

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

Volume Two - Number Four - June 2002

Education access for children affected by Aids

The Pietermaritzburg-based Children in Distress (Cindi) network for children affected by Aids raised issues about education access, particularly as it relates to children infected and affected by HIV/Aids, at a recent national conference organised by the ministry of education and held in Gauteng.

As a result of concerns about education access facing certain children that Cindi partners identified, the network formed an education access working group in May 2000. Meetings were held with the South African Human Rights Commission during which the South African School's Act and the fee exemption process was explained to management and staff from organisations belonging to the Cindi network. This group was, however, subsequently disbanded earlier this year when a representative from the KwaZulu-Natal department of education and culture's anti discrimination task team agreed to accept referrals from Cindi partners and to intervene on behalf of children who were not accessing their right to education.

Cindi was founded in July 1996 and consists of over 70 government and non-governmental organisations that work together in the interests of children affected or orphaned by Aids in and around Pietermaritzburg. It is estimated by practitioners in the field that there are between 8 000 and 10 000 orphans in the Pietermaritzburg area. The Cindi partners work together to provide support, share information, mobilise resources, lobby on behalf of HIV/Aids and unite for action.

The activities of the partners fall into three broad categories: Prevention is concerned with mobilising and empowering communities to take care of vulnerable children; early intervention focuses on ensuring rapid intervention strategies are in place to divert children from institutional care to community based models of care when prevention fails; and children in care is concerned with ensuring optimum care in institutions, foster care or cluster foster care.

Cindi partners have found that many schools are facing a funding crisis and cannot afford to waive school fees because of growing poverty and inadequate government funding. As a result many principals and school governing bodies are flouting the Constitution and the other legislation. One Cindi member reported a principal saying: "We are obliged to break the law to pay for staff, repairs and security." Another Cindi member said: "The experience in many rural schools when applying for fee exemption is that children are simply turned away or told that the school is full." Another Cindi member said: "We encounter many children who are not in school. Ward councillors prefer to let non-governmental organisations take responsibility for liaison with schools...We are engaged with 34 schools at which we have experienced a lack of co-operation from the principals with regard to fee exemptions. We are providing bursaries to approximately 281 children."

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was published by Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc in 2001 and 2002. All rights reserved. No editorial material published in Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from, and acknowledgement to, Cheryl Goodenough.

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was proofread by Donna Hornby from Absolute Proof.

Copyright Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc, 2001 2002

Cindi believes that increasing numbers of orphans and deepening levels of poverty will mean that more and more children could claim their right to fee exemption, but if there is neither the will nor the financial capacity of education authorities to facilitate this process, great numbers of children will simply not be in school. Cindi partners have also identified the cost of uniforms (and suggested the standardisation of cheap and simple school uniforms), school books and transport as impediments to accessing education. They cited incidences of learners being obliged to repeat the same grade year after year for non-payment of school fees, or the withholding of reports or other privileges. This situation is further exacerbated when the child support grant ceases when a child turns seven. This coincides with school enrolment and the need to pay additional costs related to attending school.

In this regard, Cindi believes that it is imperative to re-prioritise government spending. Appropriate budgetary allocations should be made to education so that the right to free education becomes a reality for South African children. In addition, Cindi supports the basic income grant campaign. Cindi also believes that the child support grant should be made available to children up to the age of 18.

Cindi partners have found that in many cases where learners are obliged to care for their orphaned siblings, the learners cease going to school. One child who wrote into a Cindi competition said: "After school I have to go to work to save for after my parents' deaths. I will have to give up ever going to medical school. I am tied to my younger brother and sister."

Cindi emphasises the role that educators can play and believes that teachers should become champions for the vulnerable children in their classrooms. In addition, they should monitor their well being and refer them to social workers and non-governmental organisations where necessary. Extra curricular clubs and sports teams, which can positively help channel the energies of the youth, should be strengthened. Schools should also be involved in the formation of support groups for orphaned and vulnerable children. Compassionate teachers should be rewarded by way of public recognition or special teacher awards for outstanding efforts in this regard.

About the provision of early education centres, one Cindi partner Training Resources in Early Education (Tree) has stated in a strategic plan that about 6 000 early childhood development sites that have been established in most disadvantaged communities in KwaZulu-Natal "could form a critically important haven for care, security and stimulation for young children traumatised by sickness and death".

Writing in a Cindi competition, one child wrote about being discriminated against. "The people who I live with discriminate against me because I am infected with HIV...at school some of the students are not prepared to be in class with me...sometimes the teachers gossip about me. Life is very difficult for me to live," the child wrote.

Cindi believes that educators should face disciplinary action if they practise discrimination and that Aids awareness campaigns that de-stigmatise learners affected or infected by HIV/Aids need to be sustained.

During a brainstorming session held with teachers from secondary schools in the Pietermaritzburg area, the University of Kentucky's Aaron Karnel said that he learned that life skills are taught for an average of about 12 hours a month, but that the amount depended on the priority that the school places on the subject.

They said that many learners are dealing with the effects of HIV/Aids at home - caring for sick family members or dealing with the loss of a loved one - so they need illness and bereavement

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was published by Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc in 2001 and 2002. All rights reserved. No editorial material published in Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from, and acknowledgement to, Cheryl Goodenough.

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was proofread by Donna Hornby from Absolute Proof.

Copyright Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc, 2001 2002

coping skills which are not being taught. Teachers felt that they lacked certain skills and would benefit from additional training but also criticised the lack of HIV/Aids prevention education in all aspects of education.

Cindi has found that although peer counselling is difficult to maintain, ways need to be found to extend and maintain such programmes. This is particularly important in light of the dismantling of guidance services, which has meant a decline in counselling.

Cindi suggests that inter-sectoral collaboration could be improved through a genuine commitment to the Health Promoting Schools programme. This is a partnership initiative with all the relevant role players, with the department of education playing a primary role. Some Cindi partners have found that there is little support and no commitment from the education department and officials from the department of health are driving the initiative. These projects often fail when health staff withdraw from the school and there is no enthusiasm to continue with the programmes.

Cindi partners have said that the staff turnover in the department of education is a major problem and that teachers trained in life skills tend to resign or not implement programmes. In addition, many trained teachers get very little support or encouragement from the principal and fellow staff members.

In this regard, Cindi would welcome greater networking with educators, school governing bodies and staff from the department of education and culture. The network believes that partnerships between government officials and non-governmental organisations can enhance interventions with vulnerable children.

Cindi is concerned about the levels of sexual abuse by educators and called on the departments of education and justice to jointly agree to develop guidelines to deal with sexual harassment by educators. These should include suspension parameters, termination conditions and minimum sentences. Cindi believes that draconian legislation is called for in order to protect learners.

A report by Cindi partner Bev Killian of the University of Natal's School of Psychology stated that educators are not able to offer psycho-social support for learners who report cases of child-on-child sexual abuse. The report recommends the formation of a code of conduct in each school and additional training around issues of reporting and dealing with abuse.

With regard to nutrition issues, increasing levels of poverty and the growing numbers of orphans and child headed households will impact negatively on the nutrition status of learners who in many instances are facing starvation. Concerns have been expressed by Cindi partners about the schools feeding scheme and Cindi believes that comprehensive emergency food relief programmes are necessary in all schools at junior, junior primary and high school levels. In addition, the network believes that existing feeding schemes need to be strengthened and monitored for fraud and corruption. In addition, Cindi believes that school gardening projects should be in place in all schools.

For the many learners who find themselves running the home and caring for siblings and terminally ill relatives, without necessary skills, Cindi believes that life skills education should include nutrition training, basic home nursing skills, household cleaning and budgeting, vegetable gardening and child care skills.

Cindi is concerned that the attrition rate of teachers infected by HIV/Aids will have an adverse effect on service provision to learners. A newspaper report quoted a grade one mother who said that the teacher was absent for two or three days every fortnight. A high school principal stated

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was published by Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc in 2001 and 2002. All rights reserved. No editorial material published in Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from, and acknowledgement to, Cheryl Goodenough.

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was proofread by Donna Hornby from Absolute Proof.

Copyright Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc, 2001 2002

that one or two teachers were absent from his school every day. Cindi believes that the department of education and culture should develop an emergency plan to address the projected teacher shortage, especially in the light of the recent closure of teacher training colleges.

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was published by Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc in 2001 and 2002. All rights reserved. No editorial material published in Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from, and acknowledgement to, Cheryl Goodenough.

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was proofread by Donna Hornby from Absolute Proof.

Copyright Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc, 2001 2002