

Developing identities in South Africa: alternatives to formal schooling for disadvantaged black children

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Abstract

Managing the improvement of education is currently a prominent issue in South Africa. Large numbers of black children are falling behind in school, or are unable to attend due to lack of income. This can have worrying consequences for the socialisation process, including identity development. Despite the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, enacted in 1996, stating that every child has the right to a basic level of education, the reality is often different. Consequently, there has been a growth in community-based alternatives to formal education. This paper is based on case studies of two informal schooling projects in the province of Mpumalanga in the north east of S. Africa. Data collection was through semi-structured interviews and ethnographic diaries. The findings indicate that community-based, informal schooling programmes could be used to address poverty-based problems that prevent South Africa's children becoming fully involved in education from an early age. However, the research raises important questions about the need for governmental collaboration with non-governmental projects in order to achieve success.

Keywords: South Africa; informal schooling; community; identity; child care; globalization.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In this study we take a tentative step towards trying to understand the links between social care arrangements, schooling and the social identity development of orphaned and vulnerable black children in South Africa. It is an initial, small scale exploratory study of a number of selected social care projects, and their alternative arrangements for schooling, in the province of Mpumalanga in the north east of South Africa. The projects provide care and education for a small number of orphaned and vulnerable black children.

Currently, there are gaps in the provision for such vulnerable children throughout South Africa (Drew et al., 1998). Accurate statistics for projected numbers of orphans are difficult to find, due to inconsistent measurement and a lack of birth registration details of children, especially in rural areas. However, Madhavan estimates that by the year 2015, four million children, or ten percent of the entire South African population will be orphaned (Madhavan, 2004).

For many years, the black extended family has absorbed orphaned children, when parents have died due to poverty or other reasons, yet, as Thomas and Mabusa (1991) argue:

‘...institutionalised discrimination in South Africa has progressively eroded the formerly cohesive black family structure in South Africa resulting in an increased need for alternative care’ (Thomas and Mabusa, 1991, p121).

This has resulted in the now familiar sight of grandparent and child-headed households and the economic problems this then creates (Madhavan, 2004; Foster and Williamson, 2000; Drew et al., 1998; Thomas and Mabusa, 1991; Van Rensburg et al., 2005; Case et al., 2004; Caliandro and Hughes, 1998).

Social support systems for orphans and vulnerable children

The welfare system in South Africa has been described as ‘rigid, compartmentalised, unequal and discriminatory’, and the child protection system is ‘inadequate and in decline’ (September, 2006, p67). Yet, there has been no policy put in place that attempts to rectify such problems (Guest, 2003) although Fryer and Myhoshi (1994) and Fitzgerald et al (1982) have suggested the need for closer links between social workers and children.

Inevitably, this policy gap impacts, in turn, on the opportunities for schooling and education for the children affected.

Existing education structures

Currently in South Africa, there are two main types of school: independent schools and government-funded public schools. Both are fee paying.

It hardly needs stating that the poorest sector of South Africa's population is of black, tribal ethnicity. Large class sizes, high pupil-teacher ratios, poor quality facilities and lack of book and classroom provision currently characterise schooling for the poorest, black sectors of the population. Many schools can offer only the smallest salaries for teachers, so attract less motivated and qualified teaching personnel. At least *some* children attend school but many can not afford even the relatively low fees charged by some public schools nor can they afford to buy the uniform they are required to wear whilst in school.

Again, there is a policy vacuum in this area of South African governance. As a result, Desmond et al (2002), Guest (2003) and Fitzgerald et al. (1982) argue that one solution could involve government collaboration with NGOs (non-governmental organisations) to address the lack of adequate provision for black school children. More importantly, they argue that there is an urgent need for a move towards alternatives to institutionalised schooling for black children. Utilising NGO facilities might offer one solution and, at the same time, lead to increased sustainability (Madhavan, 2004; Rosenberg et al., 2007).

IDENTITY

Utilising NGO resources, however, may create difficulties for the children who are looked after, depending on the opportunities available for experiencing both indigenous and alternative cultures. Such experiences are important for children of all backgrounds in enabling them to develop a strong and meaningful social identity.

The meaning of identity is interesting. It is defined as '...sameness with another *or* the unique characteristics which determine individuality' (Brown, 1993, p1304). This tension between sameness and difference is '...at the heart of many of the contemporary "troubles" of Western

– and especially Anglophone – cultures’ (Lawler, 2008, p1). It may also prove to be an underlying tension in the lives of many of the orphaned and vulnerable black children living in the current socio-political climate of South Africa.

Exposure to a child’s indigenous culture is important in the stages of identity development (Cross and Gore, 2003). Once access to this enduring identity base is established, exposure to difference is an important element of further development.

Exposure to indigenous culture in day-to-day living provides children with an experience of similarity. But how do they experience differences, especially racial and cultural differences? Not surprisingly, in South Africa, this is harder to come by, due to the nature of the segmented society in which children tend to live. Where this does occur, influences of difference in a child’s life make it less likely that the child will conform to cultural stereotypes (Devos and Banaji, 2003). Such experiences will enable the child to form identities resulting in an ability to adapt and evolve their identities to suit the situation they are in (Harter, 2003; Kihlstrom et al., 2003; Patel, 2007; Ryan and Deci, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

The research on which this paper is based looked at the social care arrangements in a number of care homes, in the province of Mpumalanga, and the educational provision available to the children. For purposes of this paper, the focus is on two of the homes studied, where there is a clear drive to provide alternative education provision that meets the needs of the children without having to rely on the formal education system.

The research used a case study strategy (see for example, Basse, 1999; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b). Convenience sampling (Stake, 1995) provided the organisations for study and were chosen due to ease of access. Both were in Mpumalanga, a short drive for author AP. Furthermore, the selection was an example of non-probabilistic, purposive sampling (Gomm, 2004). Each was chosen because it was a foster home caring for orphans and vulnerable children. Data were collected through ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires over a period of three months during 2007. For the purposes of

the current paper brief, relevant data were selected and reported from interviews with project managers and by reference to relevant field notes.

Dream Valley

Dream Valley was founded in 1995. It is a foster home, place of safety care organisation and a location of casual, unregistered care. It is situated in a rural region in Mpumalanga province, on approximately two and a half thousand acres of farmland.

Eleven children officially live at Dream Valley. One child arrived under a place of safety arrangement eight years ago, but was not collected by social workers after the maximum one-year period. Four children are staying permanently through an arrangement with their relatives, while the remaining six have been placed by social workers from Mpumalanga province. The owner of Dream Valley pays for all eleven children to attend the local combined school, some 15 kilometres away.

In addition to the above, the home provides food, clean water and medical care for five extended families of around 40 people, which includes 30 children. The children, who have been rejected by local schools as a result of having no money to, for example, buy school uniform or pay fees, attend the school at Dream Valley. It is run solely by volunteers and at any one time, around 11 to 22 children, aged two to 14, are taught at the school.

Creek Side

Creek Side is located on the Swazi border, in Mpumalanga. It was founded in 1958 by two South African missionaries, as an informal care arrangement that was illegal under the apartheid regime. Originally, the missionaries provided clean water, spiritual guidance and food for families living in a local compound. The project now provides foster care for orphans and vulnerable children from the same extended families. In 1998, when South Africa became a post-apartheid state, it was taken over by a white English Afrikaans and SiSwati-speaking owner, who still runs the centre today.

Creek Side is based around a central building which houses school classrooms and a feeding centre. Fifteen local houses surround the centre. The owner/manager helps to provide food for the families from these households and ensures their safety, well-being and education. In

addition to looking after their own children, each family fosters two children under the owner/manager's supervision. In total, Creek Side provides for around 90 people.

The school at Creek Side is a collaborative partnership with the nearby local primary school. At the beginning of the school year in 2006, the grade 3 cohort at the school was more over-subscribed than usual. The pupils, therefore, were divided into two classes. Creek Side agreed to house one group in its own building, to take pressure off the school. In addition, Creek Side provides one hot meal per day for the children from its own food bank. Further, overseas volunteers help in the classroom. Unusually, all pupils passed the year and moved up to grade four. Since the year group was still oversubscribed, the class continued to be taught at Creek Side.

Management of the Creek Side school is based on the following:

- No child will be refused attendance due to lack of uniform, books, pens, etc;
- Teaching is in English;
- Foreign volunteers act as teaching assistants;
- Teaching methods are more informal compared to mainstream schooling;
- Corporal punishment is not used;
- Teaching is overseen by a professionally qualified teacher.

This approach is in stark contrast to that taken by the local school.

FINDINGS

Schooling provides an experience of sameness for black children in South Africa. Most teachers in Swazi schools are black. Games are played every Wednesday and include traditional Swazi sports. Feeding schemes, school dinners and street sellers at the schools provide traditional food and snacks, all of which reflect the culinary culture of an area.

Most lessons, although meant to be taught in English, are usually delivered in SiSwati. Thus the children are immersed in their indigenous culture during the school term time on a daily basis.

The older children from both Creek Side and Dream Valley are provided with opportunities to spend time interacting within their indigenous culture, as both groups currently attend combined school¹ in the local black settlements. This opportunity is denied to many children as a result of being too poor to pay school fees or buy school uniform or equipment, hence the drive to develop alternatives to main stream education. However, the facilities at Dream Valley are in their early stages of development, due to lack of funds and expertise. Currently, the centre is planning for a sustainable future:

'We are trying to set up a permanent informal schooling system. The education system here for black children is a mess. Most of the kids from this farm go to [a combined school 10km away]. There are classes of up to sixty there. The principal turns kids away from the school for not having shoes and school uniforms, when their families can't afford to eat and it is a struggle just for them to pay the school fees...What our project manager wants to do is to raise enough money for a proper building on the other side of the farm and have a school room that is equipped with a blackboard, books and desks' (Manager of Dream Valley).

Creek Side is more advanced in its aim to develop sustainable provision:

'You can see the school out of the window, there...and it is really quite informal. The class...is always the same kids. The curriculum that is taught for them is really different and it is just not the same as the [mainstream] school over the road. The children are aged about eight and it is such a small class, unlike the fifty plus classrooms they have over there on the other side' (Manager of Creek Side).

However, experience in the school class room is not the only source of educational and developmental opportunities for children. At Creek Side and Dream Valley children are at an advantage over those in nearby local schools since children from these two homes are fluent in Afrikaans, English and SiSwati. Conscious effort is made to help the children improve their English:

'English is the only language that should be spoken. If the children are fluent in English it leads to further opportunity...T---- gets paid twice as much at the packing factory because he can speak and understand English fluently' (Manager of Dream Valley).

Both Creek Side and Dream Valley are organisations that are managed by white South Africans who speak both Afrikaans and English and thus automatically provide opportunities for fostered children to learn these languages. If children speak English fluently, then they

¹ A mixed school with children aged 3 to 18 years.

are more likely to attain better grades at school and subsequently improve their employment prospects. One reason for this is that written assessments including assignments and exams are in English. The manager of Creek Side pointed out:

'I want my children to speak English as well as any white person. This will mean that they reach higher levels in school... get paid higher rates... get respect from the people that matter' (Manager of Creek Side).

In addition, because of the large number of volunteers from abroad who spend time at Creek Side and Dream Valley, English is spoken with the children on a regular basis and as a result, is something they understand well. Further, spending time with people from overseas can make an important contribution to children's learning and development. It can result in knowledge expansion for the children, learning on a daily basis about foreign cultures and life outside of their region. It increases general knowledge, thus helping with school work. Awareness of other traditions and ethnicities are enhanced and, in addition, the children are provided with alternative cultures against which to recognise their own difference. The manager of Dream Valley said:

'I believe that it is really, really important for volunteers to keep visiting this farm. They give my children the opportunity to learn about foreign cultures and life outside their small region' (Manager of Dream Valley).

. The manager at Creek Side pointed out:

'I think that the volunteers from overseas have a really great influence on the children. It is amazing what they can get the kids to do and it really does help them having that difference' (Manager of Creek Side).

With higher attainment levels, the child's ambitions and aspirations are more likely to increase. As one child said:

'I want to put my high grades at school to good use in my future. I would quite like to go to management school, and learn in a nicer place than I do at the moment...it seems a bit of a waste doing well at school and then just getting married and having children' (Child 1, Creek Side).

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to provide an insight into how the South African schooling system is struggling to provide appropriate support and help for many of its smallest citizens (Guest,

2000). It has raised the possibility of an alternative form of schooling being provided by local NGOs that currently provide social care for orphaned and vulnerable black children. The alternative schooling outlined briefly here has the potential to exploit the positive opportunities provided by globalization. It could provide an 'education for life in a global world [that] broadens the outlines of 'community' beyond the family, the region, the nation' (Burbules and Torres, 2000, p22) with its openness to variety, difference and multi-cultural influences.

Public schooling in South Africa, not surprisingly, has been caught up in the neo-liberal agenda. It is characterised by the marketisation of education based on competitiveness, entrepreneurialism and survival of the economically fittest. The rich access high quality schooling while the poor are not only left behind, but also, literally, left outside. Equally, standardisation of provision and an emphasis on sameness are the predicted outcomes.

This may be too simplistic an interpretation, but it nevertheless provides a framework that supports the idea of NGO/governmental collaboration. It is summarised in the diagram in figure 1. For such collaboration to be successful, increased governmental interest in NGO agendas and more funding opportunities need to be in place.

Despite the constitution of the Republic of South Africa stating that all children should be allowed access to schooling, experience is proving otherwise. This discriminatory allocation of resources that marginalises the very poorest black tribal citizens of the country could have wider, more serious repercussions for South Africa's development. It reinforces the cultural segmentation and racial discrimination that still characterise much of the country.

The research reported here raises important questions about the role of community-based, informal schooling programmes. In particular, we can ask:

- 1 How should education and schooling prepare black children in South Africa for an emancipated post-apartheid world and a tolerant multi-cultural society based on a 'hybrid [knowledge] where global, national and local images meet' (Popkewitz, 2000, p172)?

- 2 To what extent should education and schooling focus on ‘sameness’, providing a secure foundation that prepares pupils for their roles in the community and a firm cultural base for future national development?
- 3 Alternatively, to what extent should social and cultural differences be embraced through policies that encourage and support collaboration between government bodies, NGOs and international organisations?

These are questions that we hope to explore in more depth in the future. Finally, we need to be sensitive to our own position as concerned researchers, with a very different background to those we are researching. We are acutely aware of this and will need to continually ask ourselves if we are in danger of drawing on and imposing a western view of education policy on our research?

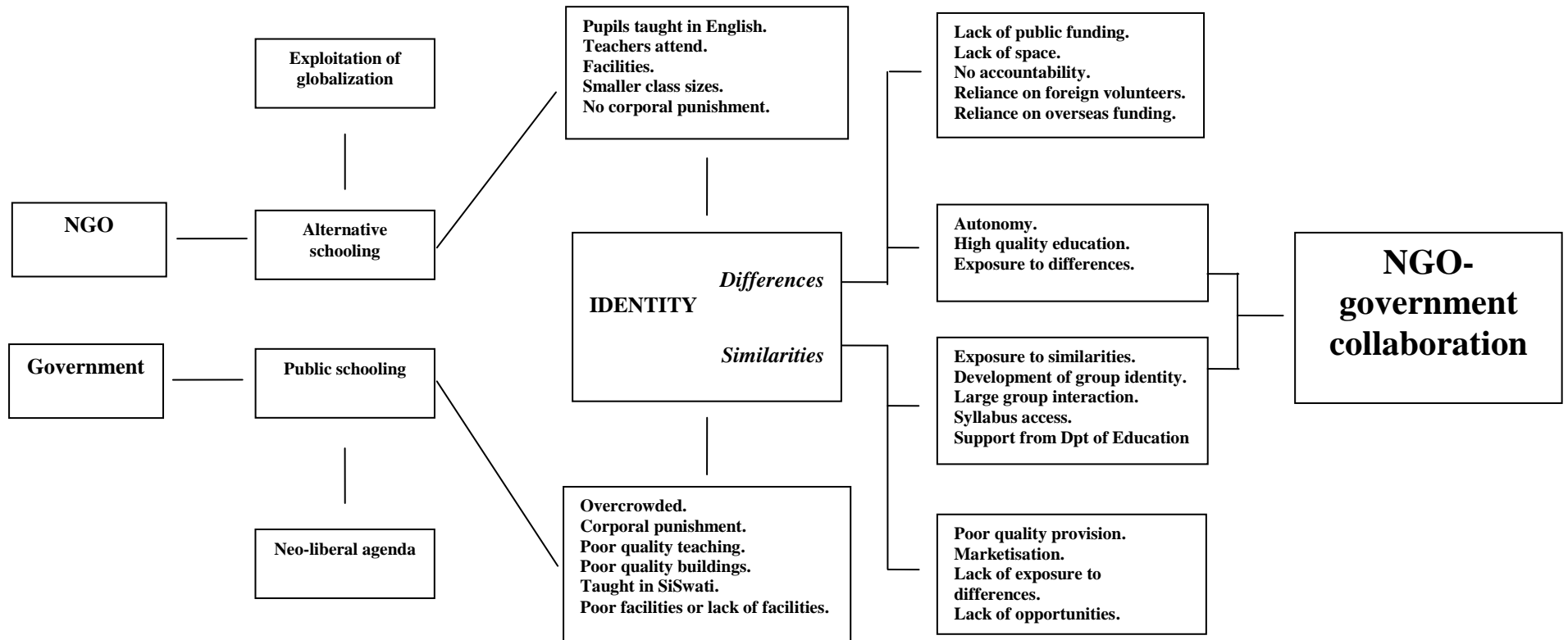


Figure 1: NGO/governmental collaboration

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