

Changing the Context of Learning for a Better Education

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Abstract

Parent involvement is an element that has been identified in the literature base as being an important element to organizational change in schools. The author reviewed literature base on parent involvement, social capital, parent empowerment and school success. Success was defined in myriad ways that include: school completion, attendance rates, student achievement, or the acquisition of necessary skills to transition to the workforce or to higher education. The belief by researchers that an important component of educational change is changing the context of learning so that students and parents may see the purpose of education was highlighted. This paper posits that an increased understanding of the relevance of education by parents through social capital, cultural capital, parent involvement, and parent empowerment may impact parental choice and support for their children's education, that will consequently provide better education for human capital development or make learning applicable to the student's life. In addition, the behavior of teachers in the classroom and attitude towards parents, culturally responsive methods of teaching, school-parent relations, school administrators effort to coordinate activities between the school and the community were all identified as important ways of creating positive learning environment for successful schools.

KEYWORDS: Parental involvement, social capital, parental empowerment, organizational change, school success.

1. Introduction

Research shows that for any change in an educational institution to be successful, there is the need to establish an environment that supports learning. The context in which students learn is very important in providing meaning and deepening understanding of the concept, procedure, information or skill that they are required to learn. By providing an environment which facilitates and enriches learning, it will help students to bridge the gap between the isolated facts and abstract learning of the classroom and the practical application of learning outside the formal education environment. In order to balance the equation and make schools more socially and organizationally just places, that will enhance learning, there is the need to address the following components of our organization: the leadership styles, methods of teaching, the students' learning styles and the community's involvement in school activities.

Since school classrooms are changing from the traditional classroom of the past, a culturally responsive method of teaching should be encouraged in our schools to enable all students to be served. Teachers are greeted with a more diverse population of students: and are seeing many different types of learners. Diversity will continue to increase based on several research findings. By definition, culturally responsive teaching is the concept of teaching with a pluralistic perspective. That is giving attention to race, gender, class, and multicultural perspectives. Gay (2000) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make

learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students. Culturally responsive teaching is a foundational concept of multicultural education as teachers infuse the curriculum with rich connections to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds within family and community contexts (McCaleb, 1997; Rehyner, 1992, as cited in Belgarde, Mitchell, & Arquero, 2002). Students become active generators of knowledge, building new academic knowledge by making connections to cultural, community and home-based experiences.

Gay (2000) gave a description of the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching. She stated that, "It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum. It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived socio-cultural realities. It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles. It teaches students to know and praise their own and each others' cultural heritages. It incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools"(Gay, 2000, p. 29). Banks (1994) defines multicultural education as a "way of viewing reality and a way of thinking, and not just content about various ethnic and cultural groups" (p.8). Multicultural education is for all cultural groups, and it is about bringing all groups closer together. A class on multicultural education should include issues related to race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, religion, age, language, values, geographic origin, ability and other differences.

Multicultural education can help us to create a more understanding, inclusive, and equitable society (Ravitch, 1991/1992). According to Sleeter and Grant (1993), the goal of multicultural education is to promote "equal opportunity in the school, cultural pluralism, alternative life styles, and respect for those who differ and support for power equity among groups" (p. 171). Banks (1993, as cited in Sutliff, 1996) reiterated that the goal of multicultural education is to create equal opportunities for all students by directing educational experiences that help them become knowledgeable and caring toward others. Teachers are not only encouraged to be sensitive to issues of gender, race, and multiculturalism, but are also directed to treat these issues as part of their educational responsibility. Multicultural education is defined in a sociopolitical context as "a process of basic education that challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities and teachers reflect" (Nieto, 2000, as cited in Strasser & Seplocha, 2005).

Multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching have one thing in common that is, both truly lead to the empowerment and the emancipation of students with diverse cultural backgrounds. Developing multicultural awareness and diversity disposition are keys to cultivating culturally responsive teachers who are able to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. Palmer (1998, as cited in Wang & Yu, 2006) said that "When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life and when I cannot teach them well." (p. 2). It implies that before a teacher goes in to teach, one must identify one's identity and work on one's own feelings and identifications. One needs to investigate one's politics and orientation as an educator to not be biased in facilitating the class. There is the need to create an environment which would enable teachers and students to connect with one another. According to Epstein and Salinas (2004), a school learning community includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students' learning opportunities. The home, school, and community connections make school subjects more meaningful for students. In addition, to learn at high levels, all students need the guidance and support of their teachers, families, and others in the community. Partnerships between schools and other community organizations form a

strong base for experiential learning and offer students opportunities to make connections that will be relevant to their future careers. Partnerships also allow staff members and students to work with professionals from a variety of fields (Tunseth and Nowicki, 2003).

Although there is no question about the influence of family socialization patterns on children's cognitive characteristics, there seems to be a general belief that these habits are more relevant in shaping certain attitudes, self-concept, beliefs, competence, and causal attributions (Coleman, 1987; Dix, 1993; Eccles, 1993; Garcia Bacete, 1998; Wentzel, 1999; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, as cited in Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2002). The relationship between parents' involvement and children's academic learning and achievement is seen by some researchers as indirect, rather than direct (Anderson & Keith, 1997; Reynolds & Walberg, 1992; Shumow, Vandell, & Kang, 1996, as cited in Gonzalez-Pienda et al., 2002). This relationship however does not diminish its positive effect on student learning. It has been found that communication is the key to successful parent involvement (Burbules 1993; Center on Families 1995; Epstein 1995). Both teachers and parents agree that communication is pivotal to foster and maintain a positive school-home partnership, but, the reality is that each feels that the other party is responsible for initiating communication (Ramirez, 2001). Although both parties agree that this partnership is important, teachers do not generally follow this school of thought. Attributing "blame" to each other creates a communication barrier between school and home, as such, creating an adversarial atmosphere. When teachers take the initiative to communicate with parents, it is usually for negative reasons such as behavioral problems (Lee, 1994; Ramirez 1999, as cited in DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). This situation needs to be addressed, to create avenues for a better teamwork between parents and teachers, in order to provide congenial atmosphere for teaching and learning to take place.

There are many factors that constrain parental participation in schools: narrow vision of parental involvement, school personnel's negative proclivity, lack of teacher training, pressing employment issues, and cultural differences (Ramirez, 1999; Yap & Enoki, 1995, as cited in DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). Moll's (1992) discussion of culture and language issues offers a view into understanding family dynamics which serves as a bridge to the school-home partnership. He asserts that it is imperative that teachers maximize the covert and overt home and community resources of their students. According to Trotman (2001), many parents are aware of the disparity between themselves and school staff and choose to stay away. The faculty and staff may also fail to involve parents with their perceived inadequate level of expertise coupled with the parents' own past negative educational experiences may further intimidate parents. Consequently, it becomes difficult to build an educational partnership. Accordingly, educators must reach out to these parents and demonstrate a visible concern for their children. Trotman (2001) claimed that public schools have contributed to the problem of decreasing parent involvement by gradually taking on more responsibilities once assumed by parents. In addition, some schools' personnel are unfortunately territorial and believe that the curriculum and education professionals should be the sole decision-makers on educational issues. They often resist any effort to program and implement parental involvement, which in turn complicates the problem of institutionalizing parent participation.

The National Household Education Survey found a correlation between family poverty and literacy activities: 87% of non-poor children were frequently read to by a family member, compared with 74% of poor children. Race/ethnicity was also a factor. White children were more likely than black or Hispanic children to be frequently read to or told a story (NCES, 2003, as cited in Holloway, 2004). An analysis of NCES Survey data by Nord et al. (1999, as cited in Holloway, 2004) confirmed that children whose family members read to them three times a week were more likely to know their alphabets than children whose family members read to them less frequently.

In addition, their research found that children whose family members read to them frequently were more likely to be able to count to 20 or higher, write their own names, and read or mimic reading behaviors. Yarosz and Barnett (2001) found that the mother's education was one of the factors most strongly associated with reading frequency. They also found that when the number of siblings increased, the frequency of reading to children decreased. In addition, they report that families with a home language other than English also tended to read to their children less frequently. These findings underscore the importance of parents reading to children at an early age. DuFour & Eaker (1998) offered a guiding principle to help parents fulfill their commitments. They posit that if parents recognize that they are their children's first and most influential teachers, they can promote their success and contribute to an excellent school. Parents also need to make and fulfill commitments including: (1) they should establish high expectations for their children and not accept minimum effort or indifference to quality work; (2) they should know what is expected in each of their children's classes and communicate with teachers when they have a question or concern; (3) they should insist on good attendance; (4) they should provide a quiet time and place in their home for study; (5) they should insist that their students accept responsibility for their learning and conduct; and (6) they should model the importance of life-long learning. DuFour and Eaker (1998) contend that if parents embrace these education beliefs and practices, student learning would improve.

2. Parent Involvement and the Development of Social Capital

Bourdieu's treatment of social capital is somewhat circular; in summary it boils down to the thesis that privileged individuals maintain their position by using their connections with other privileged people. On the other hand, Coleman's view is more nuanced in that he discerns the value of connections for all actors, individual and collective, privileged and disadvantaged (Field, 2003, p. 28). Parental Involvement as a form of Social Capital discussed by Perna & Titus (2005) drew on the work of Bourdieu (1986), and Coleman (1986). As Bourdieu (1986) suggests the conceptual model recognizes that an individual's action (e.g. school involvement) cannot be fully understood except in terms of the structural context in which it is embedded. The structural context is defined in terms of the extent to which the school encourages parental involvement, the volume of resources that may be accessed via social networks at the school (Perna & Titus, 2005). Further, Bourdieu's notion of habitus describes the ways in which individual actions and societal structures are linked. Habitus is the internalized set of dispositions and preferences that subconsciously define an individual's reasonable actions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Horvat, 2001; McDonough, 1997, as cited in Perna & Titus, 2005). In addition, Coleman identifies the ways in which parental involvement can build social capital (Dika & Singh, 2002), suggesting that social capital is derived from two types of relationships: the relationship between a student and his/her parents; and relationship between a student's parents and other adults, particularly adults who are connected to the school that the student attends (Perna & Titus, 2005). A primary function of social capital is to enable a student to gain access to human, cultural, and other forms of capital, as well as to institutional resources and support (Coleman et al., 1988, as cited in Perna & Titus, 2005) that enhance their capacity to perform at higher levels.

Without social relations, there is no possibility for the exchange of information or the enforcement of norms that facilitate collective goals. Social capital is conceived as a public good and measured as a school attribute. According to Goddard, (2003) it is a collective resource that enables productive outcomes such as academic success for all students in a school or community or economic prosperity for a society (Putnam, 1993). In sum, social interaction facilitates access to social capital within communities and schools. According to Charlton (1983), Administrators who have a community-oriented philosophy are more likely to have positive school-community relations. Every school should have three types of information about the community it serves. Information about the composition of the community, such as the

income, educational level and occupations of the majority of the residents would be useful in formulating new programs or adapting existing ones to meet students' needs. In addition, knowledge about the community's opinion about broad educational issues and the day to day operation of the school is also important. Moreover, a school's familiarity with the educational resources available in the community that can be utilized to enrich and enhance the school program is very imperative. It is evident that, the academic success of individual students is influenced by their personal characteristics and dispositions. Equally true, however, is that as members of schools, families, and communities, students may have access to various forms of social support that can facilitate their success in school. Indeed, researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of social support for students' academic success. Several researchers have shown a connection between strong relationships and student achievement. For instance, Steinberg (1996) reports that parental involvement in the form of school visits has positive effects on student academic performance. These findings support Coleman's (1990) social theory that posits that strong relationships between schools and parents can have positive effects because they constitute a form of social capital that is of value to children's academic success (Goddard, 2003).

Hessel and Holloway (2002), posit that today's educational leader promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responds to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizes community resources to achieve those goals. The significance of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standard Four developed is the importance of administrators making informed decisions regarding collaboration with staff members and other stakeholders such as students, parents, and community leaders. Launching and sustaining collaborative relationships is underscored in the four indicators that define ISLLC Standard Four. This standard intends to dwell on relationships with the broader community to foster learning. The indicators include: (a) understanding community needs; (b) involving members of the community; (c) providing opportunities for the community and school to serve each other and; (d) understanding and valuing diversity (ISLLC, 1996). This standard and indicators affirm the importance of engaging parents and community citizens in educational processes. On the other hand, (Swap, 1993; Epstein, 1995, as cited in Lazar & Slostad, 1999) assert that "Teachers, parents, and administrators have generally received limited information about how to work together effectively ... most educators enter schools without an understanding of family background, concepts of caring, or the frame work of partnership ... most teachers and administrators are not prepared to understand, design, implement, and evaluate practices of partnerships with the families of their student" (21&26).

2.1 Social Capital Influencing Decision/Perception

When students work with the community, local organizations and individuals gain a greater understanding of the school and its needs and strengths. People outside the school gain positive impressions of students and their capabilities, which strengthen the community as a whole. Furthermore, when creating the highest-quality instructional environment is a shared goal, parents transform from passive supporters to active members of the educational community. When children see the support, excitement about learning, and teamwork between home and school, they too become excited. They sense the value in learning, and their intrinsic motivation for learning grows (McLoughlin et al., 2003). In effective partnerships, each party is expected to bring specific skills and expertise to the enterprise, to offer a different perspective on issues, to provide support in difficult times, and to contribute toward the achievement of mutual goals. Effective parent-school partnerships are based on similar expectations. When parents view the school in a positive way, they are more likely to provide the necessary financial support for quality education. While there may be differences of opinion from time to time, parents and educators share the same goal, the eventual success of the child (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, pp. xix & 238).

Defra (2006) states that people will be influenced by, and respond to, many different stimuli which accounts for the difficulties in developing strategies and policies to influence views and behavior. It is observed that behavior change, driven by regulations and penalties can be very effective in producing results. For example, in banning smoking in public places for public health improvement, people may be willing to change, but may feel unable to do so. Hence, the need for some kind of influence to assist them effect the change in their lives is necessary. This calls attention for the establishment of social networks that could influence behavior. A social network approach to influencing behavior was explored in a research context that realized further the role of social networks as anchors of identity and behavior which in turn effect decisions impacting on consumption and production (Defra, 2006). Evidence suggests that a social network's approach deals with the adoption of new behaviors. For example, the increasing sustainable consumption and production could be conceptualized within the context of the diffusion of innovation, the spread of a new idea from the early stages when few people adopt the innovation to the time when almost all members of society accept it. The notion of social networks is a key to understanding diffusion of innovation as it helps understand who influences whom, and the importance of identifying key people and facilitating communication within their social networks. Based on this assumption, it is feasible to assert that social capital could influence parental understanding, as well as parental choice. Furthermore, a parent's understanding of the relevance of education is likely to impact a parent's choice with regard to the value of education. This is so because the influence of social capital and cultural capital has the ability to shape a consumer's choice. However, the level of influence or change depends on the type of people who form the parents' network. That is the composition and strength of the network will determine the magnitude and the extent of the outcome. For example, if parents network with people who understand the value of education, it might influence their value of education as well. Some social networks might even help to educate their members and provide them with advice, financial assistance or any form of help. The World Bank (2002) states that sometimes poor people's groups establish ties with other groups unlike themselves, creating "bridge" relations to new resources managed by other groups. When poor people's organizations link up or bridge with organizations of the state, civil society, or the private sector, they are able to access additional resources and participate more fully in society.

There is a general belief that parents' lack of value of education is responsible for students' deficient academic achievement. The work of Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978), suggests that a myth exists about black and poor parents not caring about their children's education. She notes that the myth is that African-American parents, "do not care about the education of their children, are passive and unresponsive to attempts to get them involved, and are ignorantly naive about the intellectual and social needs of their children" (p.36). Her work suggests that this myth maybe misleading. Trotman (2001), argued that like other ethnic groups, African-American parents want their children to achieve academically. However, some of these parents may lack the knowledge and resources to assist their child with academic success. This is where parents could count on the importance and benefits of the role that social networks play in each establishment. If a parent does not understand the value of education, he or she does not care about it, but if one understands the value of education, one is likely to support the child's education. But that does not necessarily mean that all who do not support their children do not value education, but maybe it is because that is not the person's priority. This leads to the need to educate parents on the value of education. This can be done through social networks. Coleman's (1988) contribution to the development of the notion of social capital was to theorize it in a way that illuminated the processes and experiences of non-elite groups. In other words, he argued that those living in marginalized communities or who were members of the working class could also benefit from its possession.

According to Putnam (2000) social capital improves people's lot by widening their awareness of the

many ways in which their fates are linked. People who have active and trusting connections to others - whether family members, friends, or fellow bowlers - develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society. Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others. When people lack connection to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views, whether in the give or take of casual conversation or in more formal deliberation. Without such an opportunity, people are more likely to be swayed by their worse impulses. The networks that constitute social capital also serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information that facilitates achieving goals. Social capital also operates through psychological and biological processes to improve individual's lives. Mounting evidence suggests that people whose lives are rich in social capital cope better with traumas and fight illness more effectively. Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference to lives (Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, social capital provides benefits like better knowledge sharing, due to established trust relationships, common frames of reference, and shared goals. It lowers transaction costs, due to a high level of trust and a cooperative spirit (both within the organization and between the organization and its customers and partners). There are low turnover rates, reducing severance costs and hiring and training expenses, avoiding discontinuities associated with frequent personnel changes, and maintaining valuable organizational knowledge. Moreover, there is greater coherence of action due to organizational stability and shared understanding. (Cohen & Prusak, 2001, p.10).

3. Empowerment

It is obvious that education is an area in which expanding the involvement of community actors has led to marked improvements in higher enrollments and better quality schools. Examples from around the world show that when communities can hold teachers, administrators, and government officials accountable through formal institutional mechanisms, community members become more interested in school improvement and more willing to commit their own resources to the task (World Bank, 2002). This commitment may include forming partnerships with outside actors. Furthermore, programs that expand the access of excluded groups to education have led to important shifts in mind-set among community members and government leaders regarding the contributions that those groups can make to society. These changes include creating formal channels for the participation of local actors in the management of their school and widely expanding access to education, with a shared commitment of resources among all concerned actors. The term empowerment has different meanings in different socio-cultural and political contexts. According to the World Bank (2002), an exploration of local terms associated with empowerment around the world always leads to lively discussion. These terms include self-strength, control, self-power, self-reliance, own choice, life of dignity in accordance with one's values, capable of fighting for one's rights, independence, own decision making, being free, awakening, and capability and several others. These definitions are embedded in local value and belief systems. Further, it identifies empowerment as "The expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives." Building on this, as the Bank and its partners have continued to develop and apply an empowerment framework to their work, and learn from this experience, both ideas and definitions have evolved.

This has brought up a definition as: Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets (World Bank, 2002). Further, it states that although there is no single institutional model for empowerment, experience shows that certain elements are almost present when empowerment efforts are successful. That the four elements of empowerment that must

underlie institutional reforms are: Access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability, and local organizational capacity. In President Bush's speech on Parental Empowerment in Education, he states that "we need to empower parents by giving them more options and more influence" (Whitehouse, 2001). Vincent (1996), examined the concept of "empowerment" from three angles. The first approach is exemplified by social democratic initiatives which define 'empowerment' as a strengthening of the role of parent- as-citizen, through mechanisms designed to encourage the closer involvement of parents in the planning and delivery of local education services. The second definition of empowerment is contained within British Conservative Party's emphasis on promoting the role of the parent-as-consumer, especially through policies claiming to enhance parental choice of school. A third approach, supported by the 'new centrists' emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to empower himself or herself, by taking advantage of opportunities to participate. Further, she states that definitions vary, and are often inexplicit, but tend to center around the notion of people taking greater control over aspects of their own lives. Moreover, to empower someone is a relatively straightforward process involving giving them information and offering opportunities to use that information to make choices between competing products.

According to Vincent (1996), the terminology of 'parents as partners' became increasingly common in the early 1980s, as teachers acknowledged parental contributions to their children's education. She reiterated that the 1988 Education Reform Act occasioned another form of parental participation in the education system by its devolution of a range of responsibilities, formerly held by Local Education Authorities (LEAs), to school-level. In *Spirit of the Community* (1993, as cited in Vincent, 1996), Etzioni sees parent participation in education as an indicator of and contributor to more general participation in public life. Empowering parents, he says, is a way of 'building community' (p.142). Kari Dehli (1995, as cited in Vincent, 1996) argues that "'parents" are positioned differently in relation to schooling, and they draw on and construct different "cultural scripts" to constitute their identities and community memberships to make claims on schools,' (p. 16). It is necessary to focus on the character of educational institutions. The model of parental involvement in education allocates a role to parents as supporters and learners in their relationship with professionals. Thus individual parental involvement in relation to their own child's learning, and involvement in whole-school aspects as a fund-raiser and an audience are all sanctioned. Teachers clearly and routinely send out messages that involvement beyond the role of supporter or learner is not appropriate for parents (Vincent, 1996).

3.1 Empowerment and Social Capital Relations

Social capital benefits from a network of social relations from within and without. It is obvious that almost every case of large-scale change involves strong innovators both within and outside government. Innovations and support for policy reform spread when alliances are built across classes and sectors. Innovations also get internalized through peer learning. Outsiders have important roles to play in supporting this process and disseminating information (The World Bank, 2002). Social capital and the four elements of empowerment act together to reinforce each other to deliver better parental involvement in children's education for the improvement of children's academic achievement. For example, access to timely and understandable information, inclusion and participation, accountability, and investment in local organizational capacity all reinforce each other to deliver better parental involvement outcomes. It is important to be clear on the purpose and value added of participatory processes. Sometimes all that is needed is the information from people about their priorities and resources and the constraints that guide their decision, whether these are about which water sources to use or whether to send a child to school. This information can then be used to design policies and programs that best fit the needs of people in a particular context.

The parental involvement challenge is to bring about change on a large scale. Changing rules is not enough, but implementing new rule requires educating stakeholders at all levels about acknowledging the need for changes in values and behaviors. Since powerlessness is embedded in

the nature of institutional relations, in the context of school-family relations, an institutional definition of empowerment is appropriate. Capabilities are inherent in people and enable them to use their assets in different ways to increase their wellbeing. Human capabilities include social belonging, leadership, relations of trust, sense of identity, values that give meaning to life, and the capacity to organize. Assets and capabilities can be individual or collective. Given lack of voice and power and deeply entrenched social barriers, even in many formal democracies, poor people are often unable to take advantage of opportunities to invest in their assets or exercise their individual rights (World Bank, 2002). Working through representative organizations, poor people can express their preferences, exercise voice, and hold governments and state service providers accountable for providing quality services in education, health, water, sanitation, agriculture, or other areas. Social capital, norms and networks that enable collective action, allows poor people to increase their access to resources and economic opportunities, obtain basic services, and participate in local governance. Poor people are often high in "bonding" social capital, have close ties and high levels of trust with others like themselves. These close ties help them cope with their poverty. Sometimes poor people's groups establish ties with other groups unlike themselves, creating "bridge" relations to new resources managed by other groups. When poor people's organizations link up or bridge with organizations of the state, civil society, or the private sector, they are able to access additional resources and participate more fully in society (The World Bank, 2002).

3.2 Parent(s) Empowerment and the Mission of Schools

It is obvious that people at different levels of status will like to be listened to and treated with respect and dignity by other people as well as institutions. Thus, it is expedient to address the culture, values and ethics of institutions. The social and cultural context is particularly important for empowerment approaches, where culture encourages the dissemination of information. Informed citizens are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities, access services, exercise their rights, negotiate effectively, and hold both state and non state actors accountable. Communication and information are very important tools for the processes of social capital and empowerment. Without information that is relevant, timely, and presented in forms that can be understood, it is impossible for poor people to take effective action. The sustained access to effective basic services like water, health care, education and basic infrastructure is of primary importance in the lives of poor people. However, the improvements in the quality and consistency of services must be approached first of all by addressing institutional and governance models to make them more responsive to needs of poor people. At the same time, important steps can also be taken at the local level to address the specific needs and goals of each community (World Bank, 2002). For example, in the early 1990s, enrollment in primary education in Madagascar was declining due to a lack of investment, deteriorating quality, and demoralization of parents and teachers. Schools lacked educational materials and professional support. Most of all, they lacked the support of their communities. A decision was made to closely involve local communities in the improvement of basic education. The idea of a school-based contract emerged from the vision of one official and his management team, a senior civil servant responsible for primary education who was transferred to one of the six provinces (Viens & Lynch, 2001a, 2001b).

It was recognized from the start that program administration would have to be flexible in order to respond to the real needs of the community. This implied a fundamental rule, supported by the provincial champions of the program; listening and being open to new ideas. Such an approach required basic changes in attitude and behavior on the part of government officials, in terms of their relations both with their education colleagues at all levels and with the local village communities. The first phase of direction setting was followed by community mobilization and training, including meetings and workshops, visits to schools, and exchanges of information and points view. The aim was to empower parents, village leaders, and other community members to take responsibility for education in their schools. These meetings often focused on issues such as poor enrollment or attendance by pupils and teachers, dropping out and grade repetition, lack of parental

involvement, weak accountability of teachers and local authorities, poor condition of school buildings, and lack of educational resources in the schools. In designing and implementing the school-based contracts, all parties were expected to bring to the table their expertise, vision, resources like labor, money, commitment to send children to school, and willingness to act. The entering into these contracts which were based on community needs and availability of resources, encouraged each community to recognize its role, along with that of the central and local authorities, in the transformation and improvement of their schools. The program demonstrated clear results in restoring services to the poor and empowering local communities. Enrollment rates rose in the rural parts of the country, the community's sense of school ownership was strengthened. The program promoted positive community value of children's education. Mechanisms were put in place during the project design to encourage the direct involvement of both schools and parents in the process of changing community mind-sets and behavior regarding children's education. The schools and parents were set up as agents of social transformation. Based upon the results of the project above, it was clear that empowered parents could work to support the mission of their children's school.

4. Conclusion

Research shows that there is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared (Burt Nanus, 1992, p. 3, as cited in DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 57). In addition, a more enduring catalyst for change is a compelling picture of what the school might become, one that projects positive images and practical alternatives that are clearly superior to the status quo (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Booth (1997), states that when drop-out rates and repetition rates are high, educators look to the schools to investigate the causes within the school system for those failures. However, in doing so they largely ignore the home environment, including most importantly the parents. Nonetheless, the environment has by far the greatest influence on a child's ability and desire to attend school, to progress at the appropriate rate and to use the knowledge acquired in the classroom to best advantage. Research shows positive results in student achievement, attendance, health, and discipline when parents are partners in their children's education; and to build this partnership requires the three-pronged approach: families connecting to schools; schools connecting to families; and communities connecting to both schools and families (Boal, 2004). Inviting parents, members of the business community, and service organizations to identify academic goals and standards and quantify measures of progress "sends the message that what students learn and how well they learn it isn't an issue just for teachers and administrators but is a real priority for the community as well" (Wright and Saks, 2000, as cited in Cunningham, 2004). The involvement of parents and community members in the activities of the children's education or school create some form of empowerment and social capital. Social capital is the value derived from social networks or social interaction. In its broadest sense, empowerment is the expansion of freedom of choice and action. It means increasing one's authority and control over the resources and decisions that affect one's life. As people exercise real choice, they gain increased control over their lives (World Bank, 2002).

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