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Category: Student's Work

CHANGE FROM WITHIN. HOW COMMUNITIES CAN BE INVOLVED IN PREVENTING CHILDREN FROM DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Change from within. How communities can be involved in preventing children from dropping out of school

In this article, based on a social work graduation project carried out at a primary school in Douglas, Northern Cape, South Africa, the issue of young children dropping out of primary education is outlined, as well as its causes. Solutions that address the direct causes seem hard to find. Such solutions should address deep-rooted assumptions and a lack of awareness of the importance of education on the part of many individuals, it is suggested. The author proposes that social workers seek to involve the community in solving their own problems, such as drop-outs. A bottom-up

approach should be used to change incorrect assumptions about education and the importance of education should be emphasized. An example is given of how empowering and educating the right people to take responsibly for their community can benefit that community and also help relieve social workers of their massive workloads, which is a significant problem in South Africa.

Keywords

Community development, drop outs, primary education, bottom-up approach, participation, social work, development work, South Africa

SAMENVATTING

Verandering van binnenuit. Hoe de gemeenschap betrokken kan worden in het voorkomen van schooluitval bij kinderen
In dit artikel, gebaseerd op een Social work afstudeeronderzoek op een basisschool in Douglas, Noord Kaap, Zuid Afrika, wordt uitleg geven over (de oorzaken van) het probleem van kinderen die het primaire onderwijs vroegtijdig verlaten. Eventuele directe oplossingen voor dit probleem lijken moeilijk te vinden. Diepgewortelde aannames en onwetendheid wat betreft het belang van educatie zullen moeten worden aangepakt. De auteur vindt dat Social workers meer moeten proberen de gemeenschap te betrekken bij het oplossen van problemen die de hele gemeenschap aangaan, zoals de schooluitval. Een "bottom-up" aanpak kan nuttig zijn in het veranderen van verkeerde aannames en onwetendheid over (het belang van) educatie. Er wordt een voorbeeld gegeven waarin duidelijk wordt hoe je door "empowerment" en educatie van de juiste personen hen verantwoordelijkheid kunt leren te nemen voor hun eigen gemeenschap. Hiermee kan een Social worker uiteindelijk zijn of haar te hoge werkbelasting, wat een groot probleem is in Zuid Afrika, enigszins verlichten.

Trefwoorden

Gemeenschapsontwikkeling, schooluitval, basisonderwijs, bottom-up aanpak, participatie, social work, ontwikkelingswerk, Zuid Afrika

INTRODUCTION

It is almost impossible to compare the social situations in Douglas, a small rural town in the Northern Cape province of South Africa, and Amanzimtoti, a large suburb of Durban in KwaZulu Natal, South

Africa. Taking a break from my research work in Douglas as a final-year student of Social Work, I visited Amanzimtoti and met a group of young boys in the township KwaMakhutha who call themselves "Leaders Act". They answered my questions about the situation in Douglas, and these answers inspired me to believe that what they have achieved in KwaZulu Natal, is also possible in Douglas.

This article is the result of my research about children that drop out of primary education in Douglas at Vaal Oranje Primêr, one of the largest primary schools in the Northern Cape. Principal Bernadine Bostander and local social worker Zelda Johnson asked me, as a final-year student of social work from HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht in the Netherlands, to research the question of why so many children drop out of primary school and what the community, including the school and social workers, can do to prevent this and to get children back into the education system. This article presents the findings from my research. Children dropping out of school early is a well-known problem in South Africa and the numbers are even higher in high schools than in primary schools. I chose to focus my research on primary education because the drop-out rate, which I will return to later, is even more disturbing in my eyes. Primary education is the phase when children learn basic literacy and numeracy skills. In a country where the level of illiteracy is very high and in an area where many of the parents of the children I spoke with cannot read or write, education is extremely important (when I speak of "parents" in this article, I refer to all primary caregivers, also when they are not the biological parents of the child). During the time I spent in Douglas I developed an idea of why and how such a high drop-out rate has come about and Leaders Act, among others, helped me develop ideas about possible solutions to the problem.

Vaal Oranje and the research

Vaal Oranje Primêr is one of the largest primary schools in the Northern Cape province, providing education for more than 1600 children. These children come mainly from the black township of Breipaal which lies just outside Douglas and from the farms that surround Douglas. Vaal Oranje is situated in the relatively wealthier district of Breipaal, but most children come from the surrounding poorer areas. As mentioned in the introduction of this article, to answer my research questions I interviewed a wide range of the professionals involved with these children, such as teachers, social workers, the police etc. I also assembled a group of 14 primary school children ('normal' learners as well as learners at risk of dropping out), with whom I worked together in small groups using creative research methods to get a better view of the situation from their point of view.

I talked to children, teachers, social workers, police officers and many other professionals who come into regular contact with drop-outs, most of them on a professional basis. As well as the many valid causes they were able to suggest for children dropping out of school, I noticed another thing. One of the major challenges faced by workers in the public service sector, and more specifically in the social work sector, is the increasing demand for services and the shortage of social workers (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2013). Many professionals say they face very high workloads. They feel that this prevents them from spending enough time on the tasks they need to do. Social workers do not have enough time to visit all their clients. The police have far more social crime projects than they can handle in a 40-hour work week. Teachers do not have time to do anything more than prepare and teach lessons. It is because of this that some of them become dispirited. Several professionals told me that they feel this way about their work. Social workers begin working very enthusiastically after graduating but after a couple of years some of them no longer feel motivated enough to be able to do what is expected of them and where their passion lies. Their motivation is replaced with despondency.

This is obviously not one of the causes of the problem of high drop-out rates, but it is reflected in the attitude of these professionals towards the issue of drop-outs. Teachers seem to be very aware of the problem and also seem perfectly able to identify the causes of the problem, and when asked, they tell me about possible solutions. One teacher said that they should be visiting the homes of all children at the beginning of the school year to assess their home situation and meet their parents, but they do not do this. Social workers are so busy with other cases such as adoption and foster care, that they only have time to attend to those children identified as drop-outs once a month. Although they would like to do much more, paperwork and the high workload means they are too busy and de-motivated. While investigating the primary school dropout problem, I realized that the huge pressure on those people who could be helping to deal with this problem is without doubt standing in the way of addressing it effectively and sustainably.

So what can be done? What kind of intervention is effective without being overly time-consuming? What kind of intervention is most efficient? Leaders Act reminded me that it is our job as social workers to make sure that people, our clients, ultimately no longer need us. We need to equip people to help themselves and each other, to take responsibility for themselves and those around them, for their community. Talking to the boys in Leaders Act, who were not yet 18 years old, I saw that there are people with the strength and the willpower to do this. You just need to find them, teach them, train them and they will be able to continue your work for you.

> **"LEADERS ACT"**
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> Seed of Hope is an organization in Amanzimtoti, KwaZulu Natal, that offers two-year leadership training courses to secondary school pupils in the township KwaMakhutha. "Leaders Act" is a group of boys from grades 11 and 12 who stayed together after completing the training. As leaders, they set themselves the goal of serving their community. One of the first problems they encountered was children who drop out of primary school. They saw poverty as one of the causes of this problem. Parents do not have the resources to provide their children with school clothing and shoes. Children are embarrassed and prefer not to go to school. As a solution to this problem they started fundraising and, so far, they have bought school uniforms for 20 children. They feel it to be their duty to take responsibility for their community. If they see their neighbour's children at home during school hours, they will approach the neighbour and talk to him or her. Now they are working on another project to involve younger children in their group and make them as enthusiastic as they are about serving their community and taking responsibility for each other. They told me the most important thing they learned from the leadership training was to have a vision for life - and they've found theirs!

In the rest of this article, I will describe the relevance of education to the individual and to society. Then I will discuss the connection with parental involvement and awareness and the context of the challenges with these topics. At the end of the article I will get to possible solutions.

The Relevance of primary education

One of the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.) committed the world to ensuring that all children in the world can access primary education by 2015. Since 1994, South Africa has adopted a non-discriminatory and inclusive educational system. Especially in formerly disadvantaged and marginalized areas, a great deal of effort has been made to improve the quality of education. To encourage school enrolment, transport is provided for children who have to travel long distances to school. Feeding schemes are in place in many schools in poorer areas. Through the National Development Plan, which was introduced recently, South Africa has committed itself to improving education and making early childhood development a top priority (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2013). The school enrolment rate in Sub-Saharan Africa is 97% (Lewin, 2009). This number does not take account of school attainment, meaning the

number of years that children pass. Numbers for South Africa vary widely according to different research results. One result tells me that in grade 1 about 28% (boys) and 24% (girls) drop out, while in the higher grades these percentages are between 3% and 9% (Lawrence & Mgwangqa, 2008). Sibanda (2004) says that on average 1.3% of black children in South Africa drop out of primary school. At Vaal Oranje (situated in a black area), up to 1% of learners drop out of school permanently. These numbers do not take account of school attendance and absenteeism. From the school records I could conclude that, especially in grades 1, 2 and 6, more than 10% of the learners are absent for 20 days or more per school year. Around 1% to 2% are absent for more than 40 days a year (Derksen, 2013). These last numbers are actually even more important than the actual drop-out rates, because these children will suffer the same effects. Literacy is already a challenge, even for children who attend school regularly, let alone for those who miss significant numbers of days, weeks or even years of schooling. This will make it much harder for these children to find employment when they grow up; they will earn lower wages, and often suffer worse health due to their economic circumstances and lack of knowledge. Then, when they start their own family, the chances of *their* children dropping out increases because the parents will not appreciate the benefits of having an education (Ngwaru, 2012). Schooling, besides individual goals, also serves several social goals. Through education, children are prepared for social and economic participation. They learn the norms and values that are necessary for them to cope in society, and they learn the skills, such as literacy and numeracy, that are necessary for them to participate in the economy and help the country grow. Through education, all children can enjoy more equal opportunities (Christie, 2008). There is probably no need for me to continue any further, education is widely recognized as one of the most important ways of helping individuals and societies develop.

Awareness

So why are there still so many children that drop out of school? Where are the teachers? Where are the social workers? Why don't we bring them back to school? The importance of education is well-known to social workers and teachers, but less obvious is the importance of parental awareness and parental involvement. For children to have a chance of attaining literacy and enrolling in school on a long-term basis, they need as much nurturing on a social and emotional level as possible from the very beginning of their lives. This is part of the reason why pre-school education is encouraged, but parents play an even bigger role (Ngwaru, 2012). If parents are aware of the importance of education for their child, they are more likely to be involved in their child's education. They will work harder to make sure their children go to school in the morning

and stay there for the day. They are more likely to make sure that at least one adult attends parents meetings at school, and they are more likely to cooperate with teachers and social workers when there are concerns about the child's school progress or attendance. When parents truly understand the importance of education, they know that their child's education is their responsibility and that it should be a top priority.

First things first?

In many situations it makes sense that parents are not closely involved in their children's education. They do not always have – or feel that they have – a choice. Many of the children in my research told me that single parents, if they have work, often have to leave at six in the morning and do not return home before seven in the evening. When they come home they need to put food on the table, do household chores as well as getting some rest themselves. When are they supposed to bring their children to school? They cannot come to parent meetings because those are often during the day while they are still at work. Helping their children with homework while also preparing a meal is not ideal. This would explain why some parents cannot look beyond their own economic situation (Ngwaru, 2012). Parents may be frustrated about the expense of their children's schooling and at the same time they may not be aware of its importance. These beliefs are reinforced by the experience that even being educated does not guarantee employment. Poverty, HIV/AIDS, unemployment and substance abuse are all concerns and problems in the community of Douglas, which need to be dealt with first, like the Maslow pyramid (Benson & Dundis, 2003), before parents will spontaneously get behind their children's education. This effect is even more pronounced in rural areas, such as Douglas, because cultural and economic lifestyles in rural areas differ considerably from those in the urban areas and from the way schools are organized (Lawrence & Mgwangqa, 2008). Children growing up in rural areas may be needed to work at home or in agricultural work during the day, when they are expected to be in school. The older children become, and the more useful they are for agricultural work, the more this rural lifestyle begins to conflict with their education.

As well as Ngwaru (2012), the boys from Leaders Act explained to me that many people feel almost as if education is just "not for them". Their parents were not educated and they survived. And because the parents did not have an education themselves and they are struggling to survive in economic terms, they do not see the necessity of education for their children either. They see it as a luxury, while from our perspective it is a basic need. They never had the time or freedom to dream about a better future for themselves and their children. Unsurprisingly, the children adopt

the same attitude as their parents. A social worker in Bongani township, a second township outside the town of Douglas, told me about a number of incidents in the community, where teenagers had blackmailed their parents into buying them things with their grants, threatening their parents that otherwise they would leave school and the grants would be taken away. This kind of incident indicates that some children see the most important reason to go to school is so that their parents can receive a grant. I think we can all agree, that, of all things, is not the reason!

In addition, parents who are uneducated or illiterate themselves will lack the skills to help their children with effective learning (Maree, 2010). Even if the parents were aware of the importance of education and were involved in their children's schooling, they may fail to help their children enough. When a child struggles with the school work and does not get extra support, he or she may easily become de-motivated and the risk of dropping out increases.

So there are many problems that need to be solved in order to involve parents and work with them to keep their children in school. But are we going to wait for all these problems to be resolved before we address the problem of children dropping out of school and the lack of parental involvement? We cannot afford to wait, because as I said before, a lack of education also reinforces poverty and socio-economic insecurity. Waiting would mean that South Africa will never break free of the vicious circle, which it is now vital that it frees itself from.

Sharing responsibility

In my experience and in that of experienced social workers in Douglas, it is not sufficient just to focus on children when addressing the problem of drop-outs. The theories mentioned above confirm this. Social workers admit that meeting with drop-outs once might be enough to get them back in school for a couple of weeks, but not for the long term. We need to focus on parents, educate them about the importance of schooling for their children, and teach them about their responsibilities towards their children. But why not take it one step further? Leaders Act have shown me that they, as secondary school children, took responsibility for their community. If they can do this, parents can do the same. We just need to teach them about how they should go about taking responsibility for their own children. And then we need to encourage them to take it one step further: if you saw your neighbour's children dying of starvation, you would give them food and talk to your neighbour. By the same token, if you see that your neighbour's children do not attend school, you send them to school and talk to your neighbour.

If all we do is talk to the children, we are going to have to wait another generation or two before we see any results. But if we involve the whole community and make them feel responsible for all the children around and for making sure that they get an education, we can share our work and responsibilities as social workers with the whole community. At a time when demand for social services is increasing and there is a chronic shortage of experienced social workers, we need help. In this way we can achieve our goals as social workers: teaching people to help themselves and others.

Let's work together

There are various ways of achieving this. To start with, you could think of different kinds of programmes to educate adults – with a focus on mothers, who play a very important role in the South African society. We should not forget that education of our children is a responsibility that we all share. So please let us work together as social workers, educators, police officers, policy-makers, and so on. Let's discuss the issues that make it hard to keep children in school. Everyone can play their own part, but we need to work together. And of course, let's be inspired by people

Photo 2 and 3: A class of learners (left) at vaal oranje primêr and the name sign of the school (right) (private collection author). N.B. Children in the picture were not involved in the research.

like the school boys of Leaders Act. Let's find those people in the communities that have the willpower, motivation and strength to step up and do something. Let's find them and educate them to take responsibility and help us in our job, through, for example, leadership training or projects where we have learners who are class leaders and can take responsibility for their class, mediate in arguments and step up for those children who are not coping in class. Teach them early and they will make responsible parents in the future.

TO CONCLUDE

Realizing that the demand for social services is growing and social workers often already have massive, unrealistic workloads, we need to be sure that when thinking about how to address social issues, we take account of efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. We need to get to the heart of the problems and what causes them. For primary school drop-outs, this means that we not only have to help the children, but we need to teach their parents and even the whole community about the importance of education and their responsibility. In view of the difficulties that the social workers have in terms of their workload, we also need to make sure that the approaches we use are effective and we need to teach our clients and our communities to help themselves and take responsibility for each other.

One example of a method that is well-known in the Netherlands and that may be suitable for a situation such as this one is Family Group Conferencing (Weerman, 2006). This is a method of empowerment where a group of people from the same family or social network is activated to develop a plan of action to address the problems of an individual, part of the group, or the whole group, coordinated by an independent mediator. The responsibility for executing the plan is also placed with the group. A method like this makes the most of the knowledge that exists within the social system and empowers the system to use that knowledge to take care of itself and its members.

Leaders Act was an inspiration for me in South Africa and they gave me faith that there are so many things we can do to address the issues around drop-outs. The most important thing that they learned from their leadership training is to have a vision for life. Children need a vision for the future; they need goals, and they need to start dreaming again. I hope Leaders Act can be an inspiration to all of you.

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