

Parents' perception of the South African education system and the power they hold within it

*Parents play a significant, if not essential, role in the education of their children. This role continues throughout a child's school years, where a parent's engagement with the syllabus, teachers, principals and governing bodies serves as a vital part of the school ecosystem. In turn, a parent's perception of the power they have over their child's safety and success at school, and the competence and transparency of the school's educators, play a role in the manner and extent to which a parent will engage with the schooling process. A mixed-methods study conducted by HSRC researchers outlines parents' beliefs about the safety and quality of the South African schooling system. **By Jessie-Lee Smith***

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Parents' perceptions of the quality of education their children receive are not well known in South Africa. However, understanding these perceptions can allow stakeholders to provide mechanisms for parental engagement and improve the quality of education in the country.

Therefore, in partnership with Parent Power and the DG Murray Trust, the HSRC conducted a [national survey of South African parents with children in primary or secondary school](#). This survey – the first of its kind in South Africa – was representative of all socio-economic and cultural groups in the country. Complemented by qualitative interviews, the goal of the research was to determine the factors that shape a parent's sense of power in their child's education.

"This research brings us closer to understanding where the challenges and potential solutions lie in promoting better relationships between parents and the school system, including how communication strategies and school governance can be improved," says Dr Candice Groenewald, a chief research specialist at the HSRC.

In the survey, researchers focused their data collection on five main domains. These domains included: (i) perceptions of their children's happiness at school; (ii) evaluations of their children's safety at school; (iii) confidence in their children's school principals; (iv) knowledge of the school; and (v) perception of their power in their children's schools. The responses to the questions asked were used to develop a Parent Power Index: a metric that gauged the perceived power that parents feel they have over their children's education.

Happiness of children at school

The overarching belief of South African parents was that their children were happy at school. The response to questions about happiness was overwhelmingly positive, with more than 80% of parents believing that their children got along with their peers, liked and respected their educators, were eager to learn and enjoyed going to school. Even on the lowest-rated question, over 75% of parents still agreed or strongly agreed that their children understood their work and homework assignments.

Several factors played a role in predicting parents' evaluations of their children's happiness at school. For example, parents who reported that their child had sufficient textbooks and a clean environment considered their child happier and better adjusted at school. Whether a parent perceived their child as happy at school also depended on their child's gender. For example, girls' parents reported them as being happier at school than boys. Between ethnic groups, black African parents reported higher child happiness than white parents.

Safety of children at school

As with their belief that their children were happy at school, more than 80% of parents believed that their children were safe at school. This belief was predicated on parents' perception that their children were secure and not affected by bullying, that alcohol and drugs were not a problem, and that the principal was actively involved in keeping children safe.

Several factors influenced these perceptions. For example, age and parental education level positively influenced the perceptions of school safety, meaning that older and more highly educated parents had a stronger perception of security. On the other hand, students' age had a negative impact on perceptions of safety, with parents of older children believing their children's schools were less safe. The following tended to rate their children's safety as relatively low: parents from coloured families, single-parent households, women and those who struggle to understand the language of learning.

Confidence in principals

Questions were posed regarding the principal's actions, aims, warmth and trustworthiness towards children. Questions were also posed with regard to how principals treated and communicated with parents. On almost all fronts, more than 80% of parents either agreed or strongly agreed that they had confidence in the principal of their child's school. Only the statement 'The principal treats all parents fairly' scored just under 80%. In other words, parental confidence in school principals was extremely high.

Qualities that positively impacted confidence in principals included good management of school operations, the extent of resources made available to children, and well-functioning school governing bodies. When compared to other groups, the following categories of parents had less confidence in their child's principal: black African parents, single parents and parents with greater access to educational resources that supported homework.

Knowledge of school

The statement: 'I know what is going on at my child's school' was presented to the survey participants. Parents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement. Overall, the parents rated their knowledge of what went on at their child's school as relatively low. For example, only 52% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 27% believed that they did not know what went on in their child's school, and 21% remained neutral.

Parents of children in private schools and public schools in metropolitan areas felt substantially more out of the loop with the happenings at their child's school. Most South African parents said that they wanted to know more about what was happening at their child's school and we can see a clear demand for knowledge in the survey data.

Parent empowerment

Despite most parents feeling as though they didn't know enough about what went on in their child's school, almost 80% of parents either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt empowered by their children's schools in all aspects. The statements regarding parents' perceived power measured whether parents felt 'listened to' and 'respected' by teachers; whether teachers encouraged children to respect each other's differences; and whether teachers listened to and respected learners.

Parent power was positively linked to all other indicators identified in this survey. For example, parents who reported that their child had enough textbooks and sufficient access to educational resources at home, those who were satisfied with overall performance, and

those whose children knew what to expect at school all felt more empowered. Well-functioning school governing bodies were also positively associated with parents' sense of power in relation to their child's school.

Concluding remarks

Overall, the survey results show that in four of the five domains, over three-quarters of the parents were positive about the state of their children's education. Most parents believed that their children were happy and safe at school, and had overall positive perceptions of their school's principal and educators, and their influence at school. An outlying domain was that many parents felt out of the loop with regard to school happenings. Only slightly more than half of the surveyed parents believed that they knew what was happening at school, while the rest couldn't confirm or did not know.

While parents rated the quality of schools highly, they admittedly knew relatively little about their school's daily workings. According to senior research specialist at the HSRC, Dr Adam Cooper, "Their assessment of quality was more based on pastoral care and the school providing children with meals, uniforms, etc. This raises questions about how parents perceive the roles of schools and school

personnel in a society like ours. Whether educators are seen as additional parents or whether they are primarily responsible for teaching and learning the school curriculum are important issues to be resolved."

Understanding parents' perceptions of their children's schools is important in South Africa as "parents' knowledge, understanding and involvement in the child's schooling play an important role in the child's schooling success," says Groenewald. Moreover, Cooper argues that parents in any democracy shouldn't just be consumers or clients to whom education is offered, but that "parents should be active participants in their children's schooling so that schools might become institutions where they can have power to influence and direct schools for the benefit of their children".

Going forward, Groenewald maintains that "open, inclusive and responsive school systems will facilitate empowerment and knowledge production amongst parents. This, in turn, creates opportunities for parents to advocate for better-quality school systems, and more awareness of how positive parent-child and parent-school relationships can be formed towards the child's schooling success".

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