A schools-based approach to addressing social ills and improving educational outcomes

By Mmabatho Maboya

Schools are supposed to be havens in which children can learn in a safe, protected environment. Unfortunately, in South Africa, concerns have mounted that many schools are violent, dangerous places, mimicking the unsafe environments in their surrounding communities. This reality harms not only the psycho-social wellbeing of pupils but their learning outcomes. In a national study of violence at schools, Burton and Leoschut (2013)\(^1\) found that 22,2 percent of high school pupils had been threatened with violence or had been the victim of an assault, robbery or sexual assault. More than 12 percent of pupils had been threatened with violence by someone at school; 6,3 percent had been assaulted; 4,7 percent had been sexually assaulted or raped; and 4,5 percent had been robbed at school. Accordingly, the study recommended that a National School Safety Framework (NSSF) developed by the Department of Basic Education should be rolled out in schools as a priority.

Pupils often rely on their teachers to help them resolve social challenges they are facing at school and at home. These may range from bullying to abuse and neglect in the home. At the same time, government and non-governmental organisations provide services addressing the serious social challenges facing women and children in townships and rural areas. However, there is little effective coordination among these efforts, particularly in relation to supporting the teachers working at the coal face.

Against this background, the Cyril Ramaphosa Foundation (CRF), working through the Adopt-a-School Foundation (AAS), has established a new pilot programme which works through schools and local multi-stakeholder platforms to provide support to women and children and address gender-based violence (GBV) and other social challenges in local communities which are impeding access to education. The initiative, which has been dubbed the Thari programme, is named after the Setswana word for the blanket used by a mother to carry and protect her child. The decision to launch the initiative came as part of CRF’s wider mission to address poverty and inequality through supporting education and growing small businesses after it was realised that certain social ills, such as GBV, were playing a crucial role in preventing equitable access to a proper education.

The programme further builds on a 15-year partnership between CRF and AAS which has sought to implement a holistic model to develop disadvantaged public schools in South Africa and Lesotho. Having started with a focus on strengthening infrastructure, the programme moved to improving academic aspects and the overall social and security environment of these schools, seeking to uplift formerly dysfunctional institutions and turning them into centres of excellence.

As part of this work, AAS social workers have overseen programmes to test pupils’ eyesight in primary schools; and youth empowerment workshops addressing a range of topics from hygiene to GBV at high schools. In implementing these initiatives as part of its holistic approach, it became clear to AAS that cases of rape and other forms of GBV were on the rise in some local communities although many of the incidents were not reported to the authorities or even viewed as a crime by those involved.

In response to the growing number of pupils reporting incidents of GBV against themselves, their friends or their mothers, AAS social workers sought to provide what support they could on an ad hoc

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basis, while advocating for the importance of responding to the wave of violence in a more systematic, comprehensive manner.

As a result, CRF decided to conduct research and a needs analysis in Botshabelo in the Free State and Diepsloot in Gauteng – two areas with high levels of reported cases of GBV where the foundation and its partners were seeking to implement holistic development programmes at clusters of schools. The research and needs analysis found that:

- There appeared to have been a rise in sexual abuse in these areas, including by fathers, uncles, cousins, neighbours, fellow pupils and teachers.
- There was a need to support pupils, their parents and communities to report cases of abuse. Often children, parents and teacher felt disempowered and frightened of the negative reactions they might face when reporting such cases. At the same time, victims, parents and teachers often didn’t know how and where to report cases.
- Girls tended to rely on their mothers for protection. However, their mothers were also often victims of abuse which made both themselves and their daughters vulnerable. In other cases, women who faced severe challenges in protecting and caring for their children were liable to become secondary abusers of their children.
- Violence against women was widespread and under-reported, and the victims of violence were not being effectively supported by public services.

In response to these findings, CRF and AAS together reviewed a number of existing programmes that sought to address the challenge of GBV against mothers and their children in South Africa, and identified one run by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in partnership with the National Association of Child Care Workers as being of particular interest. The programme employed the Isibindi model to train local unemployed people to become child and youth care workers in their communities. CRF and AAS adapted this model, redesigning it to focus on schools and to incorporate multi-sectoral collaboration among local organisations and community structures to address the challenges faced.

The result is the Thari programme – a psycho-social model underpinned by a number of legislative frameworks, such as the Children’s Act of 2005 and the South African School Act of 1996, as well as mechanisms including a national policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS), and the National School Safety Framework. Implemented in nine schools, the programme’s goal is to strengthen the community by creating a safe, supportive environment that is free from violence; academically active; inclusive; gender-sensitive; and promotes well-being for all.

The CRF’s implementation of the Thari programme entails providing:

1. Psycho-social support for women and children, including through the establishment of safe parks attached to identified schools which offer vulnerable women and children a therapeutic space. The programme employs 14 child and youth care workers (CYCWs) and social workers who work with school-based support teams to provide psychosocial support. The model’s effectiveness depends on the CYCWs being available during child-friendly hours. Thus, the CYCWs offer support to pupils before and after school, during breaks, school holidays and weekends. They further attend to families identified to be in need for follow-up support at weekends.
2. A multi sectoral model which involves establishing collaboration among government departments, the private sector, civil society organisations, faith-based organisations,
community leaders, councillors, non-governmental organisations, and youth and pupils who are active in their communities. The established networks aim to facilitate an effective, efficient, harmonised approach to address social challenges that render women and children vulnerable. Two forums with a total of about 160 stakeholders have been established in Botshabelo and Diepsloot.

CRF has learned many lessons through the pilot programme, including that stakeholders should not work in silos because the work at hand calls for collaboration from the level of local schools all the way up to the national level. It has learned that it is important from the outset to establish an effective monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the impacts of its intervention programmes. It has also learned the importance of integrating programmes that focus on boy children, who have commonly been left behind in initiatives to address gender-based violence.

Looking to the future of the pilot initiative and how it may be integrated into the broader whole-school development programme, CRF acknowledges the importance of engaging other stakeholders to adopt and adapt the elements of Thari. In particular, it recognises that financial support for school-based support programmes competes with other kinds of initiatives seeking to address the glaring societal challenges of school infrastructure, food security, health and gender-based violence in communities. However, CRF believes that school-based support programmes offer an effective, efficient way of bridging the gaps which are fuelled by inequality that exist in poor communities and which particularly damage the education and life prospects of children. For example, in Botshabelo, where the full model of Thari is being implemented, teachers are being empowered to assist learners with serious social challenges; community organisations are alive to the importance of collaborating for impact; the pilot schools are being empowered to collaborate more effectively with their teachers; vulnerable children and their families are being supported; and the feeling of helplessness for the schools involved is slowly being lifted – all of which are encouraging signs for the broader adoption of this or similar programmes at other schools. All in all, the Thari initiative represents an opportunity for philanthropic and social impact investors to collaborate in developing innovative funding models for safe schooling environments that can produce significant impacts.

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Typical playful day at Thari Safe Park at Reentseng Primary School in Botshabelo (Free State)

Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, official launch of Thari Programme and opening of the Safe Park at Reentseng Primary School, Botshabelo (Free State), September 2017.
Story telling session through persona dolls therapy with Child and Youth Care Workers at a Thari Safe Park