

South African Preschool Teachers Describe their Experiences with their Principals: Implications for Examining Classroom Quality

Purposes

The South African Department of Education's policy paper, *Transforming Early Childhood Development* stated, "It is universally accepted that children who receive good quality care tend to thrive, whereas children who receive poor quality care may be placed at risk" (Jacob, 2001, Section 5). In the United States, decades of research focused on quality in early childhood education and care supports this claim. Many studies have identified and examined characteristics of classroom quality (e.g., teacher-student ratio, class size, teacher education, teacher-student interactions, curriculum) and how classroom quality relates to children's language, social, and cognitive development (Scarr, Eisenberg, and Deater-Deckard, 1994; McCartney, 1984; Pianta, LaParo, Payne, Cox & Bradley, 2002; Bryant, Burchinal, Lau & Sparling, 1994; Charlesworth, et al., 1993).

In South Africa, very little research has been conducted on the quality of the 23,482 identified early childhood development sites (Nationwide Audit, 2001). Focus on early childhood education and care tends to revolve around access as only about 16% of the nation's children between ages 0-7 are enrolled in an early childhood education and care site. This study focuses on quality in early childhood centers and the Principal's role in relation to classroom quality in South Africa.

In the United States, a weakness of much early childhood research is that it has tended to study children and teachers as if they existed in isolation or as if factors could be investigated as single units, separate from the influences of their families, communities, and schools. As a result research conducted on children, teachers, and classrooms has primarily examined simple linear relationships between one factor and another, and has been highly reductionistic (Pianta and Walsh, 1996). This research has tended to ignore school-level factors, such as the organizational climate or the relationship teachers have with their leadership, which may be related to classroom quality. The organizational climate can be thought of in terms of a social-ecological model of behavior that stresses the interactive nature between people and their environments, and describes the unique atmosphere that characterizes different work contexts (Bloom, 1996).

"Teachers do not work in a vacuum but instead are part of a larger educational system. Classroom quality and positive child outcomes are influenced by a host of other system components" (Early, et al., 2007, p. 577). The following describes a qualitative interview study conducted with preschool teachers in South Africa in 2006. The study is based on a theoretical model that recognizes that teaching and learning take place within complex interrelated ecological systems.

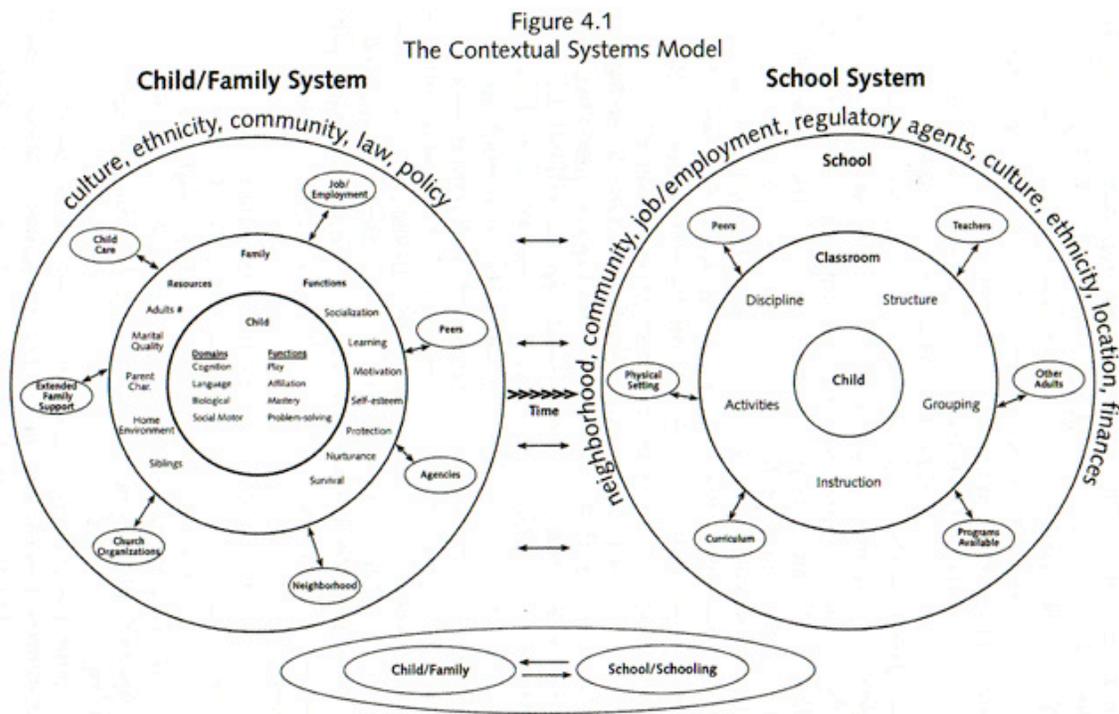
A Report on Equal Education Opportunity (U.S. Congress, 1970) identified the principal as the single most influential person in a school. This long-held American belief was substantiated by a recent quantitative meta-analysis of 69 studies over a 35-year period involving 2,800 schools, approximately 1.4 million students, and 14,000 teachers. This meta-analysis found that effective school leaders can have dramatic influence on students' academic achievement and that leadership is critical to the success of any institution (Marzano, 2005). Very little research has examined whether this relationship exists in early childhood education centers.

This research context led to an examination of the following research questions: Does the philosophy of the importance of the principal apply to preschool settings? Would this American

belief in the importance of the principal hold true in the South African educational context? How would South African preschool teachers describe the influence their Principal has on their classrooms? What would South African preschool teachers say are the characteristics of their ideal Principal?

Theoretical Framework

The Contextual Systems Model (see Figure) represents the relationships between multiple subsystems that exist over time (Pianta and Walsh, 1996). Though the factors included in the model are often viewed as static and isolated when researched, Pianta and Walsh (1996) suggest that they are dynamic, interconnected, interdependent, and must be researched as such. The empirical study to be described uses this Contextual Systems Model to guide thinking about the relationship between the school level factors (e.g., the relationships teachers have with their leadership) and classroom quality (the School ring of the School System).



Method & Sample

In-depth open-ended interviews were used, as the purpose was not to test hypotheses, but to try to understand South African teachers' experiences with their Principals and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), the qualitative interviews were guided by a very limited number of questions (i.e. "Tell me about your principal" or "Tell me about your experiences with your principal"). The teachers were encouraged to reflect in detail on events they have experienced and describe their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Each audio-taped interview was transcribed for close analysis. The transcripts were read and coded for themes repeatedly.

“Teachers are thought to provide the most valid information [regarding principal leadership] because they are closest to the day-to-day operations of the school and the behaviors of the principal” (Marzano, 2005, 30).

Nine female teachers (6 White, 3 non-White, ranging in ages from mid-20s to mid-50s), three at three schools in different neighborhoods of Pretoria, South Africa were interviewed. The principals’ at these three schools ranged in age from mid-30s to mid-60s and had been Principals at their respective schools for 9 years, 15 years, and 37 years.

Table 1

SCHOOLS	Sunnyside	Arcadia	Hillcrest
Fees	Rand 500/mo (\$70/mo)	Rand 800/mo (\$114)	Rand 800/mo (\$114) for ½ day (70% of their students); Rand 1100/mo (\$157 for full day) + Rand 500/yr (\$70) for trips/special activities
Teacher: Student Ratio	1:34	1:20	2:14 (1:7)
Race/Class of students	Primarily black/ lower income	Mixed (embassy children)/ middle income	White/upper income

Results

All the participants agreed that the Principal of a preschool has tremendous influence on the school, the teachers and their teaching. Teachers’ quotes follow:

“The success of a school starts with the principal.”

“The Principal can make or break a school.”

“If a principal doesn’t care, you won’t care. You wouldn’t want to come to school. She’s so nice you want to give more than your best. You enjoy your work. It’s a positive atmosphere. If she’s positive then we’re positive. If she’s negative, then we’re negative.”

“If I didn’t have a good attitude towards [the principal], then I wouldn’t towards the whole school, and that reflects on my classroom. Actually, that’s wrong, if the principal has an affect on you and I think it’s very wrong to allow that to affect your classroom, but I think it’s also human for that to happen. I think [the principal] has a huge influence.”

“If you’re scared about keeping your job it deflects your attention from the kids and what they need.”

“[The principal] sets the mood of the school. And if you’re scared of what you’re

going to do, then you're not so relaxed, and I think the kids pick that up. If you're not relaxed then they're also tense."

"If [the principal's] negative, we're also going to be negative. If she's positive, everything is positive. And if you're not happy at work, you can't really do the things you must do with the children."

Teachers described actions taken by the principal or discussion of the principal's role and responsibilities (e.g., she is a problem solver, she is a role model/a good example/a leader/a manager, she inspires us/motives us, she scolds in private and praises in public, she has her finger on everything, she goes out of her way to help us, she has bought educational materials for us, she has improved the physical environment of the building, she's good with people). Sometimes teachers contrasted their current principal against experiences with previous principals (e.g., our principal does not shout/scream/rant and rave/be nasty or harsh, she is not resistant to change like the previous principal was). One participant summed these results up by saying, "Actions speak louder than words."

Teachers also described the principals' character (e.g., nice/sweet/wonderful/friendly/calming, trustworthy/reliable/fair, strict/firm, resourceful, flexible/relaxed/lenient, open-minded/understanding/polite, affectionate, humorous). Similarly, teachers offered examples of what their principals were not (e.g., not easily angry/cross/rude/not understanding, not intimidating, not distrustful).

These responses emphasized the importance of the relationship between the teachers and their principal, highlighting the role of the social organization of the school setting as illustrated in the Contextual Systems Model. "In many ways the business of child care is all about cultivating relationships. Relationships are really the cement that holds a program together" (Bloom, 1995). Rafanello (1996) agreed, "Relationships are the most important part of the work." The teachers communicated this sentiment as well. One said, "We must respect her. Must not be afraid of her. The principal must have respect for us, not think that they are better than us. How can someone manage something if she doesn't have a relationship with someone?" Teachers described their schools like a family and like a team.

The most common characteristic described was the ability to listen. All nine teachers specifically identified listening as an essential characteristic of a good principal saying,

"She will ALWAYS listen to you. If you have a problem she will listen to you and help you solve the problem. If you need something, she will listen to you and she will help you."

"She is available at all times. Her door is always open. And she will let the work pile up and pile up, but she will listen to you."

"You can feel free to talk to her, personal problems, social problems, anything. She's there to listen. That is one of the things I appreciate. She has an ear to listen. Anytime. If you have a problem, no problem."

“She has an ability to understand people’s problems. I think it’s a gift really. It’s not everybody who can do that.”

This theme was pervasive, but almost absent from the literature. One article that discussed listening advised principals, in a list of ten recommendations to improve staff communication to, “spend as much time listening as talking. Be attentive” (Harris, 1995). This theme seems to require further study.

Significance of Research

Access to early childhood education and care, and subsequent research about this education and care, in South Africa is in its infancy. As of 2006, early childhood education and care received no funding from the government. The 2001 Audit reported that over 44% of 54,500 early childhood teachers earned less than \$70/month (only 11% earned over \$450/mo). The White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education (2001) recognized the importance of early childhood and the need for funding and emphasis on quality early childhood education and care stating:

“Yet, while there is growing consensus that what happens during these early years have dramatic consequences for the rest of childhood and adolescence, our children across the country and the world are most neglected in our policies, programmes and budgets. In our view, early childhood development should merit higher priority attention. It is the time when responsible governments must make decisions about policies, laws, programmes and the provision of money. Yet, in our country, as in the rest of the world, for children and nations, these are the years that receive the least” (White Paper 5, 2001, 1.1).

Though early childhood education in South Africa began in the 1940s by welfare organizations concerned with high infant mortality and morbidity rates, this care was only for White children. As operating costs increased, nursery centers became privileged middle-class institutions. Between 1948 and 1969, government support decreased, and the National Education Policy Act of 1967 increased provisions for White children while curtailing services for non-white children. Access still reflects the racial disparities and historical context of the country, as one in three White children, one in eight “Coloured,” and one in sixteen black children attend early childhood education programs. The ratios within these programs also reflect racial disparities.

Funding and access will be the first steps for early childhood education in South Africa. Researchers interested in quality should review research and measurement tools from other countries as foundation for creating tools for observing and helping to improve quality in South African preschool education programs. Research and quality improvement efforts in South Africa and around the world would benefit from a contextual systems framework, and realization that the principal and the work environment of a school is related to classroom quality and teaching.

Limitations of this study include a small sample, in a short time period (July 2006) in Pretoria, South Africa. Limited generalization may be warranted, yet themes that have emerged deem further study. “The way child care workers experience their workplace must certainly have

an effect on their teaching and ultimately the quality of the programs they provide” (Kontos & Stremmel, 1988, p. 78). Consequently, research in South Africa and elsewhere must begin to use an ecological framework and include a focus on the work environment with the goal of improving quality of early childhood education for the world’s youngest children.

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