

News

'Cinderellas' take on presidency

Early childhood development practitioners voice concerns about lack of training and poor working conditions

Thabo Mohlala

The South African Congress of Early Childhood Development (SACECD), with a membership of 10 000, has planned a national march to the Presidency next month to highlight its concerns around the struggle of early childhood development (ECD) practitioners.

The majority of SACECD centres are located in previously disadvantaged communities and have no access to training, finance and proper buildings.

Leonard Saul, the congress's president, said the aim of the march was to raise grievances relating to the government's late payment of the R12 a child a day subsidies to ECD centres, a threat by social workers to shut down home-based centres if they are not rezoned as businesses and a lack of funding for the training ECD practitioners. "We decided to march to the highest office in the land after our attempts to raise our concerns with relevant government departments

bore no fruits. We have, for the umpteenth time, met with and written to social workers, provincial MECs and ministers of social development and children, women and people with disabilities," said Saul.

ECD practitioners teach learners from birth to the age of six. Some centres operate formally whereas others work from backyards. The practitioners consider themselves the "Cinderellas" of the teaching profession because they do not enjoy the government's basic benefits such as pension, medical and housing allowances, sick, study and annual leave.

Saul believes that early childhood "is the period during which children develop socially, emotionally, physically, psychologically and spiritually faster than in any subsequent development period". He said "children who attend ECD classes have a better grasp of socialising with others".

The challenging conditions practitioners work under make it difficult to fulfil the sector's primary objective of laying a solid learning foundation for children

before they start formal schooling.

This leads to low morale, with a large number of practitioners leaving the sector to teach mostly in adult basic education and training projects, which seem to enjoy better funding. "The result of this is that thousands of children in the communities are left without proper care and are exposed to all forms of abuse. This is a worrying development that should not be allowed to get out of hand," said Saul.

Practitioners find it difficult to fulfil the social workers' requirement that compels home-based centres to be rezoned. The process is both complex and expensive because rezoning costs R2 000, which "most of our members can hardly afford," he said.

"A vast number of our centres fall in this category and our members cannot raise this amount simply because most parents are unable to pay the mandatory monthly fees that practitioners rely on to run their centres."

Saul said practitioners are disappointed that the government does not provide them with financial support to upgrade their qualifications. Of the 160 000 practitioners only 20% are qualified. It costs R20 000 for 18 months' to two years' training from level one to six or diploma level.

Saul said SACECD wants the



Critical: Children learn concepts that form the building blocks of their school education in early development centres. Photo: Oupa Nkosi

government to offer bursaries to ECD practitioners as it does to university students. Although the government provides subsidies for children, it "should make more finance and facilities available for the ECD sector".

In other countries, such as France, Sweden and Israel, the government pays the salaries of teachers and builds good facilities for children.

He said the inconsistent payment of subsidies by the department of social welfare has a negative impact on ECD centres. The congress is waiting for the finalisation of "norms and standards" on ECD, which it is hoped will reconfigure the sector, taking on board issues around career-pathing as well the improvement of conditions of service for the practitioners.

Responding to concerns raised

by the SACECD, the department of social development's Abram Phahlamohlaka said their role is limited to regulating the establishment, registration and monitoring or inspection of ECD centres and that subsidies are paid through their provincial offices.

Phahlamohlaka said payment of subsidies is "dependent on the availability of budget" and that the department is trying to address the challenge of a lack of a standardised subsidy amount. Some provinces pay a minimum of R12 and some R15 maximum.

On the rezoning of ECD centres, Phahlamohlaka said it is a legal and legislative requirement for communities to "establish their centres in the demarcated areas rather than within their premises".

loveLife launches reality TV show

Thabo Mohlala

loveLife, South Africa's biggest and national HIV-prevention organisation, has launched a reality TV series on SABC1 to provide young people with a platform to "navigate challenges" that expose them to the risks associated with the pandemic.

Called *Make Your Move*, the show aims to equip young people with the tools to change their situations by themselves. The show airs each Monday from 7pm to 7.30pm.

loveLife's Dianne Regisford-Gueye said: "Each episode is a chance for youngsters to tap into their inner strength and build on their potential to become the drivers of their destinies – no matter how hard their situations may be."

Regisford-Gueye said recent statistics indicate a steep rise in new HIV infections, particularly among people between the ages of 18 and 22. She said close analysis of the situation clearly shows that socio-economic and other factors "play a significant role in this transitional period in a young person's life".

loveLife's strategy, she said, is to empower young people "with a strong sense of self-worth, identity and resilience" so that they are able to deal with the challenges they encounter during this critical period of their lives.

It is hoped that the series will enable young people to become confident and believe in themselves so that they can avoid the risks of contracting HIV as well as take charge of their futures.

Regisford-Gueye says the range of topics handled during the series will reflect realities of millions of young South Africans.

Topics include discrimination, sexuality and identity, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse and self-esteem.

The series has 13 episodes with a presenter who engages 13 young people from across the country. Each featured young person confronts a personal challenge he or she faces. Naledi Moleo, aged 23, presents the show.

Dumisani Phakathi, who originated the concept of the series, said: "We are saying it is cool to talk about things that are personal and painful because, when you do that, you begin a journey to a more positive place."

Phakathi said Moleo was chosen because they were not just looking for a presenter but for someone whose personality would gel with the rationale of the show.

It was, Phakathi said, Moleo's "eagerness to learn and willingness to throw herself in the deep end that makes her an ideal example of a young person making her move".

Resources or issues covered during the show would be packaged into learning materials that teachers, loveLife peer educators and young people are able to download. They are available on loveLife's website: www.lovelife.org.za.

Young people are encouraged to take part in the dialogue around the show's different episodes by using multiple communication platforms such as (*MYMsta.mobi*), facebook (www.facebook.com/lovelifeNGO).

Young people can also contact loveLife's call centre on 0800 121900 to raise concerns or ask questions related to particular episodes.

Or they can send a "please call me" SMS to 083323 1023.



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Guard against stealing

There are ways to cut down drastically on stealing at school, writes

Richard Hayward

'At our school, nobody steals. Theft only happens at other schools." Really? Sadly, that's not true.

Theft occurs in all schools. However, there are schools that keep incidents close to nil. At schools who have the other extreme, if a child returns home with everything he took with him that morning, he considers it a lucky day.

There was an incident when a child complained to a teacher: "Somebody stole money from my school bag!" There was an empathetic but no-nonsense reply. The learner was reminded of the often-stated school rule always to keep money on your person. Why wasn't the rule adhered to, the teacher wanted to know.

Theft can be interpreted very narrowly. It can be seen as applying only to stealing physical items such as money, food, sports kit and school uniform. Yet there's also intellectual theft. Copying the maths homework answers of a classmate is a common one. Then there is the increasingly familiar plagiarism or "lifting" the work of others.

Millions of students from primary school through to university level dabble in this deceit. They steal the intellectual work of others and claim that it is their own work. They don't acknowledge their sources. The internet is a plagiarist's paradise of copy and paste.

SAQI (the South African Quality Institute) does school leadership and management programmes across the country. Poor schools are sponsored. For workshop details, contact either Vanessa du Toit (012-349-5006; vanessa@saqi.co.za) or Richard Hayward (011-888-3262; rpdhayward@yahoo.com)

There is no free school lunch

How to manage and prevent stealing in schools

1 Raise awareness

Talking about theft isn't a pleasant assembly or classroom topic but it needs open discussion. Learners should speak to the teacher or the principal if there is something that is needed and that the home cannot provide. Let it be known that there is no need to steal. Ask and every effort will be made to meet a reasonable request.

2 Instil lasting values

Honesty and respect are among the core values of a quality school. Emphasise values in the weekly assembly homilies and in the classroom. Values should not only be talked about; they guide the way in which learners and staff interact with each other.

3 Teach responsibility

Unless a child is in grade one, Mommy should not have to trail behind her son picking up his sports equipment and uniform. It is the responsibility of the learner to look after personal property. That responsibility should not be dumped on to the teacher either.

4 Children who need help

An emotionally balanced and happy child from a loving, supportive home background does not steal. The child who steals usually has behavioural and emotional issues that are cries for help. Counsel such a child. Stealing is usually symptomatic of much deeper issues.

5 Take decisive action

Whatever the reasons for a child stealing, it is always unacceptable. The rights of others have been violated. Stealing is a serious offence and decisive action is needed. Theft should have consequences for the perpetrators. Under certain conditions body searches are allowed. When taking disciplinary action, guard against "naming and shaming" learners.

6 Start a fund

Put money aside for children from impoverished backgrounds. If the school does not have a feeding scheme, make sure that such children have breakfast. If the school has an outgrown uniform shop, clothes can be given to poor children. Parents and sponsors could provide further items such as sports equipment or money for educational trips and tours.

7 Mark personal property

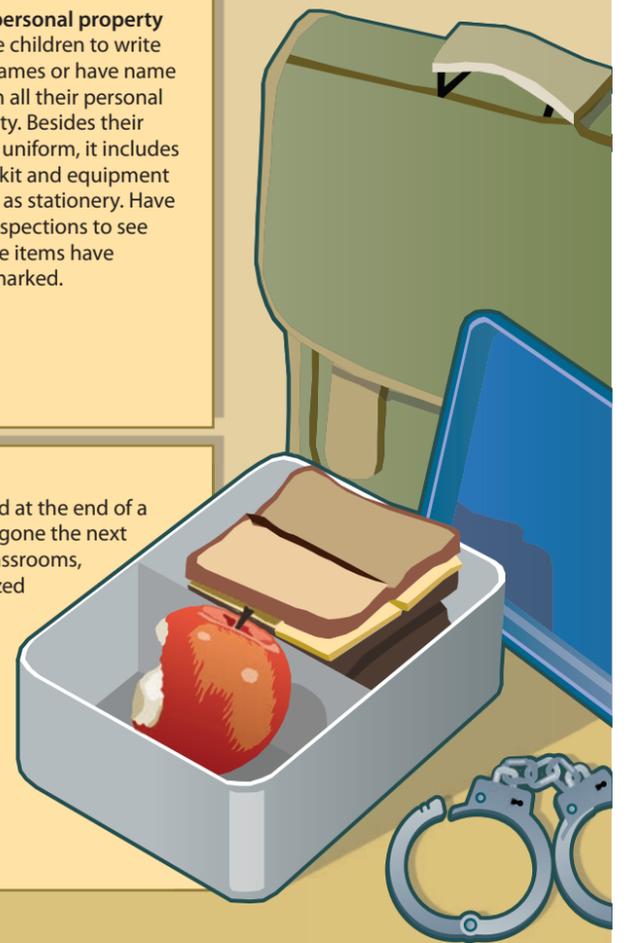
Get the children to write their names or have name tags on all their personal property. Besides their school uniform, it includes sports kit and equipment as well as stationery. Have spot inspections to see that the items have been marked.

8 Administer lost property

Too often, learners make false accusations that items belonging to them have been stolen, when the items have simply been mislaid. Clothes and sports equipment left lying around can be put into a lost property box. The learners pay a small fine to retrieve the items. In this way the learners should learn to be more responsible.

9 Remove temptations

If the sports coach leaves equipment on the field at the end of a practice, she should not be surprised when it is gone the next day. Nor should the teachers who leave their classrooms, libraries and sports kit rooms unlocked be amazed when items disappear. Avoid temptation by having unattended rooms locked and equipment stored away. These and other such tactics won't make theft disappear completely, but a school will be able to reduce theft enormously. Much of the teachers' and learners' valuable time is stolen by having to investigate theft incidents. Less stealing means that everybody has more time to focus on quality teaching and learning.



Graphic: JOHN McCANN
Source: RICHARD HAYWARD

Don't blame teachers for failures

Katalin Morgan & Barbara Dale-Jones

Blaming and shaming South Africa's schoolteachers will do nothing to heal the country's dysfunctional education system. Teachers are themselves part of a society marked by deep wounds and they need urgent government and other support, not vilification.

These were key points that emerged from the inaugural session in April of the "Teachers Upfront" series of dialogues. A collaboration involving Wits University's school of education, the University of Johannesburg's faculty of education, the education NGO Bridge and the *Mail & Guardian*. The series aims to support teachers as the key agents in quality education.

Dr Mamphela Ramphela, formerly vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, celebrated what she called "a noble profession" when she delivered the keynote address to about 100 educationists. She recalled her own most influential teachers — her mother, her father and her science teacher in grades 11 and 12, who was

responsible for her passion for science and her choice of medicine as a career.

Our dysfunctional education system is one consequence of a "deep woundedness in our society", she said. Apathetic and self-destructive behaviour throughout society, at individual, community and civil service levels, is a symptom of the wound — one inflicted by apartheid's rupturing of the connectedness that defines us as human beings, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's failure to tackle the socioeconomic infringement of human rights.

Many teachers too are so deeply wounded that they cannot function, Ramphela said. Healing circles at schools to find ways of re-establishing lost connections would be one way of supporting teachers, rather than blaming and shaming them.

Yael Shalem, professor in the Wits school of education, developed this when she spoke about teacher morale. Four variables are beyond the control of teachers, she said.

- "Access to learners who are cognitively well prepared for schooling, are

physically healthy and whose homes are a second site of acquisition;

- "Meaningful learning opportunities in the past and in the present and a reservoir of cognitive resources at the level of the school;

- "A well-specified and guiding curriculum; and

- "Functional school management that mediates the bureaucratic demands on teacher time."

Between 60% and 70% of South Africa's teachers do not benefit from any of these four variables, Shalem said. "We must therefore challenge the commonly held view that school failure is a result of teachers' inefficiency," she said. Rather, it is time to flag "the intractable pattern of inequalities produced by the close association between children's cognitive development and family poverty, adversarial market conditions, bureaucratisation of teachers' work and a radically new curriculum".

Phumi Mthiyane, a teacher at Realogile Secondary School in Alexandra, Johannesburg, was the third and final formal speaker.

Drawing on her experiences in a challenging township school environment, she attributed much of her success to a teaching mindset that is "open, humble and willing to change".

The Wits school of education had involved Realogile Secondary in "an inspiring project" that included Mthiyane spending two weeks at secondary schools and a university in England. Wits research projects based at her school have made new resources available, including training and support.

For her, "the role of teachers is to be an inspiration to learners" in the face of challenges that include the fast pace of educational and social change, as well as the personal difficulties faced by many teachers such as HIV/Aids, debt, loss of motivation and working in dysfunctional schools.

"We deal with angry learners who fight every day due to anger from home. Boys can't be disciplined by a male teacher because he represents a father who is not around," she said.

Mthiyane made a plea for mental health services: "We need an in-house

psychologist in each school for issues arising every day with our learners."

One suggestion that many present at the session endorsed was to inundate the media with positive images of teachers to counter the blighting perception that they are not committed.

Also raised was a review of the state's resource allocation to ensure that the necessary prioritising of dysfunctional schools does not inadvertently incapacitate middle-category schools by under-resourcing them.

The current school curriculum reforms involve a content specification strongly directed from above. This could remove from teachers the most interesting part of their work and further demoralise them.

There should be space in the system for teacher-led development driven from within rather than stipulated and required from without. "Fear does not make us work; being inspired does," Mthiyane said.

This is a shortened version of an article first published on April 8 in the Mail & Guardian

Better jobs for bookworms

Study finds that reading enhances the likelihood teenagers will go on to study for a degree, writes **Jeevan Vasagar**

Frequently playing computer games appears to reduce a teenager's chances of going to university, whereas reading enhances the likelihood that they will go on to study for a degree, according to research carried out by Oxford University that tracked 17000 people born in 1970.

Reading was also linked to career success, as the research finds 16-year-olds who read books at least once a month were significantly more likely to be in a professional or managerial job at 33 than those who didn't read books at all.

For girls, there was a 39% probability that they would be in a professional or managerial position at 33 if they read at 16, compared to a 25% chance if they had not. Among boys, there was a 58% chance of being in a good job as an adult if they had read as a teenager, compared to a 48% chance if they had not. Playing computer games regularly and doing no other activities meant the chances of going to university fell from 24% to 19% for boys and from 20% to 14% for girls.

Mark Taylor, of Nuffield College, Oxford, who carried out the research, said the results indicated there was "something special" about reading for pleasure.

Even after accounting for class, ability and the type of school a child attended, reading still made a difference. He said: "It's no surprise that kids who went to the theatre when young get better jobs. That's because their parents were rich. When you take these things into account, the effect that persists is for reading."

Taylor suggested that other extra-curricular activities might prove more beneficial than computer games because they were either communal, such as playing in an orchestra, or had a direct academic application, such as reading.

However, he also said that times had changed in computer gaming: "The main thing I would highlight, because this is the 1970 cohort, when they played video games in 1986, that's not very many people. And the state of video games in 1986 is nothing like it is now."



Choosing computer games over books will reduce a teenager's chances of attending university and limit his career success, according to research carried out by Oxford University. Photo: Reuters

Despite gaming reducing the chances of becoming a graduate, the research suggests teenagers who spend a lot of time playing video games should not worry too much about their career prospects. Playing computer games frequently did not reduce the likelihood that a 16-year-old would be in a professional or managerial job at 33, the research finds. Taylor's analysis also indicates that children who read books and did one other cultural activity further increased their chances of going to university.

For 16-year-olds whose parents were working in professional or managerial jobs, the chance that a 16-year-old would go to university rose from 40% to 51% for boys and 38% to 50% for girls if they read books. If they read

books and did another activity such as playing an instrument or going to museums, the chance of going to university rose from 40% to 70% for boys and from 38% to 68% for girls.

Although reading helped people into a more prestigious career, it did not bring them a higher salary. None of the extracurricular activities at 16 were associated with a greater or lesser income at 33, he found.

Taylor suggested that the reasons why reading was significant could be that it improved the intellect of students or that employers felt more comfortable taking on someone with a similarly educated background. It might also be the case that children destined for better careers tended to read more and there is no causal link. — © Guardian News & Media 2011

Passive smoking raises blood pressure in boys

Alok Jha

Passive smoking can raise blood pressure levels in boys, scientists have found. This will put them at higher risk in later life of hypertension or high blood pressure, which is associated with a greater chance of heart and kidney disease.

Jill Baumgartner of the University of Minnesota's Institute on the Environment looked at more than 6 400 children aged eight to 17 who had been exposed to secondhand

tobacco smoke. She found a 1% increase on average healthy levels in the systolic blood pressure of boys who had been exposed to secondhand smoke compared to boys who had not.

"For that individual child, it won't have a huge impact," said Mike Knapton, associate medical director at the British Heart Foundation. "But if you've got two million kids with a 1% increase, you start to see changes in the prevalence of respiratory disease, heart disease

and cancer."

Baumgartner said more than a third of children were exposed to smoke levels associated with adverse effects in her study. Previous research has linked secondhand smoke and increased blood pressure in adults, but the effect had not been measured in children.

Baumgartner showed that girls exposed to secondhand smoke had lower systolic blood pressures than girls who were not.

"These findings support several

previous studies suggesting that something about female gender may provide protection from harmful vascular changes."

The researchers collected information on passive smoking from questionnaires conducted by the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention between 1996 and 2006. The surveys collected information on levels of cotinine in a child's blood, which is a byproduct of the metabolism of nicotine by the body.

Baumgartner said the study

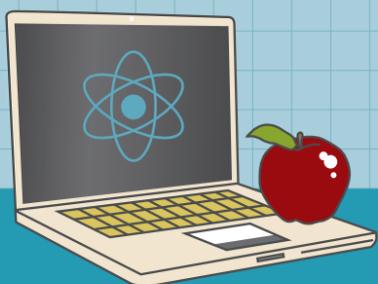
provided "further incentive for governments to support smoking bans and other legislation that protects children".

Knapton said passive smoking was only part of the story. "There has been an association between cot death and smoking in the home — 86% of cot deaths occur in families where the mother smokes. We know that children from families that smoke are more likely to smoke themselves."

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