Teachers' Experiences of Parent Involvement with Diverse Family Types

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Samevatting

In die hedendaagse Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing ervaar die gesinseenheid toenemend druk en kom uiteenlopende gesinstipes en ouerskaps- en kindersorgreëlings voor. Uit 'n Christelike oogpunt is dit belangrik dat die gesin by die kind se formele onderwys betrokke bly en dat alle skole kinders van alle gesinsagtergronde steun. Hierdie situasie skep nuwe uitdagings vir skole om doeltreffende ouerbetrokkenheid te bewerkstellig. In hierdie artikel word verslag gedoen van die bevindings van 'n kwalitatiewe ondersoek na onderwysers se ervarings van verskillende gesinstipes en ouerskaps- en kindersorgreëlings in onafhanklike multikulturele voorskoolse sentrums in 'n stedelike gebied in Suid-Afrika. 'n Literatuurstudie oor die status van die gesin in Suid-Afrika bied agtergrond. Die bevindinge dui daarop dat gesinne dit moeilik vind om 'n gesinslewe van goeie gehalte in 'n mededingende stadsomgewing te handhaaf en dat ouerskapsreëlings dikwels veelvuldige versorgers soos grootouers, au pairs *en kindersorgdienste insluit. Laastens word strategieë voorgestel vir omvangryke ouerbetrokkenheid wat voorsiening maak vir die veranderende gesin*.

1. Introduction

Educational reform to increase parent involvement in South African schools since 1994 has focused mainly on decentralised school governance which has introduced a new and important role for parents in schools. *The South African Schools Act* No. 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996) mandates the establishment of school governing bodies (SGBs) in all public schools underpinned by the philosophy that schools should become self-managed and self-reliant. A key component of the Act (RSA, 1996) is the definition of a parent which includes all primary caregivers: the biological parent or legal guardian; the person legally entitled to custody

of a learner; or any person who fulfils the obligation towards the learner's schooling. This broad definition provides a legal basis for South African schools to acknowledge diverse family types and implies the school's obligation to develop an inclusive range of parent involvement strategies accordingly. Among others, this implies a parent can be single, married, a relative (cousin, aunt, uncle or grandparent), a legal guardian, an older sibling, a surrogate, a foster parent or a group such as a commune. To build effective parent involvement in the interests of the child, schools should recognise different household structures, living arrangements and childcare and parenting arrangements. But it is exceptional for South African schools to organise parent involvement to accommodate diverse family types, living arrangements and multiple caregivers (Van Wyk, 1996). Very few studies in school-family-community relations have looked at the role of extended and fictive kin and parenting agents inside and outside the household. Family-school relations focus largely on derivatives of the marital dyad and the nuclear family with little attention given to the needs and the potential of non-nuclear kin in the child's education.

2. Families, childcare and parenting arrangements

The family is a distinct social structure with specific functions (Strydom, 1997:13). From a Christian perspective, the family is a community of love, bound into a unit that acts as such in society (Van Schalkwyk, 1986:178). The family does not only provide physical care and protection for its members but, in this community of love, children are moulded by parents: corrected, advised and supported. The family provides a secure haven from which the child can venture into the world and engage with the unfamiliar (Van Schalkwyk, 1986:179). The family is also an educational community which must accept responsibility for the child's education. The family initially undertakes the educative function itself and later entrusts the child's formal education to the school (Louw, 1998:209). However, the family remains primarily responsible for and may not be excluded from the child's education. Christian parents are obliged to participate in a child's schooling and thereby ensure that the spirit and character, aims, content, teaching methods and management thereof are reconcilable with Christian principles (Cahill, 2000:6).

In a Christian perspective, the school and family cohere in a unique way in the education system (Conradie, 1989:90). The family may make certain demands on the school such as that education should not clash with the philosophy of the family. The curriculum and teaching methods should be

according to true pedagogic principles and the community's life-view (Van Schalkwyk, 1986:214). Similarly, the school has an important complementary role regarding the educative function. The school can expect parents to ensure that children attend school regularly, to create favourable circumstances at home to promote educative teaching and to ensure that formal education rests on a firm home basis. Thus, families and schools should not function apart (Conradie, 1989:100). Parents and teachers are equal partners and should enrich and support each other in various ways. The school can expect the family to render specific services to the school community (Van Schalkwyk, 1990:64).

The Christian tradition in education has always affirmed the value of family and parenthood and upheld the tradition of family life (Pyper, 1996:viii). However, where families are dysfunctional due to a myriad of situations, such as death, divorce or abandonment, Christian educators are urgently called upon to respond to the needs of children affected by family dysfunction with love, care and support and not disdain. They should refrain from attacking non-traditional family structures and practices and focus on the positive aspects of individual families and ways that they can be strengthened in the interests of children. This is in accordance with the current movement among the helping professions who work with families, including the Christian clergy, towards a strengths-based model of understanding and relating to families. This model is more interested in how families succeed than in how they fail. The strengths-based view seeks to identify and support the key ingredients that enable a family to cope and even thrive in spite of crises and persistent problems. This model identifies the protective and preventative elements that fortify families (Weaver, Revilla & Koenig, 2002:31). Similarly, the school's task is to support children irrespective of their family background.

2.1 Families, childcare and parenting arrangements in South Africa

In South Africa various family-related factors demand that the school should view its partnership with the home from a new perspective. These include changes in family demography, increasing female employment, sustained urbanisation including the inflow of black people into formerly white residential areas, a growing black middle class, unprecedented economic growth, a burgeoning consumer culture which coexists with dire poverty and the HIV/Aids pandemic. Hence important questions for the study of families and the implementation of parent involvement are: What do families look like? How do parents and other caregivers organise childcare and parenting tasks? Who participates in the provision of care of children inside and outside the home? How do schools recognise family

types and different caregivers? How do schools develop parent involvement practices to accommodate them?

The status, structure and needs of families in South Africa are discussed in the Report of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) (Amoateng, Richter, Makiwane & Rama, 2004), which shows that, in spite of the great pressure on family life, South Africa remains a very family-oriented society (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:73). Marriage is an important family event and the bulk of childbearing occurs within the context of marriage (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:58). However, there are distinct differences in families' living arrangements due to the juxtaposition of two distinct family systems: the extended family system identified with Blacks and the nuclear family system identified with Whites; Coloureds and Asians lie between the two systems (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:73). This implies racial differences in terms of children's living arrangements. Black children are more likely to spend less time in two-parent households and more years in extended family households, due to the African cultural preference for extended family living in spite of modernisation and urbanisation, labour migration and more recently, the effect of the HIV/Aids pandemic (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:4). In rural areas and impoverished settlements black children frequently live in extended households headed by pensioners, usually the child's grandparents, highlighting the dependence on social grants for survival. However, parental involvement of non-residential parents in child rearing is not altogether lacking and is demonstrated through mechanisms such as regular cash remittances and visits (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:75). In comparison with white families, black child rearing practices are more malleable, the boundaries between parent and non-parent family members are more flexible and black families are more likely to make use of cross-household caregiving arrangements rather than paid caregivers outside the family as white families tend to do.

The gradual but steady increase in the divorce rate for all racial groups in South Africa since 1996 implies that children from all racial groups are more likely to experience significant changes in family structure and to live in a variety of family configurations across their childhood and adolescence (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:63). This draws attention to the parenting role and needs of single parents, usually mothers, of absent fathers and of stepparents in blended and remarried families. Generally single parents have fewer economic resources, less help in the provision of childcare and behaviour monitoring and lower levels of support than married parents (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:64; McLanahan & Sandefur,

1994). The parental involvement of the non-residential parent in child raising may vary greatly from total absence to shared parenting arrangements.

The occurrence of extended family living arrangements, single parent families and parent absent households in South Africa are all contexts that focus interest on the role of extended kin (aunts, uncles, grandparents etc.) and fictive kin (defined by Cox & Narula (2003:1) as close, kinlike relations such as godparents, including quasi-family members such as domestic servants, nannies and *au pairs*) in parenting and childcare, as well as other agencies outside the home which provide childcare such as aftercare centres. In particular, single parents are more likely to seek help in childcare from extended kin than couples, and black single parents are most likely to seek relatives' help (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:74). Kinship care, particularly of grandparents, has always formed a culturally congruent practice in black families in Africa and in dispersed communities (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:74). Moreover, an increasing body of international literature on grandparenthood indicates that, across race and ethnicity, grandparents, particularly grandmothers, are becoming more frequently involved in parenting and childcare (Smith, Dannison & Vach-Hasse, 1998:12), a trend also observable in South Africa, according to Amoateng *et al.* (2004:74). A new development is the growing phenomenon of child-headed households due to the loss of adult caregivers as a result of HIV/Aids (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:67).

In spite of the preference among blacks for extended families, households headed by younger persons of all race groups in South Africa are much more likely to be nuclear (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:69). This implies that the likelihood of parental isolation in child rearing will increase, as well as the family's dependence on childcare arrangements provided by multiple caregivers outside the home while parents are at work. Finally, only a slight increase in the percentage of interracial marriages between 1996 and 2001 means that the numbers of children growing up in interracial households in South Africa remains very small (Amoateng *et al.,* 2004:69). The incidence of white families fostering or adopting orphaned black children is not common but has increased (Mabry, 1997) since interracial adoptions became legal (South African Law Commission, 2002).

In summary, the family as social institution in South Africa is undergoing transformation, although this is not necessarily linear in the sense of it shifting from some typical 'traditional' pattern to a typical Western pattern. While modernising forces such as formal education, urban living and wage employment are shaping family patterns, crucial cultural traditions and

racial differences ensure that distinctive features of family life have largely persisted. However, divorce, the ever growing number of women in employment and the effect of poverty and disease, among others, is creating a complex set of living arrangements and childcare and parenting arrangements among South African families today. In terms of the role of the school in organising home-school relations, Bateman's (1996:4) words ring true: "What people regard as their family is their family and this is the reality we, as service providers, must deal with." The author believes this highlights the need for schools to organise home-school relations strategically to meet the needs of diverse family structures and extended and fictive kin who fulfil caregiving roles within the family, as well as other caregivers who do not live with the child in a household.

3. Research design

Against the above discussion, a qualitative inquiry was undertaken to teachers' experiences of home-school relations in a small sample of independent multiracial preschools situated in an urban area of Gauteng. The aim was to explore teachers' experiences of different family types, caregiving and parenting arrangements and the effectiveness of parent involvement within this context.

3.1 Selection and description of schools and participants

Six independent preschools with membership in a national association were selected by judgment sampling. The participants comprised the principals and eighteen teachers (three from each school). The principals and several of the teachers were acquainted due to their membership on the national body and had participated in joint projects. The schools are funded solely by moderate to high school fees. The learner enrolment at each school is small: approximately 150 children per school. The schools' reputations for excellence are demonstrated by the waiting list for vacancies. In these schools, according to one principal, "*children enjoy good facilities, excellent resources and the attention of teachers who love to be here and regard each child as special*". Since the early 1990's the schools have become increasingly multiracial; most black learners are from the rapidly emerging black middle class who have moved into formerly white suburbs in search of better living conditions including schooling. A small number of black children still live in the nearby township and commute to the schools.

The very low teacher turnover can be ascribed to optimal working conditions such as attractive physical facilities and equipment and small

classes. Four of the principals and several teachers have taught at their respective schools for more than 20 years. One principal commented, "*We taught the moms and dads, the older brothers and sisters, and now we teach their children*." This continuity has led to the creation of family-like schools with a warm, comfortable atmosphere. The most common parent involvement activities are membership of the board of trustees, fund-raising, acting as audience at school events, volunteering as classroom aids when teachers are absent or on field trips and the maintenance of physical facilities. Teachers welcome spontaneous, informal parent-teacher interactions daily at drop-off and pick-up times. The school policy requires all children to be accompanied by an adult or adults designated as such to the classroom or a fenced pick-up zone which is supervised by a teacher on arrival or departure from school. One principal kept the school office open prior to school starting time so that parents could call in and arrange further meetings if needed. This had "*cut car park gossip and a problem could be dealt with quickly and without a lot of fuss*". Teachers expected to get to know families well, even intimately, during a child's time at the school. Home visits were undertaken by teachers in all schools. Due to the generally close bond with families, teachers felt they could identify trends in parenting, parent-school communication and childcare and family living arrangements. Thus, they were regarded as information rich participants in the qualitative inquiry.

3.2 Data gathering and analysis

Data was gathered by means of six focus groups, each consisting of a principal and three teachers at one of the schools, during an annual conference organised by the national association. Focus groups were posed a leading question regarding family types, living, childcare and parenting arrangements represented in the schools and the impact on parent involvement. The emphasis was on the interaction between participants, and the researcher took a less active role in directing talk (Barbour, 2008:18). Sessions were recorded and field notes made. Transcriptions were made of the discussions and data was analysed according to qualitative methods. By reading and rereading the transcripts tentative themes were identified. Firstly, relevant extracts in the text were highlighted and then grouped without comment under themes (Delamont, 2002:172). Thereafter the themes were clustered into categories and compared with the relevant literature (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993:267) on parent involvement. Finally, suitable extracts from the responses were paraphrased or suitable quotations were selected as rich data to illustrate the categories (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993:267). Consistent with the

guidelines for inductive analysis, all the ideas discussed in the section entitled "Findings" emerged directly from data produced by the key question.

4. Findings

Significant patterns emerging from the analysis of the participants' responses were synthesised and brought into relation with prior research and theory as viewed in the literature.

4.1 Family diversity in the participating schools

Most families in the schools were two-parent families living as nuclear units in their own homes in the surrounding suburbs. However, a small but significant number of reconstituted families were also included. In addition, participants reported a small but significant number of divorced single mothers and one school had experience of a same sex couple. In most families, both parents were working as civil servants, professionals or business people. Extended family living arrangements were more common among black families where a grandparent or other family members were living in the same household, but some white families also had grandparents on the premises housed in a separate cottage or 'granny flat'. In some black families the extended household comprised older children, usually nephews and nieces, from rural areas who lived with the family during the school terms to give the children the advantage of attending English medium former Model C or independent schools in the area. These schools are perceived by black families as having the cultural capital, that is, the appropriate cultural attributes and norms for success in the system. In particular, English medium schooling is seen as the optimal opportunity for children to learn English, to learn to work in an interracial context and to achieve rapid upward mobility (Samuel & Sayed, 2003). The participants reported that black parents were employed in the public service or in the corporate world. Virtually all the black families were resident in the area; only two schools reported having families who lived in rejuvenated parts of a nearby township. Across all the racial groups represented in the schools, parents regarded a 'good' preschool, such as those presented in this inquiry, as a stepping stone to enrolment in quality independent or public primary schools.

In the case of employed single parents and dual earner families, irrespective of racial background, teachers found parents to be stressed, over-scheduled and committed to working long hours to maintain a high standard of urban living in a competitive work environment. Teachers who

had undertaken home visits commented on large, luxurious houses, smaller residences in gated security estates, a number of expensive cars per family and an abundance of books, toys and technology present in most homes. One school followed the tradition that: "*Teachers are always invited to birthday parties. These visits are greatly looked forward to by the children ... and they give staff extra insight into where children are coming from and what problems might exist*." Teachers reported on lavish birthday parties often planned by professionals with hired entertainment and expensive gifts. Projects such as "Take-Home-Teddy" (whereby children take home a toy bear for a weekend and report to the class on family activities involving the toy) also gave teachers a glimpse into family life. Over weekends families often ate at restaurants or took a breakaway weekend at a local resort, but family time usually meant commercialised entertainment rather than quality child-parent interaction. One teacher commented, "*Picnics? Parents would rather pay for a meal at the Spur, a movie or new toys or a Spiderman outfit from the mall than doing anything old-fashioned like a picnic or visit to the Zoo*." In terms of close child-parent interactions, teachers felt that children were impoverished. A teacher summed it up, "*The parents shower their children with material things to make up for the lack of time and effort they put into their child. These parents are too busy earning the money that they need to maintain their lifestyle to have time. They are tired by the evening*." Fathers were particularly absent due to long office hours or business trips: "*Children will tell you my dad is in Cape Town or London or wherever*". Workshops organised with parents had showed that families struggle to find time to enjoy meals together and weekends away were usually organised with the needs of stressed-out parents in mind rather than the children. This corroborates Evans' (2004:105) finding that in contemporary families, adult needs for relaxation take precedence over children's needs and diminish the quality of childhood.

The payment of high school fees in all schools reinforced the perception of schooling as a financial transaction and not a relationship between community, parents and schools. Moreover, teachers remarked on the tendency of parents to define parent involvement by paying for things rather than spending time at school. A principal said, "*We have no trouble raising money for school improvements. Parents ask, 'What's needed?' and pull out the cheque book. But to give their time, that's another story*." Some teachers were sensitive to the class division involved in serving such a generally affluent community. A teacher commented wryly, "*Did you see the parents' cars in the car park? We're the poor ones and some of them look down on us, just teachers. They are the doctors and lawyers, etc. But when it comes to their children, we must solve all the problems*."

However, the high standard of living demanded a high price in terms of parents' personal stamina and family life. Teachers felt that irrespective of their structure, virtually all the families showed stress while they functioned in a competitive, consumer culture. Parents justified long working hours, corporate travel and stressful schedules to teachers saying, "*I have to work so I can give my children what I didn't have*." Due to tight schedules, "*Parents want to outsource their parenting tasks just like the company they work for outsources subsidiary responsibilities*" commented a teacher. Overloaded time schedules and work commitments together with the belief that high fees entitled parents to make additional demands of the school meant that many parents were unwilling to be personally involved in their children's lives but were happy to pay others to assume parenting tasks. One principal related the following anecdote of a child who had been prescribed eye exercises by a specialist: "*The mother actually approached me to find out if I could find a staff member to do these exercises with the child after school. She said 'I don't have time but I am willing to pay'.*" Another teacher remarked: "*And it's not just the working mothers, the stay-at-home moms lead a frenetic social life: the gym, the malls, their friends. Some can't wait to drop the kids off so that they can do their own thing*."

4.2 Parenting arrangements

Teachers appeared to accept the diverse kinds of family structures represented, although there was a tendency to stress the difficulties, perceived or not, of children from single parent homes. Teachers found it more difficult to cope with the variety of non-parent caregivers and parenting arrangements represented. Teachers were more tolerant of varied childcare and parenting arrangements made by extended family living arrangements among black families, single parents and dual earner couples, but they disapproved of a growing trend among intact families with stay-at-home mothers to use multiple caregivers. These childcare and parenting arrangements are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

4.2.1 Grandcare

Grandparents are most often nominated as additional caregivers by biological parents (Hunter, Pearson, Ialongo & Kellam, 1998:349). But grandparent care is usually the result of a family crisis or disaster and often means a change in living arrangements in which the child moves from the family home to that of grandparents. However, teachers did not find this to be true of the families involved. Teachers mentioned that many single employed mothers made use of grandparent care as a result of their single

parent status, although the grandparent(s) usually lived in their own home. However, teachers found an increasing number of intact families who were making consistent use of grandparents as caregivers during the day, "*just for convenience, to suit mom and dad*". Often a grandparent was the only 'parent' teachers interacted with at arrival or departure time throughout the year; parents attended formal school meetings. Grandparents were sometimes employed, usually in part-time positions or they had retired and were fully responsible for parenting the child for the entire day. They brought children to school, dropped them off at classrooms, explained medication or dietary requirements to teachers and fetched the children either to care for them during the afternoons or to continue ferrying them to other activities. Grandparents did this out of loyalty and commitment but often mentioned that they were exhausted, concerned about the child's health, discipline issues or had had to change their own plans to suit the ever-increasing needs of busy corporate parents. A teacher related the following incident: "*We have some grandparents who look after the children every day for the entire school term. They are willing but often confess they are tired and no longer have lives of their own. Yesterday a gran complained, 'It was my afternoon off but my daughter phoned and said she had a meeting.' She said, 'What could I do? I cancelled my own plans. I don't do it for my daughter, but I do it for the children.*'"

The literature confirms that grandcare is a stressful occupation. Generally grandparents are committed to providing the best future possible for their grandchildren. Grandparents assume the caregiver's role in order to maintain family ties and out of a deep sense of family loyalty (Scannapecio & Jackson, 1996:190). However, this practice takes its toll on the kinship triad: caregivers, grandchildren and parents. High levels of depression and poor health are reported among grandparents (Kelley, 1993:331); children often exhibit emotional problems (Smith *et al.,* 1998:16) and parents may show anger and resentment at grandparents' participation in discipline and rule setting (Kelley, 1993:335). Grandparents report stress-related difficulties and may have health problems of their own. Social insulation is another concern. Grandparents often find they are too old to socialise with the parents of the children's friends but are cut off from visiting their own peers (Shore & Hayslip, 1994). Many feel guilty or embarrassed that they have had to take over parental roles on behalf of their adult children and worry about the pressure the latter are under (Stanley, 1997:2).

4.2.2 Au pair *care*

In many industrialised countries parents share their child minding responsibilities with professional caregivers (Van Ijzendoorn, Tavecchio,

Stams, Verhoeven & Reiling, 1998:771). In South Africa domestic helpers are frequently employed as child minders. However, this kind of childcare is usually confined to the home and domestic workers are seldom able to supply the sophisticated services that urban life requires, such as driving children to extracurricular activities, helping them with schoolwork or providing a more formal learning environment at home. Against this background, the teachers commented on the small but growing trend of employing professional caregivers, such as *au pairs* and nannies, by dual earner couples and employed single mothers and, in some cases, by affluent stay-at-home mothers.

Au pairs dropped and fetched children at school and were responsible for after-school care and after-school activities. Teachers' reactions ranged from tolerant to disapproving of this tendency and they were at a loss as how to relate to *au pairs*. They regarded them far less favourably than grandparents and viewed them as a kind of go-between or courier through whom they were reluctantly compelled to communicate with parents. A teacher remarked, "*What worries me about the* au pairs *is that I as the teacher must approach them to tell them what to do. They seldom approach me to find out what needs to be done. Some parents feel because they have an au pair for their child, it releases them of the obligation. One parent never sees the diary* [school to home message book]*, the* au pair *signs everything.*" Moreover, *au pairs* tended to enter and exit children's lives as most stayed with a family for only a year. Teachers claimed that a change was upsetting for the child and had an observable impact on behaviour and emotions. Brodkin (2004:1) confirms that the departure of a caregiver is a stressful experience for a child and that parents should inform teachers about changes in familiar routines in order to help the child adjust. Moreover, teachers felt that *au pairs* were "*... lax regarding discipline. The child seems to treat the* au pair *as an older sister. You should see how they behave around the* au pair*, hanging on her and wheedling*". Van Ijzendoorn *et al.* (1998:779) confirm that professional caregivers appear to show less authoritarian control than parents. Often the relationship between the family and a fictive kin such as a paid and/or live-in child minder has ambivalent qualities (Cox & Narula, 2003:342) and the *au pair's* membership in a host family means that this quasi-family relationship is extended to include the school.

Thus, it is crucial that schools and families keep open communication regarding the roles and responsibilities of professional caregivers. Poor communication between parents, caregivers and teachers about the child in their care increases the risk of discontinuity between the microsystems that

make up the child's environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Better communication between parents, caregivers and teachers will mean a better quality of care for the child. The input of various caregivers, the school and the family should be co-ordinated; the *au pair* is an important bridge between home and school and teachers need to be informed about the extent to which caring has been delegated to an *au pair*. Parents need to give teachers permission to involve the *au pair* where necessary in the child's development. Discrepancies in the child rearing attitudes and beliefs of parents, teachers and caregivers, whether kin or fictive, affect the child's wellbeing (Van Ijzendoorn *et al.*, 1998:772). Parents require guidance regarding the boundaries governing caregiving and the importance of goodness-of-fit between the family and a professional caregiver which should be reached before hiring.

4.2.3 Childcare services

Thorne's (1999:118) research on the wide battery in child products and services in metropolitan areas in California, United States resonates in the middle class suburbs of South African cities. In addition to *au pairs*, teachers in this inquiry described an array of services from remedial help, occupational and speech therapy, and child psychologists and family therapists to day care centres, holiday camps, birthday party planners and taxi companies willing to transport young children across the city to school. In other words, parents make use of a privatised infrastructure for raising children with access and quality depending on the parent's ability to pay.

In these schools parents made varying use of several of the above services. The most common practice was the placement of the child in an after-school centre from midday until the early evening. Teachers involved in after-school care mentioned that children were consistently fetched after regular closing time by parents. Three preschools provided an after-school care service which was run by staff other than the preschool teaching staff. In the case of two of these schools a cohesive relationship was maintained with aftercare staff. They were hired by the school governing board, attended school staff meetings and the overall supervision of the aftercare staff fell under the principals of the preschools. In the other case, the aftercare centre rented part of the school premises and was run separately from the school. Certain children from the remaining three schools attended other aftercare centres in the area. As in the case of *au pairs*, aftercare staff, the school and families should communicate with each other regularly and openly about the children in their care. Teachers agreed that the school itself was the ideal agent to facilitate and create opportunities for communication in this regard.

A hybrid and less direct form of childcare provided by external agencies is the engagement of children in a busy schedule of extracurricular activities. This was also common among the children in these preschools. A teacher lamented, "*Most children just don't have time to be children. In the afternoons it's the hectic round of pottery, OT, kiddies gymnastics, ballet, art, music. Even karate – and this is for 3- to 5-year-olds. No wonder the children are exhausted and I think it's just another way for parents to keep the children off their hands*." Teachers felt that this was both a strategy to delegate parenting tasks during the afternoons, setting mothers free for their own activities, and as a result of peer pressure. Mothers often confessed to teachers that extracurricular activities were expensive, added to already demanding schedules and sometimes of uncertain value, but they enrolled children "*to keep up with the Joneses and to give the kids the same chances other children have*".

5. Implications for reflection and practice

In general, teachers in this inquiry felt that the experience of families and home-school relations which they had acquired during lengthy teaching careers had changed and was still changing rapidly. Younger families were more liable to use childcare arrangements, irrespective of the marital or employment status of biological mothers. Parent education arranged by schools had in the past focused primarily on the nuclear family and sometimes on single parents, but teachers disclosed that no efforts had been made to address the needs of grandparents or other caregivers. Mothers who had previously formed a traditional source of volunteers at these schools were now less available; grandparents occasionally offered assistance and were always willing to help when invited. The latter formed a potential pool of volunteers that had not yet been utilised by the schools. Social events were generally well attended by parents, but schools neglected to invite alternative caregivers. These events would provide an optimal opportunity to network with the alternative caregiving circle that individual families had created. Direct contact with parents was less frequent, as this had been partly replaced by interactions with grandparents or *au pairs*. However, parents (and caregivers) were continuously available on cell phones; cell phone messaging was widely used to communicate with parents and vice versa. Teachers found parents more prompt to respond to SMSs rather than e-mail, although the latter was also used in home-school communications.

At the parents' own admission to teachers, parent-child interactions were often sacrificed in the pressures of daily living, although homes were

richly endowed with learning materials. Schools did not find it difficult to find parents willing to serve on school governing bodies/boards. Parents, particularly fathers, were often more comfortable sharing organisational or professional expertise in formal structures than through other forms of parent involvement. Parents found involvement in decision making an extension of their occupational role, times of meetings and expectations were clear-cut and participation on committees brought them in touch with the administration of the school, maintenance of facilities and financial planning. In terms of community involvement, teachers were aware of children enrolled in aftercare and had an idea of the range of services and extracurricular activities in which children participated, but the schools had not taken an active role in collaborating with these out of school agencies. In general, the needs and schedules of parents appeared to take precedence over child rearing responsibilities and limited traditional parent involvement practice.

Against the above background, Redding's (nd:24) analysis of family-school relations provides a useful framework for understanding the observations of teachers in this inquiry. Redding (nd:24) links family-school relations to three historical phases of economic development. In the first phase, typical of agricultural societies, but also of many families in rural South Africa, the family lives at subsistence level relying on children for work. In this case the family may not see the potential of education for the child beyond a certain phase. In the second phase, common to the industrial economy, the goals of the family and the school converge, with both seeking the improvement of the child's ultimate economic situation. In the third, that of post-industrial affluence, parents find the demands of child rearing in conflict with adult pursuits. They expect the school to fill the void. The latter category appears to fit closely the kinds of families in this inquiry and the parenting and childcare arrangements sought. The challenge to schools in this category is to seek ways to re-engage children with the families and assist parents to develop quality relationships with their children, thereby avoiding the loss of satisfaction which parents deny themselves by relegating childbearing responsibilities to others. But teachers should also avoid unproductive blaming of parents or misplaced nostalgia for 'the good old days'. Instead schools should reappraise home-school relations with a view to involving the multiple caregivers represented in the school in the various areas of parent involvement. In this regard, Epstein's (1997) comprehensive model of six types of parent involvement is a useful basis for reflection and future planning for improved parent involvement practice.

In the light of the findings of this inquiry, the following section makes recommendations for improved practice based on the six types of parent involvement identified by Epstein (1997).

5.1 Parenting skills

Family education programmes should be sensitive to the wide ranging types and circumstances of families, and their living and caregiving arrangements. Where parent confidence and competence is eroded by the demands of post-industrial life, schools often need "to parent parents" by giving professional advice (Evans, 2004:178). Parent education programmes should deal with collaboration between schools and caregivers and between caregivers and parents as well as the contributions which caregivers, whether kin or fictive, have to make to the educational process. Collaboration should mean that all parents, including non-residential parents and all types of caregivers should be given a voice, and that voice should be heard.

With regard to specific categories of caregivers, parenting support programmes should be offered for both grandparents and for grandparents and parents respectively. Guidance should be given in terms of rule setting, discipline and emotional support for children and parents should be informed of grandparents' needs to avoid the latter's stress and social isolation, and to ensure goodness-of-fit with parents, thereby reducing potential conflict. Professional caregivers, such as *au pairs*, nannies and after-school centre staff, should be welcomed as part of the school and informed of school policies and practice through annual induction programmes. Schools, in turn, require clear guidelines and permission from parents regarding the roles and responsibilities of caregivers: what information to share or arrangements to be made with professional caregivers.

5.2 Communication

The nature of the preschool means that teachers can maintain close personal interactions daily with parents and caregivers. However, ambivalence in roles should be eliminated to ensure effective two-way communication. Schools and parents need to be sure that information relayed by caregivers to teachers is accurate, and vice versa. Parent-teacher interviews, parents' evenings and social events should include invitations to grandparents and other caregivers and should be planned to maximise attendance of all. Caregivers, both in and outside the family, should be included in surveys and needs analyses and non-residential parents should be kept informed of the child's progress.

5.3 Volunteering

Recruitment and training of volunteers should include grandparents, especially with regard to teacher aides, and assistance with excursions and school events. The contribution of grandparents should be innovatively used, acknowledged and celebrated. Special events where volunteers are utilised should be arranged to include fathers.

5.4 Learning at home

Good at-home parenting has been identified as the single most powerful influence on the young child's achievement and adjustment and this is mainly realised in frequent, quality child-parent interactions (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Parents should be informed of research that supports the impact of parent involvement on children's outcomes. Parents should be encouraged by family literacy programmes, home visits, modelling, provision of resources such as Storysacks, and guidelines for vacation and weekend activities to spend time with children. Moreover, such activities should include the wide range of caregivers.

5.4 Decision-making

School policies should represent family realities and the input of all caregivers should inform policies and decisions. Parent and caregiver participation on formal structures is vital for financial planning, fundraising, advocating for the school and for advising the principal to shape plans for improvement. Schools should endeavour to recruit and train parent leaders among black families who are less likely to be represented on formal bodies. Training should be ongoing; as soon as a school develops a team of informed, knowledgeable parents, they lose children who proceed to primary school. However, parent leaders developed in the preschool are an excellent pool for the primary school and secondary school.

5.5 Community involvement

Schools should collaborate with after-school centres and providers of extracurricular services and activities. The challenge lies in the procedural complexities of linking and liaising with multiple consistencies. Schools can keep child service providers informed of their values and expectations by hosting information evenings and strategic planning meetings. Schools can facilitate good relationships with aftercare centres by sharing knowledge and expertise on occasion and by sharing facilities. In this way a web of support is created through which the child benefits most.

6. Conclusions

Schools are well positioned to monitor the effects of current social changes in families and parenting arrangements due to divorce, single parenthood and remarriage, to mention only a few developments. Some attention is being given to the childcare arrangements in extended families, mainly among black families, although this is more focused on extended families living in poverty. However, scant attention has been given to living, childcare and parenting arrangements among nuclear families and families in middle income groups. The inquiry reported on in this article showed that for different reasons, families across the racial divide in the middle income bracket are increasingly relying on a range of childcare and parenting strategies to cope with demands of post-industrial urban living and with the increased focus on the parents' rather than the child's needs. Schools should seek ways to engage with multiple caregivers and can act as a powerful co-ordinator of the activities of caregivers and parents in the interests of the child.

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