

A Preschooler's Family and School Influence on the Outcomes of Schooling

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ABSTRACT There are many aspects that have an impact on the learners' school progress. Housing, socio-economic status, abuse, love and neglect are some of the factors that have an impact on any child's life. The family and the society in general, play a huge role in the learning child from an early age. The product we see at the end of a schooling career is a consequence of various influences. This article explores the findings of a qualitative study performed at three Black African pre-schools in a South African township. It shows how the family's social and cultural capital are crucial for the growing child. Aspects such as language acquisition and learning in general can be fully understood if the child's *habitus* is well understood. Moreover, the study's findings also explicate that for pre-school teachers to be effective, they need to comprehend the dynamics involved in family-school relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Ryschke (2012) writes about the need for schools to counteract poverty's impact on children. Threlfall et al. (2013) point out that children who grow up in poverty are at a higher risk for school failure and dropping out. Ryschke's report argues that until policymakers and educators confront the deepening economic and social disparities, poor children will increasingly miss out the ladder to social mobility. Ryschke also cites Noguera's study which highlights that learners who grow up in poverty have tremendous obstacles to overcome; they struggle competing with their affluent schoolmates. Spaul (2012) concurs when he posits that the links between affluence and educational quality in South Africa can partially explain why poor children do not succeed in school. The poor children receive far inferior quality of education when compared with their wealthier peers. "Offering an inferior quality of education to the poor disadvantages them in the labour-market prospects" (Spaul 2012:3).

What is crucial above is how the family's economic status affects the children at school. Dixon-Roman et al. (2013) also point out that parental income and other indicators such as socio-economic status are related to various educational outcomes. Poverty, these authors claim, is related to poor nutrition, learning disabilities, poor quality schooling and parental unemployment. Much research has shown the importance of strong family-school relations.

Modesaotsile (2012) points out that parents have a fundamental responsibility to ensure that their children are at school and their school work is done. However, this author notes, many parents have never attended school and they cannot read, write or count properly.

Generally, all children are influenced by a number of aspects as they grow up. Whist the cultural aspects are among these, the psychological aspects are crucial as well. Lareau and Horvat (1999) have written how schools replicate existing social inequalities and they refer to this as social reproduction. These writers link their arguments to Pierre Bourdieu's assertions that learners with more social and cultural capital fare better in school than those of their peers who have less valuable social and cultural capital. Hedges (2012) contends that in Vygotsky's theory the child's development is shaped by cultural-historical inheritances. This author also points out that Vygotsky valued children's early experiences in families and communities, perceiving these as a foundation for later cognitive development. Ilyas et al. also (2013) opine:

... for Vygotsky scaffolding is important and adult-young (or teacher-student, or more experienced-less-experienced) relationship works best. Vygotsky believes that every function or learning in a child's life appears twice; first on social or inter-psychological level and then on individual's or intra-psychological level (Vygotsky, L.S. 1978, p.57). Moreover, Vygotsky in opposition to Piaget believes that learning cannot take place in isolation but it

occurs when a learner interact with other people especially an adult or more experienced one (for example, a teacher, or a bright peer) with a social and cultural context.

The adult's role is emphasised above. Furthermore, Vygotsky states that the child has a "zone of proximal development" or potential development and this is only achievable through the intervention of an adult who observes a child's understanding through performance. Vygotsky perceives the socio-cultural context as crucial, for it interacts with cognitive development. Vygotsky explicates the social context of cognitive development; that children can be assisted by significant others to solve problems. The social class of children will then have a huge bearing on their zone of proximal development. Class affects the cognitive growth (Lareau and Horvat 1999; Kelley et al. 1992). Lareau (1987) also averred that class differences affect children's progress in schools. This paper explores how early schooling affects the cognitive growth of poor pre-schoolers. It focuses on the potential of historically Black crèches situated in historically Black areas (townships) in South Africa. Many poor working class parents in South Africa still have their children registered in these townships institutions. Years after the fall of apartheid, integration has only happened in former White schools. None of the White parents are sending their children to historically Black African schools.

This paper also focuses on what really happens in the formative years of poor pre-schoolers. Research shows that out of every ten learners who start schooling, only two will graduate at high school twelve years later. Many poor children never reach high school. It should be an interest to researchers as to what happens to learners' lives at school in the early years. The main question posed in this study is: How are class differences affecting poor children attending historically Black township schools?

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to explore the following objectives

- ♦ To explore the experiences of the indigent learners in the early years;
- ♦ To illustrate the impact of poverty on educational success;

- ♦ To find possible solutions in supporting the poor families; and
- ♦ To understand how cultural and social capital affects learner achievement.

However, before the above are explored, the focus will be on literature review.

Literature Review

Powerlessness and the Othering of the Poor

There is much research that shows the indelible effects of poverty on mental health of the people. Poverty is among the aspects that affect the psychological mental health of individuals negatively. Threlfall et al. (2013) contend that children who grow up in poverty are at a higher risk for school failure and dropping out. Eneji et al. (2013) concurs with this when they state that children in rural areas and in poorer homes drop out earlier compared to their more affluent counterparts. Like rural schools and farm schools in South Africa, township schools are utilised by working class parents and a huge number of these families are poverty stricken. Manuel (2012) points out that poverty has major long term impacts on a child's development and that the debilitating effects of under nutrition last throughout the child's life.

In his seminal works Michel Foucault explores aspects of power in a number of ways. He argues that power is ubiquitous, that it comes from everywhere. The society's institutions cannot eschew the influence of this power. Furthermore, Foucault (2000) posits that educational institutions are 'polymorphous'; that they combine economic, political, judicial and epistemological relations of power. Foucault opines that in societal institutions such as schools there are orders and rules and usually these rules disadvantage the poor. He argues:

The school system is based on a kind of judicial power as well. One is constantly punishing and rewarding, evaluating and classifying, saying who's the best, who's not so good. There is, then, a judicial power within the school which simulates in a rather arbitrary fashion, if one doesn't consider its general function- the judicial model of power. Why must one punish and reward in order to teach something to someone? (Foucault 2000: 83).

The above extract demonstrates how the system punishes the poor people. The poor are

punished in many ways by societal institutions such as schools. In schools learners learn about social control; the hidden curriculum of relationships in the school inform the learners how they need to behave in society. In his earlier works Foucault looked at the purposes of societal institutions such as the prisons, the clinic and mental asylum and explored themes of power and knowledge in education. In these contexts usually the poor become the *Other* for they are different from the dominant society, the rich who usually use their selves as the norm. The poor as the *Other* means that they do not belong – they lack the cultural and social capital to function in a middle class society. Under apartheid policy in South Africa, Black Africans were the *Other*; they had few rights, were regarded as less intelligent and even sub-human. Arguably, the poor have become the new *Other* in South Africa. Many are Black Africans who live in the rural areas and in many historically Black areas referred to as townships. It is important though to define the concept, “poverty”.

Poverty Defined

Sen (2001) defines poverty as a condition that results in an absence of the freedom to choose arising from a lack of capability to function effectively in society. The lack of finance is then among the deficiencies. Van der Berg (2008) mentions two kinds of poverty: *absolute poverty* and *relative poverty*. Absolute poverty refers to the absence of money required to maintain a certain minimal standard of living.

Relative poverty is determined by society in which a person lives. It is linked to inflation and one who is poor in Germany might be better off in South Africa.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Children and Cognitive Development

Vygotsky perceived cultural context as very pivotal in any child’s development. In his theory he highlights that interactions with adults, peers as well as instruction are all essential for cognitive development (Gupta and Richardson 1995: 13). Understanding the cultural tools acquired by children is very crucial to Vygotsky’s theory. Gupta and Richardson (1995: 13) posit:

He argued that concepts, language, voluntary attention and memory are functions which originate in culture (i.e. in the interactions between people) and are acquired through development in interaction between the child and another person. Each of these functions appears first as an interpersonal process before it appears within the child as an intrapersonal process (Vygotsky 1988). To take a hypothetical example given in Richardson (1994): when young children first attend nursery many are highly emotionally motivated. But collective play around objects and equipment requires regulation of group feelings and activities, and ‘tools’ of regulation (such as queuing or prioritising) among participants soon emerge.

Children are stimulated by the interaction with their environment. Gauvain (2001:35) contends that interaction in the child’s zone of proximal development involves exposing children to increasingly more complex understanding and activity that they are capable on their own. In Vygotsky’s theory the latter is important; children can achieve the zone of proximal development only with the help and support of an adult. Furthermore, in this theory, Vygotsky concedes that children are capable of developing concepts of their own through everyday experience; however, they need instruction in other abstract systems. It is also critical to note that although Vygotsky gives equal importance to intrinsic (individual) and extrinsic (cultural) forces in his theory, in practice his investigations focused on the impact of culture on the growing child (Gupta and Richardson 1995:14). The child, according to Vygotsky can learn through various stages, to reach the highest level of thinking.

Many critics have tended to compare Vygotsky’s theory to Piaget’s. Unlike Vygotsky who stresses the role of culture in the child’s development, Piaget’s theory emphasises the biological makeup and adaptation. Piaget posits that thinking develops in response to pressing internal demands to make sense of the world around us. Moreover, while the environment is informative, how it informs the child is dependent upon what the children currently know and how they are capable of interacting with and constructing meaning from this experience (Gauvain 2001). Furthermore, Piaget uses the concepts *assimilation* and *accommodation*. These two processes assist the organism achieve equilibrium be-

tween what is known and what exists in the world. In assimilation, external data are fit with currently known ways of understanding or schemas. Unlike Vygotsky, Piaget maintained that the child's own actions on the world were crucial to development; that the child frequently developed in isolation, making and testing hypothesis in order to construct an understanding of the world (Gupta and Richardson 1995: 6). Piaget's theory of development was largely influenced by biology for he perceived cognitive development in children as an evolutionary process that occurs through four main stages. As highlighted above, the main difference between Piaget and Vygotsky was that Piaget argued that cognitive development is a spontaneous process; moreover cognitive structures according to him develop without any direct teaching from adults.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was a qualitative study conducted in an Eastern Cape city, in South Africa. Two day-care centres were selected purposefully from this one city. These are situated close to informal settlement area where many of the houses are made up of zinc and iron. Many parents in this area are not working full time jobs. There is rife poverty among the people living in the area. The researchers observed and interviewed parents and teachers of these two day-care centres. In each of the centres there were observations of children on the playgrounds and during classes. Apart from non-participant observation once-off interviews were conducted with parents and teachers. In the two township centres nine teachers were interviewed and 21 parents were individually interviewed.

Observation occurred over two days and the researchers used an analytic form or coding sheet during this structured observation. On this sheet there were categories of events under investigation. Among the aspects under scrutiny were participant behaviour, resources used in the centres. The researchers used interval recording. After the observations the researchers coded the categories into manageable information to make them more quantifiable data. The interviews conducted with the participants were semi-structured interviews. It was interesting to note that of the 21 parents interviewed only four were male. Each interview took about 50 min-

utes on average. These were conducted in isiXhosa which was the local language of the area where the centres are situated.

THE FINDINGS

The Resources

The parents and the teachers talked about the scarcity of resources. Many of the toys that the centres had were mainly from donations. Not all the parents could afford to pay the monthly fees. In one of the schools the fees were R250.00 (an equivalent of 30 USD), whilst in the other it was about 24 USD. Many parents were in arrears and struggled to keep up with the payments. The teachers related how they had to try and drive fund raising all the time so as to make sure that the running of the centres is sustained. During the researchers' observations they also saw how the teachers had to frequently improvise as they tried to build new toys from cardboard boxes, from old milk plastic cartoons and newspapers. The parents highlighted their absolute poverty and some of them were grandparents who were upbringing their grandchildren in the absence of their own children. These grandparents are bringing their grand children mainly using their meagre monthly government grant of about 109 USD. A few of these grandparents had up to four grandchildren to sustain.

The Teachers

Of the nine teachers in the study, only three were qualified to teach in a kindergarten. Four had short courses whose duration was less than three months and two had no formal qualifications to teach at an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre. Their qualifications are illustrated in Table 1.

Two of these teachers, teacher H and teacher I (see Table 1), also worked as cooks in the centres. In the interviews the teachers highlighted a number of challenges they are facing in their centres. The non-payment of fees appeared to be the main concern because they said they could not function without the financial resources. The principal in one of the two centres pointed out that she was always getting new teachers because the educators never stayed for a long time at her school as they were constantly looking for better paying jobs. It was clear in

these schools that the teachers' qualifications were not ideal for the teaching of the children. Yet despite these qualifications the parents were still ambitious, wanting the best for their children. Many were even stressing that they would like their children to learn more English language and be as competent as learners who were schooling outside the townships.

Table 1. Teacher qualifications in the two day-care centres

<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Highest school qualification</i>	<i>Formal ECD training</i>
A	Grade 12	Accredited Training > 1 year
B	Grade 12	Accredited Training > 1 year
C	Grade 12	Short course < 3 months
D	Grade 11	Accredited Training > 1 year
E	Grade 11	Short course < 3 months
F	Grade 10	Short course < 3 months
G	Grade 10	Short course < 3 months
H	Some high school	No training
I	Some high school	No training

Language of Learning and Teaching

Many of the learners were learning English for the first time and it was clear that some of their teachers were not even fluent in the language. All the teachers were isiXhosa first language speakers. The psychological challenge of learning a new language was more burdensome for some children who rather kept quiet than try and express themselves in class. There were also a few resources such as books to support the learning of English language.

The Parents

Many of the parents wished for better education for their children so that they could redeem them from the cycle of poverty. They saw education as an aspect that would ensure that the families' will be halted by the future education of their children. The level of formal education of many of these parents was very low. Only seven had some high school education. Four of them had never been to school and 10 had some primary school education. The parents stated that it was difficult for them to buy educational tools such as books and they pointed out that most of the time they tried to make ends meet so that the children could eat. Nine of the parents

did not even have television sets in their homes. Supporting their children was always a challenge and they did not have the time or skill to help them with homework. The parents pointed out that sometimes the children were sent home with "some kind" of homework. Many found it cumbersome to help their children with homework though, stating that they did not have the skills to help their children with small projects required at the learning centres.

Eighteen of the 21 parents pointed out that the learning of English language was very crucial for their children. They said that they did not have money to bus their children to former White schools outside the township, but would also like to hear their children conversant in the language. They perceived English as a language that would free them from poverty and better the chances of their children. However, the children did not have the right tools at their homes to enhance their English language skills.

After the collection of the data, it was collated and arranged under certain themes. Below, the discussion looks at the discussion of these findings. The findings are discussed under the following sub-topics:

- ♦ The effects of poverty;
- ♦ Vygotskian influences and children; and
- ♦ Children and society.

DISCUSSION

The Effects of Poverty

Driscoll and Nagel (2008) opine that every year a child spends in poverty there is a chance that they will fall behind a grade by the age of 18. Moreover, these writers aver that poor children are less likely to be educated and tend to be less effective workers. They point out:

For parents struggling to raise a child, poverty adds extensive stress to the family. McLoyd (1990) states that economic hardship experienced by lower-class families is associated with anxiety, depression, and irritability. With those qualities may come a tendency on the part of parents to be punitive, inconsistent, authoritarian, and generally non-supportive of their children.

This extract underscores the pressure poverty exerts on parents. The parents in this study also showed that they did not have time or ability to help in homework of their children. However, one parent seemed to sum the sentiments

of the others when she stated that there were “more pressing bread and butter issues” to attend to than the school. Poverty exerts much strain on parents who usually have different parenting styles, affected by stress and anxiety. Driscoll and Nigel (2008) assert that the pressure of poverty may promote the use of disciplinary approaches that take less time and effort than approaches such as reasoning and negotiating. These parenting styles all have an effect on the growing child. Below, the focus is on this influence as Vygotsky’s theory is explored.

Vygotskian Influences and Children

The democratic dispensation in education has brought with it a number of paradoxes. Education in South Africa is based on the democratic Constitution of the Republic where parents are also able to make choices. The *Manifesto on Values* document (DoE 2001) contends that the Constitution is unequivocal on equality, stating that all the people are equal before the law; that no one can be unfairly discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sex, ethnic, social, origin, age, religion, belief, culture and language, among others. However, there seems to be an exercise of choice by parents who tend to prefer English to other indigenous languages for their children in school. The latter was also witnessed in this study. The *Manifesto on Values* cited above acknowledges the invaluable nature of bilingual education stating that, most learners benefit cognitively and emotionally from the type of structured bilingual education found in dual medium programmes (DoE 2001: 47). However, parents who usually vote on their feet emphasise to teachers that they want their children to be conversant in the English language.

In both day-care centres in the study, the parents clearly stated that the main wish that they had was for their children to master English language skills. Even those who indicated that they would like their children to have some knowledge of indigenous language, the stress was on mastery of the English language. Kader Asmal, the former South African Minister of Education, once highlighted in the Saantrek Conference that “because of the constitutional compromise in 1996, language policy is a voluntarist tradition,” parents and communities make their own decisions as to what language they wish their children to be educated in (DoE 2001: 48). Many

young Black African learners in schools perceive learning English desirable because this is what the society teaches them; the Vygotskian influence.

The majority of the children in the study were learning hard in speaking English although most of them were isiXhosa first language speakers. They were struggling in communicating their thoughts in their second language. It was clear though that the few who were “better” in communicating were shaped by the significant others in the society. From Vygotsky’s social cognitive theory, two aspects were critical in this study. The first one being the emphasis on the importance of language in the development of intellectual functioning. Vygotsky’s theory underscores the idea that language is a social and cultural phenomenon that is centrally involved in the development of higher mental processes (Hamachek 1995). Children in the study struggled learning in English. The majority of these learners did not have the “correct” tools at home; no books, no educational television programmes. Their cognitive development was apparently stunted by the absence of the relevant social and cultural capital.

The teachers pointed out that few of the children spoke English outside the kindergarten. Vygotsky’s theory though, shows that cognitive development is strongly influenced by the learners’ cultural and social environments (Hamachek 1995). The idea is that learners should be put in situations in which they have to stretch their minds to understand, but in which support and assistance from the teacher or peers are always available (Hamachek 1995). Parents in the study explained that they would have liked to help their children more at home but frequently found that they lacked the necessary skills. They also stated that teachers are more qualified to help the learners because “they have things like books”. It was then clear that the children did not get the necessary social support in learning another language although the parents desired this. Important in Vygotsky’s theory is the contention that any child’s development depends on language and social support (Vygotsky 1986).

Bourdieu (1977) writes of how schools replicate existing inequalities. According to Bourdieu, learners with more valuable social and cultural capital will perform better in school than their less fortunate, indigent counterparts. Many

children who start nursery in the township continue schooling in the historically Black African schools will experience dysfunctionality and ineffectiveness. The social reproduction perspective has proved useful in attempts to understand how ethnicity and class influence the transmission of educational inequality (Lareau and Horvat 1999). Differences of class matter between the groups of Black parents. As evident above, the working class parents do not have the cultural capital that would enhance achievement in school.

In their study Lareau and Horvat (1999) show the differences of social and cultural capital between Black and Whites where the legacy of racial discrimination plays a role in perceiving Black parents as having less cultural and social capital. However, in this study class plays a crucial role. Children of poor Black African parents do not have the same cultural capital as that of middle class Black Africans. With their resources at home, middle class parents were able to prepare their children for school with the right tools.

Children and Society

Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in South Africa is being replaced by a new national curriculum as enshrined in the new plan referred to as *Schooling 2025*. One of the points in *Schooling 2025* is to highlight the importance of indigenous languages. Grade 1 to Grade 3 learners will be encouraged to learn in mother tongue so as to raise literacy and numeracy by grade 3. Yet parents who are the basic consumers need to buy into this plan. Children are likely to value or devalue language according to what they see and hear. The language factor can affect learners who might be incorrectly viewed as having performance problems. Early Childhood Education had begun to get attention it deserved from the mid-20th century. It was Bloom (1964) who contended that Intelligence Quotient (IQ) was not fixed at birth but could be improved through special early childhood programmes. Looking at this study there is necessity to raise their confidence and close the achievement gap that will widen when compared to middle class children in later years.

In the two township day-care centres it was clear that a number of children struggled with language of teaching. As a result of this they

had become quiet and inward looking. Unlike the middle class children, many of these children did not receive the support at their homes. The latter was confirmed by their parents who stated that frequently they did not have resources for social and cultural capital. There is then a need for society to be careful at how they educate children. Elkind (1987) has warned parents and educationists that inappropriate early intellectual stimulation can have a negative impact on children. The question then will be whether there is any potential negative impact of learning second language, especially for the disadvantaged learners introduced to subtractive bilingualism. The quality of poor early childhood centres will affect the achievement levels of the learners. Hurn (1974) avers that inferior schooling compounds the initial handicaps of the learners and leads them directly to the perpetuation of poverty and inequality.

Alexander and Bloch (2004) posit that when we consider how we introduce children to reading and writing, the challenges are to counter the grip of colonial and apartheid education that continues to influence early literacy learning. Lareau and Horvat (1999:37) also argue that class differences in parents' and learners' attitudes or behaviours toward schools affect the children's progress. A pre-school child who does not have the social and cultural capital, who cannot understand what happens in the classroom, who does not see positive attitude towards school from parents soon learns to be unsure about schooling. As they grow up, they perceive the school as a place where they do not have any advantages.

According to Piaget's theory, the children in the study were in the preoperational stage and in this stage they experiment with language. Hamachek (1995:153) points out that Piaget observed that language is essential to cognitive development in three ways:

- ♦ Language allows people to communicate ideas and thoughts;
- ♦ Language assists thinking and memory; and
- ♦ Language allows a person to construct mental pictures and images.

The working class child may find it difficult to support his cognitive language learning skills as highlighted by Piaget above. Middle class Black children outside the township though,

develop (English) language skills through their contact with their world (Msila 2011). These children find pleasure in learning new words from books, pictures, television, and the environment plays a crucial role in enhancing these skills. In the world around them, the preoperational children can learn from imitating their teachers, their parents and their siblings. Imitative speech is the primary vehicle that children use to expand their awareness of the world. Moreover, parents and teachers can greatly influence language learning, for better or worse (Hamachek 1995). Furthermore, Hamachek (1995: 165) cites Ruth Beard (1969) who observed:

All evidence suggests that in addition to the provision of a stimulating environment, attention from adults and older children, especially in answering questions and in conversation, is immensely important to developing in this stage. It is in these respects that many children from poor environments suffer.

As seen in this study, the working class child needs more support or they will continue to suffer the limits of schooling in grade 1 and beyond; especially if they are placed in dysfunctional schools. Without good models at home and at school the working class child will be behind. These children need to be listened to and be given time to explore their environment. There appears to be much pressure on working class children, trying to learn a second language where they get minimal support. This just delays the cognitive development and enhancing intellectual characteristics.

CONCLUSION

Probably before they even join any kindergarten, children perceive the society's expectations. The Vygotskian theory shows how they are influenced by society constantly. As they continue in their first formal schools they soon learn that indigenous languages are somewhat relegated to the back. Many disadvantages in education are sown in early schooling. The upper socio-economic groups have enhanced access to resources and they also have power to decide what knowledge is of most worth and how it should be taught. Poor children frequently never get to the same levels of their middle class peers and this leads to literacy achievement gap. Those township children who start nursery school might be trapped in dysfunc-

tional township schools where they might not necessarily glean cognitive and intellectual skills linked to the English language. There are still many who argue that the high failure rate in matric (grade 12) is largely due to inadequacies linked to the language of learning and teaching in township schools. The challenge for many poor learners trapped in the historically Black dysfunctional schools is that they soon discover that their English is not competent enough, whilst their indigenous language skills are also not adequately developed. Below, the paper turns to recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study drew the following recommendations:

- ♦ Education for the poor should be made priority by policymakers. Education should and can be made a tool for social transformation. More resources should be made available to poor schools;
- ♦ Schools need to be clustered according to "poor" and "affluent". More funding should be biased towards the poor schools;
- ♦ The teachers in initial teacher training programmes as well as in in-service programmes should be sensitised about ways of dealing with issues of democracy and justice in classrooms. This would ensure that they are able to deal with the poor child;
- ♦ More research needs to be conducted on the education of the poor.

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