked together. I would walk back home and get home around 6 p.m." Colleen echoed her sentiments: "There was a big financial struggle, and a long distance walk to school. The winters were cold and we had no shoes. They are not happy memories."

Once they got to school, their learning was very basic. Many parents reported that schools had few supplies and were overcrowded. Children were taught "…the basics to survive. We learned to write and read our names and birthdates- the basic necessities" (Yvonne). These reports are, of course, in line with the Bantu education policy that was in force prior to 1994. In spite of the challenges involved, most reported that they had enjoyed schooling and learning.

Parents uniformly (all 16) reported that it was very difficult to obtain any education beyond primary school in those years because high school was expensive and often far from their homes. None of the 16 parents we spoke to attended school beyond primary school (grades one through six). Many expressed regret at not being able to attend school longer. Katie's response was typical: "Beyond that (grade 5) schooling had to be paid for. I could not continue my schooling because I had to make money to support the younger children."

When we asked about struggles faced by lacks in their communities, many of our respondents seemed eager to push the struggles of Blacks away from their own lives, with responses like Valerie's (who is Coloured): "No blacks were in school with us. Coloured people got their books for free while blacks had to pay for everything. Living where I was, apartheid was not noticeable to me." And Rosa, who is Black, stated in response to the same question: "I had a few friends who were coloured and we did not spend time together at school, but apartheid did not affect me." Some other respondents did connect the lack of transportation, school supplies, and access to higher education to the apartheid regime. Jeanette reported that "We (Coloured children) were pushed aside and not allowed in White schools. Things have changed now."

CURRENT PROBLEMS IN EDUCATION

Although all of the parents said they see their children's schooling as much better than their own, many of them pointed out areas for improvement. Parents generally reported satisfaction with the content of what the children are being taught and did not see any conflicts between what is taught at home versus what is taught at school.

However, when asked how well the school staff communicates with parents, many of the same complaints surfaced that are commonly heard in schools in the United States and were found in other studies from South Africa (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Lemmer & van Wyck, 2006). Parents remarked that they usually hear from the school when there is a problem, not when the student is doing well. They also suggested that the school

hold more public meetings for parents and perhaps make home visits to communicate with parents who don't have telephones or who are illiterate. They wanted the school to ask for their help with the children when there was a problem, to use their expertise, and also to involve them more globally in the schooling process. Ursula summed up the majority of the responses in her comment: "I think that the teachers need to come and ask the parents what is going on with their child if they are not coming to school or doing their work. They need to come into our homes and talk to us about our children. We need more opportunities to talk with the teachers." Some of the parents also suggested ideas for improving school-family relations, such as adult education classes at night at the school, a parent-teacher association, and using parents as substitute teachers.

When we asked the parents about barriers to parents being involved at school, two answers were most common. The first was that teachers "don't listen to what we have to say, like they are better." Parents who answered this way thought some people are unwilling to go to the school because they feel they are judged by the teachers and are seen as "unfit parents." It is worth noting here that the teachers at the school are mostly Coloured Afrikaans speakers, and a significant minority of the parents are Black Xhosa speakers. The second most common answer was that parents sometimes do not get involved at school due to drug or alcohol problems. Substance abuse is rampant in the village. No official numbers are available, but substance abuse and related problems (domestic violence, child abuse, rape, fights at taverns) are commonly mentioned by residents as serious and widespread. Alida reports drug and alcohol use affects the number of parents teachers will approach, and consequently the number of parents invited to school functions. Most parents who spoke of the substance abuse problems in the village report that it has escalated since they were in school.

Hopes for the Future

When parents were asked what changes they would like to see in the school's educational practices, most said they are pleased with the content of their children's education (although many wanted to know more about what was being taught). Technology education, such as learning to use computers and having access to the Internet, were often mentioned as wishes for the near future.

Areas for improvement centered on greater involvement of the families and community in the schooling process. Parents often expressed the sentiments that both the teachers and community members need to change

their ways in order to improve the education for all children. Parents want to be invited to be involved at school more often and more explicitly, and they also recognize the need for community members to accept the invitations that are offered. As Alida put it, some parents think that "if my parents didn't have to go [to school functions] why should I?"

All of the parents we interviewed expressed a strong desire for their children to succeed at school. Many of them acknowledged the belief that education is "the key to getting a good job, and being happy." The challenge for teachers at this point appears to lie in harnessing that sentiment and putting it to good use in the daily life of the school.

Implications for Teaching and Teacher Education

The parents in this study echoed the sentiments of parents in other places around the globe when they expressed a desire to be more involved at school. Many ideas for achieving that goal have also been suggested and overlap our findings. More research is needed in diverse cultures to determine if any of these findings are indeed universal.

First and foremost, there should be a shift in thinking and practice among teachers and teacher educators. In traditional models of education, the educator is seen as the "expert" who imparts specific knowledge to students at school (Amatea, in press). In traditional schools, the parents are not seen as equal partners in their child's education and are often regarded as incapable of assisting in the educational process. Parents who are low-income, do not speak the dominant language, or are members of racial or cultural minority groups are often marginalized in the traditional model (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Swap, 1993). South Africa's long history of legal separation and racial hierarchy makes this issue all the more salient. Many parents recalled painful memories surrounding their own schooling under the Bantu system. In order to engage them fully in the education of their children, teachers must make an explicit shift from the traditional model of education to the collaborative model (Amatea, in press; Weiss & Edwards, 1992).

The collaborative model has roots in systems thinking, a theory that encourages people to see the interconnection between various factors in an ecosystem. When applied to education, systems thinking helps teachers to see that students do not live in a vacuum but are connected to families and communities (Senge, 2000). Problems are examined in multi-faceted ways, looking beyond the immediate, obvious behaviors to find the real source and create more effective interventions drawn from the complex, interconnected spheres of influence in a student's life (Senge, 2000).

In the collaborative model, parents are seen as equal to teachers in terms of power and agency in their child's education. Parents are involved in key decisions at the school, not just as tokens but in meaningful ways. Parents are not blamed for the child's problems but are asked to help solve them. This requires a fundamental shift in thinking for educators and should be made school and community wide, not as an isolated, one-time professional development exercise. Obviously, shifting the paradigm of education in a community requires commitment from parents, teachers, and community leaders. This can be achieved through the following steps:

1. Create routine, dependable methods to communicate with parents aside from reporting problems. Educators need to establish routine two-way communication with all parents. This suggestion not only comes from our participants but also from many leading educators around the world (Amatea, in press; Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Lemmer & van Wyck, 2004; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). While establishing a routine may be more challenging in poor rural areas, it is not impossible. Practices as simple as weekly comment folders that travel back and forth with the student have been used in a wide variety of settings (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Educators must also build relationships with parents whether they can come to school or not (Weiss & Edwards, 1992). The parents who expressed a desire for teachers to make home visits are the ones who reflect this need. Parents' lack of attendance at school functions does not indicate a lack of interest in most cases. Often, parents lack the time or a means of transportation, or they may fear judgment from teachers (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Finders & Lewis, 1994). Creating routine, two-way communications will help reach the parents who are currently not involved and will further involve those who are already engaged (Amatea, in press).

2. Create an environment in the school that welcomes parents regardless of race, social class, or educational level. Simple changes, such as holding open houses throughout the school year at times when working parents can attend, posting Parents Welcome signs, and verbally encouraging marginalized parents to come to functions help set a positive tone. In an open and welcoming environment, parents will not feel that the teachers "think they're better."

3. Stop passing the blame. Parents blaming the school for educational failures and schools blaming parents for unprepared students have never yielded any progress in academic outcomes. A far more productive approach is for all parties to work together on the problems at hand, focusing on solutions and not re-hashing past mistakes (Amatea, in press).

4. Train teachers to communicate effectively with parents. If teachers do not receive explicit instruction in how to engage parents, especially those who may be culturally different from themselves, how can they be expected to

do so? This is a logical question, yet many teacher preparation programs do not include specific coursework for education students about how to communicate effectively with parents (Bridgemohan et al., 2005). In order for schools to fully implement a collaborative model, all teachers in the school need to be trained to communicate regularly, without blaming, in multiple ways to engage all parents.

Limitations

The primary limitation for the research team was the dependence on translators during the interviews. Although the translators were briefed on the purpose of the interviews and the need for verbatim translation, having a third person present during the interviews may have caused some participants to talk less than if we had been able to speak with them directly. Along with the language barrier, the obvious differences in race and social class must be mentioned. The research team members were clearly outsiders in the village. However, whether this ultimately hindered participants or freed them to speak is unknown.

The inability of the team to tape record interviews for transcription was also bothersome, since the interviewers had to rely on their memories to create full transcripts. Notes were reviewed with participants immediately after the interview, and researchers wrote up the interviews the same night; however, we must assume some data were lost due to imperfect memories.

CONCLUSION

Although the setting and participants in this study were unique in many ways, participants' concerns about their children's education were very similar to those recounted in many other studies conducted in South Africa (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Lemmer & van Wyck, 2004) and the United States (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Weiss & Edwards, 1992). The challenges now facing schools in both countries are also similar: in order to raise student achievement, parents need to be more fully engaged. In order to fully engage parents, schools must move towards a more collaborative way of working with families and communities (Amatea, in press; Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Lemmer & van Wyck, 2004 Weiss & Edwards, 1992).

Making this shift from traditional ways of communicating with parents to a collaborative model may not be easy for educators who have been working under the traditional model for many years. Training teachers to work collaboratively with parents appears to be a widespread, if not global, need. Educating new teachers to think in systems models and to

relate to parents as equals is another crucial piece of the puzzle. Research clearly shows that parent involvement is a key to increasing academic achievement. In order to accomplish this goal, teachers must see parents as equals, treat them with respect, and form enduring partnerships if student achievement is to be raised.

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APPENDIX ONE – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I. Information about the child:

1. What strengths do you see in your child? What talents does she/he have?

2. Tell me a little more about your family. Is ___ your only child, or do you have other children? How old are they?

3. What kinds of chores do your child(ren) have at home?

4. What does your child say about school?

5. What kinds of things, at school or at home, excite and interest your child? What does he or she like to play or do? Does he or she like to read? What is his or her favorite story?

6. What sorts of things upset or frustrate your child?

7. What kinds of things do you like to do together with your child?

8. What would you like your child to learn in school this year?

9. What else do you think I need to know about your child in order to help him/her learn?

II. Parent's educational history:

1. Did you grow up in Kurland or somewhere else? What was your first language?

2. What are some of your early memories about learning in your family growing up? What do you recall your family members teaching you? How did they teach you that?

3. Who do you recall as being a wise person in your family or community? What valuable knowledge did they have? How did they share their wisdom with others?

4. Did you go to school as a young child? What was it like? What language were the lessons? How many grades of school were there then?

5. Do you remember any struggles about schooling for Blacks in your community? What was that like for you?

6. What were your earliest memories of school? How would you describe yourself as a student?

7. What was your families' involvement with your schooling? What did your parents tell you about education when you were in school?

8. What is the biggest difference between your schooling and your child's?

III. Bridges between home and school:

1. What do you think is the best way for parents to be involved at school? How could that happen here (if it isn't)?

2. How have you been invited to be involved at school? How would you prefer to be involved/invited to school?

3. Do you feel that what your child learns at school is in conflict with the values of home or community?

4. Are there any barriers to parents being involved at the school here? What are they?

5. If you could change one thing about your child's education, what would it be?