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POWER, ACCESS AND AGENCY: UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parents are the first educators of their children. Their ability to know and love their children has unparalleled benefits. Research shows that encouragement and support from parents/caregivers, not necessarily assistance with specific homework, improves learner achievement even for children attending schools where the education offered is not of the highest quality.¹ Although parents have untapped power – and rights – to hold schools accountable for quality standards, many feel they have little say in their children’s education for a number of complex reasons.

This learning brief looks at how three NGOs – Parent Power, Axiom Education and Common Good – are driving parent engagement strategies in order to empower parents and fundamentally alter the educational trajectory of children in South Africa.

¹ Bergbauer, A. 2016. *The role of inter-personal interactions in South African education. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP)*, Working Paper 09/16. <https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ReSEP-WP-09-BERGBAUER.pdf>

The South African public schooling system is marked by a high prevalence of grade repetition, overaged learners in high school, and wide learning deficits among learners in poorer schools. In fact, more than 20% of learners in Grades 10, 11 and 12 are three or more years overage, which suggests that they were caught in cycles of grade repetition.² The outcome of such an inefficient system is that far too many learners do not acquire the knowledge and skills needed to progress through school in the requisite time³ – and about 300 000 drop out annually before completing matric.⁴

A lack of parental involvement is commonly cited as a contributing factor to poor educational outcomes, and parental “involvement” is often devolved into support on subject-based homework.⁵ Most parents want the best for their children and will go to great lengths to enhance their child’s life chances. However, there is no denying that doing this is more challenging in contexts where parents lack education and resources.

Research shows that, of the approximately 19% of adults with no or low education, 79% live in poverty.⁶ In addition, employed parents from poor backgrounds are more likely to have inflexible work schedules and long commuting times, which makes it difficult for them to be involved parents in the current, narrow conception of “involvement”.



THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS ACT

The South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 decentralised certain forms of authority to School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and attempted to alter historical relations based on centralised and authoritarian modes of educational governance, to provide parents – required to comprise a majority on SGBs – with the power to devise policies in the interests of local communities and their own children.

The Act has been praised for its commitment to democratic participation of parents, but criticised for its failure to make a clear distinction between the governance (which should include parents) and management (which should be the responsibility of the principal and educators, accountable to the SGB). This fuzziness has not been good for effective school functioning.

2 Van der Berg, Servaas and van Wyk, Chris and Selkirk, Rebecca and Hofmeyr, Heleen, *Learner Flows Through Schools: Using High Quality Administrative Data to Understand Education System Performance (August 2021)*. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4009654> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4009654>

3 Ibid.

4 Van der Berg S., Wills G., Selkirk R., Adams C. and Van Wyk C. 2019. *The cost of repetition in South Africa*. Stellenbosch Working Paper Series No. WP13/2019. <https://www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers/2019/wp132019>

5 Felix, N., Dornbrack, J. & Sheckle, E. 2008. Parents, homework and socio-economic class: Discourses of deficit and disadvantage in the “new” South Africa. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 7(2): p.99–112. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ832211.pdf>

6 Stats SA. 2006. *Poverty trends in South Africa: An examination of absolute poverty between 2006 and 2015*. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-06/Report-03-10-062015.pdf>

The South African Schools Act of 1996 states that parental involvement is integral to a child’s education. However, parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds continue to experience disempowerment and alienation from schools because they simultaneously work and travel long hours due to spatial planning that isolates them from wealthy urban centres and leaves little time for participation in school processes.

Many South African parents living in poverty feel they have little, if any, say in education because their children are taught by teachers who are much better qualified.⁷ As a result, parents rely heavily on those who occupy positions of power around them, such as school staff, to assist in their lives. This reliance is often simply ignored, leading to an unequal relationship between schools and parents, in which parents are unable to hold schools accountable.

Yet the Zero Dropout Campaign⁸ has shown that having a meaningful, trusting relationship with a caring adult can make a significant difference in a child’s ability to cope with day-to-day challenges that could lead to disengagement and school dropout.⁹ When a parent or caregiver shows interest in a child’s academic journey, we’re likely to see better educational outcomes.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF A CARING, SUPPORTIVE ADULT

Some learners stay in and do well at school despite challenging circumstances. Researchers studying their resilience have found that these youth often succeed because they have “personal anchors – stable, positive emotional relationships with at least one parent or key person”.¹⁰

The status quo can be disrupted if parents are equipped with the language, information and tools to help them engage meaningfully with their child’s school and in their child’s education. This does not mean that they have to be accredited teachers, but rather that they understand the difference their contribution can make to their child’s education. One way to do this is by encouraging parents to see themselves as partners in their child’s education and to drive parent engagement strategies.

7 Smit, A. G. and Liebenberg, L. 2003. Understanding the dynamics of parent involvement in schooling within the poverty context. *South African Journal of Education EASA Vol 23(1)* p.1 – 5.

8 The Zero Dropout Campaign is a DGMT-funded campaign that aims to halve the rate of school dropout by 2030.

9 Hartnack, A. 2018. *Parental Involvement: Engaging Families and Ensuring that Caregivers Play an Active Role in their Children’s Education. Technical Brief 2: Zero Dropout Schools Initiative*. <https://dgmt.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Zero-Dropout-Schools-Technical-Report-2.pdf>

10 Shore, R. 2003. *Reducing the High School Dropout Rate KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie e. Casey foundation. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/kids-count-indicator-brief-reducing-the-high-school-dropout-rate>



The following three case studies explore varied parent engagement strategies.

Case Study

1

PARENT POWER

Parent Power seeks to redefine the role of parents or primary caregivers vis-à-vis their children’s education by buttressing their agency as a group, so they feel confident to partner with schools and hold them accountable for quality education.

Parent Power recently commissioned a study¹¹ to understand the factors that shape parents’ perceptions of education quality. The parents who were interviewed spoke at length about educators, resources, safety and the curriculum. However, in these reflections they perceived themselves largely in passive terms. They evaluated educators’ practices, the resources that are available at schools, safety and security concerns, and what they desire from the curriculum, but little was said of how they could potentially contribute to these challenges.

In 2022, Parent Power initiated a year-long programme in the North West province to help parents harness their collective agency and champion their children’s education. Four primary schools and one high school participated in the pilot known as the Parent Champion Journey. Each cohort of Parent Champions comprised a principal, a School Management Team member, a teacher, two SGB representatives and a parent not involved in any school structure. Parent Power took them on a journey that showed them how to build trust and partnerships with parents.

After the training, Parent Champions called the greater parent body to a meeting and discussed obstacles that prevent parents and teachers from working together. Various issues were identified, and an action plan was developed to resolve them. For example, a problem identified during the meeting was drug use by learners. As a means to mitigate the problem of learners accessing drugs after school, a group of parents decided to walk home with learners so they would not be tempted to visit a house where they could buy cannabis. Parent Power met with the cohort twice a term to review their plan and offer additional support where needed.

¹¹ This study was conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on behalf of Parent Power.

LEARNINGS

1 BUILD TRUST

Andisiwe Hlungwane, project lead, Parent Power, says schools need to commit time and effort into developing a trusting relationship with parents. It is also important to consider the trauma that parents themselves may be carrying from their own school experience, or lack thereof.

Hlungwane acknowledges that building trust with parents may be a big ask from lower quintile¹² schools that are already over-stretched, but says that it opens essential lines of communication that can promote parental engagement and improved child outcomes in the long term.

2 OPEN DIALOGUE

In the study commissioned by Parent Power, a prevailing theme emerged about the importance of open dialogue between schools and parents. WhatsApp groups have become extremely useful to parents, saving them from costly trips to school. Educators may also be available to parents via their smartphones, as they can potentially respond when they have time, which may not be the case if parents suddenly arrive at school.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic presented important lessons for parent involvement in school life: parents need clear instructions to assist with schoolwork and WhatsApp communication sometimes needs to be contextualised and not simply “dumped” on parents’ doorsteps.

Parents who do not have access to this form of communication will need to be supported so that there are no exclusions. It is clear parents want principals and teachers to initiate contact with them and to be informed about anything that could influence their child’s school life. However, schools need to make it clear that communication is two-way; parents should feel safe to also reach out to the school about issues at home that could affect the child's school life.

Parent-educator communication can contribute to children having multiple adults who care about them, working together towards their best outcomes and interests.

¹² For the purposes of allocating and receiving different funding allocations, South African schools are divided into quintiles based on the socio-economic profile of the community in which they are located. Quintile 1 schools are located in the poorest communities, while Quintile 5 schools are found in the wealthiest. Learners in Quintiles 1-3 schools do not have to pay school fees, although Quintile 4 and even 5 may also be non-fee-paying schools.

3 MODEL BEHAVIOUR

"Many parents were not given the opportunity to be involved in their children's education prior to 1994. Then SASA happened and all of a sudden, parents are expected to be engaged in a particular way. But prior to that, there were no Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) or things like that in lower quintile schools."

Andisiwe Hlungwane,
project lead, Parent Power

As previously stated, parents may want to be involved in the school, but are either unsure of how to contribute or lack the confidence to step forward. NGOs can educate parents about their rights, model creative pathways and show parents/caregivers how to be involved in a positive way.

4 PARTNER AT THE RIGHT LEVEL

Not every parent has the time and the capacity to be a member of the SGB. But there are small things that each parent can do to make school a more positive experience for the child. Examples include: listening to their child talk about their school day, assisting their child with homework and ensuring punctuality. "We can show the importance of education to our child by demonstrating that we value it and that we are there to support them the best way that we can," advises Hlungwane.

5 INCREASE TRANSPARENCY

Typically, parents fetch their children's reports at the end of each term, but during the pilot they were given the chance to see how each grade was faring in various subjects. For example, parents could see that 50% of learners in Grade 5 were failing English. This increased sharing of information enabled parents to work collectively to support Grade 5 learners.



Axiom Education has successfully trialled several parent engagement strategies in rural parts of the Eastern Cape under the banner of the Public School Partnerships (PSP)¹³ programme, a model of governance that empowers parents to support the delivery of high-quality education in no-fee public schools. Axiom works with 10 schools (eight primary schools and two high schools) in two of the most under-resourced education districts in the country, where many families do not have electricity or running water.

Babalwa Mtumtum, Axiom school development manager, recalls: “When I first arrived here the parents really didn’t like to go and support their learners at school. Eish! It was a struggle. Part of the problem is it is a deep rural area, many of the parents are illiterate and there is a high rate of poverty. So, initially they didn’t care about education. But we tried by all means to get them directly involved.”

Her first step was to regularly invite parents to meetings at the school to inform them about the importance of knowing their child’s teacher and motivating and supporting learners. Axiom uses a three-pronged approach:

- › showing parents practical ways to engage with their child’s education;
- › awards and ceremonies for parents and learners; and
- › training and support of the SGB.

Axiom runs a caregiver engagement initiative through Masakhane (isiXhosa for Let’s Build Each Other), a daily after-school programme teaching maths and English to Grades 4 to 7. The initiative was kickstarted by Covid-19 in 2020. The programme communicates with parents weekly, suggesting an activity they can do with their child (e.g. read a book together). The mode of communication is SMS because few parents can afford smartphones in that geographical region, but most have basic mobile phones. During caregiver engagement meetings, school staff perform skits, showing parents how to practically engage with children and form partnerships with the trainers and the school.

Parents are also invited to a lesson where they can participate in learning activities with their child. Sinovuyo Mgunukelwa, Axiom literacy instructional leader and coach, says parents are initially reluctant to participate, but when they see they can do the activities, they are eager to continue.

Axiom introduced awards and ceremonies to recognise the contributions of learners and parents (e.g. best-performing learner or best attender of meetings). There is a popular “tie ceremony” for matrics at the high school. The Grade 12s are given a special tie, acknowledging that they have made it to the final year of school and this is also intended to motivate other learners in Grades 10 and 11. Parents join the children on stage and help them knot their ties, while giving their own personal messages of encouragement. These rites of passage help to fortify a culture of support within a school community.

Axiom is co-opted on to the SGBs of the eight schools it supports, and runs SGB training. Mtumtum inducts SGB members so that they are familiar with the relevant policies and understand their roles and responsibilities. “You have to know your lane so there are no crashes. So, there is no principal taking the roles of the SGB or vice versa. Each and every person must know their own role.”

An essential element is training on the management of finances with the principal and school finance officer; school finances depend on the SGB and this is often where tensions and disagreements occur. Proper recording of financial transactions ensures transparency and the finance sub-committee shares information with parents.

“When there are high levels of transparency among the teachers, principal, School Management Team and SGB, you minimise the risk of serious financial mismanagement or abuse.”

Babalwa Mtumtum, Axiom school development manager,
AmaJingqi Public School Partnerships

After training, Mtumtum visits each school to monitor the implementation of various processes. If SGB members are struggling, she supports them with side-by-side coaching. This wrap-around strategy ensures that parents constantly feel supported.

¹³ For more information about the PSP visit:
<https://dgmt.co.za/project/public-school-partnerships/>

LEARNINGS

1 SGB TRAINING EMPOWERS PARENTS TO HOLD SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE

In a deep rural school, having parent SGB members who know their roles and responsibilities, and who can demand that teachers are present and perform competently, is a significant achievement. Part of the reason for this awareness and capacity among parents to hold schools to account was the SGB training and internal financial management training that Axiom initiated.

"Now that I am part of the SGB, I am a treasurer; I observe how the money of the school is spent."

SGB parent

2 MODELLING ENCOURAGES ENGAGEMENT

Parents who had not completed schooling themselves and lacked confidence were able to re-engage with their children's work after interacting with Axiom. Mcunukelwa explains: "In the beginning it was like: 'Yoh! I don't know how to do it.' But they know now that it is not scary and they can do schoolwork together with their child." Parents/caregivers have developed a good relationship with the Axiom team, communicating with them via SMS if their child is struggling with a problem or is too sick to attend classes.

3 CATERING IS AN INCENTIVE

Many parents/caregivers are in food-insecure households. When called to attend meetings at their children's schools, they often have to travel long distances and do not have money to buy food while on the road because their budgets are already stretched. Axiom found that more parents attended meetings when catering was provided. Mtumtum says: "When we eat together, we chat a lot and this promotes a good relationship."



Common Good is an education non-profit that works with three PSP schools in a more urban context in the Western Cape.

Common Good also runs its own SGB induction training, and SGB members recently attended training offered by the Western Cape Education Department. Yet attendance at SGB meetings remains a challenge. Dave de Korte, education programme director at Common Good, explains: "At almost every meeting, we arrive there only to sit and wait. Then we start getting WhatsApps about people stuck in traffic, who can't come because they are sick, their baby is sick, there has been a family crisis and they need to go somewhere else. We just never ever get all the parents there. And these are the same parents who put their hands up to be SGB members. I don't know how you solve this particular problem."

However, there are other events with high levels of parental involvement and, in some cases, parents initiate participation by asking to help manage stands at their school's market day. De Korte also notes that parental attendance at disciplinary meetings is good, perhaps because SGB parents who sit on the disciplinary sub-committee are usually very committed to their school's ethos and values.

LEARNINGS

1 MOBILISE AROUND AN EVENT

When parents arrive at school, it is important to seize the opportunity to interact with them. For example, parents typically visit the school every quarter to get their child's report and that is an opportunity to meet the educators in a parent-teacher conference. De Korte says: "There is a moment where, four times a year, you will get people on to campus without a problem, and it is just being strategic about how you use that time."

2 FIND THE GEMS

"In each one of our schools we have a couple of gems – parents who are highly invested in their school. These people are from poor backgrounds and offer tremendous value."

Dave de Korte,
education programme director, Common Good

De Korte says it's important to identify and secure the buy-in of parents who are vocal in their community and invested in their children's education. These key actors in the school community tend to hold sway and can encourage other parents to invest their efforts in the school.

3 BE FLEXIBLE

Parents in lower quintile schools tend to work long hours in low-paid or unskilled jobs or are unemployed. A parent's work commitments are often a barrier to engagement with schools unless there is flexibility around meeting times. For instance, scheduling a meeting on a Saturday morning may draw more people whose weekdays are busy. Common Good also found parents are more likely to attend if a meeting is catered and if their transport costs are subsidised.

BENEFITS OF PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Greater parent engagement builds parent confidence so they can:

- › show up and support their child and the school;
- › confidently hold educators to account; and
- › use their voice to champion their child's education.

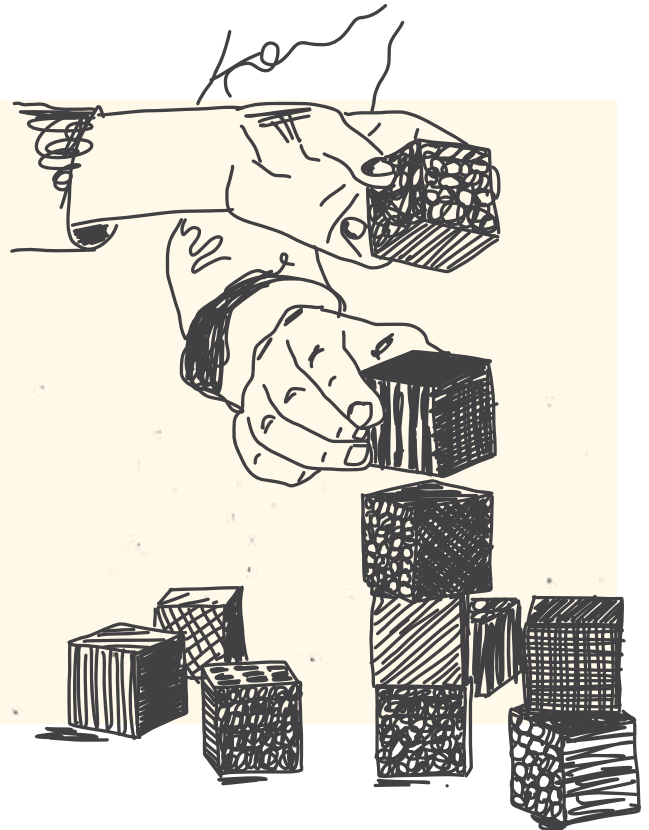
WHO SUPPORTS THOSE WHO SUPPORT THE PARENTS?

SAPPIN (South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network) is a network of NGOs working with parents, who come together to support one another and share lessons and challenges. The main objective is to work together to find a collective voice on issues in the parenting sector and to advocate for those issues collectively with government and funders.

"Parents should not be seen as a peripheral appendage to other work that focuses on children. Parents are a critical resource. So if we want parents to show up, we must show them that we are willing to support their needs," says Kaathima Ebrahim, CEO of Mikhulu Child Development Trust, a SAPPIN member.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This brief has illustrated how parents' agency can be built and how narrow confines of "parent involvement" can be widened to broader avenues of parent engagement. When parents/caregivers work together with schools to support children, their trajectory can be altered and they can succeed not only at school, but at life.



Learning brief developed by Daniella Horwitz, with contributions from Parent Power, Axiom Education and Common Good, and edited by Rahima Essop.



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