

For a “Village” Involvement: Social Representations on Pluricultural School Community Actors

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According to a West-African proverb, it takes the involvement of a village to raise a child. The meaning of “village” refers to the necessity of the engagement of all members of the community around the school for the benefit of all children/students. In this paper, we explore what are the social representations of school actors in a R-7 primary school previously demarcated as “Coloured” school. This school is located in an urban area of the province of Eastern Cape in South Africa.

Objectives and significance of the Study

The study aims to identify the social representations about school community actors. For an efficient school we need to develop reciprocal understanding and a better communication among school actors in a per-

spective of intercultural education (Stonier, 1998; Sleeter & Grant, 1994).

Theoretical Framework

The notions of parental involvement and of social representations are crucial to this analysis. It seems, based on literature and experiences, that parents from diverse sociocultural and ethnic backgrounds interpret differently what **parental involvement** means. All parents seem to agree that it is their responsibility to provide their children with a supportive environment. However, there is disagreement about what constitutes such an environment and what family and school obligations are. Many parents believe that this unwanted participation can create “interference and disrespect. Some parents believe that teachers and administrators

are fully capable of educating their children and that they have the sole responsibility” (Simich-Dudgeon, 1993:192) of doing that. In order to understand what parental involvement means, we suggest to look closer at the notion of **social representations**. According to Martin Sanchez (2000) and Jodelet (1991), representations are transmitted, socially shared and built through experiences, knowledge, and ways of thinking that can be “out there” or learned. Social representations aim to organize practices, actions, and ways of communicating (Rouquette, 1999; Doise, 1990). In summary, a social representation is related to “what” are the most important things (acceptable attitudes, opinions, and behaviours). It is also related to “how” an individual or a group is able to decode, think and comprehend what happens in the daily life in a specific social and cultural context, and “why” actions can be justified.

Research Design and Procedure

This qualitative approach implies the analysis of explicit and implicit content of multilayers of social representations (Deslauriers, 1991; Lécuyer, 1988). Starting in January 2004, our data collection procedure consisted of two phases. The first phase began mid-January and ended mid-February. The purpose of this phase was to design a research framework, establishing a timeline, sharing our intentions with the school community, selecting participants, and clarifying the role of the research team members. The second phase, which includes questionnaires as well as conducting interviews and mathematics classroom observations, started in mid-February and continued through mid-April. During this phase, the principal, the deputy principal, seven teachers, six students, and four parents were involved. Questionnaires were given first to the principal and/or head of the department for intermediate phase who helped us to contact students, parents and teachers. The selection of our participants is based on their willingness to participate in the research, their capability to articulate their thoughts, and the diversity of their sociocultural background. Though the administrators of the school tried to fulfil our request, we were conscious about the fact that we did not select the student participants directly, which constitutes a limitation.

Even though all the students were instructed in English, we allowed them the choice to express their opinions in the language in which they felt more comfortable. All students chose their home language, except one boy who started in English and after a while asked us to switch to Afrikaans, his home language. Also, a parent switched back and forth during the interview. We were sensitive about the representativity of the participants in terms of gender (as many males as females)

as well as in terms of socioeconomic status of the family. In order to preserve anonymity we referred to pseudonyms.

Upon the completion of the questionnaires, our data collection includes 30-60 minute interviews. All interviews were audiotaped, and a professional transcribed and translated from Afrikaans into English when it was necessary. The research team consulted school documents and the field notes that they used during classroom observations. Both data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously during the course of the study. Constant comparative data analysis was used (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Emerging categories were developed from participants. These categories describe the social representations on parental involvement.

Our model of explicit and implicit content analysis focuses on multilayers of social representations. It implies the description of characteristics of the participants’ social representations about something they believe, imagine is true, and see as evident. Because our methodology is grounded in data collected from questionnaires and interviews, we let themes emerge from the participants’ answers and we considered recurrent words that grounded theory studies individuals, groups, cultures, and society from an inside (emic) perspective. Characteristics of the participants’ social representations that emerged from what they believed, imagined was true, assumed without re-questioning, and saw as evident.

Findings

The findings of the study suggest that all parents have something to offer and they can help parents to develop self-esteem and confidence. Although parents from diverse backgrounds interpreted differently what parental involvement meant, all parents agreed that it is their responsibility to provide their children with a supportive environment. It was clear that parents wanted to be involved and educators thought that parent involvement was important. Parents, teachers and administrators of the school community pointed out the necessity of working together in order to afford all children the best education. In this sense, the school that we studied was exemplary. The school administration and staff believed the climate of their school was conducive to learning for children and educating the community.

Social representations on parental involvement may provide a wider and more inclusive definition for knowledge representation. It may include not only priorities of the school, but also priorities of the society where the people live and where the institutions serve them for the benefit of all children/students. This is an ongoing and emerging task that implies “togeth-

erness". Passing from a perspective about family and school involvement to an understanding about this "togetherness" encourages us to shift towards the idea of a "village" involvement.

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