

Schools and communities: Building effective partnership

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Conditions in homes, schools and communities must be conducive for children's growth, learning and development. However, in the context of AIDS and persistent inequality in South Africa, deep crisis affects all aspects of children's lives and creates barriers to meaningful access to education. This calls for concerted action from a wide range of role-players, both within and outside of schools.

In response to the crisis, the Caring Schools Project of the Children's Institute is developing a capacity-building approach to mobilise partnerships that can support child well-being and improve meaningful access to education. The *Champion for Children's Handbook: How to build a caring school community* was developed with the South African Democratic Teachers' Union, working in four school communities in the Free State and Western Cape. Save the Children UK and the Catholic Institute of Education are key partners currently using the approach in Limpopo and the Free State.

The term 'school community' refers to the full range of role-players either living in a specific geographic area or who are responsible for service provision in that area, including government institutions and officials, non-government organisations and community structures, faith-based organisations and households.

Drawing on data from the Caring Schools Project and other formal and informal partnerships, including the Caring Schools Network (see the box on p. 52), this essay explores how schools and communities can either hamper meaningful access to education or work together to ensure that all children thrive and benefit from schooling.

The essay focuses on:

- How do children's circumstances hamper meaningful access to education?
- How can partnership enhance meaningful access?
- How can policy and practice build effective partnership?
- Why are champions for children important?

How do children's circumstances hamper meaningful access to education?

Children who are hungry, sick or afraid cannot learn. In many parts of South Africa, conditions inside and outside of schools undermine child well-being and impact negatively on meaningful access to education.

Difficulties in homes and communities

School communities participating in the Caring Schools Project identified a number of factors that put children at risk. High unemployment and seasonal work leave many families in poverty and a lack of food and basic services threatens children's health and development. The breakdown of family structures due to poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS further contributes to children's vulnerability. There are growing numbers of orphans and single-parent households with grandmothers increasingly carrying the burden of child care. Adult support and supervision of children after school hours are rare, compounded by low levels of education in the family.

Children seeking a sense of purpose and belonging are easily influenced by peer pressure to engage in high risk and negative behaviour. Children report high levels of physical and sexual abuse and many are involved in gangs, or are victims of violence. School fees, together with a number of hidden costs, including school uniforms, transport, books and stationery, further hamper access to schooling.

Difficulties in communities spill into schools

Problems in homes and neighbouring communities spill over into schools. Teachers often have to pay attention to learners' physical and emotional needs before they can teach. A Free State educator explains:

The high rate of unemployment leaves many children in deep poverty. Unemployment fuels the abuse of alcohol. Many children are therefore exposed to risks such as sexual abuse, drug addiction, hunger and neglect.

Despite chemical dependence escalating in schools and communities, there is a chronic lack of affordable, good quality rehabilitation services. Children report "bullying" and "lack of

discipline” at school and complain of rough, vulgar and disrespectful teachers.

One principal refers to “bus-stop” teachers, who leave home very early, arrive at school tired and rush out of the class at the end of the school day to catch their transport home. These teachers choose to live in better serviced communities and frequently do not understand learners’ home environment, and cannot do home visits.

Communities and schools impact on each other

Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana suggest that the communities in which schools are located strongly influence their development, and *vice versa*. According to Jansen, this is particularly true in the context of the AIDS pandemic: “... as teenage pregnancies in schools soar, it is becoming more and more evident that sexual relationships between teachers and students further contribute to a very dangerous liaison in the schools. ... HIV/AIDS is not only what infected adults and children bring into the school, it is a pandemic that recreates itself in the school as well.”

Children bring weapons, including guns, into school. Children in the Western Cape describe several incidents where gang violence spilled into the school, and one suspended learner was killed at home. Learners who have been on the “wrong side of the law” or are considered “trouble-makers”, frequently have difficulty returning to school. Police in Sekhukhune district in Limpopo believe that getting youth back into school could bring down the crime rate.

Children often do not have a voice at home or in school and corporal punishment continues, particularly in schools where it is practiced and condoned in the neighbouring community. One learner describes an incident where a learner “who was slapped by a teacher, slapped the teacher back”. Learners suggest that this kind of behaviour seems to perpetuate the cycle of violence, and increase the sense of disorder and chaos in the school. Alcohol, drugs and gang violence fuel existing tensions within and between schools and communities.

How can partnership enhance meaningful access?

Schools cannot solve all these problems, but schools do offer a useful starting point for identifying vulnerable children and addressing their needs. Even in very poorly-resourced communities, schools are equipped with telephones, knowledge and contacts. For many children school is the only place where they have contact with adults they can talk to. There are also far more schools than social workers in South Africa.

Constructive involvement of parents and the broader community in the life of the school holds great benefits for the school, the students, the parents and their mutual relationship. The Caring Schools Project uses a rights-based

approach to build partnership and encourages school communities to identify strengths and work toward a shared vision of a better future. Project participants have identified many protective factors, such as: love and care; social grants and poverty alleviation programmes; schools, clinics, churches and school-feeding programmes; transport to and from school; and soccer fields.

Dialogue between school and community role-players can generate innovative strategies to meet children’s needs, including: assisting families to access grants; education and advocacy campaigns addressing problems such as “tik” and HIV/AIDS; parents, youth and community volunteers assisting in different ways; and teachers asking assertively for greater support from Department of Education district officials.

What was achieved in each school community using the Caring Schools approach depended to a large extent on geographic location, level of poverty and the quality of leadership among role-players. For example, a school in the Cape Town metropole experienced better access to services and greater support from the neighbouring wealthy community than a remote rural school in the Free State. This school is 50 km from Kimberly in the Northern Cape, but residents have to travel 180 km to access services in the provincial capital of Bloemfontein. Achievements were significantly better in schools where the principals were actively involved in the project, compared to one where the principal was absent for several months.

How can policy and practice support effective partnership?

Relationships between schools and communities are not always easy or productive. Partnerships depend on the relative capital that each partner brings and are seldom if ever free of power relations and dynamics. The next section of this essay discusses the potential (and limitations) of school governing bodies, school-based support teams, and community facilitators to build effective partnership.

School management and school governing bodies

Principals who are attentive to learners and educators contribute significantly to building healthy school and community relationships. According to Marneweck, Bialobrzieszka, Mhlanga and Mphisa many school leaders have begun to respond intuitively to the AIDS pandemic by creating networks of support for learners in and around their schools and by addressing the need for basic nutrition, aftercare and counselling.

This is a promising development, because the role of school leaders is becoming increasingly complex as management has to implement a series of sophisticated education policies, often with very little support or training. The 2000 Tirisano campaign calls for schools to become “centres of community

life” and, indeed, schools hold valuable potential as centres of learning for the whole community. Yet many schools struggle to realise this possibility – a Free State school, for example, limited their birth certificate drive to learners and their families because they were afraid that outsiders might damage property while participating in the drive.

Fortunately, principals are not expected to carry out their functions in isolation. In particular the school management team (SMT) and school governing body (SGB) can assist. The SGB is a school’s primary link with the community through elected representation of parents, educators, non-teaching staff and learners (in secondary schools). According to the 1996 South African Schools Act, SGBs are required to:

- develop and adopt a constitution and mission statement for the school;
- determine the school’s admissions policy;
- administer and control the school’s property, buildings and grounds;
- recommend the appointment of teaching and non-teaching staff; and
- develop a budget for the school, which may include schools fees, for approval by the parent body.

A review undertaken by the Department of Education in 2004 suggests that SGBs in formerly disadvantaged schools often function poorly due to poverty and a lack of expertise and experience, and that they find it difficult to sustain active parental participation due to low literacy levels, lack of time and indirect costs. The reverse is true for SGBs in more advantaged schools, where white middle-class men tend to dominate.

Despite these challenges, it is essential that SGBs draw communities into schools to address the growing challenges of poverty, AIDS and other risk factors. The National Policy on HIV and AIDS for Learners, Students and Educators describes the role of the SGB in developing an HIV and AIDS implementation plan that reflects “the needs, ethos and values of a specific school or institution and its community”. The policy also expects schools to draw on the expertise of community health workers and local clinics.

The Caring Schools Network

The Caring Schools Network (CASNET) was established by Save the Children in 2005 and brings together about 60 organisations from around the country. CASNET promotes information sharing and partnership and works with government and civil society to build caring school communities and maximise the benefits for vulnerable children. The flower represents the key components of a caring school community.

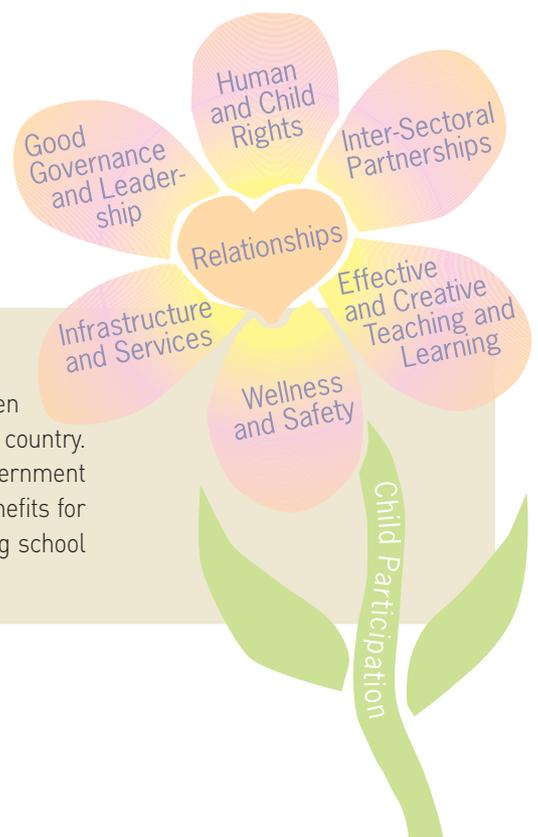
The Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communications identifies SGBs as key role-players in making schools “nodes of care and support” for vulnerable children. Since 2002, Soul City has worked with the government and civil society organisations to host highly successful jamborees at schools, where different government departments come together to process affidavits and applications for identify documents, birth certificates and social grants.

School-based support teams

Education White Paper 6, which focuses on inclusive education, proposes that the Department of Education establishes district-based support teams to provide an integrated, community-based service that can identify orphans, and co-ordinate support and care for such learners. Schools are also expected to establish school-based support teams that include health workers, social workers, police and other service providers.

These intersectoral teams hold great promise in addressing barriers to education. However, the policy has yet to be translated into law, and be put into operation effectively. Currently the need for social workers outstrips the available capacity but it is clear that there are many social work functions that could be undertaken by para-professionals working under the supervision of more senior personnel.

The notion of schools as the centre of community life places high demands on teachers working with big classes in extremely difficult circumstances. The Norms and Standards for Educators describes a “community, citizenship and pastoral role” for teachers beyond the limits of the classroom and school grounds. Teachers are expected to “respond to current social and educational problems with particular



emphasis on the issues of violence, drug abuse, poverty ... HIV and AIDS ... accessing and working in partnership with professional services to deal with these issues”.

Rebecca Makolane is a life-orientation teacher at Makeke Primary School in Sekhukhune (Limpopo) and a key player in the local child-care forum made up of volunteers (mostly women) from the local community. She explains:

I enjoy helping people and work with learners and their families to address a range of problems. Poverty and HIV/AIDS have had a serious impact on the lives of children in the district and the school established a food garden to feed orphans and needy learners. When I heard about drop-in centres in KwaZulu-Natal, I pushed for this with the local Department of Social Development. Now there is a drop-in centre nearby where needy children can go for meals, get help with homework and apply for documents and grants. This includes children not attending our school.

Community facilitators

Several organisations are appointing community facilitators to provide a link between schools and communities and to mediate access to services. Nontobeko Sithole, of the Catholic Institute of Education, describes the facilitators in the Caring Schools project in Sekhukhune:

Community facilitators live in the community, so they know the learners in their village. Their primary role is to identify orphans and vulnerable children, interview these learners, do home visits and make sure the necessary support is provided, for example, access to grants, documents, food parcels or counselling. They work with the whole family and feed back to ward councillors and the school-based support team.

Youth facilitators pioneered by Save the Children UK in the Free State play a similar role in reaching out to vulnerable children, as described in case 6.

While community and youth facilitators are an asset to schools, the primary limitation in the early stages of this initiative was the lack of training and support. Save the Children UK is developing a more systematic training approach for this important cadre of child rights champions. By exploring possibilities for accreditation, the intention is to provide facilitators with opportunities to progress along a career path and get paid according to their level of experience. Currently a wide gap persists between professionals and ‘volunteers’ who generally receive a ‘stipend’ way lower than the minimum wage. This often results in facilitators leaving the community when other opportunities present themselves.

Case 6: Youth facilitators reach out

Youth facilitators are each contracted for a maximum period of two years and assist learners in a number of ways, such as:

- having fun with children in a range of afternoon activities;
- identifying extremely vulnerable children in schools;
- stimulating the school community to donate clothes and uniforms to a clothing bank;
- facilitating access to documentation like birth certificates and identity documents;
- ensuring access to health care by taking children to the local clinic and by ensuring medication is taken correctly;
- listening to children’s problems;
- following up when children are absent from school and making home visits; and
- helping the school community to establish and maintain food gardens that can contribute to the school-feeding programme, and by yielding food parcels to vulnerable children and their families.

Children spoke about how they are able to talk more easily to youth facilitators than to educators or their family members. The home visits help facilitators to understand the home circumstances of the children better and to share this knowledge with educators and the school as a whole. They initiate a range of activities such as music, dancing, traditional dancing, sport and debating, which the children really appreciate.

Source: Mudekanye L. & Allan K (2008) Reaching the most vulnerable children through Caring Schools. In: Southern Africa HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Service. *SA/AIDS News* 2(14): 15-17.

Why are champions for children important?

Building partnership to ensure meaningful access to education depends to a large extent on ‘champions’ like Rebecca who take child well-being and justice seriously. These champions understand the circumstances of children — including local risk and protective factors; are familiar with government policy and services; and enable children to get the help they need.

Champions for children also recognise the need to put children first. Life orientation and social sciences teacher at St Paul’s High School in Sekhukhune, Stephy Dikgale, explains how she learned really to listen to children:

In the past I just used to tell the teenagers what to do and didn't listen to their stories or excuses. Through the Catholic Institute of Education I learnt to listen to the children. It was a gradual process of change from telling teenagers what to do, to listening and counselling them.

One of the learners who helped me change the way I do things was a grade 10 learner who was always skipping class and smoking. One day I asked him to speak to me at break. He told me that the year before his uncle had forced him to go to the mountain school. He said he didn't want to go but his uncle took him to a shebeen. He got drunk and when he woke up he was at the mountain school. When he came back he was very angry and didn't speak to his uncle. He started smoking because he wanted to make the uncle angry.

I suggested that he speak to his uncle. Two days later he told me that they had solved the problem and were speaking to each other again. The boy seems to have stopped smoking and bunking classes. The boy helped me to realise that I need to listen to learners' stories.

Champions for children understand the need to build partnership. This includes working with professional service providers, parents, learners and the wider community. Schools have been able to make significant improvements when they have started to listen to children and recognised their role as active partners in the process, as illustrated in case 7.

Case 7: Children as partners

Nontobeko Sithole, from the Catholic Institute of Education, describes working with a group of learners from four schools in Sekhukhune, who all regarded toilets as dangerous:

Learners in one school dreamt of having clean and proper toilets at school, but the learners couldn't do anything about this on their own, so they asked the school-based support team to raise the issue with the SGB. The SGB then organised 14 chemical toilets. This happened quickly and easily, so the problem wasn't about money. Toilets simply hadn't been seen as a problem (or a priority) by the teachers and the SGB. This project shows how real change is possible once teachers start listening to children and see them as active partners in the process.

Source: Children's Institute (2009) *Participant report: Networks of Care workshop, February 2009*. Unpublished.

What are the conclusions?

Relationships between schools and communities can either prevent or support meaningful access to basic education. The challenge lies in stimulating awareness and growing the conversation about children's rights, well-being and development, and in working together for change. Child-rights champions who promote partnership with other service providers and who listen to children can have a profound impact, especially for the benefit of those who are most vulnerable. However, it is important to remember that even with the best intentions, income and spatial dimensions of poverty impact on the quality of partnership and what communities with limited resources can achieve. Commitment and action is required from influential role-players in government, business and civil society at all levels in order to support school communities, address persistent inequalities and ensure that all children reach their full potential.

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