Systemic School Improvement Interventions in South Africa

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CHAPTER 7
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN IMPROVING SCHOOLING
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1. INTRODUCTION
This chapter looks at parental involvement as one of the seven components in the Systemic School Improvement Model. It has been implemented in selected schools in different projects including the Bojanala Systemic School Improvement Project (BSSIP) in North West and the Centres of Excellence Project (COEP) in the Eastern Cape.

Parental involvement is about the role that a parent or guardian plays in assisting or supporting the learning path of her/his child at school. It is often difficult to isolate parents from the community in which they live; hence the word ‘community’ is used here to define the social context of the parents.

This chapter covers the conceptualisation of the parental involvement model and the logical framework that has been followed in the implementation of the component’s activities. It looks at implementation specifically in the BSSIP over a two-year period – through 2010 and 2011 – and reflects on what worked and what did not in this project as well as the COEP. While the lessons learnt are considered to be of value to other school improvement projects that may incorporate parental involvement, a broader study would offer a greater understanding of the role and impact of parental involvement in South African schools.

It is significant that JET’s introduction of this component into the Systemic School Improvement Model marks a first in looking at the realities of parental involvement in (rural) schools and in opening up ways in which this can be developed to improve learners’ performance.

Parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling is important because it ensures continuity between home and school. It also is a way of ensuring that parents can interpret the world of their children and keep abreast of developments in their education. Children whose parents take a keen and active interest in their education tend to perform better than those whose parents are not supportive.

Research shows that when parents are involved in the education of their children the children’s performance improves significantly. Similarly, trends in successful schools point to a close working relationship between the learners’ families and the school. Furthermore, studies have shown that parental involvement in schooling leads to improved learner achievement irrespective of the level of education of the parents, their socio-economic status or ethnic/racial background. Learners whose parents take a keen interest in their schoolwork achieve higher grades, complete homework consistently and have better school attendance records. They exhibit positive attitudes towards learning and less antisocial behaviour towards their peers. Such results have been reported across the grades from primary to high school. (Tableman, 2004; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Epstein, 2001, 2004.)
2. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the potential benefits of parental involvement there are clear gaps between the rhetoric found in the literature and policies and typical parental involvement practices found in schools. In most South African schools there is a statutory body – the School Governing Body – which includes elected parents’ representatives, in line with the South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996 (SASA). In the policy framework for School Governing Bodies (SGBs) it is assumed that they would, as part of their obligatory functions, effectively ensure the involvement of all parents in the education of their children. Practice has shown that often the SGB does not meet this expectation. A common criticism of SGBs is that once the body is elected it gets absorbed with school governance matters and excludes its constituency – the parents – from being part of the drive to promote quality teaching and learning.

There is a scarcity of research on parental involvement practices in South African schools. Nonetheless, the literature review undertaken to inform the design of the parental involvement component under discussion looked at parental involvement models and strategies which have been implemented successfully elsewhere, mainly in South America, North America, and in Asian countries. These parental involvement and support practices were compared and considered, taking into account the fact that the targeted project schools in South Africa are in rural settings in a developing country which has its own unique social context.

Research suggests that parents continue to wield considerable influence on their children’s development as the children progress through school (Nokali, Bachman & Votruba-Drzal, 2010).

Studies show that parental involvement:

- increases grade point average (+.73 correlation between parental involvement and grade point average) (Hill & Tyson, 2009)
- improves writing skills (Epstein, Simon & Salinas, 1997)
- improves mathematics skills (+.67 correlation between parental involvement and mathematics) (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow & Fendrich, 1999)
- improves reading skills (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002)
- decreases dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995)
- and decreases retentions and special education placements (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

In JET’s Systemic School Improvement Model, which combines different components targeting specific outcomes to improve teaching and learning, Epstein’s model of parental involvement seemed the most appropriate for adaptation to the local projects. It takes an inclusive approach, encompassing in-school and at-home factors, and this influenced the design and implementation of the parental improvement component used in JET’s systemic school improvement projects.

Epstein (1995) differentiates six types of parental involvement: parental volunteering; parenting; communication; learning at home; decision making; and collaborating with community. She asserts that by supporting and motivating parents to improve their involvement along these dimensions, their children’s learning outcomes have been shown to improve. It should be noted, however, that this framework is not based on the empirical evidence of what parents actually do to support their children but is, rather, based on reflection about the general sort of things parents could or might do.

3. JET’S SYSTEMIC SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT MODEL

Many school improvement projects have been implemented in South Africa over the years and most are about strengthening curriculum delivery to improve learners’ success. However, there are very few – if any – that articulate the role that parents play in supporting teaching and learning. The exclusion of parents can render the
achievements of such projects unsustainable and difficult to replicate because the good practices brought into effect through the projects have not been shared with the parents and therefore cannot be supported by them or by the wider community.

As most school improvement projects have not looked at the role that parental involvement plays in promoting sustainable learning at home and in school, the reality of schools and parents/families working together as partners in the education of the child is an area that is insufficiently explored. It was in part to address this knowledge gap that JET moved to include the parental involvement component in its Systemic School Improvement Model.

4. CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

In JET’s experience of previous school improvement projects and in the project schools considered here, there has been little evidence of a deliberate parental involvement implementation strategy in schools. This is observed in the low number of parents attending scheduled parents’ meetings, non-participation in school activities, lack of homework supervision, lack of parent-teacher communication, and other such indicators. It seems that schools and teachers are left to teach without getting any feedback from parents, which makes teaching and learning non-collaborative.

The envisaged outcomes of the parental involvement component are:

- An evidence-based improvement in the involvement of parents in their children’s education, demonstrated by increases in the monitoring of home study, the number of completed homework exercises, school visits by parents and parents’ interest in school reports.
- Improved learner behaviours at school and after-school in respect of learners’ conduct and specifically how they manage their after-school time, homework, study, and reading for enjoyment.

4.1 Designing the parental involvement component

The design of the parental involvement component was guided by these envisaged outcomes, by policies on school governance and the national Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (QLTC), and by pointers drawn from the literature review.

However, without any practical precedents to work from, JET sought first to profile the challenges – in respect of parental involvement – found in the project schools and the rural communities in which they are located. The overall programme for parental involvement was then developed to include the following steps.

- Community profiling and charter development
- Developing School Action Plans
- Implementing the School Action Plans
- Mentoring
- Monitoring and review.

Figure 1: The parental involvement model
4.2 Logical Framework
A logical framework was developed for the component, setting out the key objectives, the activities to be implemented (inputs), and the anticipated outputs which are measurable over a period of time, as well as the assumptions on which the component builds and the potential risks implicit in these. The logical framework further takes account of the limited human, monetary and other material resources available for the implementation of the component. It is an important reference tool to keep project activities and outcomes on track.

4.3 Stakeholder consultation
When a project is implemented it is essential that all stakeholders are consulted so that their roles in the project are defined and their commitment and support confirmed. In the BSSIP, where the overall project had already been given the go-ahead by both Province and District authorities, JET also consulted with the District Governance and Management inter-sectoral team to ensure its support for the parental involvement activities.

4.4 Planned dosage
JET’s systemic school improvement projects are usually implemented within a homogeneous circuit so that their impact can be measured effectively. A circuit typically comprises between 25 and 30 schools which are located within a defined geographic area that forms part of a local municipality and the wider education district. Each circuit comprises both high schools and primary schools and, in rural areas, where schools are clustered around villages, there may be three to five schools in one village.

The number of schools per village was used to develop the parental involvement intervention plan and to determine the frequency of the intervention activities, that is, the dosage. Schools were clustered according to proximity so that joint community meetings and training sessions could be held.

5. IMPLEMENTATION

5.1 Phase 1: Community profiling
In order to gather information around parental and community involvement in schooling, a pilot study was conducted in one village, Thlatlaganya, in the Moses Kotane West Area of the Retladirela Circuit in North West. The village has three primary schools and one high school. The study centred on parents, community stakeholders and resources that support learning. Focuses discussion groups were
held with parents where they were invited to freely voice their impressions of the role they play to promote education.

Following the group discussions, parents were interviewed about matters relating to their involvement in their children’s schooling. A questionnaire was designed to gather additional information about various community stakeholders and resources available within the community to support education.

This process of community profiling led to the following findings:

- Parents do not attend parents’ meetings or visit the schools;
- Parents do not get involved in their children’s homework (show little interest);
- A small percentage of parents do homework for their children instead of supervising the activities (show too much interest);
- Parents do not support schools in any way;
- Learner discipline, absenteeism, punctuality and homework are problems that affect learner performance in the schools and parents are not doing anything about it;
- Learners leave their homes to go to school being poorly nourished and without having had breakfast;
- There is no proper maintenance of school infrastructure and school surroundings.

Data gathered from the community profiling was compiled into a report and discussed with the community stakeholders. The participants, including parents, the principals and teachers from the schools, and other stakeholders, agreed to work together to support education while recognising and respecting each other’s roles and responsibilities.

The benefit of this community profiling process was that it provided a baseline which helped to identify parents’ perceptions of education, resources within the community which could be used to enhance education, strengths and weaknesses within the community, and the community’s remedial plans.

5.2 Developing an Education Charter
The next step was to develop an Education Charter – a kind of social contract – for the village and its schools. This required that stakeholders should deliberate on the state of education in the schools in their community and agree on a common approach to address the challenges, introduce changes and sustain good practice under the guardianship of selected “champions”. The charter process proved to be a breakthrough in Tlhatlaganyane where this agreement was crafted into a village charter with the slogan “It takes a village to raise a child”. However, the process had its own shortcomings and was consequently excluded from the parental involvement model.

5.3 A change of scope
The plan was to profile each village and its cluster of schools, but this process, together with the development of an education charter for each village, takes time. With limited project funding, facilitators and time, it could not be extended to reach all the project communities simultaneously or within the given timeframe. Furthermore, the assumption that each community would require a unique approach made this aspect of the intervention difficult. A change of plan was needed but the lessons learnt were taken forward into the second phase of implementation.

The community profiling and charter development process had shown that:

- Parents and other community stakeholders are keen to assist their children to achieve at school but they are not aware of how they can be involved;
- Households in the villages are unaware that they may have resources within
Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (QLTC)

The Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (QLTC) is an intervention of the Department of Basic Education which was developed following a resolution of the African National Congress’s (ANC) Polokwane Conference (2007) that education and health be placed at the centre of social transformation over the next five-year term – from 2010 to 2014. The campaign outlines the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in education in South Africa and calls on all stakeholders to make a pledge which articulates their commitment to their roles. As stakeholders, parents and communities are called on to play their part in promoting education.

In short, communities are called on to create an environment that is supportive of schooling and school-going children, to monitor the performance of schools, and to report problems to the relevant authorities.

Parents are called on to get involved in school governance structures, to talk to their children about school, to communicate with their children’s teachers, to create a home environment that is conducive to study, and to protect education resources such as textbooks.

Source: DBE QLTC document
5.5 Implementing School Action Plans

The implementation of School Action Plans was driven by the Parents’ Support Committee – that is – the parents who volunteered to involve themselves and the school facilitator. The action plans supported the attainment of the outcomes set out initially for the parental involvement component: to increase parents’ involvement in their children’s education and to improve learners’ behaviour at school and after school, specifically how they manage their after-school time, homework, study and reading.

Some of the most common activities drawn into many School Action Plans were:

- Establishment of a school food garden to supplement the school nutrition programme and raise funds for the school through the sale of vegetables from the garden.
- Reading for children at school by parents.
- Creation of study groups, mainly for secondary schools, under the supervision of parents.
- Writing of school newsletters – with contributions of articles from teachers, school governing bodies and learners – to improve communication between school and home.
- Fund-raising for schools through cultural events such as dances and traditional storytelling.
- Developing homework diaries for parents to check that homework has been given and completed.

5.6 Mentoring

The school facilitators, who were appointed to assist the parents’ committees and to create an enabling environment for parents and schools to work together, were trained on strategies to involve parents in schooling. Training material specifically for working with parents on school activities and taking account of the local rural context of the schools was developed by JET. The material covered, among other things, parental volunteering, parenting styles and communication.

The facilitators, in turn, held training sessions with parents to share with them this knowledge of ways in which they could help their children to succeed in school and to mentor them on these strategies. This knowledge was translated into reality when parents and schools worked together to implement their action plans.

In addition, JET compiled a Parental Involvement Handbook to provide the parents with basic information on the current schooling system and a general guide on parental practice and opportunities for parents to involve themselves in their children’s schooling. This handbook was distributed to all parents with children at the project schools.

6. Achievements

The parental involvement component, as part of the Systemic School Improvement Model, succeeded in opening up a dialogue between parents and schools. Parents and communities realised that they are important role-players in education. This was reinforced by the fact that once the concept had been introduced to the parents, its applications were developed with them and within the project schools and communities and were not imposed as an external intervention. JET ensured that the facilitators were members of the local community and that the parents were involved in developing the school action plans and took on the role of implementing them.

Parents are not a constant variable in schools because their children progress to other schools or complete their schooling. Nonetheless, it is evident that over a period of two and a half years (2010 to 2012) the implementation of the parental involvement component in the BSSIP and COEP has effected a shift in attitude –
among parents and schools – which signals that parents now recognise the role they can play in supporting their children at school, and schools, similarly, recognise the contribution that parents can make.

A survey conducted on a sample of six schools in the BSSIP and COEP found that:

- Principals have come to value parents’ contributions and they report an improvement in learner discipline and performance where parents are involved.
- Principals have seen the positive spin-offs of good communication between school and home through greater attendance and participation in meetings by parents.
- Parents on the other hand report that they feel valued, that they can make a positive contribution and are confident that they can support their children to learn. They further state that the school is a supportive environment that they can depend on.

6.1 What worked in implementing the parental involvement component

- The community profiling exercise helped in understanding the social context of the project schools and the aspirations that parents have for their children.
- Using local community members as school facilitators helped to bring awareness of parental involvement to both teachers and communities.
- School Action Plans highlighted the unique needs of each school as well as common solutions to challenges in parental roles.
- The formation of a Parents’ Support Committee for a cluster of schools proved useful because parents shared experiences and developed common intervention approaches.
- Schools – principals and teaching staff – realised that involving parents in school matters can lighten their burden of learner discipline and opens a dialogue between homes and schools.
- School principals and teachers got an opportunity to learn about the educational aspirations of parents for their children.
- School performance became a focal point because parents worked with teachers to ensure the good behaviour of children in the school.
- Accountability for school functionality was widened to include parents.
- School governance was enhanced by the direct involvement of parents.

6.2 What did not work

- The model did not prescribe how this component should be implemented or what specific activities should be undertaken. Consequently, a long time was taken in testing which interventions would best yield the outputs as set out in the model. The general aim to increase parental involvement in schooling seemed vague and needed to be broken down into specific measurable outcomes. This was resolved when it was differentiated into
parental involvement activities at home and those at school. Activities denoting parental involvement were discussed at length and it was finally agreed that learner behaviour, protection of school resources and supervision at home were the areas/activities through which parental involvement outputs could be measured.

- The monitoring and evaluation done in other components of the Systemic School Improvement Model was not put in place in parental involvement from the beginning and was introduced only when implementation was already unfolding. Although this was a consequence of the component being developed “on the ground”, as the community profiling and engagement processes progressed, monitoring and evaluation would constitute an important element in the implementation of future parental involvement projects.

7. CONCLUSION
The Systemic School Improvement Model that JET has implemented in these various projects considers education as a societal matter, where all stakeholders have to play their part in bringing about change. The inclusion of parental involvement in the projects has demonstrated that social contextual considerations are critical to sustaining the gains made in improving schooling.

REFERENCES


Despite the importance of the district level in the day-to-day delivery of the education services outlined in the national and provincial policies and programmes, there is no common understanding of the role of the districts, their scope in terms of authority, resourcing, geographic coverage and the number of schools and circuits that should fall under their jurisdiction.