

# Exemplary schools – protective webs in poor communities

Often, when addressing issues related to access to quality education for the poor, the emphasis is on the provision of resources. But is this the most important element for learners to succeed? Apparently not. *George Frempong* and *Charlotte Motha* report on a study of why some poor schools do well and others do not.

**T**he assumption is often that the major cause of the low performance of schools serving poor communities is a lack of resources, and that an improvement in resources would lead to successful learning outcomes in these schools. But improvements in resources at these schools have often not yielded the expected returns, while some schools serving poor communities are able to provide opportunities for their learners to succeed. We refer to these schools as exemplary, and ask the question, what is the story behind their success?

A recent National Research Foundation (NRF) funded research study led by George Frempong and a research team from the HSRC, University of Venda and Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), tells an appealing story.

The findings showed that exemplary schools serving poor communities succeeded largely through the promotion of the values of commitment and care, and the creation of an enabling environment that shielded these learners from their vulnerabilities and motivated them to learn and succeed.

Exemplary schools seem to have a better understanding of the vulnerabilities of their learners.

A metaphor to describe how these exemplary schools function, is like spiders building webs to protect and help their young ones survive in the jungle. Exemplary schools seem to have a better understanding of the vulnerabilities of their learners and pay more attention to developing the emotional resources their students require to be successful in learning.

## Profiles of exemplary schools in South Africa

Over the past decades, a number of studies have identified and profiled how schools should work to provide opportunities for all learners to succeed. In South Africa, studies exploring how schools work for the poor have focused on the leadership qualities necessary for school effectiveness. A study by Professor GD Kamper of the University of South Africa (UNISA) examined the kind of leadership style that was effective in successful disadvantaged schools in South Africa. The study was conducted at six successful high-poverty schools in South Africa that had sustained matric pass rates of 90%, and found that 'the essential solution to the plight of high-poverty schools lies in effective school leadership'. The findings were based on interviews with six principals, observations of school facilities and the surroundings, and field notes.

The features of these successful schools include:

- The creation of a climate and culture of mutual respect;
- Focus on quality teaching and learning with monitoring of learner progress and immediate action to correct problems;
- Optimal parental involvement and a sense of parent ownership of the school expressed in utterances such as, 'This is our school';
- Building parent self-esteem as full partners;
- Very low levels of teacher mobility and the sense of family among teaching staff;
- Focus on the learner and the non-negotiable emphasis on learner and teacher punctuality;
- Values of respect for individual and school, care, commitment (going the extra mile by giving extra classes); excellence (all learners deserve the same quality of education); collaboration (teamwork produces results); accountability (educators and learners honouring their responsibilities); and
- Passion for the upliftment of the poor.



These characteristics are consistent with findings from our analysis of exemplary schools based on data from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2011, South Africa, and case studies in Limpopo. The TIMSS South Africa data consist of a random sample of 298 schools. The Grade 9 learners in these schools, who were assessed on mathematics and science content knowledge, also responded to questionnaires about their attitude towards mathematics.

## These schools instilled in their learners an identity to learn and succeed.

### Findings from our study of exemplary schools

Our analysis showed there were a few successful schools serving very poor communities in South Africa. What seemed to make a difference in these schools was their ability to instill in their learners an identity to learn and succeed.

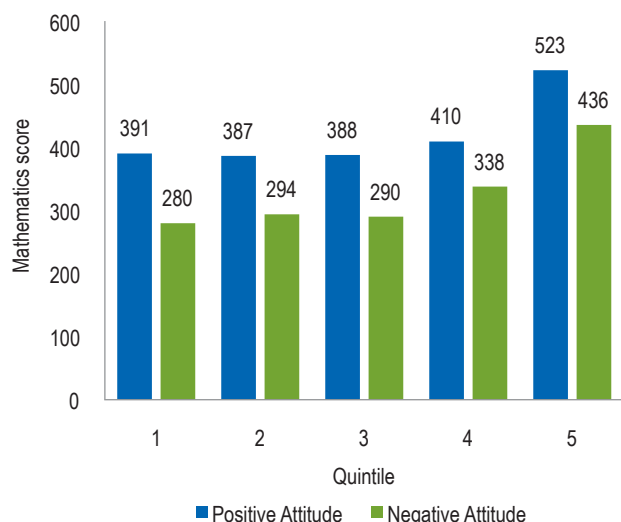
The children in these schools valued, liked and were confident learning mathematics (Figure 1). As Figure 1 illustrates, learners with positive attitudes towards mathematics (valued, liked and were confident learning mathematics) were more successful learning mathematics.

We found that the impact was particularly prominent in the poorest or quintile 1 schools. All ordinary South African public schools are categorised into five groups called quintiles, largely for purposes of the allocation of financial resources. Quintile 1 is the 'poorest' quintile, while quintile 5 is the 'least poor'.

## Exemplary schools tend to promote non-cognitive skills.

In those quintile 1 schools, the average mathematics score for learners with a positive attitude was 391, which was above the South African average of 372, compared with the average of 280 for those with negative attitude (a difference of about 119 points). This finding suggests that exemplary schools serving the poorest communities in South Africa tend to promote non-cognitive skills to support the development of their learners' cognitive skills.

Figure 1: Learners with positive attitudes towards mathematics are better at maths.



Source: HSRC, 2014



# Substance abuse: the critical need for more usable research

We conducted case studies at eight primary schools in the Vhembe district of Limpopo. Our analysis uncovered that challenges in the schools included a lack of resources and motivation to learn. Despite these challenges, teachers and principals worked hard to create an environment that provided opportunities for these learners to succeed. As one principal said during an interview, 'Even on weekends I come to school, you know when I am there I feel fulfilled'. A teacher told us that she listens to her learners, provides them with support, and motivates them to realise that maths is an easy subject, demonstrating the commitment and care some teachers employ to facilitate learning.

## Concluding remarks

The current South African education policy draws attention to transformation with emphasis on improving resources and the capability of schools to provide quality education for all. This emphasis tends to ignore the emotional challenges that children from poor families bring to school. These challenges, including a lack of confidence in their ability to learn, make these learners in poor schools able to succeed.

Our findings suggest that the schools serving learners from the poorest communities need more than just resources. They need a better understanding of how to create an enabling environment that allows these poor learners to overcome their vulnerabilities. They need encouragement to develop within their school cultural context, a social and emotional learning curriculum and activities. Quality education for all must include exemplary schools – schools that serve as webs protecting learners from their vulnerabilities. ■

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Substance abuse is a growing problem in South Africa, with just more than 13% of the population having used a substance during their lifetime. But the lack of comprehensive data to understand the changing trends of substance use and the lack of treatment facilities leaves much to be desired. *Ina van der Linde* reports on two seminars on substance abuse facilitated by the Department of Science and Technology and hosted by the HSRC.

**R**esearch on substance abuse is fairly conclusive: South African police data shows a 123% increase in drug-related crimes from 2003/2004 to 2013; driving under the influence of alcohol increased by 148% in this period.

During this period, the national injury mortality surveillance system on post-mortem investigations found that 54% of violence-related deaths and 52% of transport-related deaths were alcohol-related. A study at five trauma units in Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth found that one-third of patients tested positive for cannabis, 15% for metaxalone and 14% for white pipe (combination of cannabis and metaxalone). The same study showed violence was strongly related to the use of substances: