

School choice – as if learners matter: black African learners’ views on choosing schools in South Africa

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School choice in South Africa has accorded the majority of middle class black African parents an exit option away from many historically black African schools. This has been one of education’s major developments in post-Apartheid South Africa. Dissatisfied with underperforming historically black African schools in the townships, these parents choose what they regard to be effective schools, mostly situated outside the townships. The paradox and disadvantage of the flight from the township schools though, is that many of these schools are left with dwindling quality. Yet the majority of black African working class children with few or no choices are still trapped in many underperforming township schools. This study focused on the rights of children in choosing schools. Frequently, when it comes to school choice, it is parents’ views of good schools that matter in the debate. This study though, investigated whether the children do have a sense of what effective schools are. One of the major findings in the study was that although they might have less social and cultural capital, working class children attending dysfunctional and underperforming schools have an idea of what the ideal should be. Learners are not passive in their schooling; they have their own expectations and “know” what constitutes “good” schools.

Keywords: School choice, Township Schools, South Africa

Introduction and problem postulation

With the advent of the post-Apartheid education system in South Africa there has been emphasis on democracy and education. The Report of Working Group on *Values in Education* also underscored several attributes and strategies for instilling democratic values among learners, teachers and other stakeholders. Democracy in the above mentioned document is listed as the first strategy that is necessary in equipping citizens with the abilities and skills to engage critically and act responsibly (DoE, 2001). Furthermore, this document highlights the need for ensuring equal access to education while freeing the poor from the trap of poverty. Vally (2005) writes of the need to accentuate the human rights principles as society magnifies the role of learners in education. Moreover, Vally also cites the White Paper on Education and Training which states that learners will be helped to exercise their responsibilities and rights as citizens. Mncube (2008) concurs with the above when he highlights the importance and the need to include learners in decision making when it comes to school governance. In addition, Mncube posits that it is to destroy democracy and social justice if the voices of the learners are silenced in schools. The current classroom practice then needs to model these democratic values as classrooms are gradually being transformed to be more inclusive.

The society must empower its youth to ensure that they are able to engage critically in democratic processes. Effective schools and supportive families can play crucial roles in this regard. Gorman and Johnson (1991) cite Holt who writes about learners and rights. Holt maintains that the society’s

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unconscious attitudes toward children and the society's beliefs about learners' rights are faulty. The latter becomes an obstacle as people seek to help children attain social, emotional, and educational maturity. Furthermore, Holt "believes that a child is a complex and many-sided creature and that the right to control one's learning is critical" (Gorman & Johnson, 1991, p.115). It is within the context of this background that this study wanted to explore the role of learners in choosing schools. Some informed parents have an idea why they prefer certain schools to others, although the reasons might be pedagogically remote. However, one wonders whether learners can ever be informed when 'choosing choice'. Much research conducted in many countries reflects the parent's role in school choice however; less has been explored on the role of learners (Kelly, 2007; Harding, 2006; Sykes & Plank, 1999; Chubb & Moe, 1999; Fuller, B & Elmore, 1996). The absence of learner voices is a gap that the researcher perceived as worthy of investigation.

Cullingford (1991, p.6) argues that children have their own ideas and conducting a study among them has two advantages. On the one hand, they do not know what the norm of researcher's expectation is whilst on the other they have not developed the art of self-deception. "The most significant explanation of the absence of children from research, however, lies in the view of them as subjects" (Cullingford, 1991, p.7). Furthermore, Cullingford contends:

When they enter school, and throughout schooling, pupils bring with them several important characteristics, although these are often deliberately or conveniently forgotten. The first is critical intelligence that observes the environment with an intense personal scrutiny. From the shape and meaning of objects to the analysis of personal relationships, including different points of view and distinctions between truth and falsehood, young children show a sophistication and objectivity that we tend to forget under the guise of sentimentality and ignore when we wish to assert our intellectual superiority as adults.

This study focused on the experiences of this school going youth. There is much current literature that evokes that learners need to be seen as partners in reform initiatives (Silva, 2003; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Cullingford, 2002).

The main question asked in the study was: What can parents learn from the learners' attitudes and perceptions when they (parents) choose schools?

The sub-questions addressed were:

- Do learners make informed decisions when given a chance to choose schools?
- What is the learners' sense of "good schools"?

Theoretical framework

Tyack (1976) states that generally, the school offers different and unequal treatments based on the race, sex and class of incoming learners. Schools produce a segmented group of workers who are incapable of perceiving common interests. Furthermore, he states that the school programme does not liberate the individuals; it programmes the individuals so as to guarantee the benefits of those in power. The school is also seen as an imposition that dehumanizes the learners and perpetrates social stratification. Schools, according to Gintis and Bowles who employ a Marxian analysis serve the capitalist agenda. Tyack (1976, p.356) avers:

Gintis and Bowles claim that the social relations of the school closely matched the needs of the hierarchical relations of production. The school prepared individuals differentially-in skills, traits of personality, credentials, self-concepts, and behaviour-for performance in different roles in the economic hierarchy. This differentiation was congruent with social definitions of race, sex and class.

Apple (1982) writes about how the hidden curriculum teaches the learners tacitly what they will “require” later when they join the labour market. Apple cites Bowles and Gintis who contend that schools serve economic and class interests. Working class learners are taught punctuality, neatness, respect of authority and other elements of habit formation (Apple, 1982). However, other learners of middle class and upper classes are taught intellectual open-mindedness, problem solving, flexibility; skills that will enable them to function as managers and professionals. For years under Apartheid this was a glaring reality; gardening, handwork and domestic science are some of the subjects that were emphasized in historically black African schools. As a consequence of such subjects, many working class parents were always not certain what route their children would take. Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz (1995) argue that middle-class families are more likely to imagine their children as dentists or accountants whereas the working class will ‘wait and see’ as they are less likely to speculate about the future of their offspring.

The above explicates the political nature of education; education will always be unavoidably a political process. There are many education writers who have shown this dimension (Msila, 2006; Labaree, 1997; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In his seminal work, Labaree (1997) contends that schools occupy an awkward position, at the intersection between what people hope society will become and what they think it really is; between political ideals and economic realities. Furthermore, Labaree contends that the central problems with education are not pedagogical, organisational, social or cultural in nature but are fundamentally political. It is probably the influence of politics that makes schools appear crowded with challenges. Another writer, DeLany (1998) argues that schools are continually scrambling for order in a rather disorderly world. DeLany also aptly referred to schools as “organised anarchies” because (among others), while providing opportunities for different choices of schools, educational changes open up the possibility of institutionalising collective turbulence. Societal expectations further enhance the turbulence in schools.

The moment parents and their children choose schools; they have started engaging in the political discourse whether knowingly or not. For example the political consequences of moving away from historically black schools in South Africa results in the imbalance between schools; accentuating differences between poor schools and affluent schools. Msila (2005) avers that standards fall in many forsaken historically black African schools or township schools as quality appears enhanced in “better” historically white schools. When parents and their children exercise the voice option by going out of township schools they paradoxically enhance the undemocratic consequences of schooling by segregating learners according to advantaged and disadvantaged. Kelly (2007) cites Wood who underscores the above by contending that the introduction of school choice widens the gap between rich and poor. Furthermore, Kelly posits that choice favours the wealthy and the better informed to the disadvantage of the indigent. There are various researchers who argue that choice does not necessarily benefit the poor (Msila, 2005; Willm & Echolls, 1992). However, in South Africa many of those who support choice would argue that the “choosing families” are able to break the walls erected by the Apartheid legislation. It is however, interesting to note that years after the fall of Apartheid, historically black African schools continue to serve exclusively black African families. None of the formerly black African schools have attracted white learners. The latter says much about some sustained political and historical imbalances.

The society continues to be determined by class and the poor parents are still trapped in townships where development is not always ideal. District offices that serve disadvantaged areas continue to struggle in finding ways to educate poor children who come to school without the advantages of their more affluent counterparts (Corwin & Schneider, 2005). It is amazing to find striking resemblance in America’s disadvantaged and South Africa’s when these writers contend:

The educational failures associated with poverty schools all too often are dismissed as the inevitable outcome of crushing challenges associated with high percentages of low-income,

single-parent families, where English is not the primary language spoken at home... The schools serving these students also tend to be the oldest and generally the most rundown. In addition, the students have to use out-of-date textbooks, which are often in short supply.

(Corwin & Schneider, 2005, p.167).

The powerful in the educational, political setup are able to choose choice among other things while the disadvantaged cannot. By choosing choice, poor children and their parents are trying to internalize the culture and social capital of the dominant class in society. Wells (1996) concurs when he states that human agency and culture play a crucial role in educational choice debates. Furthermore, Wells cites Willis and Everhart who argue that learners from lower class families are not passively shuffled through the educational system; lower class students are “active agents in reproducing their social-class position, resisting the dominant culture’s achievement ideology that characterises school life” (Wells, 1996, p.26). Yet schools are hardly changing to serve the poor better or serve the diverse consumer needs. Beane and Apple (1999) contend that schools have shown growing cultural diversity while pressure is applied to keep the curriculum within the narrow boundaries of Western cultural tradition. Schools serve different parents differently for power relationships differ considerably with the social class and racial background of the parents (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999). Even dealing with educators poor parents are at a disadvantage; they can find themselves being used as pawns in the battles of larger political forces between school administrators and teacher unions (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999).

Black African parents and their children

As highlighted above, a majority of black parents, disillusioned with township or historically black schools exercise school choice in South Africa. Financially able, as well as informed parents opt out from township schools and leave them suffering from dwindling enrolments and waning quality (Msila, 2005). However, there are still many black African families trapped in underperforming historically black African schools in South Africa. It is interesting to note the parallels of school choice in America and in South Africa. Corwin and Schneider (2005, p.6) point out:

Often parents, of all races, and in various states of poverty, are desperately seeking to escape a crime-ridden, violent, drug-infested school, or one staffed with unqualified, inexperienced teachers. In big cities, such schools are typically located in poor and minority neighbourhoods...

More black children than white children have left their assigned public schools behind to take advantage of the numerous public school open enrollment plans available in many cities.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the debates on school choice have taken centre stage. Pampallis (2003, p.143) argues:

Given South Africa’s recent history, it is perhaps not surprising that the issue of school choice is inextricably bound up with overcoming the legacy of apartheid and racism. Expanding the choice of South African parents and students with regard to school attendance has been associated mainly with expanding the opportunities available to black students previously disadvantaged by apartheid.

Oftentimes when people shed light on issues of choosing choice and choosing schools it is a matter for parents. There are a number of studies that have shown how black parents in search of quality schools for their children “shop around” for what they regard as effective schools (Maile, 2004; Msila, 2005; Msila, 2009). Some black parents, because they cannot afford the distant suburban schools (usually former white schools), they search for better schools within the historically black

areas (Msila, 2009). Applying Hirschman's theory of voice, exit and loyalty, Msila (2005) writes on how parents exercise the exit option as they decide moving out of the township schools. The latter is explained by Hirschman as a process when customers, unsatisfied with service decide to take their business somewhere else. However, the parents who remain in the historically black schools can either exercise the voice option as they try to change the township schools or exercise loyalty when they are resigned and "know" they cannot change the status quo.

Johnson (1990) has seen parental choice as undemocratic because it frequently excludes the children. Furthermore, Johnson cites Baron who points out that parental choice fails to address the rights of children. Baron also claims that by sanctifying parenthood as the ownership of children, parental choice treats children not as present or future citizens with rights to education but as adjuncts to families. Johnson (1990, p.13) also adds that parental choice also defines children as essentially passive and subject to adult authority. Yet history in South Africa shows that children became assertive fighters for just education and a democratic South Africa. Before the 1990s, the quality of education in the majority of black African schools was affected by the politics of the day as these schools "became key sites in the struggle against apartheid resulted in a deterioration in the quality of black education as school boycotts, strikes, and other forms of resistance took their toll on 'normal' schooling processes" (Pampallis, 2003).

Christie (1988, p219) also writes:

June 1976 was a high point in the history of black resistance in South Africa. The opposition of these school students to Bantu Education and the apartheid system has become a landmark in South African history. It was also the beginning of a new era of resistance in education... There is in fact along and continuing history of resistance by black people to the schooling system. 1976, 1980 and 1984 are part of a long process of boycotts, protest and opposition in schools.

Then in 1985 and 1986, a decade after the 1976 uprisings explained above, black learners were demanding "liberation before education". More student activists were detained nationwide. As the soldiers occupied school yards, tension mounted in all black schools (Human Awareness Programme, 1990). Bantu Education for black South Africans had been a means of restricting the development of the learner by distorting school knowledge to ensure control over the intellect of the learners and teachers, and propagating state propaganda (Kallaway, 1988). Education for black South Africans was a way of maintaining the blacks in a permanent state of political and economic subordination. School children under apartheid became aware that the education system had been an obvious instrument of control to protect power and privilege. The resistance to apartheid education conscientised the black learners and made them to be aware of the need to strive for a better system of education.

Context of choice in South Africa

In America school choice is said to be a hot political issue which has become a cornerstone of federal educational policy (Hsieh & Shen, 2001). These authors also delineate the two kinds of choice; choice within the private and public school systems. School choice is seen as a process meant to sustain change in education. It gives every parent the power and freedom to choose their children's schools and education. Moreover, in America this is formalised through the use of vouchers. When families have to choose between public and private schools, they use choice mechanisms such as vouchers; public funds are used to fund private education.

In South Africa choosing school choice is not as formalised and parents move from one school to the next without the backing of the voucher system. Outside South Africa, vouchers help poor parents to be able to "choose schools with their feet". School vouchers are sometimes referred to as

tuition vouchers or education vouchers, are distributed by government to parents who want to send their children to non-public schools such as religious, private and parochial schools. The vouchers are meant to reduce the education gap by awarding funds to poor children who have selected non-public schools. In South Africa though, the parents look at their household income before choosing what they think are “better schools”. There is no government funding linked to the migration of learners from public schools to private schools. In 2009, there were 12 million learners (in South Africa) who were taught by 386 587 teachers in 24 693 public schools. Furthermore, 386 098 learners were taught by 1174 teachers in private schools. (SA Government Info, 2008). The few number of private schools shows how sorting of learners happens as some leave public schooling. The latter is referred to as *cream skimming*. Plank and Sykes (2003) state that cream skimming refers to learner sorting, by income. The black African parents who belong to the low socio-economic status are likely to stay in underperforming township schools because they cannot afford choosing even “better” public schools outside their area of residence. Therefore, without a programme similar to that of the voucher system, poor parents are trapped in underperforming public schools.

Research methodology

The study included 20 (children) participants who were selected through opportunistic sampling. The researcher used only participants from historically African black schools. Opportunistic sampling refers to when a researcher is observing a group of people, may decide on the spur of the moment to observe certain activities that appear to be interesting, but were not considered important before the study began (Struwig & Stead, 2004). At the time, the researcher was studying school choice and intra-township migration and was interviewing parents who had chosen township secondary schools for their children who had graduated from primary school. While interviewing the parents, the researcher’s interest grew into whether the learners themselves might be having different views (from their own parents’) on school choice. This was a qualitative research study and the researcher utilised child participants from a previous study. The researcher asked the parents for consent before interviewing each individual learner. The teachers in the learners’ schools were also informed about the study. Apart from interviewing the learners, the researcher also observed the learners’ schools for a day. During the observations, the researchers observed the following intangibles:

- The school climate
- The school culture
- General learner behavior

Observation in research helps in that the researchers are able to see factors that they might have overlooked when interviewing the participants. Moreover, through observations the researchers can see aspects that are inconspicuous or left purposefully by the participants in a study.

During the interviews, each participant was asked 20 questions. The interview instrument had structured questions that were asked to all the participants. Before the interviews commenced there was a pretest of the interview procedure. For this pilot, the researcher used one class of 10 learners who were asked the questions from the instrument. Vague questions were then eliminated or rephrased. Some questions that did not elicit the desired information were also eliminated. At the end there were 20 questions. The least number of minutes taken by a participant in answering the questions was 49 minutes and the most minutes were 67 minutes. Before the interviews were conducted, the parents and their children were informed about their rights as participants. The interviews were conducted in English although a number of participants were code switching most of the time. As a result, the researcher would also code switch to ease the participants. This code

switching meant that the interviews were conducted in part English and part IsiXhosa. Many answers were rephrased and stated more than once so as to ensure that the researcher recorded the participants' ideas as accurately as possible. The interviews took place on the school premises. In one school the researcher used a library as a venue for the interviews and in the other an empty staffroom was used.

The Findings

The participants in the study showed that even young learners do know what they should be looking for in "good schools". Many claimed that their parents chose schools for them although a few stated that they influenced their parents' decisions in the selection of these. Out of the 20 participants, only seven were satisfied with the current high school in which they were registered. The rest mentioned alternative schools they would have preferred had their parents had the financial means. All were aware of the costs involved if they were to enroll in schools outside the township. The taxi fare, the bus fare, the school fees and the expensive uniform are some of the challenges posed for parents if they had chosen schools outside the township. Jola who is in one of the better performing secondary schools in the township stated that although he is now happy with the current school, his mother and himself wanted a historically Coloured school outside the township but his mother explained to him that she would not afford the money to attend such a distant school. Many participants highlighted this; they pointed out that the schools outside the township were expensive "although they are better in quality". A few learners in the study had the perception that people go out for schools outside the township because these schools were much better. Tolo states:

My cousin speaks better English than me. She also knows a few more things than I do like rivers and mountains. But my school is not bad though. I am sure that our Maths teacher is very good, for my cousin cannot do some of the Maths problems that I can do. Although there are expensive schools that may be better than our school, I know we are better in some things though.

The learners appear to share some of their parents' beliefs as to what constitutes "good schools". The concept "good" and "better" were used by all the participants and they were linked to highly effective schools. Discipline, good English and friendly educators are some of the aspects mentioned by the participants as qualities of better schools. The participants also highlighted that good schools that they prefer have good grounds, clean and there are resources such as a library and a laboratory, two participants state that they were disappointed to find that the secondary schools had no libraries while their primary school did have libraries. They highlight so many problems in schools where there are no proper resources. Zulu summarized many participants' concerns when she said:

Some subjects are very difficult when you cannot see what the teacher is talking about. It is easy when a teacher tells you about a locust and you see the locust on a table or on a desk. That helps because you see the different parts of the insect that the teacher is talking about. However, in our schools sometimes you just imagine what the teacher is talking about. It is difficult when you cannot see it.

The participants also highlighted the importance of teacher support in school. It was clear what the learners were saying was that schools needed to be more caring. Lila mentions that in primary school she was not very good in science and that she used to be very frustrated during science classes. However, she says that her caring teacher made a huge difference as he showed patience as he supported all the struggling learners. The majority of the participants agreed that good schools have caring teachers who support the learners all the time. However, six of the participants stated that their schools do not have caring teachers. These participants cited the following as characteristics of inefficient teachers; late coming, absenteeism, not explaining well in class,

meanness and shouting. All these were seen by the participants as reasons why some learners stay away from school. Seven of the participants also highlighted that violence is also among factors that make schools not to be “good places”. Nosipho from a school situated next to an informal settlement says:

I like my school very much for all my friends are there. I also live close by and it is easy for me to go home. However, there are always fights as the girls always pick on one another. I was also beaten by a bigger girl on my second week in the school. I could not report her to the teacher because I did not want the big girl to get angry with me.

Radi, a boy from a different school also stated that there is a lot of violence in his school. He says that boys gamble and play dice behind the boys’ toilets. Radi points out:

The boys in my school play dice. They gamble a lot. When others do not win, they fight for their money. Once the teachers caught one boy with a small knife that he wanted to use in stabbing another one. Just last week another boy was caught with a sharpened iron in his pocket. Some big boys also force smaller boys to smoke sometimes. I sometimes do not want to go to school. My mother says I should be strong.

The participants know the kinds of schools that they want and they know exactly what they believe are effective schools. Safety, acceptance by others, finding a community of learners who are like them is important among the learners. The participants want to see justice, a life that is free from fear. They also want to see others who share similar characteristics with them in their schools. Wani says:

In my first week it helped when I saw that others were scared too. It makes one feel bad when they notice that they are different from others. Even in class when you are confused alone, you feel embarrassed. The girls look at you and think you are stupid. It is better when others are like you.

Of the 13 participants who regarded their schools as good schools 9 stated that their parents selected the schools that they would have selected themselves. The other four pointed out that they had different schools in mind although the parental choice of schools was not a bad choice of schools. Below, focus is on the discussion of the findings. The findings are discussed under the following themes that came up during the interviews with the learners:

- (i) Learners’ perceptions on the purposes of schools
- (ii) Learners’ perceptions of good teachers
- (iii) The climate of good schools

Discussion of the findings

The study showed that while parental choice is one aspect that policy makers and schools are looking for, the power of the learners as customers cannot be underestimated. The children are the ones who experience schools and their voice should matter. It can also be argued that as role players they can also influence educational reforms hence their voice matters.

Purposes of schools

The participants in this study did not have definite and common description of the purposes of schools. Some of the purposes given were slippery and the participants were not certain of their responses. Cullingford (2010) points out that if the learners knew exactly what schools stood for they would not lack a substantive description of what schools’ purpose should be. Furthermore, Cullingford (2010) contends that the dilemma for learners is about this schools’ sense of purpose “for them there is a lot of drudgery involved in school, waiting for things to happen, waiting for instructions, having to undergo a series of rote learning and meaningless texts” Cullingford (2010).

If learners understood the role of the hidden curriculum in schools, they could have a holistic picture of the purposes of schools. Auerbach and Burgess (1987) contend that the hidden curriculum generates social meanings, restraints and cultural values that shape learner roles outside the classroom. Moreover, they point out that the choices teachers make reflect their views of the learning process and the learners' place in society (Auerbach & Burgess, 1987). The differences that exist between township schools and city schools; between the rich and the poor schools are some of the examples that manifest themselves in various ways in the hidden curriculum.

Cullingford (1995, p.20) posits, “without vision the people perish. The vital spark of education is a sense of purpose. There must be a reason for teaching.” Effective teachers want to make a difference in the lives of their learners. These educators are driven by the need to make education meaningful to the learners. In South Africa, the post-apartheid curriculum has clear guidelines as to what education should achieve. The Constitution of the Republic also provides the basis for curriculum transformation and development (DoE, 2002). The promotion of democratic values is crucial as education is expected to enhance a national South African identity built on values different from those that underpinned apartheid education (DoE, 2002). Learners are supposed to be lifelong learners who will be able to participate in society as critical citizens. Learners are finding the learning about democracy a boon to education as was evident in the study. Thompson and Enslin (2003) contend that strong democracy envisages levels of participation that penetrates the citizen's daily experience.

Many participants in the study would be opposed to Gilles' idea about choosing schools. Gilles (1998) writes about the liberalist parental approach which allocates educational authority to parents unless they are plainly unreasonable. The parentalists argue that children should not be given legal right to control their education or their own lives “because they lack the maturity to exercise such rights in ways consistent with their long-run self-interest.” The learners in the study make choices based upon their beliefs of what schools should do. The society usually “knows” what schools are for and this is not a question that is normally asked. However, in the study it was interesting to listen to the learners as they talked about the purpose of schooling. Cullingford (2002, p.48) avers:

Children also come to their own conclusions. They observe the behavior of teachers and peers. They meet a given curriculum and undergo a battery of tests. They have to make sense, in their own way, of their experiences. Those big questions about meaning with which they are born and which trouble them have nothing to do officially with their experience of school, which is increasingly pragmatic. What they understand as the purpose of school is the more interesting because so rarely discussed.

The participants in the study perceive schools as institutions that would help them get better jobs and money. Many see schools as places where they would be prepared for leadership positions in their community.

Learners' perceptions of good teachers

Learners might underestimate their important role in a school because of the way they are usually viewed by other stakeholders. When they reflect on the society's view of education they are led to assume that all rules are carried out for the sake of teachers; they conclude that they themselves are not at the centre of the school, not the school's real purpose (Cullingford, 2010). Teachers are the part of the “pillars of power” in schools. Like the participants in the study, learners are aware of the role of teachers to keep and maintain discipline. Yet, the participants have also implied that they prefer teachers who are able to balance strictness with personal warmth. Cullingford (2010) suggests that learners understand their obligations; they know that teachers have

a huge role to play in school discipline. However, they also long for a more personal contact, an ability to share a joke and see the human side of the individual.

One other crucial aspect that makes schools invitational to learners is the educators they come across every day. While young learners might not be as articulate as adults when stating what they want from effective teachers, they know what they expect from “good” teachers. Cullingford (2010) posits that there is no learner who dislikes firmness, but they detest it when it is overdone and when teachers overdo control- learners might see this as “picking on them”. Teachers can help build or break the reputation of any school because learners talk and the community or the society judges. Most of the time learners like or dislike school largely because of the teachers in the school. Cullingford (1991) contends that the social world of school is dominated in numbers by learners but the ethos of the school is presented through teachers. Furthermore, teachers dominate and their effect on how the school runs, on how the learners work and on the learners’ happiness is profound (Cullingford, 1991). The participants in ineffective schools pointed out those qualities that make their teachers ineffective such as late coming and absenteeism. The learners also did not feel secure when teachers displayed certain behaviours such as shouting, and not being prepared well for class.

In the study also many learners who liked their schools said it was because of their teachers. The participants perceived participatory pedagogy where learners were actively involved in their learning as classes of good teachers. Ai-girl et al. (2004) contend that children possess implicit theories of good teachers. These writers also cite a study where young children identified physical appearance and regular attendance as the main physical and personal characteristics of a good teacher. Mid-aged learners focused on the range of classroom control used by teachers. The oldest learners understood that good teachers need to be well-trained and highly motivated and that they should be able to prepare the learners for the world of work and further education (Ai-girl et. al, 2004). The majority of poverty schools are situated in townships and there are just so many aspects that are challenging in these schools. Corwin and Schneider (2005) contend that the educational failures of poverty schools are inevitable outcomes of challenge associated with high percentage of low-income, single parent families. Moreover, teachers serving poor learners tend to be least experienced and too often are teaching subjects for which they hold no qualification.

Ai-girl et al. (2004) also cite Furman who posits that good teachers know how to build successful relationships with their learners. Furthermore, these writers add that teachers influence learners through the kinds of behaviour they display. Peters (2008) argues that educators cannot teach learners until they have an appropriate relationship with them. Cullingford concurs and adds that the sign of a good teacher can be discerned in the manner in which the classroom is run and some of the signs are:

- A shared working atmosphere
- Awareness of the needs of each learner
- A purposeful, well organized classroom
- The celebration of successes

Learners will see the commitment of conscientious teachers for whilst their perception might not be as sophisticated as that of the adults they can see the diligence of committed educators. Newmann ((2002) also highlights that effective teachers have a commitment to high standards by working long hours to improve practice and support students. The teachers’ role is very crucial because it is the teacher’s way of managing the class group that shapes the climate in the school.

The climate of effective schools

Kelly (2007) points out that good teachers and good classroom discipline are most important to learners concerned about school choice and transition. This was evident in the study as the participants highlighted issues of safety and security as being among the most crucial in choosing “good schools”. Furthermore, Kelly (2007) cites Ganaway who avers that prospective learners look to teachers to provide levels of safety and order that create environment free from violence and the threat of violence. In a time when there are many incidents of violence in South African schools, the participants in the study showed their need for schools without intimidation and violence.

In effective schools, there is a good support for learning and teaching and learners will perceive whether their school supports teaching and learning. Leithwood (2002) describes seven sets of conditions that enhance the likelihood of organizational learning in schools. These conditions are: related to school’s mission and goals; culture; structure and organisation; information collection and decision-making processes; policies and procedures; school-community partnerships and leadership. Furthermore, Leithwood (2002, p.106) points out that, “it is tempting to argue that efforts to improve teaching and learning are most effective when they focus directly on the relationships between teachers and students, that talented teachers will do good work in any kind of school organisation.”

The purposes of good schools and the way learners view their teachers may result to either in positive or negative attitude towards school. Participants in six of the schools in the study were highly negative towards their schools because they maintained that the climate they were exposed to was not conducive. Reading from the results of the study it is also apparent that physical resources alone do not create effective or conducive schools. Good resources need to be coupled with hard working teachers and a goal directed school that follows a vision. Some of the in the study lack physical resources, yet they are strong in human resources. Learners do not know much about the vision and mission of the school but it is from what they say about their teachers that shows that the educators are instilling a sense of vision in them.

A positive school climate can be enhanced when the learners are involved and this is part of the democratic process required by the National Curriculum Statement. Eight learners in the study stated that they were class representatives, a structure that is part of the Learners Representative Council. From what the learners were saying it was clear how democratic principles were filtering down to the learners. Klein (2003) captures how in one study the involvement of the learners impacted well on the learners who saw a clear purpose within the council and the learners were more focused in decision-making , they showed greater independence and more realistic approach about how to effect change in the school. Some of the effects in Klein’s study (2003, p.92) include the following:

- Students see their individual education plans as an important element in meeting their needs.
- Targets are set collaboratively with teachers, giving students a sense of ownership over them instead of the feeling that the targets are being imposed upon them.

Klein’s study also shown that participation of learners is about learning communication skills, the democratic process and how to take one’s place as citizens not only as adults but now as children and young people (Klein, 2003).

The school climate also includes routine at the school. Learners in more effective schools in the study showed that their schools have order; good communication, caring teachers and effective teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Children are aware of the imbalances that exist in the society. They do know that many township schools are not equal to schools outside the township and that they are trapped in some of these underperforming schools because of the financial capital of their parents. This study has shown the need to recognize every child's peculiarity as well as their rights in education. The study also shows that parents could make use of their children's preferred choice of schools when choosing effective schools. The children were aware of what constitutes a "good" school climate and who is a "good" teacher. More research into the democratisation of schools need to be explored whilst researchers do not undermine the role that children can make towards their own education. The system also needs more strategies as to how to enhance the choices that learners make when choosing schools. Even in school governance, learners should take a meaningful role and can only be effective when they know what is expected of them; when they have been prepared well. It is then not enough to say that learners are inadequate and their rights cannot be accommodated. Patronising children by deciding for them as a society, we are destroying their independence, basic human rights, social and political development. It is apt to close this with a quote from Gorman and Johnson (1991) who cite Holt. These two writers state:

Holt thinks that learners should have the right to decide their learning needs and how, under what conditions, and by whom they will be taught. His position is that, when we take away the right of self-determination, we violate a most sacred human right.

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