
Support to Teachers in a Context of Educational Change and Poverty: a case study from South Africa

SISSEL-TOVE OLSEN

Faculty of Education and International Studies,

Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT This article presents a case study aimed at describing and exploring the needs for – and provision of – formal support in South African primary schools, examining, in particular, the significance of organisational development in addressing the needs of teachers. Educational projects are often focused on the needs of learners and learner well-being and little is being done to understand the well-being of teachers. The qualitative methodology was decided upon in order to address the question of how, and to what extent, the teachers at a poverty-stricken school might benefit from the support provided. The research design draws on organisational change theories.

Introduction

The research findings presented and discussed in this article are based on an investigation for a PhD in the South African province of the Western Cape between 2004 and 2007. The framework for the empirical study is an assessment of the support provided by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), aimed at reaching teachers and learners faced with challenges connected to poverty and in particular to HIV/AIDS. The focus is on the education system supporting the teachers in carrying out their roles as teachers and caregivers in this context. The logic behind this is very straightforward: in order for the teachers to provide quality support to the learners, they themselves need to receive quality support from the education system.

The aim of this article is to describe everyday challenges experienced by the teachers at the case school selected for the thesis's in-depth study and tested against experiences of teachers in ten primary schools in similar circumstances. The main purpose is to develop an insight into the most significant issues and needs for support in order for teachers to deal meaningfully with a wide range of interlinking social issues. The school's interaction with the surrounding communities also constitutes part of the field study.

The availability and quality of this support is analysed within the context of the WCED transforming itself from a system focused on controlling schools to a system focused on providing development and support to schools. The findings are discussed within the framework of other studies and international theories on education reforms and change.

The broad objective of the transformation process is to develop a sustainable education system that is able to understand the real needs of its schools and other training sites, and to manage and support them in ways that would ensure that they are enabled to successfully manage themselves. The transformation process is outlined in the post-apartheid (post-1994) education bills, acts and policies, and in the national imperative to democratise education.

The socio-economic, political and educational changes in South Africa since 1994 can serve as an example of rapid and complex change in society. In spite of the rapid and complex structural changes concerning the education system, changing the culture of the education system still is a slow and complex process. In this article, culture is defined dynamically in accordance with Eriksen

(2010), for whom culture is interpreted, constructed and reconstructed through interaction and exchanges which take place between individuals.

Poverty and poverty-related social problems in the school community impact greatly on the classroom situation, affecting the daily well-being of teachers, the general functionality of schools, and ultimately the quality of education. In a recent national study conducted in a range of primary and high schools by the South African Institute for Distance Education, looking into the role of school leadership in supporting learners and teachers in the context of HIV and AIDS, it was found that 'while many school leaders were able to respond to learner needs, there was very little evidence to suggest that schools were equally able to respond to the needs of their teachers' (Winthrop & Kirk, 2009). Winthrop and Kirk recommend that teacher development programmes should better acknowledge the life experiences, motivations and aspirations of teachers. They further emphasise the need to create new ways of supporting teachers' long-term professional development.

Methodology

The rationale for the study is to examine the extent to which support structures in a provincial education department are addressing the needs of children rendered vulnerable in the context of poverty and HIV/AIDS in a meaningful way. Enabling or disabling factors such as leadership, systemic change and issues related to gender, race and social class are also examined. The complex nature of the study, which demands the interpretation of data rather than the measurement of it, suggests a qualitative research approach.

The rationale for using qualitative research is represented by the search for meaning within the context and cultural setting of the participants in the case study in an effort to understand issues related to everyday life in poverty-stricken schools. The chosen triangulation of different perspectives and sets of data for the thesis includes specific research methods rooted in a case study, conducted within a grounded theory approach, and understood as a methodology requiring the researcher to generate or refine existing theory from the data collected.

The limits inherent to such an approach were not ignored. Parker argues that researchers must be aware of the risks of grounded theory. He writes:

there is still a good deal of anxiety among researchers about the way 'theory' seems to separate us from the things we find rather than bringing us closer to them. This is where 'grounded theory' has come to the rescue, with the false promise to enable the discovery of theory from data. (Parker, 2005, p. 56)

Parker continues to argue against how the grounded theory approach is practised: 'Of course, every theory should be grounded, but the way it is set out in that approach is neither grounded, nor theory' (2005, p. 56). According to Parker, one problem arises when referring to the approach of induction – when the researcher comes to believe that the data 'speaks for itself', and that concepts and categories 'emerge' from the material. He writes:

The claim that theory is really only 'context-specific' – confined to the data – shows the hollowness of its attempt to throw light on what is going on. It adds nothing to our understanding because it has forbidden the researchers to step back and think about what they see. (Parker, 2005, p. 57)

In addition to the characteristic of flexibility, a number of researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Lauglo, 1995; Volan, 2003) have listed certain characteristics of qualitative research. Even though no study conforms exactly to a standard methodology, as underscored by Miles and Huberman (1994), the research process of the thesis was informed by the themes and characteristics outlined by these researchers and summarised as follows:

- Qualitative research has the natural setting as a direct source of data, and the researcher is the key instrument;
- Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products;
- Qualitative research is descriptive;
- Qualitative researchers tend to analyse data inductively;

- ‘Meaning’ is of essential concern to the qualitative approach;
- Educational problems are complex.

The methodological framework of the study, including the qualitative research strategies, themes and characteristics, informed the choice of a multi-method approach. Key research methods employed were a combination of field interviews, a literature review, document analyses and observation. The choice of conducting a case study, and in particular the use of other surveys in South Africa – as means of triangulation – offered an opportunity to understand the issues studied in relation to a larger population.

The individual interviews served as the primary means of collecting the qualitative data for the thesis. These were combined with the use of focus groups, observation, document analysis and the statistical information in a multi-method study. Loosely structured or semi-structured interview guides were employed in order to capture complexities and nuances of the data. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the case school’s principal, teachers (focus group and individual) and selected learners (focus group), as well as with field staff working within the support structures of the WCED. Other respondents, linked to the school and school community, were interviewed individually. In addition, a focus-group interview of ten teachers (including one principal and one deputy-principal) representing five schools from similar socio-economic areas in Cape Town was conducted. The purpose of this interview was to collect data from a sample unit which represents a larger population of teachers to inform the method of triangulation. One school of thought ‘broadly defines focus groups as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher’ (Morgan, 1997, p. 6). The interviews could be described as more of a conversation than a set of fixed questions and answers. ‘This permits the respondent to describe what is meaningful without being pigeon-holed into standardised categories’ (Smith, 1996, p. 36). Also, the teachers in the group interviews, after some time, experienced a level of safety that encouraged them to also express differences in experiences and opinions amongst them. Unstructured, non-participant observation of everyday school life and of one HIV/AIDS school cluster meeting constituted a part of the research methods employed.

I was aware that my values were influencing the research process and outcomes. Addison (1992) claims that it is not possible to achieve an objective, value-free position from which to evaluate the truth of the matter. According to Addison, facts are always value-laden, and the values of the researcher are reflected in the research process. Systematically, and throughout the study, I tried to establish my own subjectivity, knowing that it is always present, influencing my thoughts, decisions, actions and ways of communicating. As emphasised by Parker (2005), I do not believe that one can put aside all of one’s preconceptions through striving to be aware of them. The choice to make use of triangulation through a variety of means such as reflexivity and discourse analysis became increasingly important in order to enhance the credibility of the research findings.

As researcher, I was motivated to get to know those involved in the study and to be known by them in order to build a relationship of trust between myself, the principal, teachers and learners. In the South African educational context I soon realised that it was of particular importance to be aware of the power relations inherent in my research project. The psychological effects of the apartheid ideology are still apparent in South Africa, and were taken into consideration throughout the thesis work. The history of authoritarianism that impacted on the South African political, governmental and educational systems, as well as the tensions and mistrust in society this generated, especially in relation to information sharing, were acknowledged. I was aware that achieving confidence from the respondents would require a particularly sensitive approach in this historical context, in particular since I am ‘White’ (the school had only ‘Coloured’ teachers).

Another effect of being an ‘outsider’ could have been that people participating in the research interviews spoke more openly to me because I did not represent any of the political groups in South Africa. This is highlighted by Wieder (2002), who reports that his colleagues at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) were convinced that people spoke more openly to him because he was an ‘outsider’. However, Wieder points out that the question of whether it is possible for an ‘outsider’ to capture the tone of a culture is often asked in fields like anthropology, sociology and history. He also cites Glesne (1998), who presented the ‘position of the “insider” being incapable of seeing past her own involvement’ (Wieder, 2002, p. 67). As an expatriate and ‘outsider’, I had a

limited understanding of the local culture and the social, historical and economic context in comparison to what a local researcher might have. Regular and frequent ‘reality checks’ with my interpreter/assistant and discussions with fellow, locally based students within the HIV/AIDS Programme at UWC and with the education staff at the UWC enriched the data interpretations and clarified misunderstandings.

All interviews were recorded on tape and later transcribed by a South African assistant who also translated passages that were articulated in Afrikaans. The interviews were conducted mostly in English with the respondents understanding that they could answer in their mother tongue, Afrikaans, if they preferred. Still, with one exception, they all preferred to speak English most of the time. Only when the respondents felt a need to express themselves more strongly, or when they became very engaged, did they use Afrikaans, with the exception of the principal, whose mother tongue is English. The fact that in most interviews both the interviewer and the interviewee (at least most of the time) used languages that were not their mother tongue obviously entailed a greater risk of misunderstandings than when the communication is in the mother tongue, and the interpretation is filtered through the same cultural lenses. This may, to a certain extent, have been counteracted by the fact that I have worked as a teacher in a rural setting in Zimbabwe (for two years), and also by my extensive experience as an education consultant in many African countries, including the local context of Cape Town since 1994. Did I therefore have experiences in common with the teachers I interviewed? All the teachers in the case school were women, as were most of the teachers from other schools whom I interviewed, and as am I. Could my experience as a woman in a rural school in Zimbabwe constitute a basis of experience that made me more capable of understanding and interpreting the experiences of the teachers, and of grasping the nuances, contradictions and complexities involved? Wiederberg (1996) draws attention to experience as a key concept in research, and argues that experiences constructed through interpretation do not make them less real or less important. She writes: ‘For social scientists, experience is a key concept. That is what we seek to grasp, interpret and formulate’ (Wiederberg, 1996, p. 129). This meant an involvement which raises questions about objectivity with regard to the research findings. I felt that my experience as a teacher in a rural school in Zimbabwe functioned as a ‘door opener’ in the interviews I conducted with all the teachers as well as with the case-school principal. Most teachers immediately expressed that because of my experience I was able to understand what it is like to be a teacher in a disadvantaged school. This was obviously in line with my earlier assumptions and could also be seen as a potential weakness in the sense that my interpretation of matters could be biased as a result of it.

In an attempt to structure the issues emerging from the empirical study in a logical framework, the following categories emerged and were assisted by the theories and studies reviewed for the thesis (e.g. Dalin, 1998; Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002; Giese et al, 2003; Fullan, 2004; McLennan & Thurlow, 2004). They are phrased and interpreted as dichotomies, which could, in line with Volan’s (2003) research focusing on educational change in Zambia, be read as interlinking vertically, as well as horizontally (Table I).

Disabling home environment	Enabling school environment
Prejudices, denial, non-disclosure and stigma	Acceptance and openness
Control	Support
Structural change	Cultural change
Political leadership	Operational leadership

Table I. Analytical categories of the case study.

The research process of the thesis moved beyond phenomenology and towards hermeneutic research in the sense that the interpretation of the experiences of respondents was used in order to better understand the socio-cultural and historical context in which the experiences occurred. This dynamic interplay between the researcher and the researched is part of the hermeneutic approach which produces a continuous dialectic conversation.

The research was guided by the general codes of ethics of educational and social research. Special consideration was given to the sensitivity of the HIV/AIDS topic of the research. In word, and in deed, this meant that the research process was led by the principle of ‘do no harm’ to any

participant. Therefore, the ethical guidelines developed by the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) determined the overall ethical standard of my study.

Results and Discussion

The legacy of apartheid was very apparent in the primary school selected as the case school. Severely under-resourced, the school caters for children from impoverished informal urban settlements and semi-rural settlements in Cape Town. All the children are either 'Coloured' or 'Black'. The principal and the teachers are, without exception, 'Coloured'.

Risk Behaviour and Impact of Poverty

The home environment of the learners (meaning school community/local community and not the individual home as such) can clearly not be regarded as a positive and enabling environment for the children. On the contrary, widespread poverty, high crime levels, substance abuse, violence, child rape and probably high prevalence rates of HIV clearly do not make for a place of safety and care, and undoubtedly explain why all learners in the case school were defined as vulnerable by the principal and the teachers.

The interlinking factors of poverty, drug/alcohol abuse, rape, child rape and HIV risk behaviour were evident in the case-school communities. The data gathered indicate that the learners are at high risk of being exposed to HIV, both as potential victims of rape and/or as active participants in risk behaviour such as drug/alcohol abuse and the practice of unsafe sex. The indications of HIV prevalence among learners at the case school are found to be potentially linked to unprotected sexual activity, drug/alcohol abuse and sexual abuse.

Based on teachers' observations, and in spite of a seemingly high level of awareness about HIV transmission among the learners in the case school, we were certain that unprotected sexual activity was taking place amongst learners. The number of learners at the case school who are over the average age for their class grade due to the prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) made sexual activity among primary school learners even more likely. Idle out-of-school youth who were observed in close proximity to the school added to the risk embedded in the FAS phenomenon.

The teachers in the case school had noticed learners using drugs, and some teachers claimed that this was on the increase. Youth risk behaviour and interlinking aspects of that behaviour are being increasingly well documented by South African and international studies. The potential link between drug abuse, unprotected sex, sexual violence and HIV prevalence is found to be alarming. This link was not recognised by the case-school teachers, only by the principal, and probably more as an afterthought to my questions. In one of my interviews with the principal, she said: 'But it is very, very obvious that unprotected sex is happening here, and that AIDS is definitely doing its rounds.'

South African and international research investigations provide substantial evidence that high levels of poverty in the family and neighbourhood increase a child's vulnerability to sexual abuse. About 50% of the learners at the case school came from impoverished urban informal settlements. The other half came from semi-rural impoverished areas with similar poor infrastructure exposing health risks. Researchers based in Cape Town claim that the scourge of abuse can be partially explained by the stark economic reality facing a large percentage of 'Black' and 'Coloured' people in the townships of Cape Town (Joubert, 2007).

According to Richter et al (2004), most children affected by HIV/AIDS are also affected by conditions of poverty and exclusion. They argue that poverty exacerbates the spread of HIV infections and that it becomes, in itself, a consequence of AIDS. International research documents the same impact of HIV/AIDS on children (Grainger et al, 2001; Kelly, 2002; UNICEF, 2004). It describes the direct impact of HIV/AIDS on children in the form of material problems related to food security, education and health, as well as non-material problems related to welfare, protection and emotional health.

However, contrary to the expectations that studies described above imply, the teachers in the case school had not observed any infected learners, and only two siblings were affected by AIDS, a condition which constitutes a prerequisite for teachers to offer or access any kind of support if

needed. This contradicts talk by teachers about learners practising risky behaviour, as well as about traumatic cases of sexual abuse and child pregnancies.

Why teachers either did not respond to warning signals of learners possibly being infected with the HI virus or were reluctant to do so became a pivotal question to address.

I argue that these warning signs that could have been associated with HIV/AIDS were not noted due to the fact that the teachers understood the signs as 'normal' for the learners in the case school since 'all' children were regarded as vulnerable because they lived in poverty.

Enabling School Environment? Teachers as Care-givers

The education sector's role in the social support of affected learners seems to have been unclear. Richter (2003) points to the need to adapt the schools to provide a range of support measures for children. Her view is supported by a number of researchers in Southern Africa (Kelly, 2002; Giese et al, 2003; Meerkotter and Lees, 2003). UNICEF (2004) reports that in spite of the many barriers to assisting and supporting children through schools, teachers and principals can play a positive and supportive role in the lives of many children. The above arguments concerning the role of schools coincide with the finding of the study with regard to the supportive role played by the principal and the teachers in the case school.

Giese et al's study (2003) supports data from my research which demonstrate that there are teachers who are committed, but not appropriately prepared to face challenges related to dealing with sensitive issues such as HIV/AIDS. There is no doubt that the case-school teachers displayed a strong commitment to their learners in spite of high work-related stress levels. Many expressed feelings of frustration; however, this could be ascribed to the fact that they felt that they functioned more as social workers or caregivers than as teachers. This was also found in Giese et al's (2003) study in which teachers expressed concern over the fact that they needed to do much more than is normally required of teachers. They also had to play an extensive caregiving role, particularly when sufficient support from other service providers was non-existent.

Many teachers participating in the study conducted by Giese et al (2003) expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the vast numbers of needy or vulnerable children they faced in their classrooms. As mentioned above, in the case school, *all* the learners were defined as vulnerable by the teachers, as well as by the principal. The experiences of teachers in Giese et al's (2003) study coincide with the experiences of the case-school teachers concerning the difficulties in providing the learners with the individual attention needed to learn and to assist in addressing the social problems related to home circumstances that they might have. The social problems represented a daily struggle for the case school's teachers, which at times led to frustration because these problems often considerably limited the time spent on teaching and learning.

One teacher at the case school shared with me the approach she used when learners' behaviour needed to be dealt with:

Usually, at that moment, at that time we have to stop with whatever we are busy with. Then we have to address the problem. But then, it's difficult just to because it's sensitive for them. So you ... usually when you do a lesson – Life orientation, then you will address it ... the problems that they have. And then everything comes out. Then it doesn't feel that you are pressurising them personally or undermining them. It is regarded as a classroom discussion, thus making them feel it is not their individual problem. They find out there are many with even similar problems ... you are not alone. This is how we should handle the situation.

Kelly (2002) has emphasised the need for the education sector to ensure an enlarged cadre of guidance and counselling personnel qualified to provide the kind of support and assistance needed to address the trauma, loss and discrimination experienced by children affected by and/or infected with HIV/AIDS. My analysis of the data gathered for my investigation reveals that the teachers in the case school had not received any training in how to counsel learners with social problems. When comparing the school and the home environments of the learners, the case school seemed in general to be perceived by the learners as a place of safety, care and hope for a better future. The principal expressed how the learners perceived the school as follows:

Well, I would say so, because I feel that this is their beacon, in spite of their poverty and everything, they love coming to school. They get fed every day, there is some form of feeding for them, it is warmer, drier, sometimes they get clothing ... they don't readily go home. In the afternoons we must actually tell them, leave now, especially the ones who live around here. Obviously the ones who travel by bus are forced to go. They hang around here because what's at home – a small dingy shack.

Despite a case-school environment characterised by poor human, financial, pedagogical and administrative resources, the teachers and the principal demonstrated a high level of commitment towards the learners, which manifested itself in a variety of ways, including teachers at times paying out of their own pockets to improve the physical conditions of the classroom in an effort to establish a more welcoming teaching and learning environment. This is reminiscent of the teachers in the study by Giese et al (2003) who loaned or gave children money, paid their school fees, purchased uniforms, bought food, and drove children to the clinic in their own vehicles.

My impression is that the case school faced one additional challenging factor linked to poverty which could have a 'blinding' effect on the principal and the teachers in terms of HIV/AIDS. The significant impact of FAS on the teaching/learning environment made particularly heavy demands on teachers' time and energy in the case school.

The effect of FAS on learners was acknowledged by the majority of the teachers. Already in the first interviews teachers talked of signs of FAS in learners. The disease has a very noticeable and distinct impact on the behaviour of affected children, which disturbed the teaching/learning environment in most classes considerably. The teachers felt that there were no places to refer these children to for the necessary support. The case school's remedial teacher explained:

Yes, I think more children should be tested by a school psychologist because they have greater problems than just simple reading problems. There are domestic problems. There are many children who have Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, and of course the social background of many of the children at this school is very poor. I think that adds to their lack of concentration.

I would argue that the impact of FAS, which is on top of teachers having to deal with a wide range of other social problems of learners, has probably eroded much of their energy for identifying and having to deal with yet other problems, such as HIV/AIDS. The schools in areas such as the case school undoubtedly require appropriate forms of support from the district support team. I support the argument of Giese et al (2003), that the teachers' reluctance to bear the responsibility for single-handedly supporting vast numbers of vulnerable children is understandable and justifiable.

Enabling School Environment? Teachers as Teachers

The data gathered for the research provide significant evidence that the scarcity of human and material resources in the case school itself created serious obstacles to implementing the prescribed school curriculum, let alone addressing all the other pressing issues. This impression was confirmed by the school principal when I asked her to describe the working conditions for the teachers:

Well, I must say we have been very, very lucky in that whoever came here ... as a teacher ... maybe the odd one or two that, you know, ... didn't adapt, because you need to be special. I maintain you need to be special to ... to work here, and to work with these children ... it's really taking someone special to be able to be here ... and to deal with ... with the challenges that we face.

The level of stress felt by most teachers in the case school was found to negatively influence their motivation to implement the HIV/AIDS and Life Skills syllabus. A few teachers in the case school even expressed the feeling that there was no use in teaching and empowering the learners as they are exposed to such extensive abuse in their home environments.

Interviews with the teachers and some classroom observation revealed that most teachers seemed to need training in how to implement participatory teaching strategies based on a learner-centred approach in their classrooms. These techniques are particularly necessary in topics where learners are not only supposed to acquire academic knowledge, but are also meant to strengthen their chances of survival through the development of life skills. The data gathered during the

investigation reveal that inadequate competence to teach HIV/AIDS reinforced the poor level of motivation. Dalin (1998) draws on Fullan (1993), who finds that teachers use new ideas and methods in their teaching when they find the content of the in-service training relevant and specific, when the acquisition of knowledge happens on an interpersonal basis, supported by sufficient personal follow-up in the implementation phase, and when the school and the district have a positive attitude to school development.

The research data indicate further that daily challenges linked to the language of instruction not being the mother tongue of half the learners was increasing work-related stress and affecting the teachers of the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 and 2) in particular. It seems clear that the context in which schooling takes place is not always favourable, neither for the teaching/learning in general, nor in terms of seeing and supporting children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS or for other reasons.

Educational Change and School Support

The analysis of the research data indicates that the process of structural and cultural change of the education system in the Western Cape was facing challenges that, to a large extent, are confirmed by theories on organisational change and change leadership. The intended change from controlling schools to supporting them was not found to be significant in the case school, and this relates both to the general curriculum support – support to the teaching of HIV/AIDS in particular – and to support to learners affected by poverty and/or traumatic experiences.

The case school's capacity to address HIV/AIDS-related issues was not benefiting to any significant extent from the support initiatives provided within the framework of education system change. On the contrary, the ability of the principal and the teachers to appropriately address issues related to HIV/AIDS and poverty was hampered by the demands of the new curriculum reforms, by the school being under-resourced, by poverty in the learners' home environments and by the many social problems of learners linked to poverty and, in particular, by the problem of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. Frequent educational reforms resulting from the system change processes were not accompanied by appropriate leadership or by the allocation of adequate resources or HIV/AIDS competence-building, and this contributed to the high stress levels and capacity problems of both support staff and the case school's teachers, including the principal.

Researchers have different views when comparing the challenges of educational reforms in the North ('developed' countries) with the challenges of countries in the South ('developing' countries). Volan (2003) argues: 'I maintain that even if educational reforms in the South seem to face many of the same problems as in the North, developing countries also have to cope with additional hindrances linked to poverty and underdevelopment' (p. 37). The research findings support her conclusion, and I would emphasise the impact – in the school case – of the additional issue of HIV/AIDS, which has links to poverty.

McLennan and Thurlow (2004, p. 16) refer to a particular problem of South Africa – the legacy of apartheid: 'again for most schools the challenge is compounded by the enduring effects of the apartheid past'. Their claim is supported by data from my research which indicate a general relation of distrust [1] between the education department and the schools. The distrust seems to be reinforced by the prevailing poverty in some areas and by the many educational reforms. The HIV/AIDS Coordinator in the WCED expressed the frustration felt by many teachers due to the increased administrative work resulting from educational reforms. He acknowledged that the situation of increased workload for teachers posed a challenge for the support structures in terms of motivating teachers to accept and understand the need for the additional administrative work:

Teachers are frustrated ... they're overburdened by administration, bogged down by little nitty-gritty things that's placed upon them by the school system itself, which blames the department for giving it. So the teachers are blaming the department for the extra workload and everything else ... so the department has a negative face – a negative connotation – because they are giving the teachers extra work ... extra things they can't really teach ... so now we need to look at that and look at how to motivate teachers to do better.

The respondents taking part in this investigation felt that the reforms were 'too many and too fast'. The case-school principal expressed a widely held view concerning the many new educational policies to be implemented in the school in the following way:

I sometimes still think I'm in over my head in this thing, being ... fairly new to this, and I think what makes it difficult is that things change all the time. Just when you are getting used to something a certain way, there's a new policy from the Department that needs to be implemented ... that you need to give attention to or need to change, what you have put into place ... what I've put into place at school.

The socio-economic, political and educational situation in South Africa can serve as an example of rapid and complex change of the society, which constitutes the external environment of any organisation. Davidoff and Lazarus explained as early as 2002 that a number of new policies have been introduced to address the imbalances of the apartheid past. This also applies to the education sector. They claim that 'for many schools, and teachers, the introduction of so many new policies over a relatively short period of time has proved to be confusing and overwhelming' (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002, p. 4).

The investigation reveals, however, that some schools were benefiting to a significant degree from the support provided by the Western Cape Education Department. The findings with regard to learners being infected or affected by HIV/AIDS are not supported by what emerged from the field interviews I undertook with the teachers from five other schools located in the same district as the case school. This was in spite of the fact that these schools were facing similar challenges to the case school with regard to poverty and health. The teachers had identified a significant number of learners infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, and the schools provided internal support as well as facilitating external support for learners in need. The teachers claimed that their schools had managed to establish what they labelled an 'AIDS-friendly school'. Guiding principles of privacy, confidentiality and staff sensitivity to young people's social needs and perspectives, as pointed out by Summers et al (2002), were followed by these schools in their efforts to create an AIDS-friendly school environment. The HIV/AIDS Coordinator in the WCED supports my investigation's findings with regard to the positive achievements by some schools in the same district as the case school. He said in the interview:

Some schools are very far in their fight against HIV and AIDS. They've done their policy, their implementation, their planning ... look, they're managing the situation ... they're on top of it. They've got their parents behind them ... when you walk into the school you can see ... the school is HIV-friendly. You can see it by the posters; what kids are doing; what teachers are doing; their work that is presented.

An interesting common feature identified in these 'AIDS-friendly' schools is that parents to a significant degree were found to be actively supportive of the school. One of the aims of the change processes in the education system was to provide integrated and collaborative support structures to schools. This strategy required that the different support professions in the WCED changed their way of working. A number of training programmes were introduced over many years in order to facilitate deep processes of change. The programmes were meant to accommodate the new ways of thinking about working together – a planned paradigm shift which involved the decentralisation of power, as well as a shift in focus away from the Education Department controlling the schools and towards the department supporting the schools.

My research data suggest that there is a general willingness at district level to work collaboratively in order to support the schools in a coordinated and comprehensive manner, including with regard to HIV/AIDS. Clarity about roles and responsibilities seemed to be present among the school support staff.

My interviews with respondents at the case school and in the HIV/AIDS support structures revealed that even if the different professions worked well together at the WCED district office, this was not visible when they conducted the visits at the case school. In spite of the efforts made to include the curriculum advisors in the monitoring of the HIV/AIDS programme, the HIV/AIDS-related support to schools was still carried out by the HIV/AIDS staff at the time of the investigation that was conducted for the thesis. Coordination of the actual support across disciplines seems to constitute an ongoing challenge even though the training of professional

support staff included issues relating to inter-sectoral collaboration. Dalin points to the problems of creating a cooperative culture in an organisation in a way which could illustrate the above description of problems connected to inter-sectoral collaboration in the WCED district office: 'In the first place, it is difficult to develop a cooperative culture, let alone maintain it once it has been established' (Dalin, 1998, p. 50).

Fullan argues that structure does make a difference, but that it is not the main factor to ensure that the aims be met. Transforming the culture – changing the way things are done – is the main point according to Fullan, and he calls this re-culturing. He argues that this does not mean adopting one innovation after another, 'it means producing the capacity to seek, critically assess, selectively incorporate new ideas and practices – all the time – inside the organisation as well as outside' (Fullan, 2004, p. 53). This is in line with the concept of a learning organisation as described by Senge (1990), Dalin (1998), Davidoff (2001) and Davidoff and Lazarus (2002). Fullan underlines the fact that when it comes to the process of re-culturing, change takes time. In 2010 I attended a meeting with support staff in the same district as the case school that I had conducted the study in three years earlier. Discussing how the support to schools was carried out, one staff member exclaimed: 'We are working in silos still!'

In the case school of this research, little evidence of a collaborative culture was found amongst teachers, nor did research interviews reveal a dynamic culture of innovation and reflective practice. According to Fullan (1993) and Volan (2003), many reforms are failing because of an excessive preoccupation with structure and legalities, and an inability to focus on teaching and learning, and on supportive collaborative cultures amongst teachers. Volan argues that workable, powerful solutions are hard to conceive, and even harder to put into practice.

The Way Forward?

I found from the case study that factors influencing the change processes of the education system and the appropriateness of the HIV/AIDS support to schools are interlinked vertically and horizontally along the dichotomies presented in the methodology section above. The relation between internal and external factors such as poverty, leadership, the number of reforms, capacity problems, the prevailing top-down culture, ownership, training, problems linked to implementation strategies, multi-sectoral coordination and collaboration, and other hindrances linked to decentralisation/restructuring were identified as vital in the understanding of the impact of the change processes on schools.

I am not claiming that the findings from the case study represent general trends with regard to issues around support to schools, nor do I claim that the case study itself can give rise to key principles for support provision to schools that might be applicable elsewhere. Nevertheless, the principles and factors that are presented below find much support in other research on vulnerable children, change processes and theories of change and leadership (e.g. Dalin, 1998; Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002; Giese et al, 2003; Fullan, 2004). However, my study reaches beyond solely confirming the work of others focusing on change processes.

Cultural Sensitivity

To prepare teachers adequately to implement the curriculum, and the HIV/AIDS Life Skills Curriculum in particular, and to provide support to them in doing so, the issue of cultural sensitivity needs to be carefully considered. Schools themselves can differ significantly in terms of culture and tradition, which, in the context of HIV/AIDS, might manifest itself in terms of what is generally viewed as appropriate in relation to the teaching of issues around HIV/AIDS. The culture of a particular school, as well as cultural diversity, is important to assess when support to the school is planned. The diverse reality of the 'new' South Africa poses challenges to all levels of leadership in formulating the HIV/AIDS policy, and in developing the curriculum and support programmes. During the implementation phase of policies, curricula and support programmes, the complexities which are synonymous with culturally diverse situations need to be acknowledged.

Factors Relating to the Principle of 'Needs-driven' Support

The establishment of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms as a component of a support programme would clearly have to take into account the entire teaching/learning environment of the school, as well as the needs of the individual learner, and the needs of the teachers and the principal. Support measures which ensure the active participation of the principal, teachers and parents/guardians in formulating how and for what purposes the monitoring and evaluation should be carried out would enhance the element of support and development rather than control.

Regular monitoring and evaluation procedures concerning the meaningfulness of support measures would identify the professional needs of the teachers and principal. A regular monitoring and follow-up of the support provided to the school should help to assess education and training needs and appropriate assistance required by the principal in particular. Education, training and assistance might relate to tasks connected with current school-based management reforms, curriculum reforms, supervision, and in particular the use of mechanisms to track and monitor vulnerable learners. Supervision skills are particularly important when supervising staff around sensitive issues.

Below are some critical factors to consider in enhancing the impact of the education and training of teachers and principals:

- In poverty-stricken communities, there might be a need to provide education, training and support that enable teachers and principals to see beyond the 'normality' of distress signals in learners.
- The education and training itself needs to result in a negotiated plan between all stakeholders on how to practise what is learned, and on how the education system's professional support staff and the school principal will conduct participatory follow-up assessments and improve their measures of support. The importance of ensuring regular and frequent follow-up support services at school and classroom level cannot be emphasised enough.
- The plans need to address issues such as teachers' safety. Safety concerns may conflict with teachers' needs to know more about learners' situations at home, in order for them to provide or facilitate the necessary assistance to the learner. These issues clearly constitute dilemmas needing the professional involvement of sectors beyond the education sector.

One area of further research could be on how, and to what extent, an appropriate HIV/AIDS support provision programme to schools might inspire and influence general curriculum reform implementation at classroom level with an emphasis on participatory classroom practices in the teaching of HIV/AIDS-related issues.

Factors Relating to Leadership and Implementation Ability

There seems to be a need for leaders and managers at all levels of the education system to acknowledge that changing the culture of a system is time-consuming, complex and non-linear. A transformation process of a system therefore requires adequate and long-term investments aimed at restructuring and re-culturing. The re-culturing dimension of the change requires a continuous careful follow-up process with regard to support provision to schools and all other levels of the system in order to ensure a deep and long-lasting change. The efforts necessary to change the culture of a system from one of control to one of development and support to schools are, in particular, important when the support is meant to address the sensitive and complex issues related to HIV/AIDS.

In order to achieve meaningful change and the successful implementation of reforms, support and commitment from the highest leadership levels are essential, and need to be ensured throughout all phases of change implementation. Fullan's argument that 'our purpose is to understand change in order to lead it better' (2004, p. 42) highlights the importance of an informed leadership in ensuring the viability of meaningful processes of change. He also argues that any effort to understand and review change processes, given their complex nature, needs more than checklists, which often tend to be oversimplified.

The active involvement by top management and leadership must include political leadership. The key determinants concerning leadership recognised in the investigation are the ability to be

visionary, to provide *credibility* and *direction*, and to demonstrate *consistency* with regard to HIV/AIDS policy and policy implementation. Ensuring the allocation of adequate human and financial resources to the operational levels of change was identified as a critical factor in order to provide a meaningful curriculum, programme or level of social support to schools. Leadership at policy and operational levels is required to focus on the entire teaching/learning environment of poverty-stricken schools in order to ensure that the environment is conducive for the principal and teachers to implement new educational reforms such as, for example, the Outcomes Based Education (OBE) curriculum, the School Based Management (SBM) model, or the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement.

The demands related to the many reforms require everyone who holds leadership positions in the education system, including teachers, to be open to change and to be able to work in a democratic, interactive and participative way. Apart from the issues related to capacity described above, leadership education and training is necessary to encourage the leadership qualities needed in the context of change management, which should also include a capacity for taking care of other people's needs in a change process that, at times, might be characterised by uncertainty and 'messiness', as described by Fullan (2004).

Factors Relating to Whole School Development and the Learning Organisation

As is pointed out by many researchers, the school is at the heart of educational change, and it is the place where most of the educational policies are put into practice. The key leadership challenge, according to Fullan (1993) and Volan (2003), is the transformation of the educational system into a learning organisation, which implies that the educational leaders become experts in dealing with change as a normal part of their work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life. This view places high demands on leaders at all levels but, as reported above, this form of leadership was not found to be a prominent feature in the case school. The importance of leaders being open to change is underscored by Volan (2003). She refers to Hallak (1990), who claims that there is evidence indicating that the first line of professional support is the school principal. Volan deduces from this that a principal who is receptive to change and who sees the importance of creating a positive learning environment in the school could have a powerful influence in relation to the entire teaching staff (Volan, 2003).

While responsibility for the school's self-management lies with the principal and the school governing board, the school must be sufficiently resourced with regard to both human and material resources needed for the school leadership to exercise leadership and change management in a whole-school-development approach. The leadership of a whole-school approach needs to include the ability to delegate leadership tasks to resourceful people within and outside the school.

Strengthening a democratic school culture through the encouragement of staff members' active participation in decision-making processes might enhance teachers' motivation to take on extra tasks such as those relating to HIV/AIDS, even if the human and material resources available at the school are not fully sufficient.

The degree to which parents and other community members are encouraged and enabled to participate in the school's development seems to represent a critical issue in the case of creating an AIDS-friendly school environment, as well as in terms of enhancing a safe environment for both learners and teachers generally. Assessing whether – and how – a school needs to be assisted in creating a dynamic relationship with the parents and the wider school community could provide an excellent point of departure in a whole-school-development approach.

The Education Sector Cannot Do It Alone

The education sector alone cannot sufficiently address the teachers' workload and stress related to learners being affected by poverty, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse and other challenges, such as Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. The challenges facing schools in the context of poverty illustrate the need for the education sector to collaborate with other sectors in the provision of appropriate forms of support to teachers, principals and learners. Child sexual abuse has become a major issue in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa because of the risk of HIV infection in such

situations, and this highlights the need for a multi-sectoral approach potentially involving a wide range of service providers.

The degree to which other professionals, non-governmental sectors, the business sector and various structures in civil society collaborate with the school in addressing the needs of vulnerable learners seems to be central to the success of such an approach. In order to create a school environment in which teachers can play a supportive role in learners' lives, the issue of support to teachers and principals as 'caregivers' becomes a matter of key importance. The availability of referral options when needed is a critical issue. The education and training of teachers in, for example, counselling skills needs to be carefully balanced, however, against expectations of teachers acting as therapists to the learners.

Efforts to change the traditional culture of different support professions working in 'silos' to one of them 'working together' not only require sufficient education and follow-up support, but are also dependent on the allocation of sufficient professional support staff to enable the staff to coordinate support at school level when necessary.

Supporting Teacher 'Well-being'

As found in the investigation, the impact of poverty and related problems is placing an immense responsibility on schools and teachers to support the educational and care needs of many learners in public schools. A joint partnership between the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the Transforming Institutional Practices (TIP) at the University of the Western Cape and the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) has acknowledged the need to urgently address the support needs of teachers, in order to assist with teacher retention, job satisfaction and the achievement of quality education for all. TIP field staff identified the well-being of teachers as the highest priority for improving the quality of education. A unique intervention, Teacher Well-Being (TWB), focusing on research and development in a limited number of schools to highlight need and to propose potential strategies and policy to enhance TWB, was developed by the three partners. In close cooperation with the Western Cape Education Department, the TWB project has been implemented in the piloting schools since 2009. The aims of the project are to develop a supportive policy context and practice that enhances the capacity of schools, teachers' unions and WCED district offices to support teacher well-being in schools. The aim is to expand programme practices to other schools and into the education system as a whole. The overall goal of the project is to promote the resilience and well-being of teachers in order to enhance quality education for all in South African public schools.

Note

- [1] The legacy of apartheid that deeply impacted on the South African political, governmental and educational systems generated tensions and a general feeling of mistrust in the society. Young (2004, p. 11) stresses: 'The horrors of apartheid made it difficult to grasp that the system had any positive features. It may be that even in a society with such acute divisions as South Africa, reforms should focus on expanding trust in existing institutions rather than necessarily seeking to replace them.' In the many change programmes implemented by WCED since 1995, teachers were trained and educated together with management staff at all levels of the education system in order to break down some of the vertical barriers in the system, encourage critical thinking and empower the lower levels in the system. However, people still feel that nothing has changed. One teacher expressed her view like this: 'People, like the circuit managers, are still behaving like those *'pompous inspectors' from the previous system [the apartheid system]*. They are supposed to be your line manager, but they are unapproachable; you don't feel like asking them for help; they either don't respond or they take their time' (my emphasis).

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SISSEL-TOVE OLSEN earned a PhD from the University of the Western Cape, South Africa in 2008. Since 2007, she has been Associate Professor at Oslo and Akershus University College, and gained a Master's degree (*hovedfag*) in history from the University of Oslo, Norway. She has had a number of consultancy assignments for the UNHCR, UNESCO, the Norwegian Refugee Council and the Norwegian government's aid agency (NORAD) in Africa and Asia. *Correspondence:* sisseltove.olsen@hioa.no