



## PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND MEANINGFUL ACCESS IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

CREATE SOUTH AFRICA POLICY BRIEF 4

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### PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND MEANINGFUL ACCESS

This policy brief analyses parental involvement in their children's education in two districts of the Eastern Cape and Gauteng provinces of South Africa. The research explores the relationships between parents' socio-economic circumstances, the extent to which they support their children's access to and learning in school, and their perceptions of the nature and quality of the education their children are receiving. After discussing the findings the brief recommends ways in which education policy, by encouraging parental involvement, can overcome obstacles such as poverty and illiteracy and promote meaningful access to education in South Africa.

#### Introduction

Lack of meaningful access has become a defining feature of the South African schooling system. Systemic evaluations that repeatedly show poor performance have added pressure on government to intervene, yet progress has been frustratingly slow. Among a myriad of suggestions listed in policy documents and research outputs to improve the situation, parental participation is seen as crucial both locally and internationally (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000; Soudien, 2007).

Involvement of parents in education is perceived to be instrumental in improving children's access, attendance and retention in school. But it also has the potential to improve parents' sense of empowerment, and support the greater achievement of valued educational outcomes. Parental involvement may even compensate for the lack of meaningful learning in schools, especially when a conducive environment is created in the home for learning (Grant Lewis & Motala, 2004; Fleisch, 2008).

CREATE research in South Africa, focusing in particular on issues of silent exclusion and the

quality and equitability of provision, posed a range of questions specifically related to parents and their involvement in their children's education. They included questions about parents' backgrounds, employment, levels of education and access to social grants, the impact of migrancy, parents' perceptions of teachers, schools, and the overall value of the education being received, and home education support and resources.

#### Child-headed households

The picture above is of three siblings outside their home in Dutywa in the Eastern Cape. They have no parents. The brothers have chosen to stay at home today because it is too cold to go to school barefoot, but they are expecting their older sister, who is at school and who is also the main caregiver, to bring home supper from the school feeding scheme. In 2008, at the time the CREATE research was being conducted, 98 000 children in South Africa were living in child-headed households like this one, and 3.3 million were in households which reported child hunger (Eddy & Holborn, 2011).

**Methodology**

Field sites for this research were chosen based on their socio-economic profiles and deprivation indices. The Eastern Cape schools are clustered in poor and rural Dutywa, a district in the Gcaleka region traditionally perceived as a place where modern education (*ubugqobhoka*) was only slowly established. Although schools based in the urbanised and industrialised Ekurhuleni South district of Gauteng receive extra resources from fundraising and partnerships, they are often poor and under-resourced and the district had the worst matriculation (school-leaving) results in the province in 2008. Some of the xenophobic violence that affected South Africa in 2008 also took place in this vicinity.

The following parent-related findings were derived from 1,121 completed Learner Profile Cards for learners in Grades 2, 4, 6 and 8 in eight schools in the Ekurhuleni South district of Gauteng, and 596 equivalent cards in six schools in the Dutywa district of the Eastern Cape, combined with 108 questionnaires administered to parents in Ekurhuleni South and 87 administered to parents in Dutywa. The learner sample was based on four indicators of vulnerability: repetition, average, poor class performance and absenteeism.

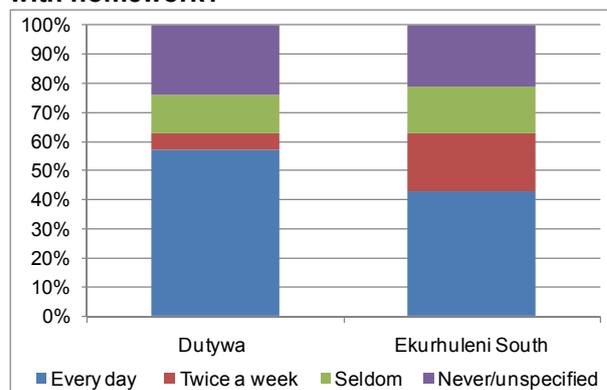
**Findings**

As expected, poverty, unemployment and poorly educated and fractured families are the norm, especially in Dutywa. 57% of the parents or caregivers with whom Ekurhuleni South learners live with most of the time were currently employed as compared to 24% in Dutywa. 25% of families receive one or other form of social grant in Ekurhuleni South as compared to 60% in Dutywa. In both provinces, about 28% have access to the primary school nutrition scheme. A large number of Ekurhuleni South learners come from outside Gauteng, with about 20% originating from Mozambique alone. At least 25% of their fathers and 22% of their mothers are not South African, whereas almost all Dutywa parents are South African. At home, most Ekurhuleni South learners speak IsiZulu, XiTsonga or SeSotho (in that order); all Dutywa learners speak IsiXhosa.

In Ekurhuleni South, just under half of learners (44%) live with both parents, while 31% live with their mothers or fathers only; in Dutywa, only 20% live with both parents, while 41% live with their mothers or fathers only. 43% of Ekurhuleni South parents and 57% of Dutywa parents said they supervised their child's homework every day

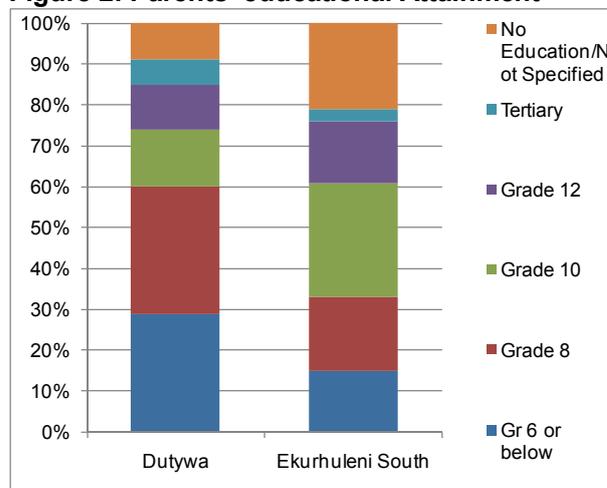
(Figure 1); nevertheless, some Dutywa parents expressed the opinion that their task was primarily to get their child to school – education was the school's concern.

**Figure 1: How often do parents help children with homework?**



Most parents in both districts had a Grade 10 or lower level of education; only 18% of parents in each case had a Grade 12 or higher qualification (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Parents' educational Attainment**



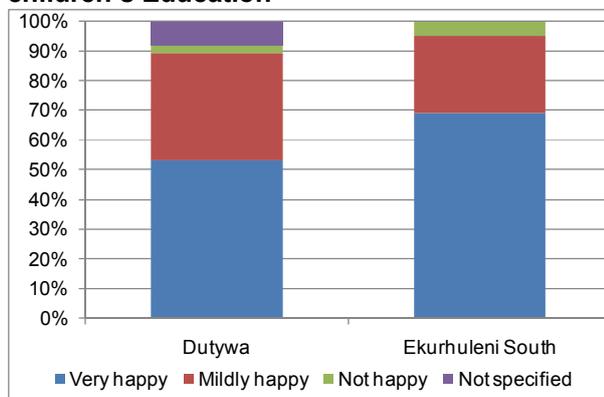
Most parents (62% in Ekurhuleni South and 49% in Dutywa) chose schools for their children on the basis of proximity, with the perceived quality of the school a factor only 8% of the time. Parents' choice of schools is constrained not only by poverty and the level of fees but also by what's available. Despite the fact that one Ekurhuleni South high school has a bad reputation in the community (being associated with a lack of learning and ill-discipline), few parents wanted to remove their children because of the difficulty of finding places at other schools in the area. In Ekurhuleni South and Dutywa, about 50% of parents indicated that they

pay school fees, with fees ranging from R100 to R230. Uniforms top the list of costs apart from fees. All parents set great store by schools which promote fluency in English, as well as ‘town’ schools in general, whether independent (including inner-city schools) or former whites-only schools. The latter are especially valued, because in these schools, children can mingle with whites, and because they believe that an education from such schools will improve their children’s job opportunities.

Most Ekurhuleni South parents did not know who the members of their School Governing Body (SGB) were (SGBs are representative bodies of parents and educators which determine matters like admissions, school fees and the language of instruction), had not participated in a SGB election and did not attend SGB meetings. The same was true of Dutywa parents, who nevertheless referred to schools as ‘theirs’, i.e., as belonging to the community; Ekurhuleni South parents instead called schools by name, with no sentimental attachment or feeling of ownership. No parent expressed any sense of control over what takes place inside the school buildings.

Most parents of primary school learners thought that ‘care’ should supersede all school activities, because a caring school would spend more time on teaching and learning and be responsive to children’s needs. Parents of learners in high school were more concerned about discipline, either insisting upon it or worried that it was excessive. Dutywa parents in general, who were adamant that their status as parents, and the respect accordingly due to them, was being undermined by the new discourses of democracy and children’s rights, deplored the prohibition of corporal punishment.

**Figure 3: Parents’ Satisfaction with their children’s Education**



School-going is highly valued, and most parents and learners indicated that they were happy with the overall quality of education being received and with their school, teachers and SGB (Figure 3).

Most Dutywa parents tended to treat schooling as secondary to the daily struggle for existence, summed up in the phrase, “You don’t eat school”. The few Ekurhuleni South parents who expressed dissatisfaction were concerned about bullying, discipline or what they saw as teachers’ disrespectful attitudes; a quarter of parents would move their child to a better quality school if they could. It remains unclear, however, whether parental approval of schooling is an expression of their resigned acceptance of the limited choice of schools and the few alternatives that poverty permits, of their own lack of knowledge and of relevant comparative information, of their unwillingness to contest the real or reputed power of school authorities, or of their genuine satisfaction.

**Policy Recommendations**

Efforts to improve parental involvement in South African education are confronted by daunting poverty, illiteracy, low parental self-perceptions and poor channels of communication. It is important to recognise these constraints when making policy recommendations. Therefore:

- Parental involvement should be initiated and promoted by schools. Parents’ own levels of education may influence their involvement in their children’s education, but the fact that school-going in South Africa is highly valued suggests that parents would welcome initiatives to involve them, especially if these also take into account their specific socio-economic circumstances.
- Such school-led initiatives to involve parents would permit children’s learning, assessment and overall progress to be better supported, and help align the curriculum and learning at school with learning at home.
- Assessment plans should clearly stipulate or provide parents with various strategies they could use in assisting their children with specific content. In this way supervising homework would be targeted and become more meaningful.
- Instead of giving progress reports only at the end of term, schools should host parents’ days more often. Making teacher-parent-learner conferences possible also on sports days or market days could

help ease any tensions. Timing is important if participation is to be maximised, for many parents work long hours and also may not have access to private transport, and thus it is important to involve parents, teachers and learners in the planning of such events.

- SGBs should be supported to deliver on the practical as well as administrative potential of education policies. Support for SGBs from a central, district level, school governance facilitation organisation could ensure that they receive the support that they need and deliver a useful and standardised service.

- The prohibition of corporal punishment, the persistence of which is a barrier to meaningful access to education, should be strongly enforced.

- Child support grants and school transport and feeding schemes are important mechanisms in overcoming the poverty barrier to education and should be extended. Similarly, the no fee schools policy should be progressively extended to more and more schools and learners, and ways of reducing the indirect costs that parents incur, in the form of uniforms and transport, should also be considered.

- Better coordination between housing, health, welfare and education policies is important in order to make it possible for the most vulnerable children, such as orphaned heads of households or those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, to persist with their education.

- An unintended consequence of the extension of children's rights has been the alienation of some parents and adults. Parenthood is historically and culturally informed, and national policy needs to be more sensitive to local contexts and traditions by demonstrating that children's rights are accompanied by children's responsibilities and do not undermine respect or detract from parental authority.

### **Conclusion**

Parental involvement in their children's education is an important contributor to meaningful and equitable access in South Africa. The quality of education necessary to realise meaningful access remains a major concern, especially for urban children and the rural poor. Policies which promote parental participation at school governance level must be supplemented with policies which encourage parents to play complementary roles at

the levels of teaching and learning. The Department of Basic Education's *Schooling 2025* action plan already highlights the centrality of parents to the learning process; this could be strengthened by developing a social compact bringing parents and the broader community together to support teachers in creating a conducive and quality learning environment.

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This policy brief was written by Shireen Motala and Roger Deacon. It is based on research done for CREATE in South Africa from 2007 to 2010 including Luxomo, G. (forthcoming).



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