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# Action Research for School Leaders

Participant Reports

DG Murray Integrated School  
Development & Improvement Project

**DGMT**  
THE DG MURRAY TRUST

Project Leader: **Prof Lesley Wood**

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## Preface

Lesley Wood

### Action Research for School Leaders

Schools require leaders that are capable of focusing on the development and maintenance of “structures and cultures” that will guarantee continuous refinement and success (Tucker & Coddington, 2002:252) There is sufficient evidence to support the claim that successful schools are led by successful leaders (Taylor & Ryan, 2005; Van der Westhuizen & Van Vuuren, 2007). In fact, the most common denominator in weak schools is weak leadership (Taylor & Ryan, 2005).

Successful leaders provide benefits for educators, learners and the school (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe & Orr, 2010). Huffman and Hipp (2003) state explicitly that head educators who are capable of sharing power, allowing staff members to take part in decision-making, and who foster a common goal are more inclined to accomplish the results desired by the school.

Research thus confirms school leadership as the all-important element in schools that achieve outstanding outcomes (Darling-Hammond, *et al.*, 2010). Research also relates schools who deliver excellent results to school leaders who take a proactive, hands-on approach to the running of their school (Darling-Hammond, *et al.*, 2010). School leaders should have a dream that they are determined to realize, and that dream has to be conveyed to all stakeholders in their school. Constant improvement and striving towards excellence undergirds the actions of successful schools and school leaders (Taylor & Ryan, 2005).

This project aimed at helping school leaders to learn how to imagine and accomplish this dream through the adoption of an *action research approach*. Action research is an experiential or hands-on process that allows individuals to participate actively in bringing about positive change in matters that concern them (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Participative action research requires a partnership between all stakeholders, ensuring that multiple viewpoints are included to contribute towards overcoming barriers to advancing education (McGarvey, 2007).

The real and sustainable benefit of action research, however, lies in the fact that it ensures that people hold themselves accountable to values that they have identified as being important to guide their practice. These values derive from notions of *democracy, equality, participation* and *enhancement of the quality of life* (Stringer, 2007). It is our belief that, if we are serious about transforming and improving education, we cannot continue to play lip service to such transformative values. We need to find ways to embody these values in our everyday practices, so that our actions will be truly transformational for ourselves and others in our sphere of influence.

The participants in this project worked together with their school community to address the following questions (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006):

- What is our concern?
- Why are concerned about it?
- What can we do about it?
- How did we ensure that our conclusions are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How can we explain the potential significance of what we are doing?
- How should we modify our practice and ideas in light of our evaluation?

The school leaders did not work in isolation, since in action research it is important to remember that we are part of a system composed of multiple other 'I's' and therefore need to create a shared understanding in our quest for improvement and learning. This ontological commitment opens the way for the realization of shared values at a personal level. Individuals can transform themselves by living out their values in their everyday interaction. The cumulative effect of this individual transformation in turn will change the culture of the whole school.

Based on this premise, we (myself, and the three mentors on the project) worked with school leaders to help them to operationalise the values of, inter alia, inclusion, people-centredness, democracy, social justice, compassion and respect as they strove to address specific issues that were impeding the delivery of quality education in their schools. Our role was merely to facilitate the process and challenge their thinking - they took full responsibility for the identification of an issue, deciding on how to address it, implementing the corrective action, evaluating the outcome and then reflecting on their learning throughout this process. Since the school leaders were able to fully own the problems they identified, change was not

imposed from without, but emanated from an internal epistemological and ontological shift. As Reason and Torbert (2001:1) state, transformation takes place when our usual ‘assumptions, strategies and habits are challenged’, and we would add that transformation is more profound when people challenge themselves, rather than being challenged by external agents.

The narrative accounts in this book do not reflect the full story. As interesting as they are, mere text cannot encapsulate the profound shifts that took place in the participants on a cognitive and affective level. The growth in passion, commitment, capacity for critical self-reflection and motivation were evident to us as the facilitating team. At our regular sessions we were amazed by the learning that was taking place and the passion with which the participating leaders took the projects forward. The mentors, who regularly visited the participants on site, have the following comments to make:

*The role of the mentor is to guide, support and assist the action research team at each school. However, the role of the mentor varies from school to school. In some cases the mentor is able to play a passive role by simply providing encouragement and acting as a sounding board, but letting the action research team get on with what they want to do, while in other cases the mentor has to play a more active role. In these cases, the mentor will provide much more guidance and support, sometimes in terms of providing information and new ideas, or by adopting a more structured approach, for example holding regular meetings to ensure that progress is made on the school's project. The mentors also learn a lot from interacting with school action research teams. They soon become aware of the day to day challenges faced by teachers and schools and how little time teachers have available to take on additional responsibilities. The mentors also get to know the dynamics of the schools quite intimately. (Viv England)*

Brian Walter says the following:

*As with all mentoring, I have found the interaction with the schools allocated to me in the Action Research project a great learning experience.*

*One school was special because mentoring was more of a “classic” example: that is, after a while, the school started to take the initiative, and the project focus grew from focussing on one aspect to discipline, to the creation of a more moral school climate. The school drew in, and used, other agencies, and used the momentum provided by the Action Research model to achieve effective, and visible, change in the school. What was heartening here was that Action Research was — as it should be — the change catalyst, and the mentor's role became one of prodding, suggesting,*

*helping with monitoring, and helping with the reflection in the important report writing process. Through the implementation, the team grew to include others, including the teachers in charge of school leaders, of a peace project, and also the parent who is employed as the care giver.*

*The importance of reflection, of collecting a sense of what has been achieved, and evaluating this, was evident during the latter stages of the action research project. The final stages of writing were effective “penny drop” moments, where mentor and members of the team could draw together the collective experience, and reflect on what had been, and what could have been, and what could still be, achieved.*

*Oral interviews with team members revealed the richness of the project, and the work done “behind the text” started to emerge. Report writing was a daunting task for nearly all the schools and this alerts us to the fact that we need to show, in some follow up work, how report writing can be a guiding, and enlightening, activity, done for the sake of the project itself. It need not be a threatening “research” activity, done for a judgemental “outside reader”.*

*In one school I mentored, it was proposed to the principal that each committee in the school should produce a short annual report, using the action research format, and modelled on this team’s experience. Thus, this action research committee became a trail-blazer.*

#### Mentorship experiences – Randal Grebe:

*Action Research is a process of learning, a learning experience for mentees, school management, the learner, parents, other stakeholders and especially for the mentors. Therefore, **the process of learning is more important than the outcome.***

*There are the right things we do, but there are also many “wrongs”. It is through the mistakes we make that we really learn and empower ourselves and others. It contributes to the improvement of the learning spiral, building good relationships and acquiring many values and skills. As a 'beginner mentor' I tried to focus on this process. This does not happen automatically. It is related to many factors----the context of the school, the communities, management and culture of the school, the personalities of the mentor and mentees and the nature of the problem addressed.*

*A very important part of the whole process is to have the commitment and 'buy-in' of senior management, especially the principal. Only two of the principals were personally involved in the schools I was mentoring. Principals tend to delegate responsibilities, which is not necessarily wrong, but when they show little active interest in the project and the development there-of, it becomes a major problem that can hamper the process. Therefore, the visible support and*



*involvement of the principal contributes to the success of the process and eventually the research project. They must be informed of the progress and attend some of the scheduled meetings of the team of mentees and the mentor. Therefore, they should be actively involved, supportive, informed and consulted in all the phases of the process.*

*It is also important that the mentor acquaint him/herself with the school environment, activities, projects, the community and the learners. This helps to build a sound relationship with the staff (including the administration staff) and project mentees. The mentor should become one of the 'school family'.*

*The involvement of people and agencies outside the parameters of the school also contributed to the empowerment and motivation of the project team. In all the projects we managed to obtain the expertise and support of NGO's, people from other units in the University, parents and skilled, voluntary interested people.*

*We also had media coverage of a project that did not turn out to be as successful as we intended. We learned from this that involving the media should be managed with care, especially with sensitive problems in our communities and schools. Nevertheless it opened-up a dialogue amongst school leaders and the wider community on a very sensitive national problem relating to school learners in South Africa.*

The process was not without challenges – 2010 was not a good year for education. First, there was the wonderful world cup that meant extended holidays, closely followed by the teachers' strike that shut down most of the schools in this project. When the strike ended, the priority for the schools was to make up for lost time, and so it is understandable that this project took a back seat at times. However, despite these challenges (not to mention the usual challenges of working in a disadvantaged educational system), nine schools present their accounts here as a testimony to their resilience and commitment to improving education.

The focus in the projects was not on classroom activity and learning *per se*, but on improving the many social factors that impinge on education in South Africa. The topics cover an interesting range of issues:

- Improving safety at school (Malabar and Kama)
- Addressing teenage pregnancy (Gelvandale)
- Trying to instil a culture of reading (St James)
- Reducing late-coming (Woolhope)

- Improving parental involvement (Dower)
- Extending participation in extra-mural activities (Sapphire)
- Providing skills development for children with barriers to learning (Machiu)
- Improving the moral climate of the school (Charles Duna)

The action research process undertaken to address these issues provided the school leaders with a systematic tool to guide their actions. It also helped them to live out the values that they wanted to cultivate in their schools and, by so doing, to influence the rest of the school community to adopt these values as their guiding principles.

The accounts in this book are valuable examples of how school leaders can take action to improve their schools. If other educationalists choose to take notice of the valuable lessons described here, then we have no doubt that education in South Africa can be improved from within. Change that emanates from taking control of our own situations is more likely to be lasting. Finally, schools who live out the values that underpin action research will contribute greatly to development of future citizens who will be able to contribute to the creation of a socially just society.

*Lesley Wood, Head, Action Research Unit*

*Viv England, Mentor*

*Randal Grebe, Mentor*

*Brian Walter, Mentor*

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# REGENERATING MORAL VALUES IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Charles Duna Primary School

Mr Hlulani, Ms Zweni, Mrs Ngumbela, Mrs Nombombo, Ms Sume and Mrs Krweqana (parent)

## Our Context

Charles Duna Primary School is situated at Msimka Street, New Brighton. Established in 1962, it was named after Mr. Charles Duna, who was a member of the Bantu Education School Board.



We have 1,010 learners, coming mostly from the neighbouring informal settlements of Chris Hani, Silver Town, Noxolo and Mandela Village. Poverty, unemployment (80% of our parents are unemployed), alcohol and drug abuse are all socio-economic issues that greatly impact on our school. There are six shebeens (unlicensed taverns) in the same street as the school. Our learners are exposed to sexual violence at an early age due to socio-economic circumstances, including lack of privacy. This violence impacts on morals and affects behaviour amongst learners. Incidents of promiscuity amongst learners have increased.

The school fees are R40 per annum, and less than 10% of learners qualify to pay (as per government policy that exempts learners from paying fees if they are recipients of government social grants, or are being raised by grandparents or guardians). Thus, a school can raise amounts of only R110, as we did this year. Thus, our income from low fees is further restricted by exemptions. We cannot operate on the fees alone. We are forced to undertake fundraising efforts.

Compounding our financial problems is the fact that the school has unfortunately been placed in Quintile 4 (same funding Category as the previously advantaged ex-model C schools). This means that, in terms of the government subsidy, we receive less funding from the Department of Education. We also then do not then qualify for the school nutrition programme. We are continually scouting for food from NGO's, the business sector or private individuals. On

the positive side, the school is a tourism tea stop for Calabash Tours. This venture has helped in raising much needed funds.

Our staff complement is 40 permanent teachers including two Grade R practitioners, and fourteen staff members who joined us in 2009 to help with our large number of learners who encounter barriers to learning. Unfortunately we will be losing nine teachers through the current redeployment process, and this will have a negative impact on our remedial programme.

## **Our Concern**

Our concern identified during this project was learner bullying and the need for discipline, in our school, with the basic question being “How can we improve discipline at our school?” Through the action research project, this question has broadened to encompass the question of values. Taking a more constructive approach, the project finally looked at “the regeneration of moral values in our school”.

The whole staff has been affected by the lack of discipline amongst the majority of our learners, and this is why the issue was raised in our early discussions. The following incidents are an indication of how we have arrived at the realisation that there is a major need for intervention. Each teacher has an incident book register where they record learner transgressions. This has also been very helpful in helping us identify problematic behaviours.

Analyses of these incidence books and discussions with staff have revealed the following:

1. In our staff meetings every teacher has voiced frustration as learners were not doing homework.
2. Learners fought a lot, even in front of their teachers. This showed disrespect.
3. There were repeated incidences of late coming.
4. Learners swore openly in front of teachers.
5. Learners easily became aggressive with little provocation.
6. Learners disrupted classes while tuition was taking place.
7. Learners vandalised property by writing on walls and desks.

Other offenses included glue sniffing. For instance, on the 10/11/10 one of our Grade 5 pupils disturbed the class by stabbing another learner with a sharp object. The class teacher

called him to the class and he refused to come into the classroom. This is one of many cases that have been reported with regards to the learner's behaviour. A number of learners have also been caught in possession of illegal weapons, like knives and other sharp objects. Even although in all the cases we managed to catch them before they actually used the weapons, it still bothered us what they can do with the weapons, if not caught in time. These, and other incidents like smoking dagga, fighting, forcefully taking other's property and using vulgar language, made us to want to do something about the problem.

More evidence for the problem comes from the reports of the school care-giver. The school has a care-giver, a parent who does home visits on behalf of the school at the homes of serial behavioural offenders. The care-giver confirms that social conditions at home are not conducive to shaping good behaviour. These visits and consultations confirmed the violent and dysfunctional environments that our learners come from. Some of the homes are not in a good state e.g. the child shares a one roomed shack with four or five siblings, the mother is unemployed and the father is not around. These are the kind of homes that many of our learners come from, and that is quite evident from the lack of involvement of the parent in the child's education.

Generally, there is a lack of positive parenting, promotion of positive value systems and role-modelling. Major problems in this regard are unemployment, and the high alcohol consumption by parents. HIV/AIDS also plays a role, as infected parents may be too ill to discipline their children, while in some cases the parents have already died.

The majority of our parents are illiterate. Those that are employed often work as labourers. They leave their homes early and return very late in the evenings, leaving children unsupervised or in charge of siblings. When they come to school, these children tend to bully others. We link this to home environments that are often unsupervised. Another challenge is that the majority of our learners are living with extended families, who do not always invest much time in bringing up these children. As a result there are no clear communication lines and disciplinary procedures.

We concluded that the school should fill in these gaps in the children's education. The school needs to provide a caring environment, better supervision, and clear communication lines and disciplinary procedures.

The above mentioned are the reasons that have convinced us that our school has discipline problems.

## **Why are we concerned?**

We are concerned because when our learners misbehave that becomes a representation of what we are as a school and who they are as individuals. This contradicts the values that we would like our learners to adopt for their lives. To have a children being brought to the office because they misbehaved, or stabbed another child with a pair of scissors they are supposed to use to cut their paper with, undermines what we are about, and does not reflect the values that we embrace and cherish.

These values include respect for others and their property; responsibility for doing what they are supposed to be doing; accountability for their own behaviour; honesty and integrity. We want to practice what we preach and this is not only for the benefit of the school but also that of the community, as the learners are the future leaders of their communities. The major aim is to make our school a safe environment where our learners will thrive and grow into responsible and respectful citizens, who will respect not only themselves but their peers as well.

For this reason we were committed to trying to intervene to try and create a moral climate at school that would resonate with these values and encourage embodiment of them in learner and staff behaviour. Since learners are mostly exposed to values at home, we knew that it would be important to also involve parents in our project.

## **Our Actions**

We decided that we would hold workshops on bullying and elicited the help of Childline, the Department of Social Development, and the General Motors Peace Project. We also included workshops, whereby we teach parents about what it is to be a parent and how to inculcate good values in their children. The process of our actions is detailed in the following sections.

### ***Forming the Action Research Committee for the Project***

As a school, we have different committees that deal with different issues within the school premises. However we did not have a committee that dealt with disciplinary issues. And thus

at the beginning of 2009 we established the Action Research Committee, whereby we encouraged teachers who were interested to volunteer for the committee and that is basically how the committee was established. The fact that all staff members share these concerns has ensured “buy in” into the process. We worked with all the teachers that volunteered their services, and it was not difficult to get the teachers to buy into the project in that they all wanted to contribute a make a difference. The action research committee has grown as new components have been added to the project.

Knowing that discipline affects all the teachers, it was decided that all the teachers should come up with different strategies that can be used as corrective measures to the problems that were identified. As a result, we had different teachers coming up with different strategies and thus it was impossible to have universal agreement on strategies and that was one of the initial stumbling blocks for us. Adding to the problem of the committee was the time lost due the teachers strike and the long holidays for the World Cup. This meant that we tended to be more reactive than proactive in addressing the problems. In other words, we tended to focus on disciplinary measures, rather than focussing on how we could encourage learners to live out their values.

#### ***Data gathering by means of questionnaires***

In order to find out more about the situation as a guideline on how to improve it, we compiled questionnaires, which were distributed to Grades 6 and 7 learners. The questionnaires were designed to assess the extent of bullying, fighting or other forms of violence on the school grounds or in the classrooms. The analysis of the questionnaires confirmed that 85 percent had been culprits or perpetrators of bullying. This confirmed to us that we would have to address bullying.

#### ***Reviewing the Code of Conduct***

The school code of conduct was reviewed at a parents meeting. Each learner was then given a copy to read together with the parent, sign and bring back to school for filing. A3 size copies were then given to each class teacher to put up in class and continually discussed with learners. The aim of this intervention was to firstly get parents involved in deciding what behaviour is acceptable at school. Learners are then expected to sign and know they are accountable for their actions.



**School Leaders**

Each class elected two class leaders who form part of our school peer leaders to help with discipline during break time, when we have visitors, and during school functions. The choice of leaders ranges from assertive to troublesome learners (some suggest that this is a “put a thief to catch a thief” policy, but we view it as more creative – giving frustrated youngsters’ responsibility that they can grow with). The committee was responsible for the training of the school leaders, and introduction of the school leaders to the entire school during assembly. The initiative has worked in that the learners that previously misbehaved now model good behaviour, because they know that as leaders others learners are looking up to them. We believe that this is evidence that our use of peer leaders has encouraged respect and support from the other learners.



*School leaders monitoring water wastage*

**Peace Education**

We have joined the G.M. Foundation’s Peace program. The following modules have been completed: peer mediation, feelings alphabet, getting a grip on anger, conflict resolution, listening (3 ways), what are my limits and interacting with others. The program was attended by Ms Zweni who now runs the peace project and is also one of the members of the Committee and the Principal.

The main focus is on the teaching of values. We requested and received the Values Manifesto from the National Department of Education. We plan to involve all stakeholders in choosing values for our school.



*A classroom based peace space*

We have included Peace Spaces in classrooms: these are classroom sanctuary spaces for learners to withdraw to in times of stress.

### ***Parenting Skills***

Three teachers attended the G.M Foundation parenting workshop. Two workshops have been given, firstly to parents of the serial offenders. Child Line has also come on board. They facilitated “circle time”, with learners first, then with parents per grade. The aim was to get people talking about their concerns or challenges. This became emotional as parents talked about domestic violence, their HIV status or economic challenges.

Out of the learner circle time, a new rape case was reported. The follow up workshops will be from Social Services as per the request of parents.

### ***Community Police Forum***

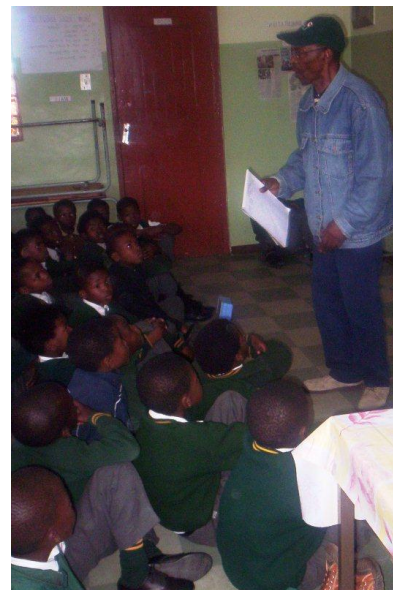
We have established a good working relationship with our New Brighton community police forum that come to our rescue whenever we need them, usually for parent warnings in the case of child neglect, vandalism and criminal behaviour of learners.



*Learners and the principal interact with the community Police Forum: 2010*

**Health Advisory Committee (HAC)**

We have established a Health Advisory Committee including a policeman, a nurse, a community member responsible for the initiation of young men, our garden representative, two learners and two teachers. Their function is to look into the wellbeing of learners, staff and parents. For discipline improvement, they are to organize talks for boys and girls separately where members of the community will address them. We hope to get our community involved in the shaping of future citizens. This committee is new, therefore they still have to organise and strategize their interventions.



*Learners being addressed on health issues by the Health Advisory committee: 2010*

**Extra-mural Activities**

The Umzingisi Foundation has been allocated ninety minutes on Tuesdays for the coaching of different sporting codes to our learners. We use the participation in this program as an incentive to well behaved learners. Life skill training is also offered by Grassroots soccer, Umzingisi and Love Life. Sport is an effective and enjoyable tool to teach team work, healthy competition and to release stress. Some learners have lost their innocence through rapes, being responsible from a young age, or taking care of ill parents. Playing gives them a chance to be children again.



*Learners busy in the garden area*

Other extramural activities, initiated and run by staff, include the book club, gardening, and the mosaic workers.

**Promoting health through physical activity in schools**

This intervention, brought by NMMU Department of Human Movement Science through the DG Murray Project, will create a physical activity friendly environment. This will include some



leadership training for school leaders. In this project, students from the University work with the school to put in place simple break-time activity centres and basic equipment, as well as simple play-equipment stored in class-rooms.

This is to encourage increased school-time physical activity. The school leaders help to monitor usage and behaviour. Earlier phases of this project monitored physical activity, which increased through the use of the equipment: increased physical activity has proven health and well-being benefits. Some of the equipment may be integrated into sports training.

### Were our actions successful?

Although still in the early stages, we believe that we have managed to begin to inculcate more positive values in our school. The table below summarises what we did, how effective it was, and what we think we still have to do:

**Table 1: Summary of actions taken**

ACTIVITY	ACTION TAKEN	EVALUATION	LEARNING
<b>REVIEWING CODE OF CONDUCT</b>	The review and signing of the code of conduct	More learners know the contents of our code of conduct and parents have been involved in deciding on it.	There are some learners who did not bring back the form. We will have to follow this up.
<b>SCHOOL LEADERS</b>	Training and inauguration of leaders	Formerly disruptive learners are now acting responsibly and becoming good modellers of the values we wish to live by.	Some learners are still disrespecting school leaders and have received warnings from the principal We acknowledge that changes to behaviour will take time. We will continue with the process.
<b>PEER MEDIATION</b>	Peer mediation Anger management Feelings alphabet	Noise has lessened as we encourage learners to speak softly Less incidents of fighting	Vulgar language is still a problem and we have to find ways to promote more acceptable language.
<b>PARENTING SKILLS</b>	Workshops for parents	Parental involvement has improved. Parents have been exposed to alternative ways to discipline their children.	We now have 60 volunteers who clean classes daily – this is quite an achievement but we would also like to find ways to involve parents in more educative activities.
<b>COMMUNITY POLICE FORUM</b>	Including a policeman in our HAC committee	The relationship has helped with speedy response to our cases We have called them to warn a parent who was neglecting her 5yr old boy.	We need to include our policeman in prevention work and not just in punitive work.

ACTIVITY	ACTION TAKEN	EVALUATION	LEARNING
		Police have started to address learners on crime, drugs and absenteeism	
<b>EXTRA-MURAL ACTIVITIES</b>	Umzingisi Foundation sporting activities.	There are happy sounds as the learners are playing They are now being introduced to Tennis and hockey. We are expecting a donation of +_R90 000 from Reeds College (UK) towards the development of a sports field in July.	Involving youth in positive activities is a natural way for them to learn pro-social values.
<b>SKILLS TRAINING</b>	We have revived our skills training this year. Learners are doing beading, sewing, mosaic and decoupage on Wednesdays from 14h00 to 15h00	The focus is learners with academic challenges but it does not exclude interested learners.	Giving learners something useful to do increases their self-esteem and this leads to better behaviour.



*Rewarding and encouraging good behaviour: Awards Ceremony at Nangoza Jebe Hall, 2010*

## What have we learned that will influence our future practices?

We are now developing a measuring or monitoring tool to evaluate the success or effectiveness of the programme. We will not make too many claims of improved behaviour as this is a process that will not yield results overnight, but the above table indicates some of our successes. The most important thing for us as leaders is to be aware of what we have learnt from this process and build on this learning to inform our future research.

The planning and implementation of this research has been beneficial to us as a committee as we have to learn to find solutions to challenges using the research cycle. The skills can also be used in dealing with our own personal challenges, as what we have learnt is applicable in all walks of life. We have learnt that inclusion of as many stakeholders as possible is important when we want to improve the values in our school.

This has been an exciting process for us, and as we reflect on what we have learnt, we are excited about the potential for positive change in our school and motivated to know that we can make a definite positive input into the lives of our learners and community – this helps us to stay motivated and to rekindle our passion for teaching. We have already identified fundraising as the next project that we will be doing using this model of research.



*A well maintained school gives a sense of calm order and helps to instil a sense of pride: the school in 2010*

# ENHANCING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

## Dower Practicing School

Mr M.W.G. Steyn (Principal) and Ms C.L. Machiu (Deputy)

### Our context

Our school is situated in a fairly affluent area of Uitenhage, a town in the Eastern Cape. It is a dual medium primary school, with instruction offered in both Afrikaans and English. However, the majority of our learners are not from the immediate community, but live in townships some distance from the school. Only a few communities are within walking distance, one of them an informal settlement.

Approximately 40% of the learners come from impoverished homes, meaning that our attempts to provide quality education are negatively impacted by the social and financial problems that usually accompany poverty. Almost a quarter of the learners receive social grants. Only around 30% pay school fees in full. Many of the households are headed up by single parents or grandparents who have limited income and the transport costs to the school are often prohibitive for them.

We are the closest English medium school to the township. We have 800 learners and 24 teachers, meaning that our class sizes usually exceed 40. Because of this financial situation we have to fundraise to meet our expenses, but it is mainly the staff who is involved in this, and not parents.



*Dower Practicing School*



## Our concern

Given the social, economic and educational contexts in which we have to work, we are concerned that the children are given the best educational experience possible. We would like to ensure that we send well-prepared learners to high school. However, we are hampered in our educational endeavours by a lack of parental involvement. Parental involvement is a very important component of education, and one that is especially lacking in certain communities in South Africa (Lemmer, 2007). It is known that parental involvement increases school attendance and improves the social behaviour of learners, which might be the reason that it has also been linked to an increase in self-esteem and academic achievement (Swap, 1987). Parents and teachers both benefit from this partnership, since they can support each other to attain positive changes in the children's behaviour and in the school in general. Parents often possess skills and knowledge that can be valuable resources for teachers, yet, in our experience, cooperation with parents is not an easy process. Although parents are enthusiastic to enrol their children, and will come for days on end looking for a place, once the child is enrolled, we encounter major problems in getting them to co-operate with regard to assisting their children. Some of the problems we have encountered are the following:

- Children do not receive support at home with homework which often means they do not complete their assignments
- Parents do not attend annual information sessions where they receive important information on how to support their child with school activities, such as homework. Usually fewer than 50% of parents attend in Grade 1, and in the higher grades, fewer than 10%
- There is no community near to the school. We have two high schools in the area and a cemetery, but there is no residential community in the area. Children come from far away, therefore community involvement is difficult – many of the children live in communities 15km away. Transport is expensive and scarce

## Why we are concerned

We know that schooling is an extension of the child's up-bringing at home. However, it seems that parents are of the opinion that the school is the first and only place responsible for the education of their children. This is problematic for us because we know that we need to



partner with the parents or caregivers in educating the child. It is important that parents and teachers work together to make sure that the children complete homework and tasks as this increases the likelihood that the child will do what is required of him/her to stay abreast with the learning taking place in class. As Epstein (1995) states, when parents and teachers share responsibilities for bringing up children, learners are more likely to be successful in acquiring academic and social skills. Ideally, parents and teachers should work closely together, thereby creating *school-like families* and *family-like schools*.

We would like our school to be “family-like”, where each child feels valued and special. We would also like to help our parents make their families more “school-like”, meaning that the education of the children receives priority, and where parents recognise and reward effort and progress. This is in line with the values that guide our educational work, namely respect for each other, commitment, responsibility and accountability. If we as teachers, and the parents, can live out these values, then there would be more involvement on both sides. In other words, the school would know more about the home circumstances of the child and the parents will know more about what is happening at school. The child will thus benefit from this. In order for families to become involved in schools, they need to feel welcome and valued. We therefore wish to create an atmosphere in the school that is conducive to making parents feel they are important.

On a practical note, since our school is not well resourced, we would like to enlist the talents of parents to help with tasks at school. If we can do that, then school fees can be kept low, a move that will be of benefit to all our parents. However, we don’t just want to “use” parents, but rather to work hand-in-hand with them. They should be part of the decision-making process about what needs to be done. We want to encourage them to take ownership of the school in the community, and work with us to make sure our school can offer a high quality educational experience for the learners. To this end, we would like to be able to work towards attaining the following:

- Parents to take more ownership of the school and become involved with what is happening there
- Improve parental attendance at meetings
- Parents to assist teachers in identifying barriers to learning in their children
- Parents to volunteer to assist with administrative tasks or as classroom assistants

The question we therefore set out to answer was:

*How can we enhance parental involvement in our school?*

### **Actions taken to improve the situation**

As school leaders, we were aware that it was important to involve all the staff in any attempt to improve the situation. We therefore involved all the staff in a SWOT analysis exercise, to ensure that they felt part of the problem identification process. Even although we, as leaders, had identified lack of parental involvement as an issue, if the staff did not agree or wanted to choose something else, we would have gone with this choice since it is imperative that people feel part of the decision-making process. The table below lists the areas identified during the SWOT analysis.

<p><b>STRENGTHS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are an established school with a history</li> <li>• We have a good reputation</li> <li>• We work well as a staff</li> <li>• Staff are committed, talented, work well under pressure, have much expertise</li> </ul>	<p><b>WEAKNESSES:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers unable to maintain discipline</li> <li>• Lack of toilet facilities</li> <li>• Lack of resources for teaching</li> <li>• Overcrowded classes</li> <li>• Teachers have abilities but they are often not used</li> <li>• Principal does not delegate easily</li> <li>• Lack of a computer lab</li> <li>• Language of instruction not home language of most learners</li> <li>• Untidy classrooms</li> </ul>
<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many teachers are currently doing further studies or short learning programmes</li> <li>• Partnerships with overseas schools</li> <li>• Sponsorships</li> <li>• 90<sup>th</sup> celebrations an opportunity to market school</li> </ul>	<p><b>THREATS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-payment of school fees</li> <li>• Lack of parental involvement</li> <li>• Drop in enrolment</li> <li>• Lack of public transport</li> <li>• Vandalism of school</li> <li>• Competition from neighbouring schools</li> <li>• Crime</li> <li>• Incomplete buildings</li> </ul>

We discussed this and came to the conclusion that more parental involvement in a meaningful way would help us to overcome most of the threats and weaknesses, therefore, through this democratic process, we attained “buy-in” from all the staff at the school.

Our first step was to try and understand the reason why parents are not more involved. It was important for us to hear from them and not just to assume the reasons. If we want to establish a partnership, then each party must have equal say and decision-making power. To this end, we distributed a questionnaire in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa. It was important for us that each parent could



*A brainstorming session with teaching staff*

answer in their own language, so that inability to express themselves in a second language would not hamper their communication. In many cases, we also had to speak to the children to get the information that the parents could not respond to. The analysis of the questionnaire revealed the following:

- Transport is a major problem since they cannot afford to come to school meetings
- Language is problematic, since the parents speak Xhosa at home and often they do not understand the communications from the school
- Parents who have financial and other problems are hesitant to come to the school because they are not paying fees and this makes them feel uncomfortable

Based on these findings, we realised that it would be a challenge to overcome them, but we decided that we had to find ways to try and improve parental involvement and communication. We thought that communication was the best place to begin and therefore we brainstormed many options with our staff. We decided to implement the following strategies, namely a homework diary and bulk SMS.

**Homework diary:** the purpose of this is that parents must sign the diary when circulars are sent out and also when children are absent. The diary lists all the homework the child has to do and the parents must also sign for that. There is also important information about the school in the diary, as well as important dates. We know that this system has worked well at other

schools and decided to try it. It is working quite well, but the success also depends on whether the staff check that the diary is used. So far, it seems like it has improved the situation more and we will get more feedback from the next parents meeting. The teachers report that the children are using them.

**Bulk SMS:** This is used to communicate important information and activities to parents. However, we have found that most calls are not received since parents change their SIM cards so often. We know this because if we try and call some of the numbers, about 50% of the time, the cell number is not in operation. We have learnt that our context makes this a poor option, in comparison to better resourced schools where this system has been successful. We cannot simply copy other actions, but need to find ones that suit our context.

**Home visits:** We have decided to start home visits during 2011 to parents who have not come to parental meetings. This has not commenced yet, but we are committed to doing this. We know in the past when we have taken children home, the parents tend to become more cooperative and involved in the education of the child.

**Establish a PTA:** We asked parents who would be willing to participate in this and 45 indicated they would be. We called them to a meeting and they established the PTA. We have just begun this, but it was important that the parents who wanted to be involved volunteered rather than being elected. Their first project will be to help organise events for the 90th celebrations of the school.

**Satellite meetings:** We intend to have meetings in the communities where the parents reside, and to perhaps have them on a Saturday. This will only be done in September/October of this year.

**Establishing parent workgroups:** On a voluntary basis once per month parents are invited to join some teachers in tackling maintenance around the school. So far, we have painted two of the foundation phase blocks and part of the intermediate block. We are also aiming to paint the old building soon.

## Were our actions successful?

The measuring of success is a long-term undertaking. We need to implement everything during the course of the year and then after each event we will be able to assess in detail. However, as can be seen above, we have initiated several actions and most seem to be working well. This is a long-term project and the overall improvement in communication and involvement of parents will take some time to establish. During the work sessions, the atmosphere is great and we sometimes have whole families turning up. In one instance, a father came back on a Monday with glass and fitted it in a broken window – this has never happened before and is evidence that this sort of activity is improving involvement. The PTA parents are very excited about their projects. All in all, as leaders of the school, we can sense an improvement. We believe that we have been able to live out our values of responsibility, respect, accountability and commitment and that the parents have also begun to demonstrate these.



*Parent Workgroup in action - painting the foundation phase blocks*

## **What have we learnt and how will it influence our future practice?**

We have learnt many things from this project. We realise that it will take considerable time and effort to get more parents involved, since it involves shifting the mindsets of both parents and teachers.

We know that every parent that becomes involved will be a victory and they in turn need to motivate other parents to become involved too, and so, in time, the whole culture of the community with regard to involvement with the school will change. We also realise that there are parents who are willing to make inputs and who strive to turn them into reality. We have also learnt that we need to be evaluating and modifying constantly to assess whether the goals we set for the school are still relevant and whether we are still on track.

Action research is a method that can be used to solve or investigate most of the challenges/problems we encounter in our schools and is a useful way of getting everyone in the school involved in making the school environment a pleasant one.

As leaders, this process showed us that there is no situation that cannot be improved if one uses an action research approach. It does not matter how big or small the change is, but as a leader you learn from going through the process. We will definitely continue to address all our other problems in this way as we strive to improve our school and live out our values of responsibility, respect, accountability and commitment.

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# ADDRESSING HIGH TEENAGE PREGNANCY AMONGST SCHOOLGIRLS

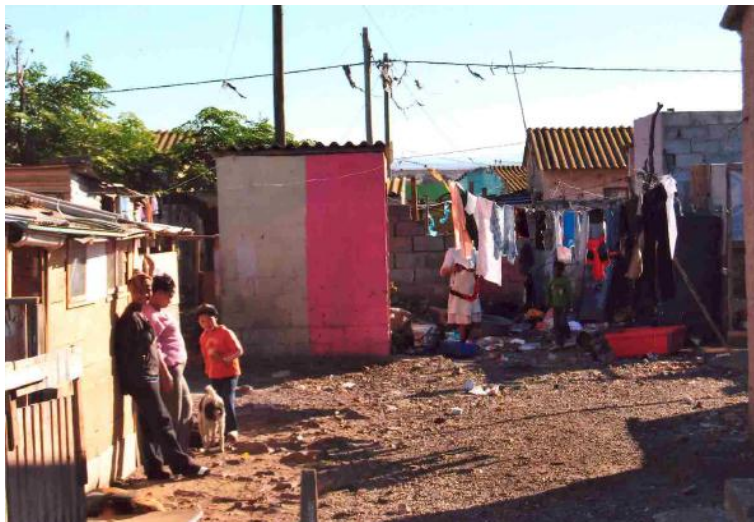
Gelvandale High School

Ingrid V. De Monk and Farrah Hendricks

## Our context

Our school is situated in Helenvale, also known as “Katanga”. Most of the learners at our school come from this poor community, although some come from better-off areas. Most people in Helenvale are unemployed, therefore people are poor and they can hardly afford the basic necessities of life. Most parents cannot afford to pay school fees, because most of them rely on grants for their daily needs. According to the bursar at our school only 40% of all parents pay school fees.

Sometimes, up to 5 families share one small house. Gangs thrive in Helenvale and drug abuse is common, with children as young as 8 or 9 using or even selling drugs. They use the money to buy brand-name clothing and cell phones. Young girls get the money for this by using sex as a means of barter to get the things that their parents cannot afford. Alcohol abuse is also common amongst adults and the parents often use what little money they have to buy alcohol, rather than food for the family. Most children are not fed properly and come to school hungry. As a result of all these problems, girls tend to be sexually active from a young age, with results that there is a high teen pregnancy rate.



## Our concern

We are concerned about the high rate of teenage pregnancy at our school. For the past four years, our teenage pregnancy rate at school has been high:

- 2007 - 17
- 2008 - 16
- 2009 - 16
- 2010 - 13

The actual figures are actually higher since some girls hide their pregnancy and do not inform the principal, have the baby and return to school a few days later, meaning that they do not have to miss out on school. However, this does not mean that they escape the social consequences of teenage pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy brings with it a whole host of social problems, some of which are discussed below.

**School drop-out or interrupted education:** The Department of Education policy, gives girls who fall pregnant have the right to remain in school, but suggest up to a two year waiting period before girls can return to school in the interests of the child. Many of them do not return to school. Most drop out because they do not have the support from the school, the Education Department, churches and the broader community. These girls either stay at home to care for their babies, or they get a job to see to the needs of the baby. Only about 50% of the girls do in fact return to school but of this 50%, some drop out on a later stage because they cannot cope with the care of the baby and the schoolwork.



**Vulnerability to or participation in criminal activity:** Teenage girls in Helenvale are vulnerable to gangsters and older men, because they want money to buy the things that they need and want. Due to the poverty in Helenvale, some girls will do anything for money, even get involved in criminal activities. We struggle to get a formal Education Department (Eastern Cape) Policy on pregnant girls.



## Why are we concerned?

We are concerned about this situation for several reasons, as detailed below:

1. If girls fall pregnant they have to leave school and return the next year, they may in fact not return and drop out. Even if they do return, they find it hard to fit in and become a “school girl” again
2. It is hard to cope with the school work and take care of a baby, and many of these girls fail the year in any case and drop out
3. Pregnancy and/or dropping out affects their future life chances. Many of these girls have no life goals or hope of a better life and have to depend on a man to look after them. They add to the already high unemployment rate in Helenvale
4. The self-esteem and confidence of the girls are affected, since they have little hope for the future
5. Teen mothers also face many challenges in trying to complete their schooling because, notwithstanding the importance of their academic work, they are mothers first. As teenagers these girls are in a crucial phase of their lives as they are experiencing the integration of their personal identifications, abilities and opportunities available in society
6. There are no strong policies to deal with any mockery, teasing or marginalizing of the young teen mothers in school. These remarks may affect the comfort of the teen mothers and may force them to drop out of school
7. Sometimes pregnant girls have fear participating in class discussions for instance during Life Orientation classes, where topics like “teenage pregnancy” may arise
8. Some pregnant girls also feel teachers do not understand their situation and they are expected to perform and behave just like any other student in their respective classes
9. Due to poverty, many teen mothers cannot afford to take their babies to crèche or to hire a babysitter so that they can have time to study and do their homework
10. Another problem linked to teenage pregnancy is, of course, the greater risk of becoming HIV positive. The government recognised this and targeted a reduction in teen pregnancy as one of the key areas of the National Strategic Plan (NSP) to reduce the rate of new HIV infections by 50% by the year 2011 – a plan that has clearly not worked, considering we are now in 2011.

An excerpt from the Parliamentary Report on Teenage Pregnancy amongst school learners and in South Africa generally (3 September 2009) states the following:

*The rise in learner pregnancy was most likely the result of improved reporting rather than a real increase. Learner pregnancy rates were higher in schools located in poor areas and in schools that were poorly resourced. There was no empirical evidence of a link between teen fertility and the Child Support Grant. Termination of pregnancy by teens had increased over time and there was in fact a low uptake of the Child Support Grant among teens. Data showed that an increase in education resulted in a decrease in fertility and that pregnancy was no longer causing students to drop out of school, although dropping out was a significant risk factor for early pregnancy and HIV. In South Africa, only about a third of teen mothers returned to school.*

This situation is untenable for us, particularly the fact that “only about a third of teen mothers returned to school.” Once they drop out, the risk of becoming pregnant again and of contracting HIV increases sharply. This situation denies our values of social justice, respect, responsibility and accountability. Social justice is denied because the life chances of the girls are impaired by teen pregnancy. The girls also need to learn to be responsible and accountable; girls must take responsibility for their own sexual protection and learn to value and respect themselves. The young man involved in the pregnancy must also be held accountable for their actions and learn responsibility towards their child.

For these reasons, we chose the following questions to guide our intervention in the school:

*How can we reduce teenage pregnancy in our school?*

*How can we better support learners who are pregnant?*

We realised that there is no easy answer to these questions, and that it would require much research and various interventions to answer them both, but in this report we detail how we began to address our concerns.

## **Our actions to improve the situation**

Based on our identification of the problem, we devised the following objectives to guide our interventions:

1. To raise awareness about the consequences of teenage pregnancies among our school girls

2. To help teenage school girls with the care of their babies and with other responsibilities they may have
3. To raise awareness about the added dangers of having unprotected sex in terms of HIV and STI infections
4. To heighten awareness of the importance of living out personal values such as respect, responsibility, accountability and social justice in order to address this issue

In order to attain the first, third and last objectives, we decided to enlist the help of all the Life Orientation (LO) teachers in this action research programme. Because of the lack of sexuality education in the current Life Orientation programme offered at our school, we drew up a programme for LO teachers about sexuality education and all the dangers of unprotected sex. We could do this, because one of us is the HOD for Life Orientation. We met with the teachers and facilitated discussion around the need for this and also guided them on how best to tackle these issues in class. Through this action, we made the other teachers aware of the magnitude of the problem at our school. Active involvement of all the LO teachers was crucial if we were to raise awareness of this issue among learners, as we knew that what the teachers chose to teach around this issue would determine the success of the intervention. Lessons were developed by the LO team and shared with each other. This supportive atmosphere allowed the teachers to feel more comfortable about addressing sexuality, contraception, HIV and AIDS and STIs. We implemented the lessons for a term and evaluated at the end of this period.

In order to attain objectives 2 and 4, we realised we had to address the needs of the learners who were pregnant or who had had babies for support. We arranged an initial meeting with Childline, an NGO who work to protect the rights of children. They were willing to assist with a 5-day workshop that they had developed to guide learners on how to successfully cope with their schoolwork and being a mother. The aims of the workshop included improving the self-worth, self-esteem and confidence of the participating girls. We had at least four meetings with Childline in preparation for this workshop. We participated in the planning of the workshop and decided on the following:

- The workshop should be on the school grounds;
- Should be conducted during the September holiday;
- A Childline social worker would conduct the workshop; and

- The school would organise:
  - Venue,
  - Security,
  - Teacher presence during the days of the workshop; and
  - Recruitment of girls to attend workshop.

The purpose of the programme was not only to help them cope with their schoolwork and motherhood, but also to prevent further pregnancies and the practice of unsafe sex, as well as to inculcate prevention to the learners and encourage personal growth.

Childline wanted to conduct personal interviews with each participant and ask them to fill in a questionnaire, so that they could evaluate the impact of their intervention. However, this was not a success, because the girls were hesitant to open-up to an unknown social worker – who, incidentally, worked for an agency that had the power to remove children from parents if they suspected any form of neglect.

This was an important learning for us and we therefore decided to design a questionnaire for the girls to complete in their own time that could be used in the place of the existing data gathering methods. The purpose of the questionnaire was to establish what problems the girls experienced at home and at school as teenage mothers and how they perceive that we as a school can solve these problems. We realised that we had to obtain their perspective on the problem, otherwise we ran the risk of not addressing their real needs. Too often, the voice of the learner is silenced and we wanted to hear the voice. We followed appropriate ethical guidelines to maintain the confidentiality of the participating girls. We also arranged for a “box” outside the classroom (well protected area) for the completed questionnaires. They could drop the anonymous questionnaires into the box to protect their identity.

The workshop started on Monday 27 September 2010. On that day only three girls attended the workshop. Being a Monday and a school holiday, we decided to continue with the process. The attendance on Tuesday doubled to six. On Wednesday the number increased to nine and on the Thursday eight girls with their babies came to the workshop. On Friday the girls completed an evaluation form on the completion of the entire programme, but of course the trustworthiness of the evaluation was hampered by the fact that some did not attend the whole programme. However, it did show to us that the ones who attended on the Monday had had a

positive experience, which they had then shared with their friends and “recruited” them to come along. We had follow-up meetings with Childline to rate the success and identify the pitfalls of the programme.

Another action we took, stemming from our learning about the power of peer opinion (as per the word of mouth message to attend the workshop) is that we are busy training peer educators at our school as a support to teachers in and outside the classroom. We hope that this can make an important contribution towards educating learners regarding sexuality education, abstinence and safer sex practices.

### **How can we justify our claim to have had a positive impact in our school?**

We have gathered some evidence to show that the workshop with the teen mothers and the Life Orientation lessons about sex education have had a very positive impact on our learners.

From discussions with our LO colleagues, we know that they are also actively involved with the discussions and lessons about sexuality and sex education. The learners seem to have enjoyed the lessons so far, indicated by the fact that they ask questions and participate in the discussions. Some of the comments in the forms are given below:

The learners understand the importance of values such as respect, responsibility and accountability.

*Having sex before marriage is not a responsible thing to do. You must think before you act. Girls must respect themselves and care for their bodies.*

*People don't realise that your body is yours. No one can tell you what to do or even force you to do things that you don't want to do. So, respect yourself, it will pay off.*

The learners understand the consequences of unprotected sex.

*These days boys only want you for sex and most likely you will get HIV/AIDS.*

*Some girls think it's jokes to have children at such a young age. They are actually messing with their future. It is really sad to see such young children having children at such a young age, really sad.*

The data provided in the evaluation forms are evidence that the learners have started to think about the consequences of teenage pregnancy and teenage motherhood. This provides the basis for us to continue our programme and include more teachers and learners.

From the evaluation forms collected at the workshop, we realised that the girls who attended the workshop really benefited from it. It provided them with the skills on how to care for their children and to cope with their schoolwork. It also taught them some valuable life skills.

Some of the girls said the following:

*We have learnt a lot at the workshop. Apart from the information, the presenters was kind and sympathetic*

*The information helped me tremendous. I am very grateful towards the organisers of the event. I realise now the importance of the right choices in life.*

*The workshop was a very good idea. It really made a impact on me and I know now how to cope with the demands of life. More learners should attend these workshops*

*I realise now the responsibilities of being a mother and it was good to talk to girls in the same situation. We could learn from each other.*

Although the workshop was only for five days, the impact on the learners was positive. The teachers at the school also reacted in a very positive manner towards the programme and there was plenty of support, especially from the LO teachers. This has motivated us to continue with the programme in order to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies at our school.

## **What we have learnt from this experience and how will it influence us in the future?**

We realised that we must provide our learners with the necessary information and provide them with the skills to cope with the demands of their teenage years. We learnt that most of the time they get the wrong information from their friends, because the parents do not talk to their children about these things.

Some of the problems that we experienced with the workshop are the following:

1. We must start earlier with the programme and involve more learners, because only a few benefitted from this workshop.
2. Childline should be more involved in the recruitment of learners so that they do not feel threatened by them.
3. The group of girls must meet each other before the workshop, for an orientation session to allow them to get to know each other and the facilitator.
4. We must also change the questionnaire to a more learner friendly questionnaire and guide the learners when answering the questions.
5. The format of the workshop also needs to be revised. The participants made suggestions such as: the inclusion of more participatory activities; the use of media; and inclusion of speakers who have had a baby and still managed to do well in life. .
6. We must also conduct a pre test and a post test. This will provide us with the learner's pre knowledge and what they have learnt from the workshop.

We plan on having a follow up meeting with the girls to monitor their progress and their attitude towards their responsibilities. For the future, we plan on more workshops, involving Childline but working together, so that we can be sure the final programme is relevant to our community needs. We plan on making lessons and time available for pregnant girls and teen mothers at times that are convenient to them.

We are hoping that by working with Childline and with the support of our teachers we will be able to reduce the incidence of teenage pregnancies at our school.

We are pleased to have noted that the learners have become more aware of the importance of living out values such as respect, responsibility, accountability and social justice. We have also been able to better model these values by our involvement in this project. We spoke to a reporter from the local newspaper, who wrote an article (The Herald, 10 November 2010 ) about our project, who sensationalised it and put it on the front page. This caused quite a stir and made the wider community aware of the issue. We have been contacted by the Department of Education on a national level to share our findings with them and to become involved in a national programme. Because of the newspaper article, the district offices of the Department of Education, as well as the pharmacy department of the Nelson Mandela

Metropolitan University, are now involved in our project. The Pharmacy department students will present contraception advice to our learners.

All of this attention indicates to us that this is a problem that many people are concerned about and the action research process has enabled us to begin to address it and network with others to improve the impact of our interventions. As teachers and leaders, we have learnt that the action research process really makes us aware of what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how we could do it better. The constant self-reflections made us realise how easy it can be to drift away from our values, and how difficult it is to live them out in the face of barriers that threatened the success of our project. However, when we do stick to our values, we feel much better about ourselves and are able to give more of ourselves to the project.

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## IMPROVING SCHOOL SAFETY AND SECURITY

### Kama Primary School

Mrs Vuyiswa Gantana, Mrs Nozuko Mashicila and Mrs Nobantu Olifant (Principal, advisory)

#### Our Context

Our school is situated in a disadvantaged area. Most of our children are from economically challenged backgrounds, and unemployment is high in the community that our learners come from. A number of our pupils come from child-headed families, due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. We currently have 700 pupils, 22 educators, and a clerk. We start from Grade R and go up to Grade 7.



The funding for South African schools is complex, and seeks to redress imbalances: “South Africa's schools are divided into five categories or "quintiles", according to their poverty ranking. The poorest schools are included in quintile 1 and the least poor in quintile 5. There are two steps in the classification of schools. First, a national poverty table, prepared by the Treasury, determines the poverty ranking of areas based on data from the national census including income levels, dependency ratios and literacy rates in the area. Provinces then rank schools from quintile 1 to 5, according to the catchment area of the school. Each national quintile contains 20% of all learners, with quintile 1 representing the poorest 20% and quintile 5 the wealthiest 20%.” (“Addressing quality through school fees and school funding”. Katharine Hall, Children’s Institute) and Sonja Giese (Promoting Access to Children’s Entitlements; South African Child Gauge 2008/2009: [http://www.ci.org.za/depts/ci/pubs/pdf/general/gauge2008/part\\_two/quality.pdf](http://www.ci.org.za/depts/ci/pubs/pdf/general/gauge2008/part_two/quality.pdf) )

We are a Quintile 3, No Fees School.

To assist learners from these backgrounds, the school provides children with one hot meal a day. We do have some useful resources, such as a library and computer centre. However, our school is not generally well resourced, and our play-grounds are not conducive to playing safely. There are stones, and the grass is uneven. Our classrooms are furnished, but we do have

challenges with broken windows and broken burglar bars. We have also suffered problems of theft, with windows being broken for entry. Our telephone lines have repeatedly been stolen, and this has cut off our internet access, as well as landline telephone and fax access. In short, we are typical example of a township school, with some resources, but not enough to function as well as we would like.

## **Our Concerns**

The concern we identified for this project was *learner safety on the school premises*. The process for this decision was initiated by the principal, after she attended the action research workshops. Through a circular, teachers were asked to consider what issues were concerns, or what school needs there were. Another circular later called us to a meeting of all staff (which, in this case included the secretary and the grounds-man). The meeting was held in our school library. All issues that had been considered were put on the table. These included issues such as lateness, absenteeism, discipline, and also safety and security of learners and staff. At this meeting, everyone agreed that safety and security of learners and staff was of prime concern.

After discussions with all the teachers and the School Governing Body (SGB), there was full agreement that learner safety was the concern we wished to tackle in this project, and that some elements of discipline would also be involved.

Two members of the school management team were then tasked by the principal to form a small team, to conduct the research and carry out the action research activities relating to security. Lead by the principal, they held meetings with the staff (again, including the secretary and the grounds-man), since it was very important for all to be given the chance to be democratically involved in the process of improvement. The values that underpin action research are equality, democracy, participation and improvement in quality of life for all (Stringer, 2008), and these are the values that we aspired to adhere to in carrying out our action research project.

## **Why we were concerned**

The staff felt that learners are not always safe and secure in their home environments, and that the school is the only place of safety many learners have. Learners need to learn that there

is a safer side to their community, where love and support is available, should it not be so at home.

Some learners are forced to stay alone at home for long periods, while parents are at work; others have parents who have abandoned them or have died, and therefore do not have biological parents to care for them. Of this latter group, most then live with grandparents, who are often partially disabled, and are supported by disability grants. Some — a minority — live in child headed households, whom we support through our feeding scheme, with extras and leftovers. The child householders from the high school alongside us were often coming through the fence, before this project, looking for food from our children, to take home to their siblings. This was very sad, and painful, as sometimes the fence was broken by them, and this project needed to fix the fence.



*Easy target for unauthorized entry – the previous school gate was old and had no secure locks*

In tackling this concern we hoped to teach learners values, to be better citizens, and to take care of their own environment. Amongst the values are responsibility for the school and their own environment, looking after things, and cleanliness. Also, we teach love and care, helping others, and honesty. We value openness. We also wish to teach them a sense of ownership and appreciation. An added value will be a growing sense of self-discipline. We are concerned about the lack of safety because the values that we wish to embody in our leadership of the school, are being denied by the current situation. As leaders we are also aware that we have to model and practically live out the values that we want learners to internalise, so we are not just changing the learners, but also hoping to change ourselves to live out our values more fully.

To guide our work, we wrote out questionnaires for all the educators, for four selected members of the School Governing Body, and for 20 Grade 6 and 7 learners. Because of lack of facilities, we asked a teacher with a clear hand-writing to write these out, and then we photocopied them. These questionnaires raised the issue of whether safety and security was a problem, and what could be done. It emerged than this was a common concern. Some of the

specific concerns raised from these questionnaires, and from discussions, regarding school safety are as follows:

**Burglaries**

We have had a lot of burglaries in the past. This negatively affects our safety, and the way our school operates. About two years ago our brand new photocopier was stolen within days of arrival. Our computer laboratory has been broken into, and some computers were stolen. Our classes have also been broken into, and equipment stolen. In a recent case, donations of cleaning materials from parents were stolen. Our school and national flags, attached to poles, were also stolen. Our telephone lines have repeatedly been stolen, and this has cut off out internet access, and also means we cannot have public telephones. Sections of the fence were also stolen.

These incidents dishearten teachers and learners, who feel devastated. Parents also stop donating if their donations have been stolen. This series of break-ins also threatens the safety of learners, and their feeling of security.

**Thoroughfare**

Our school boundary fence has not been secure in some places (*see photo alongside*). The fence is at times removed by thieves. Also, our gate was old, and had no secure locks. It was easy for unauthorized entry. Pupils' possessions, such as their jerseys, lunch-tins and so on, were being stolen. This was an issue raised by the learners through the questionnaires.



People were able to enter and walk around, and some used the school as a short-cut to their homes. This compromised safety, and led to the disappearance of school bags, garden tools, and so on. Teachers felt they could not leave their own bags in classrooms.

### ***Unauthorized Entry and Child Collection***

Child collection was also difficult to control. Sometimes in the case of divorce and separation of parents, one partner would come and take a child from the school without the knowledge or permission of the other. This could lead to unhappiness, and the child being affected by this situation. The school was at times blamed for such incidents. While these were not many cases — just a few were reported — it caused a great sense of unhappiness, with a sense that a child was lost and could not be found. This was an issue raised by parents in the questionnaire.

### ***Learner Safety during Playtime and Pupil Movement***

Pupils have sometimes been hurt by running into each other during playtime. Also, some incidents have occurred during movement of pupils to and from assemblies or entering and leaving classes. Greater discipline and better order was needed during assembly and break. The playground is uneven, with stones and holes, and has rough grass. This leads to injuries during playtime. These injuries — not serious injuries, just cuts and scratches — were occasional, but they had to be looked after.

Thus, the responses to the questionnaires re-enforced the feelings of staff, that security was an issue to be addressed.

## **What did we do?**

We attended the action research workshops, and met with our mentor, which guided our activities, although we had difficulties, often, in attending the more formal action research sessions. We also liaised with the principal on security matters: usually this liaison was informal, but was also done in staff meetings. We also reported on safety and security issues in staff meetings.

The teachers and the principal were asked to look around for safety issues, and report to us. This they mostly did through the principal, who referred the matters to us.

Based on the reports and our observations, the following aspects were prioritised for action by our committee, in consultation with the staff and principal. Our activities included:



We monitor the alarm system. This system, which was installed before the action research project, has become our responsibility. A security company is employed to monitor especially four key rooms, the secretary's office, the kitchen, the computer room and the library. We have to monitor payments, and check that these are made. Also, they phone us if there are incidents, and to take further action.

We had a new, strong security gate installed. This gate runs on rollers, and is easy to open and shut, and has heavy padlocks.



*The new school gate*

We have temporarily repaired the fences, and have called a handyman to fix them more permanently and remove the tree trunks with which gaps have been closed. Also, we are planning to repair burglar guards that have been broken, and window latches.

We have put some fences near one set of swings, to prevent learners running into the swings (the second set of swings still needs a fence).

We have — encouraged by the principal — instituted and monitor a staff playground duty system: two teachers have a week's responsibility to walk around during breaks, and check on children's safety, and check the children when they return from break.



*The new fences around the one set of swings*

We have erected a notice board requesting visitors to report to the main office. Also, children can only be collected by a person known to the school staff.

We visited Diaz School (and other model schools) to observe how they conducted assembly, and tried to implement their practices.

We instituted school visits by persons who would talk about safety concerns. All learners were addressed by our committee about safety in assembly, and were spoken to by the principal. They were also introduced to the police: representatives from the police came (the police told learners to avoid strangers, and not to talk to people they didn't know: they spoke mostly about sexual abuse). A team from Transnet spoke to the learners about safety in general: home, playtime, as well as railway line safety.

The Grassroots programme, LoveLife, also visited the school to speak to Grade 7 about HIV/AIDS, condoms, pregnancy, sanitary matters, and so forth.

Our Grade 7s were tested for drugs: not as a preventative measure, as we are not aware of our learners engaging in this activity and we have no reports of this, but as a learning exercise.

We have also instituted fire-drill training.

Also, we liaise with the discipline committee, and the school care-giver (who is a parent employed by the government) who looks after children when they are hurt or don't feel well. She deals with toothaches, and tummies. She treats children using the first aid box in the secretary's office, but she will also take learners home or to the clinic, if needs be.





*Kama learners engaged in an HIV/AIDS awareness programme*

## **Were our actions successful?**

We still have a lot to improve, but we feel we are on our way. The number of burglaries has declined. Previously this was a frequent problem, but incidents have become fewer, and minor. The use of the school yard as a thoroughfare has stopped. There have been no further reports of learners being lost or going off with an unauthorized person. The other teachers do cooperate and perform their playground duties. Also, we have become the people that others turn to for safety matters.

## **What have we learned?**

We have learned that we can help ourselves. We have learned to work as a team, together with other structures, like the police, LoveLife, parents, learners and other staff members.

We have also learned that action research is an ongoing thing, where there is not a “right or wrong” approach. Rather, it is a process that develops us, and has helped us to understand situations better. For example, we have learned to put ourselves in the learners’ place, so as to understand where they are coming from, in order to help them, motivate and inspire them.

We can make ourselves and our learners feel more secure, learning and teaching in a good, more conducive environment. This research has also helped us to plan our day-to-day activities.

However, this project has been hard, but as we have been working we find we are getting better. Also, the other teachers have become more interested and helpful, though we have felt alone at times, especially with the work on the report: doing this report, it has been useful having the mentoring process, so we can say what we feel, and have it captured in writing. We find it easier to talk about our work, than to write it as a report. But this process has increased our eagerness to learn to write reports. We would like to develop computer skills.

Where we could improve: we feel it would be better to get the whole school even more involved. We are aware that improving school safety and security is an on-going process, and we have many things still to do. The grounds are not yet conducive to playing on, and are still not entirely safe. Old and potentially dangerous branches have to be cut off trees and the classroom burglar guards need professional welding. But we have had successes: since we have monitored the playground roster, we have reduced the number of injuries.

This is the first time we are doing “research”! But, on the other hand, we have found this research to be something practical. We also found the structure of the action research, in the diagram, very helpful for us.

Generally, our interaction with the mentor has improved our confidence.



# IMPROVING THE SKILLS OF LEARNERS WHO ARE STRUGGLING TO COPE IN MAINSTREAM CLASSES

Machiu Primary School

Denise May, Cheryl Rossouw, Marilyn Jafta, Elroy Rhagosingh

## Our context

Machiu Primary School is situated in the Northern Suburbs of Port Elizabeth near the Salt Pan, in Salt Lake. Our school has an enrolment of 864 learners from Grade One to Seven. The staff complement comprises 25 state-paid educators and three Grade R educators paid by the School Governing Body.



*The northern areas near the Salt Pan*

Our school is largely attended by underprivileged learners from different areas. Many of the learners are from poor socio-economic conditions and many parents are unemployed and illiterate. Also, many learners are from single-parent families and are reared by grandparents. Approximately 199 learners receive a social grant.

School fees per annum are R500 which is paid in full by two thirds of the learners. There are 45 learners with some form of barrier to learning: 15 learners diagnosed with ADD, 12 assessed as mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, 6 with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, while 7 are diagnosed with specific learning problems such as dyslexia and Tourettes Syndrome.

Another have 5 have physical impairments which impinge on their learning e.g. eye problems or heart condition, etc.

Learners at the school come from Afrikaans, isiXhosa and English backgrounds. The language of learning and teaching (LOLT) is English. The school has been rated as a Quintile 5 school which means that it is classified as a well-resourced school, when in fact it is not well resourced at all. Most of the buildings are pre-fabs, there is no school hall, no music teachers or equipment, no art facilities, and no sports facilities or physical education classes. The school does not have money to pay outside people to take responsibility for organising such activities. This means that, apart from academic work, there is not much for learners to participate in, and if they are not strong in academic work, then they have little opportunity to shine. This can have a negative impact on the development of healthy self-esteem of learners and they also lose out on the chance to develop important life skills.

## **Our concern**

As we move towards change in the school, we are committed to the values of responsibility for and accountability towards the learners with specific learning disabilities or barriers to learning. According to Pretorius (2007:24), education is about guiding the children forward to help them determine their position among other people and in the wider society. At Machiu Primary we are concerned with the scholastically challenged child's needs. The questions we continually ask ourselves are:

- What would the learners have learnt when they leave school? and;
- What values, knowledge and skills will they embody to influence their younger siblings and other people in general?

In the past, some learners left school without any special skills and some could not be accommodated at the nearest school for scholastically challenged learners. Even if learners are accepted at this school, unemployment in the families contributed to the fact that learners were unable to afford the travelling costs. This meant that a number of learners per class eventually dropped out of school altogether. If learners can complete education at schools such as these, they often gain employment, using the practical skills taught, and some even go onto tertiary education such as technical colleges. However, since few of our learners can gain enrolment at this school, we realised we had to do something here to help them.

Previously we provided adaptation classes for learners who did not progress academically. The adaptation classes taught them skills such as sewing, beading, weaving and so forth. With the infusion of these learners into the mainstream, in accordance with governmental policies of inclusion, classes have become over-crowded. There is no special intervention programme to equip these learners for the 'big world' as there are no trained educators to do this. This means that the learners progress to the next grade as a result of age cohort, without meeting the learning outcomes required of them in their current grade. This situation defeats the whole purpose of education, since it demoralises both learners and teachers, just to meet the requirements of the system.

Because a child or youth is a 'participant' in forming and developing his/her environment, inadequate education can cause a child's participation in society to be damaging rather than meaningful and productive (Pretorius 2007:31). The scholastically deprived learners in the classroom are frustrated, and act in a negative way, which leads to the disturbance of other learners who want to work. They display a negative academic self-concept including behavioural problems such as aggression. Also, their learning activities are incomplete or unattempted as a result of the accumulated disadvantage.

We realise that change is a learning process and filled with risks. But, if we do not take the risk, no significant change will happen. If we neglect to develop the learners' life skills, their sense of responsibility would remain underdeveloped, their self-esteem would remain low and their efforts and achievements would go unrecognised. We therefore wanted to reinstate the adaptation classes, but this time involving parents and the community to solve the problem of not having additional educators to do this. Our research question was framed as:

*How can we improve the skills of learners who are struggling  
to cope in mainstream classes?*

While the learners are learning how to sew, or do beadwork, they are also learning many more skills, such as how to commit to a project, how to concentrate on one thing at a time, how to organise and construct a business plan and so forth. This will help develop a healthy self-esteem and give them sense of achievement. Should we be successful in this project, we would like to believe that our learners would be better skilled for society and the 'drop-out' level will begin to decrease.



## What we did to address the concern

Since we adopted an action research design, it was important that we involved as many staff as possible to encourage ownership of the project. We decided to ask our colleagues to compile a SWOT analysis at our strategic planning weekend, so that the problem could be identified as being one worthy of attention.

STRENGTHS: democratic management, team work, committed teachers, good human relations with educators, school governing body, parents	WEAKNESSES: initiatives not always followed through; the learning barriers of learners present a challenge for teachers; absenteeism and late coming of learners and teachers
OPPORTUNITIES: development of relationships with community and business; available community leaders and parents	THREATS: financial constraints, overcrowded classes; lack of family support for learners; unemployment and poverty; lack of time; lack of resources

The results of the SWOT analysis indicated that “remedial” learners were seen as a problem due to the behavioural problems the teachers experienced. The educators felt that discipline was a problem, but further analysis indicated that the bad discipline was a result of learners feeling neglected and frustrated because they could not cope in the mainstream. Absenteeism and latecoming of learners was also linked to the frustrations of learners who found it difficult to keep up in the class.

Once the problem had been identified and owned by the whole staff, we contemplated what we could do to address it. The whole staff brainstormed possible actions and we chose to implement the following, by a democratic vote.

**Action 1:** At a staff meeting educators were requested to identify the learners with barriers to learning and then forward the names to the Individualised Learner Support Team (ILST) committee, whose duty it is to determine individual support plans for each learner. The parents of the respective learners were informed in order to give their consent for the learners to be referred to psychologists at NMMU-Vista Campus, NMMU-South Campus or privately to be

assessed ('screened'). Ultimately we ended up with 45 learners. During the identification process, some parents were reluctant to give their consent. In these cases the educators had a one-on-one consultation with parents to educate them about the benefits of having their child formally assessed, so that support could be arranged.

**Action 2:** We intended to set up classes for these learners where they could learn skills such as beadworking, knitting, woodwork, crafts or karate. We had to involve parents and the wider community in this endeavour, since the teachers would not be able to attend to all these needs. Letters were sent to all the parents to inform them about the project and requesting their assistance. A group of teachers headed by a School Management Team member was assigned to create a task plan with time frames indicating who could be responsible for which tasks. We were motivated to work together. The



*Learning the skill of beadworking*

The response from the parents was overwhelming, but many of them also expected to be paid for their services. One excited parent who had just completed a course in beading came all the way from a distant township to offer her help, free of charge. We received offers for help with leatherwork, karate, needlework and woodwork. Some of the other challenges we encountered were lack of a venue to do these skills, lack of finances to give volunteers an honorarium, and lack of equipment for activities like sewing. Also, another external threat was the teachers' strike which demoralised and preoccupied the staff. However, we were committed to overcoming these barriers.

**Action 3:** We reported back to the staff on the progress of the project and the challenges we were facing. The staff pledged their full support and commitment. Educators wanted to know if the beading would be an on-going process for the learners or just a 'once off' programme for this action research project. They had to be re-assured that it would be an on-going project which would promote fewer frustrated, undisciplined and low self-esteemed learners in the classroom. The educator's working condition would improve and teaching would be more



interesting as a result of fewer interruptions. In this way, we strengthened commitment to the project.

**Action 4:** Taking 20 learners from Grade 6 and 7, we initiated a beading class. We chose the older learners, because they would be leaving the school soon and we wanted to help them first. They attended this class twice a week for a few hours at a time, and the children became extremely excited about it. Attendance was 100%. They created necklaces and bracelets that they later sold to the school community. This involved making their own posters to advertise the goods, helping to develop their artistic side. The next step is to make souvenirs for sale to tourists. One of the team members had to provide the start-up capital, but this was soon paid back.



*Intense concentration – learners create necklaces and bracelets at beadwork classes*

## How successful was our project?

We encountered many problems in our implementation which meant that only one of our attempts was successful, namely the beading workshop. We will now have to readdress some of the barriers such as finding appropriate venues, involving more community members, and finding some start up finance and/or equipment. We have already sourced one venue and are still working on the other issues. However the learners



*Learners line up to purchase a necklace or bracelet made by fellow learners*

who have taken part in the beading are reportedly behaving better in class, and their enthusiasm is visible. Educators also report more involvement on the part of these learners. These learners are also going to teach the craft to other learners, which increases their self-esteem and expands the curriculum for all learners. The fact that they are interested in this also keeps them out of negative after-school activities. The real success of this project has been to show us that we need to work together as a team and that we can overcome problems if we do this. As a team, we are now very motivated and encouraged by this project.

### **What have we learnt from our research intervention?**

We have learnt that it pays to make sacrifices for the learners, as we are rewarded by the results that benefit them. We benefit by living out our values of care and concern, responsibility and accountability towards learners and become better people and teachers for it. The action research project has increased our resilience. We know that we can overcome adversity if we put our minds to it. The action research process actually forces us to become creative in providing solutions to challenging situations. Working in a team helped us to understand each other better and build relationships. We were all very busy with other commitments and we often had to stand in for each other and help each other out in order to ensure the project progressed.

We intend to carry on with this project, and address the many barriers since as a school we think that this programme would also benefit parents via their involvement. Eventually, the skills may be used to support financial needs of learners and their families. We see this project also as a good marketing tool for the school, since we will become known as a school who caters for learners with scholastic challenges. All in all, the process of action research has proven to be a wonderful tool to help us to dream big, and then to plan, and implement action to attain these dreams. It has also opened up our eyes to the many opportunities that exist if you are looking for them. For example, we have acquired a sponsor for a venue, and also a sponsor for a feeding scheme, which are important spin-offs of this process.

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## IMPROVING SCHOOL SAFETY

### Malabar Primary School

Mr EL Serfontein, Ms P Pather and Ms S Pillay

#### Our school context

Malabar Primary school is situated in the Northern areas of Port Elizabeth, in the suburb of Malabar. The school's name "Malabar" is a name from India which depicts a hill top. The name is aptly applied since this school, which was established in 1980, is situated on top of a hill. The motto of the school is *Strength of Mind and Body*. At the time of inception of this school, it started with Standard 1 to Standard 3 which is now Grade One to Grade Three. To date the school has two Grade R classes (reception classes) and four of each grade from Grade 1 to Grade 7. Many past learners from Malabar Primary have become very successful in their careers.



Malabar Primary is unique in that it has a multi-cultural staff as well as learners. There are 30 staff members, of whom 21 are permanent staff whilst the others are either in a temporary capacity, or appointed to posts funded by the School Governing Body. Currently we have 1,039 learners. The learners hail from different areas of Port Elizabeth. The socio-economic conditions of most of the pupils are poor and many come from disadvantaged backgrounds. While the present school fees are R720 per annum, the rate of non-payment of school fees is staggering. Many of the learners' parents receive social welfare grants and many apply for either full or partial exemption from the payment of school fees.

The school boasts a library which is currently being upgraded with new books, a television, wall charts and useful equipment that are used by teachers in their classes. We now have a data projector which was bought for the school by the previous year's Grade 7 classes. Donations in the form of cash and books have made this venture possible. We also have a computer room which consists of 26 computers. These have been purchased from money that

was raised by the various fundraising ventures at the school. There is a science laboratory which is functional but not fully equipped.

The local community, despite not having children at the school, always supports the school with regard to sponsorships, donations and attending our fundraising events. The school depends upon this support since the parents from outside Malabar are not always able to attend functions held at the school due to financial and other constraints. To show our appreciation to the community, the learners and staff regularly visit the local Senior Citizens home and entertain the citizens with tasty edibles and song and dance.

## **Our concern**

As a School Management Team, we need to ensure that the learners and all stakeholders are always protected against injury, inside as well as outside the classrooms at our school. Therefore, we are constantly monitoring the premises for any physical danger that could befall the learners whilst on the premises. The school has its own Safety Policy and Safety Committee in place. As a result, fire-drills are executed during the course of the year and fire extinguishers are strategically placed in various areas around the school. The extinguishers are regularly serviced so that they are operational at any time.

However, we also have two other major safety concerns. The first is an unsafe staircase in one of the school blocks and the second is an unsafe drop off zone for learners outside our school.

## **Why we are concerned**

The unsafe staircase became a serious problem. We have a double storey building with wings on either side of each other, each of which has many classrooms. There are only two exit staircases for the upstairs part of the block. Through constant use, the stairs on one of the staircases have literally been falling apart and have become extremely slippery when wet. As a result, many children have slipped and fallen down the stairs and sustained serious injuries. Parents were not sympathetic to the school in these instances. Furthermore, in the past the children tended to push and shove each other on the stairs in a bid to get up or down them as

quickly as possible. Also, some children also used to run up and down the stairs. As a result of this behaviour, children have fallen down the already dangerous stairs and injured themselves.



*Learners crowding the staircase in a rush to get down*

Regarding the unsafe drop-off zone, the school has one double gate at the front entrance of the school through which both cars and pupils enter. Learners alight from vehicles and run blindly into the school yard oblivious to in-coming traffic or other vehicles that are moving off. We have not had any accidents to date, but this is something which can no longer be allowed to continue as it will be detrimental to the safety of our learners. Our objective is to relocate this drop off zone to an unused park adjacent to the school which will be much safer for all concerned. This land, however, belongs to the Municipality. Until recently, the park was not fenced off, with the result that some taxi drivers would drive onto the park to drop off the children thereby creating another, but illegal and unsafe, drop off area.

This situation is not acceptable to us, since it violates our values of care and compassion. We hold ourselves accountable for the safety of the learners and, apart from the legal implications, we are not happy that our learners' safety is not at an acceptable level. We would also like to raise awareness among the learners that they have to accept responsibility for their own behaviour, and act in a way that does not endanger the safety of others, or their own safety. We would like them to learn how to behave in public spaces, as this is an important life skill and also helps to inculcate a sense of responsibility and care for others.



## What we did to improve the situation

We attended an action research training session for the DG Murray Trust *Integrated School Development and Improvement Project* at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. After consultation with the principal, it was decided that we would participate in the action research component of the project. We held a staff meeting in March 2010 and discussed this new project. We brainstormed the many concerns that we had as a staff and eventually decided to focus on school safety. The staff mandated the three of us to get this project into operation.

However, although our goal was the improvement of safety at our school, we soon realized that we needed to focus on short term and long term objectives to achieve our goal. Therefore, our short-term objective was to try to make the staircase safer and our long term objective was to relocate the drop off zone from in front of the school gates to a park adjacent to the school.

Thereafter, we attended several action research sessions where we learnt how to “tackle” our project. We conducted a baseline assessment of the safety of the staircase and identified what was needed to be done to improve its safety. We conducted a survey regarding the safety of the staircase, using the teachers, learners and parents as respondents. The findings were then discussed with our mentor in April 2010. Since finance was a consistent constraint, we would need to look at alternative methods of financing our plan. We decided that we needed to paint the staircase, divide it into two sections and erect signs displaying how the children should behave on the stairs.

In addition, a sample of learners completed a questionnaire and documented their observations on the movement of learners up and down the staircase in short essays. The questionnaire attempted to obtain information from the learners about the following:

- Which areas in the school are unsafe?
- How can the staircase be made safer?
- What is the main cause of injuries on the staircase?
- Is the scholar patrol system effective enough for road safety?
- What are the main causes of traffic accidents?
- Is the drop off zone at the main gates of the school safe?
- What suggestions can you make to solve the drop off zone congestion problem?

The learners identified the following areas as unsafe: staircase, clubhouse, front and back gate. In their responses to the questionnaire and in their short essays, the learners were able to provide valuable suggestions and exhibited an awareness of safety issues in the school. The teachers also provided valuable suggestions in short written responses.

*The staircase in the senior primary block is in constant use by the teachers and learners; however the way that it is used is rather unsafe and has led and can lead to violent behaviour amongst learners as well as injuries.*

*Learners tend to push each other as they walk up or down the stairs, it may be a mistake, but tempers begin to flare and learners get physical. This becomes dangerous as they can easily fall or bump their heads during the 'fight'.*

*After school learners are coming down the stairs and some are going up to fetch their bags (returning from the field), there is total chaos as they try to fit through each other and a lot of pushing and shoving occurs which can lead to children falling and getting hurt.*

*At times teachers and learners are going in opposite directions and this leads to confusion, teachers and learners can easily trip and fall. Usually after a bell rings learners tend to descend the stairs in such a manner that it is nearly impossible for anyone to get anywhere other than in the direction the learners are going.*

*There was an incident whereby learners were pushing the younger children down the stairs and led to a girl getting hurt.*

Having gathered this information, we realised that the stairs should be first priority. We made temporary signs and laminated these:

- KEEP LEFT
- PASS RIGHT and
- NO RUNNING





At an assembly the pupils were informed of the nature of the project and the reasons for this being done. They needed to walk up and down the stairs keeping left at all times when walking up and keeping right when walking down, so as to avoid causing any obstruction to each other. The movement of learners on the staircases was also monitored by teachers and prefects.



*Learners using the stairs more safely*

We then wrote letters to the municipal ward councillor for assistance, particularly with regard to the unsafe drop off zone and the need to be able to use the municipal park adjacent to the school as a drop off zone. She visited the school and assessed our needs. She has not yet been able to assist us in the relocation of the drop off zone for children. However, she was able to ensure that the park was fenced, thereby preventing it from being used as an alternative illegal and unsafe drop off zone in the interim.

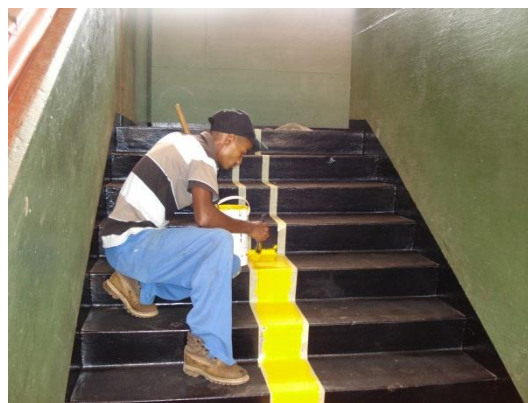
She offered advice and secured the sponsorship of black non-slip paint for the staircase. We could only eventually follow through with the painting of the staircase in early 2011 due to time and monetary constraints. We had also been advised that sea sand could be used as well because this would contribute to a non-slip surface. We enlisted the help of the non-teaching staff and they painted the staircase, threw the sea sand over the first coat of paint, repainted and then painted a yellow stripe down the centre, thereby dividing the staircase.

After a short period of time however, the black paint began to peel off due to excess traffic. Consequently, we held a staff meeting where we all tried to revisit our use of this paint. The principal then suggested that we replace the paint with non-slip tiles. This idea was met with much approval by all. In addition, the KEEP LEFT, PASS RIGHT and NO RUNNING signs will be made of more durable perspex. We then discussed possible fundraising ventures to raise enough money to cover the cost of the tiles and the signs. We have already had one "civvies" day (where the children pay a small amount for the privilege to come to school in their own clothes, rather than in uniform) which raised R1400,00 which will be put towards the costs of the project. Raising the funds for this project is something that cannot be done overnight and will always be on the agenda until the project has been implemented completely.

## How do we know that we have improved the situation?

As mentioned above, initially signs were put up to encourage learners to KEEP LEFT, PASS RIGHT and not to run on the staircases. In addition, teachers and prefects monitored movement on the staircases. Initially this was difficult to put into practice until their mind-set changed and this method gained support from the children. Both teachers and prefects were eager to encourage pupils to implement this safety measure.

However, after the stairs were painted, to the amazement and joy of the staff, everyone who used the two staircases did so with care. They are now constantly reminded by each other to keep left and not to run down the staircases. This small accomplishment has shown us that small efforts such as this can make a big difference in keeping a child safe.



*The newly painted stairway*

Unfortunately, we have made very little progress in attempting to shift the drop off zone. However, we will continue to work on it.

## What have we learnt from our research intervention?

As a group we have realized that we can work together and accomplish goals that can better benefit our school. We have learnt that we are so wrapped up in our little cocoons that we sometimes cannot think “out of the box”. We looked for help from all corners and found that there are many companies, people, parents and even political office bearers who are ever willing to assist or to offer advice. We even realized that in order to obtain suggestions of alternative methods to tackle a task, all that was needed was for us to ask for help.

Above all we have learnt that no problem is too big. Through action research we learnt that our concern of school safety was very big but, by breaking it down into smaller parts, we can accomplish many goals.

We have learnt to work together as a team. Also, by attending the action research sessions, we met educators from other schools and learnt to listen to each other’s concerns, difficulties,

failures and achievements. This enabled us both to learn and to offer help where we could. We also empathized with each other as educators regarding the short comings of the situations we found ourselves in. No problem is ever too big or worse than the next school. We made many friends and soon realized that teaching is a Calling and not a Job. Teachers will always be doing everything possible to make the life of a child at a school a safe and nurturing one.

## STRENGTHENING THE EXTRA-MURAL PROGRAMME

### Sapphire Road Primary School

Moefeda Krause, Sylvia Saulse, Sylvia Frans and Alicia Baatjes

#### Our context

Sapphire Road Primary is situated in Booyesen Park, Port Elizabeth, South Africa but it mainly services the disadvantaged areas of Kleinskool, Kwanoxolo, Frans Valley, Greenfields, Pola Park and the Nceba Faku Village. Our learner population has grown from 559 in 2001 to 1,115 in 2011. We have Grade R to Grade 7. Our challenges have increased because 90% of our parents are unemployed.

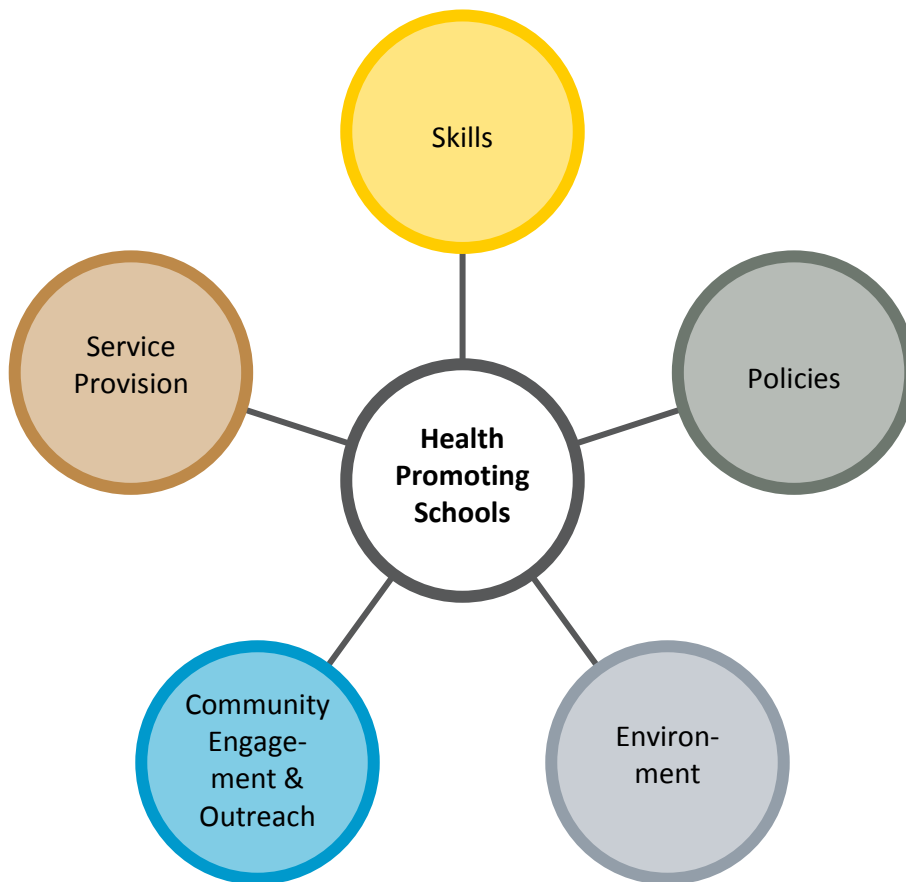
We adopted a policy that ensures that no child is excluded from a school because of school fees. The School Governing Body therefore took a courageous decision in 2005 to abolish school fees and to fundraise instead. In 2010 we were officially declared a 'no school fee' School by the Department of Education.

The school not only focuses on educating learners but the capacitating of our parents and the community at large, with skills that would be beneficial to the individual, the community and the school in general.

Sapphire Road Primary shares the vision of Government, Business and the Education Department which is to ensure that our schools not only become centres of academic excellence, but serve as a catalyst for social and economic change in previously disadvantaged communities.

The objectives and vision of our school can only be achieved with the assistance of government, business, community and parents, and social partners. Our vision is to ensure that the school is used as a base to educate our learners and also provide the opportunity for development of parents and the community. This can be done if the school serves as a centre of educational and social transformation.

We have attained awards on both a national and international scale for the work we have been doing as a school. Since we are a health promoting school, we focus on the promotion of overall health in 5 areas: skills, policies, environment, community engagement and outreach and service provision.



Some of our most notable achievements in these areas have been:

**Skills:** Our teachers are part of an international pilot programme that focuses on the improvement of best teaching practices and undergo continuous training in programmes related to the curriculum. They also have access to various programmes that promote their wellness.

**Policies:** We have developed many policies to ensure the wellness of our learners, teachers and other staff, as well as contributing to the wellness of the community. The school adopted

parent and teacher charters that recommit us to providing quality education to the most vulnerable sector of society. We are also a no fee school.

**Environment:** The building of two security houses on the premises of the school using bricks that were made by unemployed parents. The homeless families that live in these houses stay for free and in return they look after the security of the school. As a result, we have had no vandalism since 2003.

- The fitting of security gates, to protect the school, by unemployed parents, trained at our skill school.
- Repairs to school furniture and securing of neighbouring schools buildings, using our skill school.

**Community engagement and outreach:**

- We use volunteer parents as teachers assistants in the classrooms
- No school fees since 2006.
- Training of unemployed youth and parents in basic skills like welding, computer literacy, sewing and carpentry. The school has trained more than 1000 unemployed members of the community, through the skills programme.
- The establishment of two vegetable gardens on the school. The produce from this garden is shared between the people that work the garden, those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS and the school.
- The opening of a gym by the weightlifting association of South Africa to promote weightlifting development in the area. Two of the learners from these classes won gold medals at the national Weightlifting championships in 2005.
- The school is used by five different churches, from the surrounding area, to hold services over weekends.

**Services:** Opening of an accredited training centre for the unemployed, on the premises of the school that will train the unemployed from 10 other communities.

- ABET classes for parents to teach reading skills.
- The opening of a counselling centre on the premises of the school to help the community deal with social issues confronting them, including HIV/AIDS. The centre is manned by peer counsellors who do advocacy as well as home based care.

- Opening of The House of Hope, 2010, on the premises of the school that focuses on remedial intervention during the day and during the evening acts as a place of safety for those children who feel threatened in the community.
- Building of a clinic run by 10 parent volunteers and a supervising doctor. The supervisor of the clinic is a retired nurse who volunteers her services free of charge.

We have 88 volunteers who work on a daily basis in the school, developing their own skills as:

- Teacher Assistants
- Day and night security
- Administration volunteers
- Computer trainers
- Orphaned and vulnerable children volunteers
- Vegetable gardeners
- Clinic nurses
- Plumbers
- Painters
- Grass cutters
- Sewers

These volunteers are unemployed and by volunteering gain valuable work experience to build up a CV. We have won many national and international awards for these achievements.

Although we have attained much success in our school improvement efforts, we ascribe to the action research principles of lifelong learning and continual improvement. We were invited to participate in an action research project by the Faculty of Education at the University and welcomed this opportunity to learn how to improve our educational offerings.

## **Beginning the process**

In line with the democratic and participatory nature of action research, we met with the principal, discussed our views and then laid out our plans to the School Management Team. It was suggested that we should lay out our plans to the entire staff. We now describe how we implemented the process.



The Action Research team, consisting of the four members stated in this report, met and each one of us brainstormed ideas we had for school improvement. We, as a team, identified the following areas as being in need of improvement:

- Discipline, as a whole, in all the areas of the school, e.g. staff, pupils and non-teaching staff
- Learners with learning barriers
- Teacher Assistants – the positive role they can play
- Finance
- Absenteeism

We then met with the whole staff and explained the concept of the action research project and what part each of us will be playing in the focus area that we will identify. We, as a team shared our ideas and asked for more ideas from the staff. All the suggestions were written on the board and the necessity of each area was explained by the person suggesting it. After discussing all the proposed ideas, the feeling was that all areas warranted attention but staff recognized that we could only choose one. Staff then voted to decide which area would be identified.

The focus area that staff voted for was Extra-mural Activities. This had not been one of the original suggestions by the team and even the suggestion from the Principal was outvoted. This underlined for us the importance of democratic decision-making, since if we had not given the entire staff the opportunity to give input, we would have embarked on a project that they did not think was warranted, and therefore cooperation would have been problematic.

## **Explaining our concern**

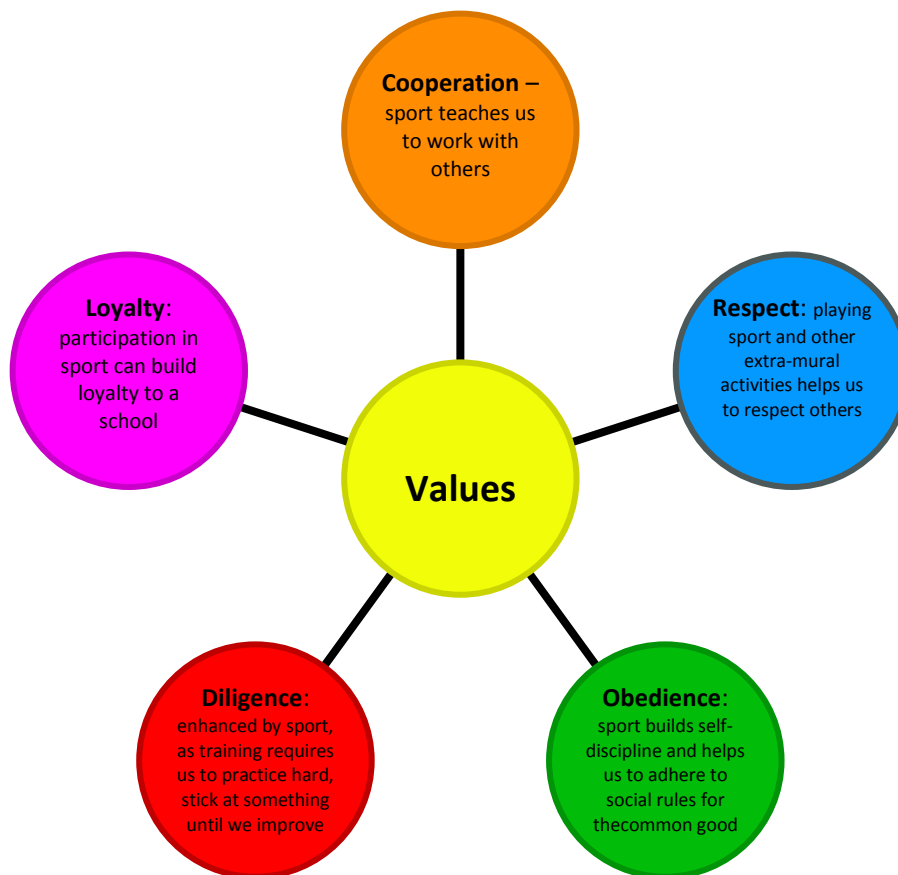
As a school we were only about 30% productive when it came to extra-mural activities. Part of our vision was to look at the holistic development of the learners and failure to have a proper functioning extra-mural programme prevented us from reaching this vision. Some of the contributing reasons we could identify, in consultation with staff, were the following:

- Sports facilities and lack of equipment hindered us in delivery of this vision. Our netball field is very uneven; we have one field we use for both rugby and soccer; we have very little equipment in the form of balls, etc.

- No proper monitoring and leadership support for an extra-mural programme: sport had been sacrificed while we attended to other priorities
- We did not keep to the fixtures and did not play all the matches that we were expected to play in school leagues. This was because we had not organized our team sports well
- Many of the children are bussed to school and this negatively impacts on our ability to have after-school practice since children need to use the contracted transport. This affects 340 of our children

This was a concern to us because sport and extra-mural activities are important for the holistic development of the child. Sport improves concentration and coordination, enhances self-discipline, cooperation with others, and generally helps with the development of life skills.

We felt that our values were being denied by this situation. The values we ascribe to, and which are displayed on the wall of the principal's office, are the following:



This situation was not acceptable to us because we were not able to live out our values and therefore we looked at ways of improving the situation. Our research question was framed as:

*How can we improve our extra-mural programme at school?*

## **Actions taken to address our concern**

The team suggested that the sport committee needed to look at the present state of extra-mural activity and analyse what our strengths and weaknesses were and, most importantly, come back to staff with recommendations that we could implement.

The sports committee did this and came back with suggestions that we deliberated in a staff meeting. The following recommendations were adopted in this staff meeting.

We committed to remaining consistent with the implementation of the adopted plan. We felt that it was important to make this commitment a resolution so that the plan would be carried through to fruition. By committing to this as a staff, we would be able to live out our values of cooperation and diligence.

Our extra-mural activities at our school are the following: rugby, soccer, netball, chess, spiritual dancing, traditional dancing, Sapphire Buddies<sup>1</sup> choir and judo. Our plan was to divide the children into the different sporting and extra-mural codes according to their choice and allow staff to choose which code they wanted to become involved in – it was expected that each educator would participate in one code, since they had committed to this project. When they choose their teams, there was noticeable excitement among the educators and the children, which indicated that this was experienced as an enjoyable project.



*Sapphire Buddies on litter patrol*

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<sup>1</sup>Sapphire Buddies is a club that focuses on environmental issues in the school. For example, they identify areas of the school that need improvement and organise to have this done e.g. they painted decorative murals on a wall that was dirty and in need of painting.

Our sewing volunteers made the strips for the teams and our maintenance volunteers patched up the netball court.

We then began to collect learner information e.g. birth certificates, so that we could apply for players cards for those taking part in sports who were in school leagues. Where children were too old for the codes, they had to help with the cleaning of the grounds, so everyone was involved in some way. We entered all the fixtures on a board and committed to attending each one.

Some of the sports were difficult for educators to coach, due to lack of skills and experience, therefore we approached ex-pupils, parents and the community to help us. For instance, the local rugby Club, Booyens Pride, volunteered to help with the coaching of the rugby teams. Because we only have a few male teachers at our school, some of the ladies were in charge of the soccer. We did not have the skills and abilities to train the children, therefore we made use of the children who play soccer for outside clubs, to help their peers to do the warm up exercises and teach them various skills with the balls. We also called upon some of the older boys who are at High School to help us train the children. In this way, we instituted peer coaching, which had benefits for both the trainers and the children being trained.



We have volunteers who we call teachers assistants. They are parents, mostly ladies, from the community who help us in different ways. Some of these ladies play netball and therefore they also helped with the coaching of the girls.

We set Monday as a day when the whole school would be involved in extra-mural activities, with matches played on the other days. Because the children are bussed home, we arranged with the transport companies to arrive later on these days. We wrote a letter to the parents to inform them of this.



*Netball team in action, with teacher assistants*

Not all the children can play sport; therefore we have music and dancing also as a code. If they have a project, they sometimes come to school on a Saturday to complete the task.

### **Has the situation improved?**

We think that we have made a good start in overcoming some of the barriers that were hampering our provision of extra-mural activities for the children.

The staff and children appear to be very enthusiastic about the sport. Children came prepared and there was good discipline during training. Some of the children even walked long distances to their homes after matches in groups, which shows their motivation. All children in Grades 4-7 took part in extra-murals, while the younger grades only did netball and cricket. We could see that they loved to work together as a team. Because they had to play together, they learnt to respect each other and to realize that although they are from different cultures and backgrounds, they need to work with each other to reach their goal and to give their very best for the team. Our values of loyalty to the team and school, cooperation, diligence and respect were being lived out as staff and children were engrossed in these activities.

We managed to play every fixture possible, in contrast to other years when we had cancelled many of them. The teacher strike did cause us to miss some, but all the schools were affected by this, so we did not let them down by cancelling. In other words, we managed to stick to our scheduled matches

A sense of belonging and of mutual interest could be seen as those who did not play came to cheer on their friends. This was instilling loyalty and pride in our learners

The grass on the rugby field was cut and it is still in good condition because the male volunteers at our school keep it short. Some of the rugby players were chosen to represent Port Elizabeth North in Somerset East. When they were honoured at assembly, their self-esteem was boosted and a sense of pride in the school was created.

Our volunteers also made netball poles and repaired the field. The 5 ladies in the community took the responsibility to coach the netball girls, increasing school-community partnership.

In judo, our team went to the national championships in Gauteng and won 2 bronze, 1 gold and 2 silver medals. Since we did not have expertise in judo coaching, we invited the Booyens Park Judo Club to come to our school to train them.

The traditional dancing has been taken over by the mothers in the community and a drama group has also emerged from this, so again we are strengthening cooperation with the community and creating a sense of loyalty to the school.

We have also divided the children into athletic codes and are practising regularly with them. We had not had athletics at the school, and plan to continue working on these codes.

For those who are artistic, rather than sporty, we approached a local artist to work with them. The paintings were then auctioned on the internet via E Bay and we made R60 000 for the school.

All in all, we have tried our best to live out our value of diligence by making sure that this project was implemented to ensure that extra-mural activities took place. We are still very enthusiastic about it, as is the rest of the school. The one drawback was the teachers' strike which disrupted some of our training and matches. However, this was out of our control. After the strike, we had to concentrate more on our academic work to prepare the learners for promotion to the next grade, but hopefully this will not happen again this year.

## **Reflection on learning**

Participation in this project has taught us many things. The process of action research is very democratic and participative, and we have seen that this helps all staff to take ownership



of a project and commit to implementing it. We have also learnt that our community is a wonderful resource that can help us to reach our goals. By strengthening community-school partnerships, we can achieve much more than we could on our own. Action research promotes this form of participative cooperation.

We really feel that our teamwork as staff has improved and that our enthusiasm and sense of satisfaction in our work has increased. We are busy now planning the athletics for later in the year and there is visible excitement among learners and staff about this. We have also been amazed by the talents of our children, given the chance to display them, and have been reminded that we must never underestimate a child's ability.

We do have to make provision in planning for unforeseen circumstances e.g. strikes, but action research has been a wonderful process for us. It has made us aware that what we are doing can be very influential – just a small change can have a lasting positive impact. We have always worked well together in this school but this process reinforced our convictions about the value of democratic, inclusive ways of working. As leaders, we also learnt that we must welcome having our own ideas challenged and actually encourage it. Often the best ideas come out of dissenting voices and our job as leaders is not to make sure our ideas get implemented, but to listen to others and help the whole school work towards a collective vision. We would like to extend this to our younger grades and this is our next challenge.



*Instilling loyalty and pride, and a sense of belonging*

## HOW DO WE GET OUR LEARNERS TO READ MORE?

### St James Roman Catholic High School

Elroy Ruiters

#### Our school context

St James Roman Catholic Vocational High School was formally opened by the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption in 1939. The school later absorbed St Theresa’s school which had been located in the North End suburb of the city. In 1951, soon after the beginning of the apartheid era in the country, it became the Assumption Chinese College, catering for Chinese children living in the suburb of Schauderville. They were accommodated in what is now the main administration block of St James Roman Catholic High School. After Chinese people were forcibly removed to the Kabega Park suburb and Chinese learners were allowed



to attend designated “white” schools, the building formally became St James (Roman Catholic) Secondary School, initially catering for girls from the surrounding suburb of Schauderville. Towards the end of the apartheid era, the school immediately became open to children from all population groups, but still remained an all-girls school.

Whilst the school is situated in the Northern suburban areas, it draws most of its learners from former ‘black’ suburbs as far afield as Motherwell, one of the oldest townships in Port Elizabeth, as well as learners from Greenbushes, a semi rural area outside Port Elizabeth. Consequently, more than 60% of the learners at the school are Xhosa-speaking. The school is situated in a formerly designated “coloured” area of Port Elizabeth, due to apartheid policies of old, and is surrounded by a relatively impoverished working class community.

While the ethos of the school is firmly based in Catholicism, it is only fair to say that Catholics represent a minority of the school community and that therefore the school is spiritually diverse. While the school is still owned by the Catholic Church, the teachers are paid by the Department of Education who also provide financial support for maintenance costs. Therefore, the school is essentially a public school.

As mentioned above, over 60% of the learners at the school are Xhosa-speaking, while the remainder are either Afrikaans or English speaking. However, the language of instruction at the school is English. A third, primary or home language subject, isiXhosa, was introduced to cater for Xhosa-speaking learners, but surprisingly most of these learners chose to study English as their primary or home language.

The school is reasonably well resourced, mainly as a result of the continuing support from the Catholic Church who assist in raising funds for the school from international donors.

## **Our concern**

Owing to the fact that the vast majority of the learners at our school are Xhosa-speaking and that the medium of instruction is English, the perception amongst teachers at the school is that many learners have low levels of reading ability in English, particularly those entering the school at the Grade 8 level. This is because the Xhosa-speaking learners come from primary schools where their reading ability in English has not been developed to a level at which they can cope in Grade 8 at our school. Consequently, many of our Grade 8 learners battle to cope with the demands of the curriculum and some even drop out of the school after Grade 8 or 9.

Another perception of our teachers is that our learners only read for school work, and do not read for enjoyment or for their own self-development. In short, our learners see reading as a “drag”.

## **Why we are concerned**

Our school strives for excellence and the optimal development of learners. However, this is not being achieved due to their lack of literacy skills in English. Therefore, learners are struggling to read and their academic work is suffering, resulting in poor performance in all subjects.

Furthermore, there is also a feeling amongst the staff of the school that learners' reading ability in English can be significantly improved if they read more, even if it is mainly for pleasure. We also think that reading extensively improves general knowledge, grammar, concentration and spelling. However, all of these benefits are lost because our learners do not read enough in English. Most teachers at our school value reading extensively, because they are aware of the benefits for learners, particularly in improving their overall academic performance.

Also, prior to the implementation of this action research project, there was no real culture of reading extensively in our school. The library, which contained old books, had become neglected and soon became a disused store room. There was no time set aside for reading in the timetable and very little was done to promote reading in the school, or to raise awareness of its benefits. Only



*The library had become neglected, resembling a disused store room*

individual teachers were making attempts to get the children to read more, but there was no whole school strategy to do so. This situation denied our value of wanting each learner to be able to reach their potential. If they cannot read well, their academic performance will be lower and they will not be able to reach their full potential. We believe that, even although these children face many social and economic challenges in life, they will be able to better their opportunities if they make the most of their educational opportunities.

### **What we did to improve the situation**

Initially, when we joined the DG Murray Trust *Integrated School Development and Improvement Project* at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, we met with the staff of the school to decide on our action research project. At the meeting, the staff raised two options – improving sport at the school, or getting learners to read more. Eventually, it was decided to focus on getting learners to read more by promoting a culture of reading at the

school. Subsequent to this meeting a small committee was set up to implement the project. Our tentative plans for the project involved the following:

- Conduct a survey of learners' reading preferences and habits.
- Set aside one period per week for silent reading.
- Re-activate the library which had become a store room.
- Set up class book corners.
- Promote reading at the school in a variety of ways.

The first thing we did was to draw up a simple questionnaire to find out what learners read and what their attitude to reading was at the time. The questionnaire was administered to a small sample of learners and then the data was analysed. However, the results were not particularly revealing at this stage. Our mentor then introduced us to a website called *Reading Connects*, a project of the *National Literacy Trust* in the United Kingdom ([www.literacytrust.org.uk/reading\\_connects](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/reading_connects)), which provided a range of innovative ideas and information on how to promote reading in schools. The website also contained two questionnaires, one which was a "Self-perception as a reader survey" and the other which was about "You and your reading". Copies of these questionnaires were then administered to a larger sample of learners – 10 from each grade.

The "Self-perception as a reader survey" asked the learners to rate themselves as to how good they were at reading, whether they enjoyed reading, what they read outside school and how often they read, as well as what they think about reading, for example how important they think it is. The survey also asked learners about their friends and family and their reading habits, as well as their teachers at school. The "You and your reading" questionnaire asked learners about their reading habits, i.e. what they read, how often they read, whether they belong to and go to a library and what they think about reading in general.

The responses to the questionnaires were quite surprising. For instance, the learners who completed the questionnaires indicated that they are better readers than we as teachers think they are. The learners were also most positive about reading and the benefits that they could gain from reading. This was also surprising to us. Magazines were indicated as the most popular reading material and most learners responded that they read at least once a week, but that they needed more time to read. They also indicated that their mothers played the most important role in encouraging them to read and most admitted that they read because they



were forced to read by their teachers or parents. What was again surprising to us was, when asked if they thought that their teachers think they read well, that most responded with “I don’t know”.

This questionnaire survey was most revealing in that learners seemed to have different perceptions about their reading and reading in general to that of the teachers at the school. As mentioned earlier, the teachers’ perceptions were that the learners were largely poor readers who did not read much outside of school and that therefore they had a somewhat negative attitude to reading, but the survey results indicate that learners are in fact more positively inclined towards reading.

Having gathered our baseline data, we used the results to guide our actions. We set aside two periods per week for silent reading. Once again, we were surprised by our learners as a number of them brought books from home to read during these periods. It was also apparent that a number of learners had obtained their books from public libraries. During these periods, learners were not only encouraged to read on their own, but time was also set aside to discuss the books they were reading, or in some cases teachers read stories or parts of novels to the learners. These reading periods have been made an official item in the timetable and are now a part of school life.

The next action was to re-activate the library which had become a store room. We cleared out the room and packed the books neatly onto the shelves and then placed gymnastic mats on the floor for the learners to sit on while they are reading. A lot more still has to be done to refurbish the library. We need to get rid of old and irrelevant books and obtain new books which the learners will be interested in;



*Clearing and preparing the library*

we need to set up a catalogue system so that learners can take out books from the library; and we need to have newspapers and magazines available to learners in the library. However, clearing out the library and making it available to learners has contributed to raising awareness



about reading. We also want to set up individual classroom libraries, but we need the financial resources to obtain books for them.

We also attempted to promote reading in the school in a variety of ways, so as to instil a culture of reading in the school environment. In order to do this, we constantly reminded the teachers about the importance of promoting reading in their classes. Another way we tried to promote reading was to set up a “Reading Board” (see *photo alongside*) on a wall near the tuck shop. The Action Research project leader put up the disused notice board and then put a copy of a cover of a book he was reading, as well as a review of the book. He invited responses to his review and asked learners what they were reading. Soon the Reading Board began to attract some interest from the learners.

Eventually one learner approached the project leader and told him she was an avid reader of Ken Follet novels which her teacher had introduced her to. He encouraged her to write a review of the novel she had just read and gave her a copy of a magazine article on Ken Follet to read. She wrote her review of the novel and it was then placed on the Reading Board along with a copy of the cover of the book



*The notice board displaying one of the learners review of a Ken Follet novel*

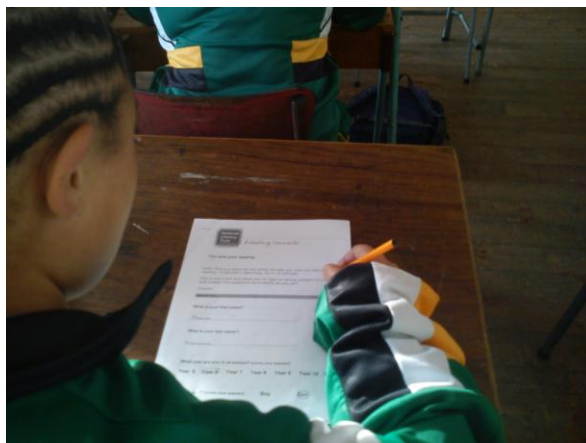
and the magazine article. This attracted the attention of other learners who indicated that they also wanted to write reviews of books they are reading to be placed on the Reading Board. The Reading Board and the process of up-dating it has also captured the attention of teachers. In future, book reviews by teachers and even the principal will be placed on the Reading Board.

## **How do we know that we have improved the situation?**

Owing to the fact that we have the two reading periods every week, we now see learners walking around with books which they either got from home, or from a public library. Teachers at the school have also begun to provide positive comments regarding the fact that the learners have books and are reading more than before. The reading periods have therefore exposed the

learners to reading and have encouraged them to bring books to school. They have also made us realise that more learners read than what we had originally thought.

The reading survey we conducted helped to raise awareness about the importance of reading and also provided us with valuable information which has helped to change our sometimes negative perceptions about our learners and their attitudes to reading.



*One of the St James' learners completing the reading survey*

We have also re-activated the library which is no longer a store room. However, as mentioned above, we need to purchase books which will be more relevant to the lives of the learners and we need to set up systems so that learners can take out books.

Our attempt to promote reading in the school by setting up a Reading Board has been relatively successful to date. The Reading Board has attracted responses from some learners and has captured the interest of a number of learners who read it during break times.

We are pleased with the response to our actions and think that we are making an important contribution towards instilling a culture of reading in our school and thereby improving our learners' educational opportunities. Our value of helping every learner to reach their potential is thus being realised in a small way each day. We are also motivated by our success in this venture and can sense the excitement among our colleagues also.

### **What have we learnt from our research intervention?**

With regard to the implementation of the project, we have learnt that adopting a formal and structured approach may not necessarily lead to successful implementation of the project and attainment of our aim – to get our learners to read more. Rather, the action that did not require learners to respond, that gave them a choice in the matter, has sparked the interest in reading that we were striving for. The introduction of the Reading Board and the invitation to respond seems to have sparked much interest among learners and teachers. This was done

because the committee leader found it difficult to obtain teacher commitment to attendance at meetings. It is difficult to get teachers to attend committee meetings at our school mainly because of time constraints. It has taught us that often the most simple actions, done out of a sense of not knowing what else to do, can have huge impacts.

However, the implementation of our project relied mostly on one teacher, a Life Sciences Teacher who has the responsibility of teach Grade 12 learners. If more teachers are actively involved in the implementation of the project to promote reading at our school, the greater success we will have. But, there will always be the issue of time. Teachers have enough on their plates and therefore it is difficult to find the time to implement projects of this nature. This makes us think that we need to find more ways to pique the interest of learners, so that they can take the project further, rather than relying on overburdened teachers. The response to the Reading Board, has led us to believe that perhaps we should ask the learners to set up a Book Club or some similar project. The project has always enjoyed the support of the principal and management team of the school which is a most positive factor and bodes well for the future.

We always believed a more structured team approach, involving more teachers, would be needed to attain success, but perhaps we have to give over more control to learners, thereby living out our value of inclusion and belief in the ability of learners. Due to the non-participation of teachers and the committee's controlling role, the values of participation and democracy in action research were not fully adhered to in this stage of the project, which will be on-going. In future, our aim will be to ensure that they are. However, we did learn that sometimes we need to "go with the flow" in the action research process as it does not always follow a pre-destined plan.

The project changed our perceptions about our learners and their reading. We found that more learners read than what we originally thought, that our learners do have access to books and that a number of them belong to public libraries. We also found that learners have a better perception of themselves as readers than teachers do and that they have a more positive attitude to reading than we originally thought. Learners are also aware of the positive benefits of reading, something we thought they were not aware of. We therefore learnt that we should not always make assumptions about our learners. We need to carry out research in order to find out what is really the case.

We also learnt that doing simple informal things such as setting up the Reading Board can spark interest in and enthusiasm for reading. Setting up reading periods was formal and structured, but may not have created the interest and enthusiasm we strove for.

We are now also aware that change is a slow process. For instance teachers are at different stages in the process of promoting reading and need to be constantly reminded about the importance of emphasising and raising awareness of reading in their classes. We also have to be diligent in maintaining interest in and enthusiasm for reading. For example, we need to ensure that we change the book reviews on the Reading Board every week to maintain interest and enthusiasm.

Above all, we need to get books into our learners' hands by acquiring more books for our library that are attractive to teenagers and that speak to their lives. We have also learnt that magazines are popular, so we need to get more of these to get learners used to reading. Maybe the next step will be to establish a book club? The possibilities are endless and we are excited about the opportunity to change the culture regarding reading in our school.

## ADDRESSING THE LATE-COMING OF LEARNERS

### Woolhope Secondary School

AJ Jaram, L Yoyo, ZB Jaram, N Botha and V Govindasamy

#### Our context

Woolhope Secondary School was established in 1969 in the suburb of Malabar, following the forced removal of people of colour from the previously non-racial suburb of South End, Port Elizabeth, by the then Apartheid government as part of its racially separatist policy. As a result, so called “coloured” residents were moved to areas such as Gelvandale, Korsten, and Chatty in the northern areas of the city; Chinese people were moved to Kabega Park, in the western suburbs, people of Indian descent to Malabar (between the western suburbs and the northern areas), and black people to townships situated on the outskirts of the city. Woolhope Secondary School was therefore established primarily for the people of Indian descent who now were forced to live in the suburb of Malabar. Initially it catered for both primary and secondary school learners, but became a secondary school after the establishment of Malabar Primary School in the suburb of Malabar.

Following the collapse of the Apartheid government, the separatist Group Areas Act was no longer enforced. Consequently, learners from outside the suburb of Malabar began to attend the school. Many of these learners came from the former “coloured” area of Gelvandale, as well as the former “black” areas of the city. Most of these learners were sent here by their parents because they believed that they would get a better education and therefore improve their life chances. While the school is situated in a relatively affluent part of the suburb of Malabar, most of the learners come from less affluent communities.

Woolhope Secondary School has a long and proud tradition, with many of its graduates achieving success in their careers. It is also a relatively well-resourced school, mainly due to fund-raising efforts and an active and supportive alumni association. It is a co-ed school with learners from many cultures and religions.

## **Our concern**

As mentioned above, in recent years at Woolhope Secondary School there has been an influx of many learners from outside the suburb of Malabar. Most of these learners (nearly 70% of the total number of learners at the school) find their way to school either by bus, taxi, their own transport (including parents), or in lift clubs, while those learners who live in or near the suburb of Malabar usually walk to school. The Department of Education has also provided subsidies for learners who come from the former “black” areas, which are situated some distance away. The transport situation, along with other factors that result in late-coming to school, ultimately leads to learners missing out on instruction in the classroom. Furthermore, learners are frequently late for lessons, both after break times and between lessons. This is very disruptive and results in learners sometimes missing parts of lessons.

In doing this action research project, we therefore wanted to answer the following questions:

*How can we decrease the rate of learner late-coming to school?*

*How can we decrease the rate of learner late-coming to lessons?*

## **Why are we concerned?**

The fact that learners arrive late at school and for lessons is not consistent with the values of responsibility and respect which are important at our school. We want learners to become responsible citizens, who care for others and respect their needs. Learners should learn to take responsibility for their own actions and to make plans to overcome factors outside of their control. For instance, they need to learn problem solving skills to address their transport issues. Furthermore, late-coming means that learners are late for school and therefore for classes which leads to the disruption of lessons and the work schedule. This is disrespectful to educators and to their fellow learners.

## **What we did to improve the situation**

The first thing we did was to conduct research to find out why learners were late for school and for lessons, and to determine the extent of the problem of late-coming. We also decided to limit our focus to a random sample of the following subjects:



- Learners who are common, or habitual late-comers both to school and to lessons
- Late-comers who live nearby the school
- Drivers of mini-bus taxis that are frequently late for school

In order to collect the information we needed, we developed a report form to record learners who were late for school and for lessons and their reasons for being late. We also developed an interview questionnaire to use when interviewing mini-bus taxi drivers. The process of collecting information involved in-depth interviews and observations of the late-coming of learners and taxi drivers. The interviews were semi-structured, open ended and conversational, with educators taking down notes.

In order to gather information about learners getting to lessons late, monitors were appointed to note down the learners that were late for class and their reasons for being late for a period of two consecutive weeks. The educators in charge of the project would identify which learners are bunking, taking time to smoke, the common periods that they bunk or come late and the time that the learners got to the classrooms.

With regard to gathering information about late-coming to school, a monitor was appointed to wait at the front of the school gate before school started at 7.50am and then close the school gates at 8.00am. The late-coming of learners from 8.00 to 8.15am would then be noted, as well as their reasons for being late.

A similar procedure was followed to gather information about mini-bus taxis that were late. The number of mini-bus taxis that were late was counted, as well as the number of learners who were late as a result of the mini-bus taxi being late. The learners were also questioned as to why they were late, as were the mini-bus taxi drivers who also completed a questionnaire.

After collecting and analysing the information that the monitors of the classes had collected, we noticed that the same learners were bunking and/or were late for classes and that the same learner or learners bunched the same period. We also found that the time that learners were late for class ranged from 5 to 10 minutes.

However, we also found out that the reason why some learners were late for lessons was because some teachers were sending them out of their class – i.e. they were refusing to allow latecomers to attend class, some learners were doing errands for teachers and some learners

doing catch up work for the next period. An unexpected outcome of monitoring learners' late arrival for lessons was that soon the learners began to question teachers who arrived late for their lessons by enquiring as to why they were late. This was an indication that our investigating late-coming to lessons had raised awareness of late-coming amongst the learners.

The most significant aspect we discovered was that the same learners who were late for lessons, or simply bunked them, performed very poorly in their school work and contributed to the failure rate of the school. Furthermore, their late-coming led them to be inattentive and passive participants in the lessons. In addition, as mentioned above, we



*Late-comers locked outside the school gate*

found that learners who were late for lessons took approximately 5 – 10 minutes to get to the next class. This indicated that they went for a 'cigarette smoking break'. Also, the fact that some educators would take more than the allocated minutes per lesson period would result in the learner being late for the next period. Consequently, the whole school timetable becomes disrupted and congested and results in learners are not being taught for the full duration of a lesson. The observation that some learners bunk the same lessons for the same educator or learning area, indicates that they don't like the educator, or did not do the homework for the lesson.

With regard to the mini-bus taxis arriving late, we found that money was an issue for the mini-bus taxi drivers as they have to meet a certain figure for the day for the taxi owner and then the rest of the money belongs to them. Therefore, their aim is to fill their taxi to capacity to make their trip profitable and they also pick up other passengers on the way when bringing learners to our school. Taxis also have a set route to follow, resulting in too many stops on their way to school. All of these factors result in time being wasted on their way to our school. An additional problem high-lighted by the mini-taxi drivers is that learners do not necessarily board mini-bus taxis that are ready to leave from taxi ranks or stops. Instead they wait and choose which minibus-taxi they want to ride it. The most popular choices are mini-bus taxis that have flashy decorations on the bodywork, as well as elaborate and loud sound systems which play the music that the learners like.

Learners arrive at school late in the mornings for a variety of reasons, such as oversleeping, getting up late, parent delays at home, public transport delays, choosing taxis that they like and detours whilst walking. Late-coming also occurs due to factors associated with socio-economic status and disrupted patterns at home. Ironically, records of the late arrival of learners at school in the morning indicated that many of the learners who arrive late actually live in the Malabar suburb. Therefore, apart from public transport problems, our investigations revealed that late-coming resulted from firstly, learners lack of personal responsibility, i.e. oversleeping, not getting ready in time and secondly, lack of parental supervision/support – many parents leave for work before children have to leave for school , or parents do not respect the school timetable.

From this cycle of research, we therefore uncovered some information that we were not aware of and that will help us to address the problem. It also alerted us to the fact that we cannot assume that the late coming is due to transport problems, as we previously thought.

To address the late-coming of learners, we decided to punish late-comers by getting them to do community service, for example, getting them to pick up the garbage in and around the school grounds. Although the learners did not really like doing community service of this nature, many were light-hearted about it.



*Learners performing their community service as punishment for late coming*

## **How do we know that we have improved the situation?**

The monitoring of late-coming to school in the morning, as well as the monitoring of learners' arriving late at lessons has certainly raised awareness about late-coming in our school. Furthermore, the fact that learners began to question teachers about their being late for lessons is an indication of the level of awareness raised and hopefully this will result in educators coming to class on time. We have also communicated to the staff that they should not put learners out of their classrooms when they come late, as this only makes the situation worse.

The number of late comers has decreased, mainly because learners do not want to have to do community service. However, we need to work more on this problem and address the attitude of the learners who are late due to their own lack of responsibility. This will be our next focus.

## **What have we learnt from our research intervention?**

In conducting an action research project of this nature we have learnt that it cannot be successfully implemented unless the senior management of the school is involved in the implementation team. For most of 2010, we floundered about and made very little progress with various members of staff attending the training and sharing sessions at the University. However, as soon as senior management became involved the project gained focus and implementation improved dramatically. We also realised that we need to work as a team and that the whole school has to buy-in to a project of this nature. Unfortunately, we only realised this late in this study.

We have also learnt that the socio-economic problems that our learners experience contribute to their late coming – they live under difficult circumstances and do not always have parental support. Late-coming is only a symptom of a deeper problem. Owing to the fact that we interacted more closely with learners, parents, and taxi operators, it enhanced our mutual relationship and raised late-coming as a mutual concern. We therefore need to work more closely with parents to try and find workable solutions to this problem and with taxi operators – we need to partner with each other and live out the values we want our children to emulate.

Learners, especially those living near the school, are late because of their own behaviour or perhaps due to their parents' behaviour and this needs to be investigated and worked on. Those travelling by taxi are more at the mercy of the taxi drivers, therefore we need to work on this issue and ensure that public transport becomes more reliable. In this first step of the process, we have succeeded in raising awareness about the problem and in unearthing some issues that we were previously not aware of.

We learnt that we have to continue to work on cultivating a climate where respect and responsibility are lived out – perhaps punishment is not the best method for a lasting solution to this problem. Learners would benefit more by learning how to solve problems, take responsibility and have respect for the needs of others. Action research provides us with the tool to take this issue further – it opens up the real reasons for problems so that workable solutions can be found.

We fully acknowledge that our project was not as advanced as it should have been, because we did not live out the values of participation, inclusion, and democracy in this project. No one in the team took responsibility for it, and therefore not much could happen. However, when school management realised this and became involved, we were able to do a great deal in a short time. This has convinced us that, if we follow the process of action research and live out the values underpinning it, we can achieve much in the future. We are now committed to taking this action further since our learning in this project has motivated us to take control of the issues that negatively impinge on the quality of education in our school.

