

UNIT ONE

How responsive are schools to the socio-economic challenges in South Africa today?

Introduction

The issues and challenges facing schools in South Africa today are very different from those of the past. Are schools that were created to respond to particular social needs at a particular time ready to play a significant role in preparing children and young people for the world in which we live today?

South Africa today is a country grappling to establish a society in which all its people have access to quality education, health, housing, and economic well being. At the same time we are part of a fast-paced world in which technology makes it possible to connect people from around the world into a global network. In response to emerging new realities at home and internationally South Africa, like countries around the world, has embarked on educational reform. New education policies and curricula encourage us to think differently about learning and teaching, and about the role of the school within society with all its challenges and opportunities.

In this first Unit we reflect on the role that schools are expected to play in society and what the impact is of socio-economic issues like HIV and AIDS, poverty and violence on schools. Are schools doing enough to respond constructively to these social challenges? Your first response may well be that the focus of the school must be on teaching and learning and that social issues must be taken care of by the community, government agencies and non-government organisations.

Teaching and learning are the core business of our schools but the research in which this guide and toolkit are rooted provides strong evidence of the fact that schools have to undergo a paradigm shift in order to become centres of care and support. The high number of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in our schools make this shift a precondition for successful learning and teaching to take place.

The lessons learnt from this research have been distilled and are discussed in this guide. It is hoped that these findings, together with the extracts from relevant articles selected and the reflection activities provided, will stimulate you to deepen your understanding of the issues related to HIV and AIDS and the range of socio-economic issues which have an impact on education. That this guide may, in some small way, help to provide clearer insight into the changing role of schools in South Africa and the leadership and management role required to create a caring school environment is our aim.

Key questions

This unit explores the following questions:

1. Why is schooling important?
2. What are some of the key challenges facing children in South Africa today?
3. What are the implications of these challenges for schools?

Outcomes

By the end of this Unit you should be able to:

- More fully understand the vital role that schools can play in society.
- Identify the effects of socio-economic challenges like HIV/AIDS, poverty and violence on the children who come to your school.
- Critically analyse the changing role of the school in South Africa in the light of these socio-economic challenges.

Why is schooling important?

Education is highly valued by all societies. In South Africa we have policies in place that ensure that all our children have access to education. The perception is that education will equip children to be productive citizens and to take their rightful place in society.

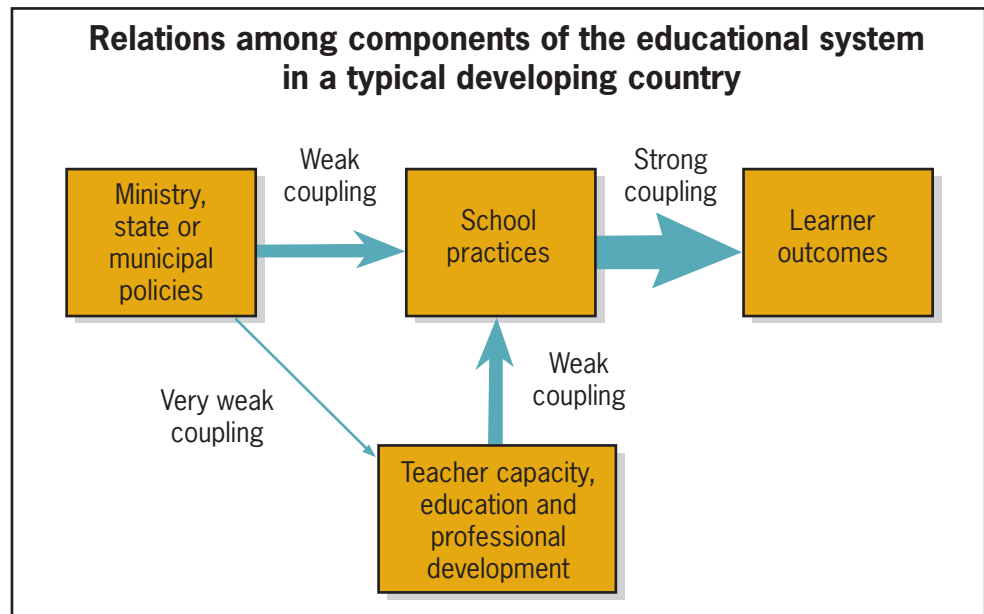
The extract below, from a recent Development Bank publication, *Investment Choices for South African Education*, focuses attention on the important role that schools can play in society.

Education is both a human right and a human need. Although no education system is perfect, public education is still one of the best ways in which a state can support the development of its people and thereby improve their lives. In South Africa a large part of the annual budget is spent on education and more children have access to schooling now than ever before. But going to school does not always led to a better life. Why not?

Money and access to schooling clearly are not enough for development to take place. The quality of each school matters. Often, well intentioned policies, such as curriculum frameworks, are weakly coupled to actual school practice, because there is no supervisory/instructional assistance structure to ensure that the reforms are being implemented as anticipated in the reform programme.

The flow diagram (Figure 1) shows that that state policies only have a weak influence (thin arrow = weak coupling or effect) on teacher capacity and school practice. There is also a weak link between teacher education and school practice. This means the state has little direct influence on the students' lives. In the end the biggest effect on students (fat arrow) comes from what actually happens on a daily basis in each school.

(Bloch, G, et al: 2008)¹



Source: Bloch, G, Chisholm, L, Fleisch, B and Mabizela, M (eds.) (2008:27) *Investment Choices for South African Education*, Wits University Press, Johannesburg.

Education policy cannot directly improve education and cannot directly improve learners’ lives. At best a good policy and a good curriculum will give the individual school a clear framework for the job that needs to be done on the ground. The really important questions about the state of education in South Africa therefore have to be directed to each individual school. This is what we must ask the principals and management teams in our country: What is happening in **your** school? How much value does the daily practice in the classrooms of **your** school add to the lives of learners? What is the real benefit for learners of coming to **your** school every day?

Various research initiatives have found that the majority of schools in South Africa are struggling to deliver on the promises that the education policies make. By the end of 2008 a large number of schools in South Africa were considered to be dysfunctional, because what actually went on at the schools undermined the possible benefits of attending class. This dire situation has sparked much critical reflection and discussion in the education community. The business sector has also expressed concern about the lack of adequately skilled people and much of their criticism is aimed at the quality of education and training. The unsatisfactory state of education in the country is a complex challenge that requires attention in a number of areas. At the top of the list is the need to strengthen management and leadership capacity, improve teacher training and development, and encourage professional behaviour and practice by all members of the teaching staff. We know that no teaching and learning can happen where teachers are absent. In well-managed schools principals and their management teams show strong leadership and teachers are ‘on time, teaching with text books’. Mechanisms that create zero tolerance of unwarranted teacher absenteeism are in place.

Equally, where absenteeism is legitimate, be it amongst teachers or learners, systems are in place for managing this. Substitution is arranged for classes with absent teachers and support is provided to learners who have missed sections of school work.

**ACTIVITY****Activity 1****Does going to school lead to a better life?**

Read the extract from the Development Bank publication again and examine the flow diagram. Then discuss these questions with your management team:

1. Why do the authors think that schooling is important?
2. Discuss this statement: *Access to education without success is as bad as no access.*
3. What are the threats to your school's ability to offer quality education?

**TOOLKIT****Tool 1****Check threats to quality education**

This tool enables you to identify key problems that may affect your school's ability to offer quality education. You can refer to this tool when you compile a care and support plan for your school in Unit 8.

Comment

Bloch and his co-authors make a strong case for the value of education. They see it as a critical tool for development and call it both a human right, and a basic human need. Education is the responsibility of the family, but also of the state. Through national education policies the state wants to ensure that all children have access to education and get a chance to develop their full potential in life.

It is interesting to note that the research findings show how national education policies can set clear goals for schools, but cannot ensure outcomes. The authors argue that each individual school has to guarantee the quality of education that the state provides. Does this mean the state cannot make things better without us? There is a tendency in South Africa to expect 'the government' to solve all problems. This article challenges us to rethink this assumption. Perhaps it is time to think about what you can do today as school and community leaders entrusted with the responsibility of developing the children of today who will be the adults of tomorrow.

*We are also challenged by the flow diagram. It shows how the quality of education in a country depends on what happens in each individual school. The implication of this is huge. It not only means that every school matters, but also that the **daily practice** of schooling matters. How we run our schools day-to-day will add to the value that our schools have in our children's lives.*

**STOP
THINK**

If children attend school regularly, they will have spent an average of 600 hours a year in class. If a quarter of every lesson is wasted with starting lessons late, teachers coming to lessons unprepared, learners having no books, the children will have spent 150 hours that year learning 'how to waste time'.

Schools, as sites of education delivery, are organised in such a way that they bring together various stakeholders. In particular, parents (as primary educators) and the state (concerned with national development). This means that schools offer the children an important entry point into society. When children start school they move from the private to the public sphere. Schools do not only prepare children for life in society by teaching the curriculum. They also help to socialise them. Through the daily experience of going to school, children fit into a larger system and learn how a society works. Schooling will be most successful if the match between the school and the community is good. But what happens in situations where social problems in communities break down the links between families and schools? What happens when children have to cope with the trauma of living with parents who are HIV+ or who themselves have to cope with the effects of HIV? What happens when families are unable to care for their children because they are poor and destitute? What happens when children are victims of violence and sexual abuse?

What challenges do young people face in South Africa today?

The flow diagram we examined earlier shows how powerfully schools are placed to make an impact on children's lives. Unfortunately, the diagram does not show how the economic and social context of the school influences this role. As a school principal, one of your responsibilities is to lead your team in analysing the social context in which your school is located and to think about how this influences the children who attend your school. A deep understanding of the social challenges that children face will enable you to find ways in which your school can be a beacon of hope, a place where everyone is supported to develop and achieve their potential.



ACTIVITY

Activity 2

What do the newspaper headlines reveal?

If you pick up any newspaper and page through it, you are likely to see a plethora of socio-economic problems that our communities face daily.

Here are some recent newspaper headlines. What do they tell you about the challenges and problems young people face?

Child trips, dagga found

Parents urged to apply for school uniforms

Child grant heist

Food insecurity a global issue

Children orphaned as HIV strikes

Child abuse on the rise

Student stabs teacher in the neck

Embezzlement of school feeding scheme funds

Think of your own school.

1. What are some of the threats and challenges that face the young people who come to your school?

Comment

The newspaper headlines remind us that our social system is under pressure. One of the most talked about and often least understood social issues is HIV and AIDS, which is particularly widespread in Sub-Saharan African countries including South Africa. It is estimated that over five million people, or 11% of the population over the age of two years old, are living with HIV and AIDS in South Africa (Shishana: 2005² and Claasen: 2006³). The impact of HIV and AIDS on individuals, households, schools and communities is complex and children are often the ones who are most affected by the consequences of the epidemic. HIV and AIDS push households further into poverty and children do not get the basic care they need, are malnourished and often suffer stunted growth and development. A growing number of children are orphaned and have to fend for themselves.

The effects of poverty are not limited to children who live with parents or family members who are HIV+. High unemployment rates fuel the cycle of poverty in our country and coping with poverty is a reality for a large number of children. In communities where people are poverty stricken we would expect schools to struggle with children who come to school hungry and with parents who are unable to pay school fees and buy books and school uniforms.

Rising levels of violence and abuse in communities mean that many children grow up feeling unsafe, fearful and showing signs of emotional trauma.



Have you noticed how easily children become identified with their problems? It makes sense to say that schools struggle with hungry children. In reality, however, the children are not the problem at all. They are the victims who need our help. Children's experiences (being hungry) or behaviours (being aggressive) are symptoms of deeper, more widespread problems in the community in which they live.

South Africa is a country in the process of transformation and although we have achieved a high level of political and economic stability since 1994, the social conditions for the majority of South Africans have not improved as much as we hoped. Poverty levels have not decreased significantly and the burden of unemployment remains unacceptably high. Add to this the disruption caused by the HIV and AIDS epidemic and high levels of crime and violence and we have an environment which is unable to provide the support that children need to grow and flourish. The school is a microcosm of society and social problems do not stop at the school gates but are present in the school community. Thousands of children are showing signs of physical and emotional strain and stress and this has a negative impact on their ability to learn and develop.

The South African Schools Act requires schools to offer quality education to all learners of school going age. Since it is the school's responsibility to create an environment in which all children are supported and enabled to learn, school management and teachers must be encouraged to understand the social issues and barriers that make this difficult, or prevent children from learning and developing. What are these barriers? The short notes that follow give an indication of the effects on children of three key socio-economic realities: HIV and AIDS, poverty, and violence.

The impact of HIV and AIDS

Most children in South Africa are in some way affected by HIV or AIDS. The following extract shows how disruptive HIV and AIDS is for families and children.

The impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on children and families is incremental; poor communities with inadequate infrastructure and limited access to basic services are worst hit. Poverty amplifies the impacts of HIV/AIDS on children and renders their effects on children unrelenting. At the same time, changes associated with the illness and death of caregivers and breadwinners can push children into conditions of desperate hardship. As John Williamson says:

The common impacts [of HIV/AIDS] include deepening poverty, such as pressure to drop out of school, food insecurity, reduced access to health services, deteriorating housing, worsening material conditions, and loss of access to land and other productive assets. Psychosocial distress is another impact on children and families, and it includes anxiety, loss of parental love and nurture, depression, grief, and separation of siblings among relatives to spread the economic burden of their care.

(Richter, L: 2004)⁴

This table gives an overview of the impact of HIV and AIDS on families and children.

The potential impact of AIDS on children, families and communities

Potential impact on children	Potential impact on families and households	Potential impact on communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of family and identity • Depression • Reduced well-being • Increased malnutrition, starvation • Failure to immunize or provide health care • Loss of health status • Increased demand in labour • Loss of educational opportunities • Loss of inheritance • Forced migration • Homelessness, vagrancy, crime • Increased street living • Exposure to HIV infection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of members, grief • Impoverishment • Change in family composition, and family child roles • Forced migration • Dissolution • Stress • Inability to provide parental care for children • Lack of income for health care and education • Demoralisation • Long-term pathologies • Decrease in middle generation in households, leaving the old and the young 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced labour • Increased poverty • Inability to maintain infrastructure • Loss of skilled labour, including health workers and teachers • Reduced access to health care • Elevated mortality and morbidity • Psychological stress and breakdown • Inability to marshal resources for community-wide initiatives

Source: Hunter & Williamson (2000, 2002) in Richter, L. (2004). *Family and Community Interventions for Children Affected by AIDS* page 8⁵.

The statistics below give some idea of the scale of the impact that HIV and AIDS are having in South Africa.

SOME SOUTH AFRICAN HIV AND AIDS STATISTICS⁶

- South Africa is currently experiencing one of the most severe AIDS pandemics in the world. At the end of 2007, there were approximately 5.7 million people living with HIV in South Africa, and almost 1,000 AIDS deaths occurring every day.
- HIV prevalence in 15 – 49 year olds is 18.1%.
- According to UNAIDS, there were around 280,000 children aged below 15 living with HIV in South Africa in 2007.
- It is estimated that there were 1.4 million South African children orphaned by AIDS in 2007, compared to 780,000 in 2003. Once orphaned, these children are more likely to face poverty, poor health and a lack of access to education.

Source: HIV and AIDS information from Avert, www.avert.org, accessed 22.07.2009

Families that are poor are more vulnerable to HIV and AIDS and families that are affected by HIV and AIDS often become poorer because of the disease because people are often too sick to work. Equally, people who are poor often are unable to afford the proper balanced diets necessary for maintaining a healthy life style or they may be unable to seek the necessary medical treatment. Thus, poverty and HIV feed on one another.

The poverty cycle

There has been positive economic growth in the country for more than a decade now, yet the reality for many households and communities is that they remain stuck in poverty. What exactly do we mean by poverty? Here is a description of what is a complex social problem.

In South Africa to be poor means to be alienated from your community, to be unable to sufficiently feed your family, to live in overcrowded conditions, use basic forms of energy, lack adequately paid and secure jobs and to have fragmented families (May, J. p5: 2000 in Borhat, H., Poswell, L., Naidoo, P. 2004).⁷

In essence poverty describes a state of deprivation that prevents an individual from achieving some minimum socially acceptable standard of living.

Poverty is the “inability of individuals, households or communities to command sufficient resources to satisfy a socially acceptable minimum standard of living”⁸

THE EXTENT OF POVERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA⁹

- *The Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive Social Security System for South Africa* found that between 45 and 55% of all South Africans live in poverty, depending on the poverty measure used.
- *Statistics South Africa* calculated that 60.8% of all persons in South Africa are living on less than R250 each per month, based on the Census 1996 data.
- In 2001, unemployment rates were as high as 37%.
- Spiraling food prices, general inflation and unemployment all feed increasing poverty.
- It is estimated that in 2002 about 11 million children under 18 years of age in South Africa are living on less than R200 per month and hence are desperately in need of income support.

Source: *Children's Institute, University of Cape Town (2002) Childhood poverty in South Africa. www.ci.org.za accessed 22.07.2009.*

For the children who make up these statistics, these numbers translate into extreme hardship and real suffering. In their own words, poverty means:

"...the biggest problem is food. Sometimes we end up not getting any food at home... The other problem is to have school shoes." (Boy, 15, Limpopo)

Apart from physical hardships, children from disadvantaged communities also often suffer from a range of emotional problems. These may be externalised as aggression, fighting, and acting out. But emotional problems may also be internalised and manifest as anxiety, social withdrawal and depression.

The unstable economic situation of most families, together with the presence of HIV, has created a situation in which parents are frequently absent and many are physically and emotionally unable to give their children the care and support they need. As a result children are frequently left to look after themselves. Even where a parent or guardian is present, children often grow up without family routines and a clear set of guidelines and rules. Children who have experienced inadequate parenting often start school with poor social skills that lead to disciplinary problems and they may find it difficult to fit into the structured and controlled environment of a functional school.

Another negative aspect of poverty is the hugely widening gap between rich and poor in South Africa. One effect of this uneven development is that young people are exposed to a range of luxury goods, which they cannot afford. They are flooded daily with advertisements about an alluring lifestyle that is not within their immediate reach. For young people who suffer from low self-esteem this often leads to an increased desire to own 'brand' clothing and goods. They see such goods as boosting their self-image. They believe it communicates to the world that they belong to the group that matters in society. Since parents want their children to have a better life, the 'image needs' of their children often use up the limited resources of the family. The strong need to own expensive brand products also makes young people vulnerable to unscrupulous people who offer them financial rewards for sexual favours.

Violence against women and children

Violence against women and children is common in our country and disturbingly often the perpetrators are family members or family friends. Large numbers of children in our schools are affected by it. The extract that follows from a paper compiled by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, *Psychological Effects of Criminal and Political Violence on Children*, gives a summary of common responses to violent events. The paper was published in 1993 and at that time, the most commonly expressed fears by children were in relation to possible attacks by the then security forces on the children's homes. It is interesting to note that today, although the most common fears relate to perpetrators of criminal acts such as assault and sexual abuse, the effects of the trauma on children are very similar.

PSYCHO-SOCIO EFFECTS OF CRIME AND VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN

Fear: of attack, assault, sexual abuse, losing parents and loved ones.

Emotional changes: feelings of emotional numbing, powerlessness, of extreme vulnerability and lack of safety. Anxiety, restlessness and irritability. Having no interest in life, feeling guilt or bad to be alive. No energy and feeling tired all of the time. Changing quickly from one mood to another. Younger children often act much younger than they are by clinging to their mother all the time and beginning to wet their beds again, for example. Older children tend to get depressed and withdraw into themselves.

Difficulties with sleeping and dreaming: nightmares about attacks and fear of falling asleep.

Difficulties with thinking and learning: Constantly thinking about and re-experiencing the traumatic experience. Not being able to concentrate and to remember properly. Children's thoughts are negative and they find it difficult to be creative.

Social difficulties: not wanting to be social with other children, being aggressive with others.

Eating problems: refusal to eat and loss of appetite.

Somatic complaints: mainly in the form of headaches and stomachaches.

Children are psychologically more at risk than adults through violent experiences. Follow-up studies of disasters found 80% of children had symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder one to two years later, compared with 30% of adults. Children's potential for long-term recovery without the support of a significant adult and/or the relevant treatment, is markedly less than that of an adult. Their conceptual and emotional inability properly to understand the violent event, and to have some measure of control over their environment are factors which mitigate against a swift recovery. (Stavrou, V.: 1993)¹⁰

The impact of violence on children has devastating effects on them. But it does not mean that there is no hope at all. Research has found that the response of children to high levels of stress depends to a large extent on their personality, temperament, learned coping skills, age of exposure to violence and the availability of support of caring adults and social supports in the environment. Even in the most dire of situations, opportunities for recovery can be hastened when children are given opportunities to achieve in and out of the school context, are offered new and supportive relationships and positive changes are made in their circumstances. Recovery is hindered and maladjustment sets in when the violent conditions persist and no support is available.



Have these brief notes helped you to become more aware of how a range of social issues may have an impact on children's ability to fully participate in learning?



Activity 3 What is the situation in your school?

This is an opportunity for you to open up a discussion within the School Management Team (SMT) and later with teachers and relevant stakeholders to create awareness of the needs of the children in your school. In particular, the needs of those who are affected by HIV and AIDS or the many problems created by poverty and the violence that affects so many of our communities can be brought to light.



1. Ask each member of the school management team to complete **Tool 2 - Check barriers to learning**.
2. Compare your completed checklists. What did you find?
3. Discuss the size of the problem in the context of your school. How many children in your school show symptoms of physical and emotional distress which is compromising their ability to learn.
4. What percentage of children in your school would you consider to be at risk and vulnerable? Make an estimate based on your present observations.

This percentage may change (and become even bigger) when you've worked through Unit 3 and have a better understanding of what we mean by *vulnerable* children. But this is a start; identifying and acknowledging the problems is one of the necessary first steps to supporting and caring for those learners that are vulnerable.

Comment

Vulnerable children come to school displaying many of the physical and emotional symptoms described. A child living with HIV is often a hungry and traumatised child who is unable to participate fully in the learning process. For them the present and future looks bleak and without the right kind of care and support they will probably drop out of school and their lives are likely to continue in the cycle of poverty and deprivation.

In the course of school visits which we conducted as part of our research project we noted that about 40% of children in the schools visited are vulnerable. This is an average percentage. In some schools we discovered that as many as 80% of the children are vulnerable and in need of physical and emotional support.

In many schools, the present response to the needs of vulnerable children is informal and implemented on an *ad hoc* basis. It often depends on the commitment and dedication of a single visionary principal or a caring Life Orientation or other individual teacher who feels compelled to take action. Such a principal or teacher may be moved to respond to the needs of vulnerable children by providing some food for them or by making available emotional counseling. Indeed, our research identified some examples of principals and SMT members doing extraordinarily good work under the most challenging conditions. Pockets of good practice do exist in schools all over South Africa. These *are* signs of hope in, what is for many children, a sea of anguish and hopelessness. But is it sufficient? Can schools play a more systematic and sustainable role in providing the kind of support that vulnerable children need?

What are the implications of these socio-economic challenges for schools?

Schools are microcosms of society and they have to cope with the social challenges that are prevalent in a society at any given time. The research we conducted focused attention on the multiplying effects of HIV and AIDS on children, their families, the community and the school. We also noted how HIV and AIDS is closely intermeshed with a range of other socio-economic factors such as poverty and physical, sexual and drug abuse. We soon realised that we could not easily separate the root causes of learners' vulnerability. The causes were often created by a number of closely interlinked factors. We therefore opted for an inclusive approach – an approach that is in line with White Paper 6: *Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (DoE: 2001).¹¹ In this policy, HIV and AIDS-related effects are considered as *one* set of barriers among *many* barriers to learning. At the same time, given the particular impact of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, this Guide does retain a clear HIV and AIDS focus, but *within* the wider context of social challenges that create barriers for children to learn and develop.



What is your reaction to the following two extracts?

Despite all their shortcomings, schools have significant potential to play a critical role in obviating the worst effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on children. Apart from the accrued personal and social benefits of education for work and national development, schooling provides stability, institutional affiliation and the normalisation of experience for children. It also places children in an environment where adults and older children are potentially available to provide social support.

(Richter, L.: 2004 Chap.2 p.26)¹²

It is important that educational institutions be well managed, places where orderliness and normality prevail and where high expectations for the behaviour of everyone are articulated. In the disturbed environment of a severely AIDS-affected community, 'school' may be the only normal situation a child encounters (although even here sickness and mortality among teachers, fellow students and family and community members may cast a pall). A key goal of educational managers should be to ensure full scope, within secure environments, for vitality, happiness, hope, energy and play. Education systems must ensure that those affected by HIV/AIDS can work and learn in caring institutional settings where the safety and human rights of all are respected. Education systems must be rendered fully and patently inclusive, providing for the most extensive possible participation by persons with HIV/AIDS.

(Coombe, C. and Kelly, M.J., : 2001)¹³

Research into HIV has shown that schools can play a critical role in providing stability for children affected by HIV and AIDS as well as for those children living in poverty-stricken and violent contexts. The role of the school features prominently in reports and articles that investigate ways of managing the effects of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. This role is also highlighted in the conceptualisation of schools as "centres of community life" and schools dealing "urgently and purposefully with the HIV and AIDS emergency *in and through* the education system", two priority areas outlined in the *Implementation Plan for Tirisano 2000 – 2004: A plan for the transformation of education*, developed by the then Minister of Education, Kadar Asmal (DoE 2000 a: pp 7 & 8)¹⁴.

The extract below from *A framework for the protection, care and support of orphans and vulnerable children living in a world with HIV and AIDS* – a Unicef report, offers some pertinent points about the roles that schools can play.

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE PROTECTION, CARE AND SUPPORT OF ORPHANS AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN LIVING IN A WORLD WITH HIV AND AIDS – UNICEF

1. Schools can provide children with a safe, structured environment, the emotional support and supervision of adults, and the opportunity to learn how to interact with other children and develop social networks.
2. Education can reduce children's risk of HIV infection by increasing knowledge, awareness, skills and opportunities.
3. The introduction of school meals, especially in areas where food security is an issue, provides the added benefit of improving children's attendance and nutritional status. When combined with take-home rations, school meals also offer benefits by supporting the larger household.
4. Making the curriculum more relevant to the daily needs of children and youth will help attract and keep children at school.
5. Teachers can be trained to identify vulnerable children and provide needed support and counseling.
6. Schools can also be a place of increased risk. Policy and monitoring measures are needed to prevent and address situations in which learners are bullied, abused or exploited. These measures can help ensure that all children, particularly those most vulnerable, are not prevented from enjoying their right to a safe educational environment due to such practices.
7. Enhancing the role of schools in fighting HIV/AIDS and mitigating its impact on children may also involve childcare (after school), recreational programmes and community education.
8. Efforts to improve and expand the role of schools will require the involvement of parents, community leaders and children themselves

(Connolly M, & Stirling M.,: 2004)¹⁵

Schools are centrally positioned in communities and are more than places of education. They are places where strong relationships are established among learners, and between teachers, learners and their parents. Because schools reach large numbers of children and their parents, the school can be at the forefront of mobilising efforts to break down stigma and discrimination, to disseminate information, and be a gathering point for a range of support services and activities. Schools can also play a significant role in collecting relevant and dependable information required to monitor and manage the HIV and AIDS epidemic in their area.



ACTIVITY

Activity 4 What is happening in your school?

We started our reflection on the role of schools by identifying that the quality of education in a country depends on what happens in each individual school. What is your school doing to lessen the effects of HIV and AIDS on children and teachers who are affected and infected by the epidemic? What are you doing to support and help children who suffer from the effects of poverty and violence?



TOOLKIT

Tool 3 How responsive is your school?

To carry out a reality check with your management team, use the table provided in Tool 3 to record your responses to these questions:

1. What support is the school currently providing for children affected by socio-economic issues such as HIV and AIDS, poverty and violence?
2. What prevents the school from providing adequate support to these learners?
3. How effective is the support the school is providing to these learners?
4. How is the school supporting teachers who are affected by HIV and AIDS?
5. What prevents the school from supporting these teachers?
6. How effective is the support your school is providing to these teachers?

Once you have worked through the whole guide and gained a good understanding of the issues, you will have the opportunity to compile a coherent plan of action. You will then be required to refer back to these responses to compile a *care and support plan* for your school (as set out in Unit 8) so keep these initial responses in a file for future reference.

Comment

It takes strong leadership and management to create a school environment where there is respect and acceptance of difference and where teachers, learners and their parents work together to create a place of learning and development for all. A safe environment makes it possible to offer opportunities for support and care for children in need. Caring schools are better schools. Unless the basic needs of learners like food and safety are addressed, it is unlikely that quality learning can take place. Therefore, by addressing the challenge of teaching vulnerable children affected by various social and economic issues such as HIV and AIDS, poverty and violence, schools will improve the quality of their work. Vulnerable children and their parents or caregivers will be encouraged to stay connected with a school community which is a centre of hope, where households at risk can get support. In this way, parents and caregivers can be drawn in to become part of the solution, instead of possibly being a part of the problem.

Key points

In this Unit we have explored some of the main social challenges that children face. We have also examined how these socio-economic issues affect not only the children, their families and communities, but also the school.

In particular, we explored:

- Why schooling is important;
- What some of the key challenges are that face children and young people in South Africa today; and
- What the implications of these challenges may be for schools.

Some important insights we gained include:

1. Access to education is an important human right and need. But access to schooling is not enough for development to take place. The *quality* of education influences the kind of development that can be achieved and schools are responsible for ensuring that quality education is provided.
2. Large numbers of children who come to school show symptoms of the effects of a range of social and economic issues. These include learners who are infected or affected by HIV and AIDS and/or affected by poverty and high levels of crime and violence. These issues have an impact on their ability to learn. Frequently such children, if they don't receive the support they need, drop out of school and their lives continue in the cycle of poverty and deprivation.
3. The school is a microcosm of society and the effects of HIV and AIDS, poverty and high levels of crime and violence are present in the school environment. The school therefore has a responsibility to find ways of responding constructively to these social challenges because they can and do seriously undermine the learning and development that should take place.
4. The school can play a critical role in providing all children with a non-threatening, caring and supportive learning environment. This requires that management take a strong leadership role and create opportunities for teachers, learners, parents and the community to work together to become part of the solution.
5. Basic care and the hope that it generates is a pre-requisite for quality learning to take place.

