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Parental Involvement in the Process of Implementation of the National School Nutrition Programme in Public Schools

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ABSTRACT –This paper reports on perceptions of educators and parents about the involvement of the latter in the process of implementation of the National School Nutrition Programme in school districts in the Gauteng and Free State provinces. The paper elaborates on the empirical data gathered by means of qualitative, explorative and descriptive approaches using face to face interviews. Four research sites were purposefully selected from the Sedibeng and Fezile Dabi districts. The results indicated that the procedure for recruitment of parents was not clear a situation which led to a lack of transparency in the process. Furthermore, there were no clear strategies in place to empower parents thereby denying them an opportunity of being actively and fully involved in the National School Nutrition Programme. Thus, parents could not initiate and take ownership of the programme. Stipulations of the policy regarding their roles are limiting to the extent that they could not hold suppliers accountable for their inefficiency. Volunteering as food handlers was an eye-opener to some parents enabling them to realise the importance of their involvement in their children's education in general.

INTRODUCTION

Socio-economic problems including high poverty rate, unemployment, abuse, HIV/AIDS and others are prevalent in most disadvantaged communities posing challenges to schools' efforts to support learners in their learning. The consequences of such factors are played out in the learning environment in the form of learner behaviour that is unbecoming, developmental disorders and academic failure. These factors present challenges to schools in general and to teaching and learning in particular (De Villiers 1997). It is on this basis that selective intervention programmes such as the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), food garden projects, school uniform and others are implemented at schools to buffer the impact of these social factors. Selective intervention programmes target learners who are the most in need and who are at risk, thus, those who are in environments that could jeopardize their ability to perform well academically (Wyn et al. 2000:595). The NSNP which is the focus of this research improves the health and the nutritional status of school children (Wilderman and Mbebetho 2005) thereby, contributing in addressing hunger and poverty among the learners, their families and communities (Public Service Commission 2008:8). Nutrition, particularly in the short-term, is believed to have a positive impact upon individual behaviour, grade repetition, drop-out rates, learning achievement, school performance and helping in the development of social skills and self-esteem (Sorhaindo and Feinstein 2006; Adelman, Gilligan and Lehrer 2008: 28).

Although educators are at the forefront of the implementation of policies guiding the provision of selective intervention programmes, this mammoth task cannot be done without the involvement of parents. Parents have always been involved in school activities, attending meetings, volunteering in committees and academic matters. The Integrated School Health Policy (South Africa 2012), the White Paper 6 (Department of Education 2001) and the School Nutrition Programme (South Africa 1994) all mandate the involvement of parents in intervention programmes, coordinating efforts with educators to implement selective intervention programmes.

Parental involvement in these programmes is essential for the buy-in of the entire school community. Research indicates that when parents are involved in school activities in general, children tend to have high educational aspirations, perform well academically, and experience a

sense of school belonging (Cheung and Pomerantz 2012; Kuperminc, Darnell and Alvarez-Jimenez 2008). The media reports on learners who died (Mail and Guardian 2012; The Citezen 2014) and a thousand that had been hospitalised (News24 2014) because of food poisoning in the school feeding scheme in Limpopo is indicative of challenges that schools are faced with and lack of active involvement of parents in the implementation of NSNP.

It has long been internationally and nationally recognised that parental involvement has academic benefits (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014) and challenges (Naong and Morolong 2011), and although researchers focused on strategies of parental involvement (Okeke 2014), dimensions of involvement (Kaplan 2013) and others, no studies seem to have directed attention on the involvement of parents in the process of implementation of the NSNP in public primary schools..

THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN THE NSNP

Engelbrecht (2008:23) and Donald *et al.* (2008:52) strongly advocate for community-based approach in the implementation of intervention programmes in order to draw local and indigenous resources. The latter cannot be achieved where negative attitude towards parental involvement, lack of resources to facilitate such involvement, lack of parent empowerment and support for parent organizations (particularly in poorer communities) prevail (Belknap et al. 2008:172).

According to the NSNP (2009/10) the involvement of parents in the nutrition programme is three-fold: first, an active School Governing Body (SGB) can act as employers of food handlers and suppliers. Second, parents can work as volunteer food handlers responsible for preparation, cooking and serving of meals to learners in return for a monthly stipend of about R600 per month. Volunteer food handlers sign a contract of up to a year which is not renewed on expiry. Third, parents can supply neighbouring schools with food for the NSNP and or act as agents paying voluntary food handlers on behalf of the department (Department of Education 2008:10). Schools are supplied with the food based on a set menu and according to the number of children to be fed per school for the number of feeding days per month.

There is lack of uniformity among provinces regarding procurement issues as the National Schools' Nutritional circular No 107 (Department of Basic Education 2011) left the decision on which suppliers can be appointed entirely in the hands of the provincial department and not the SGB. In most provinces the procurement model used is that of the provincial tender system with

a strong focus on local empowerment and involvement. Specifications are advertised by the Tender Committee, once approved, the provincial NSNP Unit receives the list of approved suppliers and then informs the district NSNP Unit of the budget allocated for each supplier and for each school, the number of targeted learners and the number of feeding days. Challenges in the provisioning of NSNP which include a lack of resources, basic supplies and clean water, insufficient linkages to local agriculture and food vendors, corruption and theft (Buhl 2009:10) which hinder the stability of NSNP in South African schools can only be dealt by involving parents in the NSNP implementation process.

RESEARCH SITES

We investigated involvement of parents in the process of the implementation of the NSNP in the Sedibeng West district of the Sedibeng District Municipality (SDM) in Gauteng, and in the Fezile Dabi district of the Free State province. The SDM is believed to be the poorest municipality in Gauteng, with a general unemployment rate of 95% in 2009 (SDM 2009). The SDM had a poverty (lack of basic human needs) rate of 38% in 2010 and HIV/AIDS prevalence of 29% in 2009 (SDM, 2009/2010). The leading causes of death in SDM are influenza and pneumonia followed by tuberculosis. All these illnesses are HIV/AIDS opportunistic diseases and most of the deaths could be HIV related. In the Fezile Dabi district in the Free State province, the disease profile according to the Integrated Development Plan (South Africa 2013/2014) can be regarded as that of an “HIV modified triple burden”, consisting of persisting communicable disease and increasing chronic disease, mental disease, cancer and violence and injury of the epidemiologic transition combined with HIV and AIDS related mortality and morbidity.

The main hope for healthy communities in areas such as these therefore lies with the involvement of parents in the NSNP. The primary and secondary schools in these areas enroll thousands of learners, who would be directly affected for the worse if the NSNP, for example, is not properly managed by safeguarding the involvement of parents.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted research in schools in the Sedibeng West District in Gauteng province as well as in the Fezile Dabi district in the Free State province. We interviewed educators and parents about

the involvement of the latter in the NSNP. In this research the qualitative method was employed to gather data for the study which was explorative in nature.

Purposive sampling was used to get a small sample in order to have participants that provided the most detailed information (Lodico et al. 2010:134). Furthermore, the criterion sampling was used to recruit participants. In criterion sampling some characteristics that participants need to possess has to be acknowledged, the criterion for educators was based on: being an educator and a chairperson of the NSNP, for parents: being involved in the process of NSNP. The convenience sampling method was employed as both districts are at close proximity to the university. This sampling method is not ideal, but even in the best sampling methods the chairpersons of the NSNP and parents would have been chosen to participate. There was an element of a judgement approach, since efforts were made to ensure that participants came from a range of clinical, academic, managerial and political backgrounds. The aim of this research was not to generalise but to gather data on the participants' understanding of involvement of parents in NSNP. The data were made up of the participants' perceptions that were captured by a tape recorder in face-to-face interviews.

We interviewed educators and parents involved in NSNP in Sedibeng West and Fezile Dabi districts, using a sample of seven educators (n=7) who were chairpersons of the NSNP in the participating schools, eight parents (n=8) who were serving a year's contract as food handlers and three chairpersons of the SGB (n=3). The food handlers comprised six women and two men of which one of them was a retired teacher, the SGB chairpersons were all males and five female and two male educators participated in the age range 28-55 years.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by the following questions: (1) What is your perception regarding the involvement of parents in the NSNP?. Data were analysed inductively to identify themes. The rationale behind the choice of inductive approach was to allow the research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2006:364).

RESULTS

The results are presented in three categories: interactive involvement; functional involvement and potential involvement after contract expiry. Interactive involvement pertains to engagement of parents in the recruitment of food handlers, their orientation and training. The functional involvement entails the performance of duties by food handlers and the challenges in executing these duties. The last category is about the time when the contract expires and the possibility of involvement afterwards in other school activities.

Category 1: Interactive involvement

Recruitment of parents

Educators indicated that the selection of parents for involvement in the NSNP was based on having a learner in the school, the learner should be needy, the parent must not be working and in other schools parents must be already volunteering in other activities. In these schools educators were leading the recruitment of food handlers.

“The helpers should be parents who are poor” (Educator 1); *“educators identify needy children and their parents qualify to be in the committee”* (Educator 2); *“we make sure that parents have children at school”* (Educator 3); *“we encourage parents to volunteer in school activities develop a pool of volunteers”* (Educator 4).

Some schools did not use sound recruitment strategies that motivated parental involvement in school activities. In trying to come up with a fair strategy the schools in the Free State decided to do raffle to select parents. If the idea of recruiting parents was to harness and utilise the potential and strengths that parents can bring to the school, this strategy seemed to do the opposite.

“Parents who are interested write their names on pieces of paper, all the papers are put in a bowl and the first few that are pulled out are employed” (Educator 5); *“it is a matter of luck, if the name is pulled out then the parent wins”* (Educator 6); *“sometimes we end up employing parents that are lazy, there are no interviews”* (Educator 7).

In some schools posts were advertised in school news-letters to recruit parents. Parents at least read these news-letters an indication that they were interested in school matters. This seemed to be a better strategy a model that locates involvement as close as possible to schools and their communities. This is what two of the participants said:

“I applied for the post that was advertised in the school’s newsletter and I was invited for interviews” (Parent 3); *“I saw the post in the school’s news-letter and decided to apply”* (Parent 4).

Parents in the Gauteng province believed that they were selected based on their involvement in school activities such as attending meetings, helping with the choir and cleaning the classrooms. This strategy also seemed to be appropriate as it motivates parents to be involved in all school activities not only in those where they were to be paid.

“Usually the school makes a list of parents who attend meetings and when there is a vacant for parents they simply select applicants who appear in that list” (Parent 4); “I have been assisting the school with the choir for more than 5 years now” (Parent 1); “I had been volunteering cleaning the Grade R classroom for the past year” (Parent 2); “before my appointment I was not active in the school except for attending parents meetings” (Parent 3).

Although some parents regarded being involved in school activities as helping when one is applying for a post, they were not sure if this was a criterion or not. The quotes from the participants show that there was a lack of transparency regarding the criteria.

“I’m not sure about the process the school followed as there were many parents who applied for the post” (Parent 3); “there is no clear procedure for appointing parents” (Parent 6); “before my appointment I did not play any role but I was helping during the parents meetings” (Parent 1).

Orientation of food handlers

In both provinces participating parents were orientated before they started with their duties. From the educators’ responses this part seemed to be running smooth. Although coordinators trained food handlers before they started with their duties, this training was reinforced by the direct experience that the new recruits had during the observation period. Thus, educators provided training while out-going parents provided orientation to the new recruits in order to integrate successfully in their new task.

“Parents are trained for the whole week before they start working” (Educator 1); “we tell them about the importance of personal hygiene, having aprons, wearing head gear for hair not to fall on food, having short nails etc.” (Educator 2); “parents have the whole month to get used to what they have to do. A month before the contract ends we recruit another group that come to school to observe” (Educator 5); “parents do not just start without guidance from us and the out-going food handlers” (Educator 6); “through orientation parents have enough time to get used to their duties before they even start working” (Educator 7).

The above excerpts paint a picture of lack of interactive parental involvement in the very first phase of the implementation of the NSNP programme. Participating schools recruit, select and

employ parents they also come up with criteria for recruitment without involving the parents. Parents are therefore excluded either intentionally or unintentionally by not being transparent on how the process works. Coordinators largely saw themselves as tasked with teaching parents about their duties. Even when parents served for six months to a year as food handlers they were not involved in the training of the new coming food handlers, an indication of a lack of trust in their abilities.

Category 2: Functional involvement

Performance of duties

Participating parents were aware of their duties, an indication of training and orientation that went well. Most of the duties that the participants mentioned were in line with the NSNP policy and parents seemed to be dedicated in their performance of duties.

“We serve food to learners, cook and clean the cooking and storage areas (Parent 3); I clean the storage area as well as carrying heavy stuff to the kitchen, females clean the cooking area” (Parent 8); “we feed learners whether the food has been delivered or not” (Parent 7); “if we have a shortage of mealie-meal we approach the principal, he buys a bag from the school funds just for few days” (Parent 2); “we arrive very early before 7 am to prepare food for learners, we go back home late after 3 pm, we have to make sure that everything is in order for the following day before we knock off” (Parent 6).

Challenges in functional involvement

All participating parents were concerned about suppliers who were not from their communities, and who were not reliable. Another problem was that of supplied food items that were not fresh at times. Parents were under the impression that if suppliers were local it would have been easier for them to address some of the problems. Thus, parents felt restricted by not being able to deal with suppliers that were unreliable and their deliveries that were not up to standard. The schools were aware of the problem but could also do nothing.

“Suppliers are not reliable, especially when it comes to delivery dates” (Parent 5); “I wish the department can help us with the food suppliers as they are trouble-some” (Parent 2); “we rely much on suppliers that are not from this community it’s a problem” (Parent 7); “when the deliveries are late, the school has to buy food items from its funds until food is delivered” (Parent 3); “it is difficult to contact the suppliers we tried but sometimes they switch off their phones” (Parent 6); “suppliers deliver insufficient food items and promise to add the outstanding items in

the next delivery, but this doesn't happen” (Parent 8); *“they sometimes deliver vegetables that are not fresh”* (Participant 4); *“they have a tendency to deliver fewer items than those indicated in the list and force us to sign, I reported this to the principal several times but nothing has changed”* (Parent 1).

Another challenge was that of stoves that were not in good condition. The participating parents could not wait for the schools to fix the stoves before commencing with their duties. There was no plan in all participating schools for maintenance of the gas stoves. It is interesting that participants decided to take it upon themselves to solve the problem.

“The old stove has never been serviced. We reported the matter but nothing was done, we decided to fix the stove ourselves so that we could continue cooking” (Parent 1); *“no one is interested in a story about a stove that is not working, children want food”* (Parent 8); *“there is no focus on the cooking utensils, I think stoves should be serviced each year during holidays, this doesn't happen”* (Educator 6); *“I think servicing the gas stoves is the responsibility of the department, the school does not have the capacity”* (Educator 2).

In some schools food handlers performed duties that were not within their jurisdiction. The NSNP policy states clearly what the duties of a coordinator are and what the duties of the food handlers are. In two schools in both provinces parents were coordinating the activities of the NSNP and performing duties of food handlers at the same time.

“The principal and the coordinator appointed me to receive deliveries. It is my duty to see to it that the stoves are in working condition, when they are not working I have to fix them” (Parent 1); *“we report to one of the food handlers who is regarded as our manager”* (Parent 7); *“I receive the food items on behalf of the school, I take the invoice to the principal to sign after counting the items, I tell the principal if there are shortages”* (Parent 6).

The coordinator of one school confirmed this indicating that the principal did not allow her to receive deliveries but instead allocated her duties to one of the food handlers.

“As an educator I have to be in class the whole time that's what the principal wants, I am a coordinator but I do not know much about what is happening in the kitchen, one of the parents gives me a report only when there are problems, in most cases there is nothing I can do to assist as I am not familiar with the procedure, the parents ends up taking decisions on my behalf” (Educator 1).

Another challenge was that of not being supported by the school regarding cleaning materials. According to the NSNP (2009/2010) the cooking area must be kept clean not only to avoid food contamination but also for other hygiene purposes. Food handlers are expected to maintain a high level of hygiene. Without the support from the school this would be difficult to maintain.

“We sometimes struggle regarding the cleaning material, it is the school that gives us the supply, they say they are doing us a favour, the cleaning material is for the classrooms and not the cooking area” (Parent 2).

Although parents were dedicated to their work, their full involvement was constrained by: their inability to solve problems relating to the supply of food to schools; and lack of support from the schools they served. The possible cause of lack of full involvement of parents at this stage seems to be located in the prescribed functions of food handlers in the NSNP policy, emphasising their task as just involving cooking, dishing up for learners and cleaning the cooking areas. All these functions do not require highly skilled workforce with specialised knowledge, unlike a function of holding suppliers accountable. Schools encountered problems with food suppliers and parents did not only lack capacity in helping out in solving these problems but were also ignorant of the procedure to follow. The ultimate challenge is to hold food suppliers responsible for their role in supplying schools with food for the NSNP. Parents were unable to exact accountability from suppliers and schools were not doing anything about the problem. The policy on NSNP does not stipulate any strategies that intend to complement and enhance accountability. This lack of accountability can jeopardise the effective implementation of the NSNP thereby effecting good governance, transparency and efficiency negatively. This situation paints a bleak picture a non-functioning, under resourced monitoring and evaluation system that is not in place.

Category 3: Potential involvement after contract expiry

Contract expiry phase

Some educators indicated that they encountered problems when contracts of food handlers expired. This seemed to be the most difficult period for both the parents and the participating schools because the former seemed to have feelings of being emotionally attached to the school. The difficulty of not having an income becomes a reality to parents at this stage, leading to bitterness and sadness. As a result of conflict and discomfort during this phase some parents become reluctant to take part in other school activities where they are not going to be paid. The participating schools seemed not to be having a solution to this problem.

“In most cases they become bitter once contract expires and become discouraged in being involved in other committees because they will not be paid” (Educator 1); “this is the most difficult time for us as a school because parents are now like part of us” (Educator 2); “they do not want to accept that they have to leave, it is a problem” (Educator 5); “all parents are told about their term of contract but when it ends they come up with stories, that they were not told, as a result refuse to be involved in any of the activities” (Educator, 3); “we also feel so sad when their contract ends, we ended up deciding to allow one parent whose contract expired to sell fruit to learners during break, we all loved her” (Educator 6).

Possibility of involvement after contract expiry

As much as participants were concerned about conflict during the contract expiry phase, some parents were positive about their experiences. To these parents the involvement in the NSNP was an eye opener as they were not aware of the problems learners encounter before being exposed to the programme. There is willingness to be involved in other school activities for those parents. Their involvement in the NSNP proved to be a gateway to involvement in other school activities. *“Working in this school helps me to see things differently. I’m now able to identify learners that are needy, I also realise the importance of being involved as a parent in the education of our children” (Parent 3); “before being involved I did not understand why I should be called to school for my child, I thought it was the educator’s role to sort out problems regarding learners but now I know that they need parents to help them” (Parent 6); “I will help with the food gardening project, when the post expires there is nothing I’m going to do at home” (Parent 7).*

Some educator participants confirmed that some of the parents involved in the NSNP realised the importance of being involved in school activities even after their contract had been expired.

“Some parents feel that they have a close relationship the school after participating in the NSNP” (Educator 5); “I believe that the involvement in this programme can motivate parents to take part in other school activities but the problem is that schools are not doing enough to involve them” (Educator 6); “some parents who had been working in NSNP become more involved in other matters related to learner support but I think they do so because they want to be reconsidered” (Educator 7).

This seemed to be the most problematic stage in the implementation of the NSNP for parents and educators. No one seemed to have a solution to an on-going problem of conflict between the parents and the schools towards the end of the contract. Besides the fact that parents were

worried about the loss of income they were emotionally attached to the learners they were servicing and had adapted to the school environment.

DISCUSSION

What we found working in this research is that volunteer food handlers were aware of the importance of being involved in school matters in general after being involved in the NSNP. It seems that involvement in the NSNP becomes a trigger that motivates some to become more involved in school activities in general. The exposure to the school system as a whole while serving in the NSNP motivates parents to explore and be involved in other school activities and or in children's well fare. This nature of involvement is capable of reinforcing home-school relationships if according to Okeke (2014: 7) is promoted and popularised within the school community.

Orientation of food handlers seems to be working well although there was no uniformity in the number of days for orientation. In participating schools in one province it was for a week whilst in the other province a month. The training that educators get from the department to train and orientate new recruits seems to be effective as all participants were happy. The orientation phase helped in engaging parents fully regarding the core function of their involvement which is to help in providing food to learners.

What we found not working however, is the procedure for recruitment of parents that was not clear thus, not transparent. Transparency regarding the recruitment procedure of parents would add value to the schools' efforts of engaging parents in school matters. It is of utmost importance that parents should understand all stages of their involvement from recruitment to a stage where contracts end in order to become fully engaged. The lowest level of participation according to Pretty (1995) is symbolised by passive participation where people are not given enough information to make an informed decision. In such a situation parents did not have power, they did not own the project, they were just recipients of this selective intervention programme.

The lack of empowerment of parents denied them an opportunity to initiate intervention regarding the conduct of the suppliers who were delivering either limited amounts of food items or stale food. This problem was highlighted in a research conducted in the Eastern Cape schools

in 2010 (Overy 2010:54). The information regarding the procedure for the supply of food to schools was also not communicated to parents. In this regard both the schools and parents are losers, while both would have benefitted if parents were empowered. It seems that it was difficult for parents to take initiative to deal with the suppliers decisively although they were aware of the implications of their bad conduct to the NSNP. They however, took initiative in fixing broken stoves and continued feeding learners. Their power is however limited to solving problems within the school.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that parents should be involved from the initial stages of the implementation of the NSNP up to the last stage. Each phase leads to the next phase, if in one of the phases the parents were not fully involved that could have a negative impact on the whole process. For instance, if the recruitment phase is effective where parents are engaged fully and informed about how the recruitment process is done and the purpose thereof parents would be empowered to participate, initiate projects and ultimately own the programme. In cases where parents are not engaged there will be minimal involvement with less decision making power and no responsibility and accountability.

The conflicts in the contract expiry phase are mainly caused by lack of engagement and empowerments of parents in the initial phase of the recruitment. Although orientation phase seems to me effectively implemented parents are just following orders. Thus towards the end of the process the bitterness might be the results of the realisation that parents they have no stake in the programme when the contract ends.

RECOMMENDATION

Further research needs to be conducted on several factors related to the involvement of parents in the NSNP. Beyond the NSNP is the role of the School Governing Bodies in the implementation of the programme and the challenges in procurement. Based on the findings of this research the following recommendations are put forth:

1. Schools need to understand the importance of actively involving parents in all phases of the implementation of the NSNP. Effective involvement of parents can be a gateway to more active involvement in other activities within the schools.
2. Schools need to make use of sound recruitment strategies and be transparent about the criteria used. Some recruitment strategies employed in schools did not promote parental involvement.
3. Capacitating parents in all levels of their involvement is important, the focus should not only be to prepare them for functional involvement but in other phases as well. To avoid conflict

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