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TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE VIOLENT NEIGHBOURHOODS OF THE CAPE FLATS

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ABSTRACT

This research consists of the presentation and analysis of focus group data obtained from a non-probability sample of foundation phase teachers from a primary school in a middle-class community on the Cape Flats. Like other communities in this area, the ordinary citizen is subjected to constant territorial gang wars, with the ever-present danger of being caught in the sudden crossfire of a violent uprising. Violence exists not only on the boundaries of school children's areas, but also intrudes into the schools, including the school playground. Cognisant of the difficulties of teaching and learning in a perpetually unstable environment, a local non-profit organisation, Think Twice, provides training programmes in life skills in a pilot project called Circle Time to schools. Prior to this study, the programmes had not been evaluated. Think Twice consequently committed itself to researching programme effectiveness and to involve the teachers who are presenters of the programmes as co-researchers in the generation of data. Using a participatory design, the research aims to: 1) identify the precise need for life skills programmes in schools; and 2) institute relevant changes to the programmes in collaborative action. The researcher-facilitator is a representative of the organisation which designs and provides the training programmes.

PROBLEM FORMULATION

The South African Department of Education is currently developing and implementing a national curriculum – Curriculum 2005 – including the teaching of Life Orientation, which is aimed at equipping learners with social skills. While Life Orientation lessons may be offered as a separate class, they are also intended to be integrated with other subjects. The objective of this is to make knowledge gained in the classroom as relevant to life outside school as possible. However, this method of teaching is new and many teachers have been trained only in traditional teaching methods. Teachers consequently find it difficult to teach life skills and, because it is unfamiliar, a life skills lesson does not take priority in class preparation. A team from a local non-profit organisation, Think Twice, aims to complement the Department's requirements for this subject in their *Circle Time* programme² and in this way provide a resource for teachers who are struggling to find ways to teach life skills in their classes.

Circle Time is a medium-term intervention. Think Twice visits the school twice a week for 15 sessions and presents interactive material to learners, with teachers as trainee presenters, on topics such as HIV/AIDS, self-esteem, making choices and child-abuse awareness. A term later they meet with the learners and their teacher for a follow-up to assess what impact the programme has had in terms of how much the learners remember and to receive feedback from the teacher regarding any improvements that could be made to the programme. When preparing the programme for use by the school, Think Twice observed an absence of infrastructure for the school system. In addition to this, the violent conditions in the neighbourhood militated against

² *Circle Time* involves learners as well as presenters sitting in a circle in a safe environment outside the class environment, receiving training in social skills.

any sense of security for the school. Consequently the team was concerned about the capacity of teachers to present the *Circle Time* programme in its existing form. The team also questioned the validity of the issues addressed within the programme, given the current environment. A full evaluation involving staff at the school seemed imperative.

A first step in evaluating the effectiveness of *Circle Time* was to explore the problems which teachers face in terms of teaching life skills as well as the problems which confront schools in the environment of the Cape Flats. This information would not only help to provide a better picture of the kinds of skills children need to acquire in order to cope with the situations they face from day to day, but it would also assist the team and teachers in offering a suitable programme.

Goal of the research

The goal of the research was to involve schoolteachers in the development of a life skills programme for learners who live in Cape Flats communities.

Definition of life skills and implementation

According to Rooth (1997:6), life skills are "...essential skills that make life easier, and increase the possibility of us realising our potential and becoming productively involved in the community". Life skills can include relationship skills, stress management skills, coping skills, communication skills and self-awareness. Life skills education is "the process of allowing students the opportunities to develop and practice all the necessary life skills" (Rooth, 1997:10) and is concerned with the preventative, promotive and developmental aspects of social skills (Rooth, 1997:10). In a sense it is concerned with the "how to" aspect of life: teaching students how to deal with conflict, communicate with each other and express themselves appropriately. Life skills have been identified as playing a key role in the mental health of both children and adults (Weisen & Orley, 1996). Children who have acquired essential life skills are better able to face life circumstances, express their needs and manage conflict. However, these skills do not come naturally and have to be taught (Rutter 1975; McWhirter *et al.*, 1998).

Another important aspect of life skills training is that it can incorporate issues which are relevant to the individual learner as well as to society. An example of how this can be done can be found in the South African Department of Education's aim to address the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS through education. They hope to "equip learners with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for healthy sexuality and a positive lifestyle ... through integrating life skills and HIV/AIDS content within the life orientation and other learning areas" (Department of Education, Annual Report, 2002:13).

In order to be effective, life skills education makes use of experiential learning (Weisen & Orley, 1996; Rooth, 1997). Experiential learning takes into consideration the key ways in which children learn. Thus students are given the opportunity to engage actively in the lesson, through discussion, questioning and self-directed learning. They are also given the opportunity to practice the skills that are being taught. The philosophy of experiential learning acknowledges that both the teacher and the student come with different bodies of knowledge which can be shared and built upon in the classroom. Both the teacher and the student learn (Rooth, 1997:69-70; 77).

A particularly important aspect of experiential learning is that it provides the opportunity for students to "get a sense of their own worth and capacities to learn" (Rooth, 1997:77). Experiential learning also allows for a more holistic learning experience (Rooth, 1997:77-80). Students are allowed to explore feelings, focus on aspects of personal development, and practice the skills they

have learnt about and be generally more involved and take control of their learning experience. All of these aspects are missing in the more traditional methods of teaching.

King and Kirschenbaum have identified three primary tools for teaching life skills. These are: (i) verbal or modelled instruction, (ii) rehearsal and (iii) feedback (1992:23). These three tools form part of the life skills model developed by McWhirter *et al.*, which they consider to be ideal for life skills training in primary and secondary schools. This model employs five steps which, together with careful design and good implementation, help ensure the effectiveness of the life skills programme. The five steps are as follows:

- *Teach* (Verbal instruction): The skill is described and learners are given oral instructions on how to perform it;
- *Show* (Modelling): The skill is demonstrated for learners by the trainer or a fellow learner, by video or other means;
- *Practice* (Role-play/rehearsal): The learner is encouraged to imitate and use the skill by role-playing in the training session. The learner's performance is evaluated, with the emphasis placed on the correct aspects of the learner's attempts;
- *Reinforce* (Feedback): The learner role-plays additional problem situations. Feedback and coaching is provided to shape and refine the performance;
- *Apply* (Homework – rehearsal and feedback): Students are requested to perform the newly acquired skill in various real-life situations. They record their experiences and report back at the next session. The characteristics of successful and unsuccessful performances are reviewed and refinements introduced as needed (McWhirter *et al.*, 1998:222-223).

In their Social Growth programme, King and Kirschenbaum (1992) add to the homework component by sending parents a note explaining what the lesson was about for that day and how it is significant for the child's social growth.

McWhirter *et al.* (1998) describe three programmes which are successful in reinforcing and supporting the use of life skills, since the aim of being trained is to put the skills into practice in a particular setting. These are school peer mediation, peer tutoring and peer facilitation. The programmes involve training up students in conflict resolution and mediation, tutoring and peer facilitation or counselling. Peer mediation involves students working in teams of two and provides an opportunity for those students to practise critical thinking, problem solving and self-discipline skills in themselves and other students. Peer tutoring improves social interactions, self-concept, motivation, attitudes toward the school, peer status and overall school experience. Peer facilitation provides the opportunity to model and practise skills in listening, offering support, suggesting alternatives and engaging in verbal and non-verbal interactions. Students involved in peer mediation, tutoring or facilitation also serve as role models to fellow peers and support teachers by sharing the load of some of the teacher's tasks. It is important that these students receive consistent supervision and guidance from teachers or other appropriate professionals.

The concept of being “at risk”

The term “at risk” refers to a “set of presumed cause-and-effect dynamics that place the child or adolescent in danger of negative *future events*” (McWhirter *et al.*, 1998:7). This means that a young person “at risk” of developing any particular behaviour or attitude may not necessarily have adopted that behaviour or attitude yet. However, his/her social and environmental circumstances and present coping behaviours suggest the potential for him/her to adopt that particular behaviour.

For example, a young person who uses tobacco may be at risk of alcohol use, or a child who constantly witnesses a significant adult (mother, father or teacher) handle conflict situations with physical aggression may be at risk of developing delinquent or overly aggressive behaviour.

Some of the environmental and societal factors that affect at-risk youths include socio-economic status, single-parent families, homeless families and young families, all common to the communities of the Cape Flats. Low socio-economic status is a major cause of stress to families and is an important factor in the overall wellbeing of young people (McWhirter *et al.*, 1998:29). The stressful economic situation of the family can also contribute to the stress of parent-child relationships. Weist, Lowie, Flaherty and Pruitt (2001:1349) point out that, while "...most school-age children and adolescents are not in a high-risk group...many present needs for mental health intervention related to conditions of stress and risk in their lives." The exposure of children to "...violence, mental health and substance-abuse problems of caregivers, and abuse and neglect, place children at risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems." All these risk factors are prominent in the environment of the Cape Flats.

Classroom learning for the young child

Young children are particularly receptive to learning. Fisher (1996) explains how they learn through interacting with their environment and actively constructing their own understanding of how the world works. This learning is brought into the classroom from home (Fisher, 1996; Wood, 1998). As children learn, they develop certain patterns of behaviour and thinking called schemas, by which they construct their realities (Fisher, 1996:9; Louw, 1998). Schemas are developed from infancy and become more complex and numerous as children learn and interact with their environment. Schemas are also the starting point from which children build new understandings. Children construct their own reality and continuity through the schemas they develop. Piaget considered language to be a 'medium' for the expression of thought; Vygotsky (in Fisher, 1996) considered it to be a "tool" of thought, while Kruger states that "language and thought are inseparable" (1998:176). Language provides children with a means of sharing and acquiring knowledge through interaction with others. It is also a means for children to place what they are learning into a "context which is personal ... and which relates to their own experiences" (Fisher, 1996:13). Therefore opportunities for discussion, explanation and interaction in the classroom are particularly important. This view of the role language plays in learning has significant implications for children who struggle with the language of instruction, especially those who receive instruction in their second language (Kruger, 1998; McWhirter *et al.*, 1998). As children learn by interacting with others, they not only learn on their own, but also draw from the experiences of those who are older, more experienced or more knowledgeable (Wood, 1998). This is commonly referred to as modelling (King & Kirschenbaum, 1992). Children may choose an adult, older child, sibling or peer whom they consider to be particularly powerful, admirable or similar to him/herself to learn from and imitate. Therefore both the teacher and other children are sources of knowledge and learning for the individual child. The teacher can facilitate learning by interacting with learners and facilitating their interaction with each other in ways which take into consideration what they already know and what they can still learn (Fisher, 1996).

Methodology

Sampling: The school has a total population of 557 learners. All primary school learners are exposed to the life skills programmes and high school learners are offered sexuality education. Teachers are trained by the organisation as presenters of the programmes. The purposive sample of 4 teachers is directly involved with 240 foundation phase learners aged 5-10 years and indirectly involved as school staff members with the older learners.

Collection of data: A series of focus groups was conducted, using the structured format suggested by Collins (1999), where narratives from the group members are prompted and guided by the researcher-facilitator. Audiotaped recordings were taken of the group process and transcribed for textual analysis.

Analysis of data: This qualitative research design used the paradigm of grounded theory from De Vos (2001:265), where the emphasis is on creation of theory based on inductive observation rather than on deduction. Categorisation of data takes place through close examination of data, in this case the text transcribed from focus group recordings, from which concepts emerge (De Vos, 2001:271). De Vos's paradigm is a tool for presenting "causal conditions, phenomena, context, intervening conditions, action/interactional strategies and consequences" (De Vos, 2001:274). These categories were collected into 8 themes, presented below.

DATA PRESENTATION

The themes reflect the empirical data generated by focus group discussion.

Community violence, drugs and gangsterism

All children are exposed to witnessing violence and gangsterism, especially over the weekends, and tend to arrive at school on Mondays feeling traumatised. Some children have had their houses shot at, or stray bullets enter the home during shootouts and gang fights. At times it isn't safe for the children to leave their homes and they are confined to playing in their yards or inside. The incidents of violence in and around the school premises during the week are not as frequent as the incidents the children witness on weekends. However, there have been times when it has been unsafe for the children in and around the school grounds. Children have encountered gunfights on the way to school in the morning. Even though the school field has been fenced off, the general public has used it as a short cut. In order to make the school environment safer for the children, the school applied to the *Safe Schools Project* and had another fence put up within the school grounds. This fence is closer to the school buildings and cuts the playground in half. It creates some protection by enclosing the school. The shortcut has also been fenced off in such a way that the public can use it, while at the same time there is a barrier between the public and the school.

It is common for family members to be involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activities in order to earn a living or to supplement their income. Some of the children are exposed to drug trafficking as "runners" for their parents. Besides being exposed to danger, the children may be internalising the message from their parents that this method of earning a living is acceptable. The children are receiving a conflicting message from school programmes, which denounce drug use. The children are thus left to discern their own truths – likely to be too difficult a task for them at their age.

Another concern is that the teachers witness the children being "drawn into danger". By using this term they are referring to the children being attracted to the excitement of fights on the school grounds. A similar reaction is likely outside in the community when there are incidents of violence where two or three people commonly engage in fistfights or use knives. There is also the effect of exposure to sex and violence in unsupervised late-night TV watching.

The teachers have addressed the problem of children's trauma by setting time aside on Monday mornings for the children to tell about the events of the weekend before they start their lessons. This is called "News Time." The teachers, without formal training in trauma debriefing, have discovered this to be a good way for the children to give vent to their feelings. Aggression is recognised as an outcome of the children's insecurity. They are prone to act out in class and are

often themselves involved in fights on the playground. The teachers find it difficult to get the children to take responsibility for their actions. They encounter the same problem with the parents. For example, some of the children have fathers in jail, but when the teacher asks the mother why he is there, she would say in an excess of denial, "I don't know – he hasn't done anything."

Dysfunctional families, neglect and rejection

Basic needs are being neglected (not having hair washed and brushed, getting themselves ready for school, while mother sleeps in the morning, etc.). There is at least one such child in each class. The school responds to nutritional needs by providing a cup of soup and bread for the day.

There are many other stories of rejection due to family breakdown, divorce and unmarried parents. Approximately 12% of the school population have parents or other family members serving jail sentences. An estimated one quarter have single parents. Teenage pregnancies are rife in the community and many of the children have very young mothers. Some of the children report being rejected by one or both parents, parents leaving without an explanation and generally experiencing unstable family relationships. For example, unmarried parents have changing partners whom the children experience as parent figures. A teacher mentioned that two of the children in her class are brothers. They have the same father but different mothers, are the same age and in the same class. One of the boys lives with his father and receives what he needs, while the other does not. On occasion he has told his teacher about how his mother takes his father to court for maintenance for him. When he gets to school he is faced with the visible evidence that his father cares for his half-brother and not for him. There were many similar stories of rejection and breakdown which are brought into the classroom. Another example: a boy regularly passes his father in the street on his way home from school in the afternoon, but receives no acknowledgment from him.

"Unlearning" of life skills taught at school

The teachers find that the children understand the concepts taught during life skills lessons, but that it is often impossible to apply the skills to life circumstances or even think them through usefully. For example: one of the lessons taught in life skills is making choices and facing the consequences. How does an eight-year-old boy make the choice to stop running drugs for his mother – especially when he knows that this is the way in which his mother provides the food that he eats?

Value systems at home and school are totally different and often clash. One teacher said, "When I come to school I feel as if I am entering another world." The lack of congruence between the two worlds appears in many stories. For example, at school the children are taught to find alternative ways of resolving conflict as opposed to starting a fight. However, their parents tell them that when someone else starts a fight, they should "fight back". While we expect to encounter some conflict between home and school values in any environment, the present conflicts are based on survival life styles at home, making school input peripheral. The teachers nonetheless think that congruence can be achieved through communication between school and home, and that that parents should also be taught life skills. This will give them a sense of what their children are learning and help to reinforce children's skills, simultaneously teaching the parents new ways of relating to others.

Frustration of teachers

Teachers are frustrated because their job requires far more than teaching. They feel ill equipped and untrained in managing the kinds of problems the children present. The school used to employ a teacher (the "Guidance teacher" of the former Education Department) who was trained in

counselling skills, but due to staff reductions and retrenchments, there is no longer a teacher qualified to offer the children this service. The teachers who remain are overloaded with other duties as well. They have identified the children's emotional needs being displayed as attention seeking and other behaviours, but lack capacity for managing such behaviour. Teachers are aware that the community problems of poverty, malnutrition, neglect and violence faced by the children are affecting their academic performance as well.

The way in which the children "unlearn" the skills taught at school is also a source of frustration: "It feels like hitting a wall." Teachers have to juggle a lot of different tasks at the same time. They think that what they are teaching (respect, obeying rules, etc.) should be taught at home as well as in school. The school can then reinforce these values and skills. However, teachers find themselves going against the grain of what is acceptable in the community. They are also concerned that at times, when they become frustrated, they react in the very ways they teach the children not to, often turning into bad and angry role models themselves.

Teachers find changes in the education system inhibiting. The new philosophy encourages learners to challenge authority in class with the aim of developing critical thinking skills. Teachers can no longer enforce discipline and rules on a learner, but must allow the learner the opportunity to challenge these rules as well as the teaching material. This leniency evokes a sense of insecurity with the teachers, since it is completely different from the attitudes entrenched by their training. The insecurity also arises from the fact that the children tend to solve their problems in very physical ways, creating further discipline problems for the school.

Communication and relationship building

There is a breakdown in communication between the school and parents as well as the greater community. Teachers consider that communication between the school, the parents and the community plays an indispensable part in providing an effective service to the children. Such communication would go two ways – parents knowing what the teachers are teaching and informing teachers of the home situation and together assessing the effect on the child. Community efforts are required to create a safe environment and to provide extra-mural resources where domestic resources are generally squalid.

Furthermore, the teachers think that the children need to be taught communication skills in terms of expressing themselves in appropriate ways – for example, learning to express anger in less physical ways through anger management and conflict resolution. This would include learning how to verbalise their emotions. Teachers also know that the children's poor ability to communicate their emotions is due to low language skills. This difficulty with language is perpetuated by the fact that the home language of the children is Afrikaans; however, consistent with parental choice of language, the school uses English as medium of instruction.

The involvement and role of outside organisations

In order to maintain their professional roles at school, the teachers need support from outside organisations – for example, counselling for children and even for teachers, involvement with the children's family problems, and extension of school training content to the home.

The teachers have found that organisations which present their programmes to the learners themselves, as opposed to meeting with teachers about the programme and leaving the teacher to present it on his or her own, are much more helpful. This stimulates the class, motivates the teacher and inspires new ideas. The teacher also learns from the style of programme presentation. The teachers value the involvement of outside organisations in presenting programmes to the learners as they introduce specialised knowledge and skills. They are highly aware of the

limitations to their own professional knowledge and skills in a teaching role. The question then arises: "Should South African teachers incorporate management of trauma as a part of their job description?" The present sample identified other agencies as responsible for this task.

The teachers appreciate continuous contact and involvement from the organisation. They find it supportive when the organisation remains in contact with them, asking for feedback on what they think about *Circle Time*, how they are using it, and inviting them to contribute to its development. The teachers introduced the idea of being "weaned off" the organisation. By this they mean that once the actual training process has been completed, the organisation does not leave abruptly, but instead maintains regular contact. This contact is maintained at regular intervals, which become longer as the teacher gains confidence in implementing the programme or other specific training. They have also found that being let into the bigger picture of how the organisation functions is instructive, conscious as they are of the rather narrow view that a school environment imposes.

HIV/AIDS and sexuality education

The teachers state that the sooner the children are introduced to information regarding HIV/AIDS and sexuality education the better, because education around these issues reduces prejudice and fear among the learners. They also suggest that the sexual and physiological terms of "rape", "vagina", "penis", "sex" and "anus" should be used and explained to learners. Some of the teachers have tried to do this with their class. Although the learners respond with giggling and embarrassment at times, the teachers consider it to be important for learners to become comfortable with these terms and to understand what they mean. Teachers are particularly concerned that children should understand and know how to use these terms in cases where they need to report abuse.

The teachers use a life skills activity book from the Education Department as an aid to HIV/AIDS and sexuality education. They find such activity books can be helpful, but that they contain an inherent disadvantage in not always being pitched at an appropriate level for the age of the learners or in terms of what learners are exposed to within the community (e.g.: incidents of violence and the greater chance that the children will come into contact with a person who is bleeding whom they would want to help). Teachers also need fresh ideas on using activity books in conjunction with their lessons.

Organisation and the *Circle Time* programme

Learners should be encouraged to involve others (e.g. a confidante/mentor) in making choices and should be taught how to choose someone whom they can talk to. They must learn how to say "No," in a community where heedless behaviour is the order of the day. Since many of their families are involved in gang-related activities and the activities incorporate the adults known to the children, it is difficult for them to distinguish between good and bad influence in making choices, especially in terms of drugs, sex and abusive behaviour. The teachers suggested that the children be taught of consequences in terms of immediate as well as long-term effects; for example, the immediate consequence of taking drugs would be to feel good (positive), and to make bad judgments (negative). Long-term consequences include drug dependency, bad health and financial status, and even a jail sentence.

ANALYSIS

From the focus group data presented above, the problems encountered by the children emerge as follows.

There is a total absence of the secure environment that Kruger (1998) and Weist *et al.* (2001) conclude is required for the optimum development of young people. At a basic physiological level the inhabitants of a community cannot even know when a gang fight will break out and their safety be endangered. At a domestic level the children are faced with disturbed family relationships, which are complicated by unemployment and problems with drug use and abuse, where the children may themselves be required to traffic drugs and roll doped cigarettes. These unstable conditions, along with low socio-economic status, the incidence of teenage pregnancy and the absence of fathers due to jail sentences or parents not being married, are conducive to the continuing cycle of family difficulties, as documented by Akhurst and Ntshangse (1998). In the present study the trauma caused by the domestic situation was greater than that caused by community violence. Children living in this environment are at risk of emotional and behavioural damage as well as damage to their educational progress. The damage has been identified by their teachers, who are powerless to prevent it. It would be facile to expect any outside intervention to change these circumstances. Nevertheless, we can expect that as each child learns new ways of relating and becomes aware of his or her own educational potential and different ways of earning an income, their hope for a better personal future can begin to change circumstances in the community from within. We have long known that despite adverse circumstances, certain children function well, as documented by Rutter (1975), Collins (1982) and Louw (1998). We also know that certain schools function well where others fail to thrive (Potterton, 1998). Clearly, the competencies of these children and the policies of these schools must be scrutinised for programme planning and action.

The children experience further educational difficulties in the area of language. Teachers' accounts in the present study and in the international literature (Davey & Goodwin-Davey, 1998; McWhirter *et al.*, 1998) draw attention to the importance of the language of instruction being at the learner's level. Because of the link between language, social relationships and self-esteem (Adams, 1998; McWhirter *et al.*, 1998), finding ways in which to increase learners' language proficiency build the first steps towards helping them feel competent enough to try out new skills.

According to Burman and Preston-Whyte (1992), at later stage in the lives of these children in the foundation phase, teenagers at risk of engaging in risky sexual behaviour have low self-esteem and low self-worth. They also have disrupted family relationships, are born to teenaged parents or are in a single-parent family. These conditions typify the family constellations of the Cape Flats. Many are in single-parent families due to teen pregnancy or fathers who have been imprisoned. Others have complex family relationships, such as the half-brothers described above. The kind of rejection this boy and others like him face from their fathers and other family members can only be a blow to their self-image. Young children and adolescents need acceptance from their parents or a significant adult. When this is not found, such acceptance is sought from other relationships, which are not likely to enhance lifestyles in a community where chaos prevails, as explained by McWhirter *et al.* (1998) and Weist *et al.* (2001).

Research emphasises the importance of intervention programmes in training ways to improve relationships, boost self-esteem and reduce behavioural problems in schools (King & Kirschenbaum, 1992; Weisen, 1996; Rooth, 1997; McWhirter *et al.*, 1998; Weist *et al.*, 2001). Such programmes in the form of life skills training are already being extended to schools in the Cape Flats by local organisations. However, when programme content is not supported but actually contradicted by experiential learning, the skills are "unlearned" the moment the child leaves the classroom. No wonder teachers in this study are frustrated. Clearly some other approach must be tried, one which cannot require extra effort from already overburdened and demoralised teachers, but which either incorporates other resources or taps skills in which teachers have self-

confidence. Let us pay attention to the recommendations from the teachers themselves, supported by findings reported in the literature.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The teachers have identified certain skills they think will help children cope with their situations. The main ones are *adapting to change* and *communication*. Other research into the foundation phase includes *concept of self* and *self-esteem and control* as important components of competence (Rooth, 1997; Kruger, 1998; Louw, 1998; McWhirter *et al.*, 1998). Interventions such as peer tutoring, co-operative learning, life skills training, assertiveness training, peer mediation, conflict resolution and peer support networks are all identified as methods which increase competencies in these skills for young children. Role-playing in class will give learners a “feel” for using skills they have learnt and also provide them with some practice. Teachers and class members challenge learners to apply a skill to a particular situation by asking the learners to think of using the skill at home. They are then asked to use the skill in the way they have described and afterwards to report back on this in the next session. In the report-back session the learners are given an opportunity to explore ways to improve their use of the skill and to explore how to overcome any difficulties they may have experienced. Learners themselves provide the examples for practice, which incorporates the element of appropriateness for age. Learner choice leads to programme content more relevant to everyday life experience.

Competencies and training methods overlap experientially, as the training relies on competencies to be effective, while also aiming to develop these competencies. As existing life-skill training methods achieve only an understanding of concepts and stop short of application of skills to the environment, other methods well suited to the classroom situation must be sought. In addition to the above recommendations, the teacher steps into a guidance role to replace the initiating role in alternative methods for children above 8 years of age. Two or more learners may be delegated the task of mediating conflicts and being the class “listeners” for short periods of time. The delegated learners are responsible for mediating conflicts between other learners in the class and are available to listen to minor complaints from other learners. Also, those learners who are delegated to this position should role-play and practise with the rest of the class using the skills they would use, before testing them outside school. This would serve two purposes:

- If the class role-plays and practices together, the teacher will have the opportunity to assess which learners are ready for the task;
- When the learners take up this task outside the classroom, they will not be completely unprepared for it.

With regard to the HIV/AIDS training, the programmes and manuals for sex education are standardised and incorporated into life-skills training by the Department of Education (2002). There is a high risk of indiscriminate application in the classroom. Programmes tend to be poorly understood, even by teachers, and are often inappropriate for the age groups. The teachers and other researchers agree that programmes must keep language simple, contain built-in feedback mechanisms to continually check the understanding of the learners, be age appropriate in content, and be accessible to adaptation by the presenter, who needs training in the programme (Rooth, 1997; Fischer, 1996; Wood, 1998). Malaka (2003) and Strydom (2003) made similar recommendations for adaptive presentation of HIV/AIDS programmes in their research on older South African children.

Recent research in the Cape Flats area has demonstrated the potentially overwhelming stress encountered by teachers having to manage their own trauma as well as the school children’s

(Reckson, 2003). Outside resources can assist the teacher in this role. The existing policy of training teachers in using a life-skills programme, however, must be extended to follow-up contact with teacher feedback. Teachers request an open-door policy with supporting organisations which invite the teacher to approach the organisation with any comments, difficulties or questions. Such a policy would aid programme implementation as well as teacher support.

Parental and community involvement undoubtedly influence the success of schools and schools-based intervention programmes. At present, the only forum for participation by parents is the parent-teacher meetings, which the majority of parents do not attend. Further channels are required, which may include the note used by King and Kirschenbaum (1992) in which the teacher inform parents not only of what the children are learning, but also of the importance of these skills.

Parent training is another way to involve parents by improving their own life skills. In an open-day format the parents and other community members may be invited into a classroom-type situation and witness first hand the kind of training the children receive in life skills and through programmes like *Circle Time*. Providing skills training may also be a way in which the school becomes involved in community activity and a means of building a supportive relationship which benefits both parties.

CONCLUSION

The focus groups created a forum in which a remarkable degree of interest emerged. Despite the environmental dissipation of their efforts in educating the children, these teachers remain enthusiastic and highly motivated. They are intent on finding new solutions in a culture which counteracts learning. They are prepared to co-operate with the community in ameliorating destructive environmental effects on school children. Unlike many others in unsupportive situations, the team of organisation and teachers expressed a strongly positive vision. Having uncovered this vision quite unexpectedly, we must maintain it.

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