

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE RURAL SCHOOL LEARNERS: IN SEARCH OF SOCIAL JUSTICE!

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Abstract

Psychosocial support has been defined as an ongoing process of meeting emotional, social, mental and spiritual needs, all of which are considered essential elements of meaningful and positive human development. It goes beyond simply meeting the learners' physical needs, placing greater emphasis on learners' psychological and emotional development and their need for social interaction. The Free State Department of Basic Education defines vulnerable learners as orphans, heads of child-headed households, neglected learners and all learners who do not have access to a basic set of school uniforms. The department states that there are currently 70 000 of these learners in the province. This article presents a theoretical critique, within a social justice paradigm, of efforts aimed at supporting vulnerable learners psychosocially in the rural areas of South Africa. It describes attempts to afford vulnerable learners education and addresses their marginalisation and inherent powerlessness (social justice). It argues that psychosocial support (meeting their needs) for vulnerable learners will improve their access to education.

Keywords: Psychosocial support, vulnerable learners, schools, social justice

1. INTRODUCTION

Social justice advocates adequate mechanisms used to regulate social arrangements in the fairest way for the benefit of all (Mncube, 2008). It is readily accepted that in the South African context, the majority of learners are rendered vulnerable by poverty and all its associated challenges to child development and outcomes. Many learners, particularly those in poor rural communities, are also affected by domestic and community violence. Therefore, poverty and violence remain two key features of vulnerability which are common to most groups of learners requiring protection (Daes, van der Merwe and Brandt, 2007). Learner vulnerability in rural settings is a serious problem, rapidly growing and long-term. It is regarded as the one of the most devastating social challenges ever experienced in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has also enjoyed worldwide media attention. As the number of vulnerable rural learners escalates, concern about the consequences for their health and future life chances is increasing (Foster, 2002). A great majority of learners in rural poor communities are receiving less than is their right in a democratic South Africa. Worse still, is the fact that this will have long-term effects on their opportunities for development, their capabilities and their lives.

Moreover, the communities in which they live will continue to suffer the debilitating effects of poverty and inequality for as long as these problems persist (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005: viii-ix).

There is a general perception that very few educational policies worldwide specifically target rural people (Sauvageot and Da Graça, 2005). In various countries, even though a reasonable percentage of their populations stay in rural areas where their learners attend school, little attention is usually given to the needs of rural schools. Turning a blind eye to the unique challenges facing rural schools is likely to hinder, impede and limit both the quality of and access to education. There is general consensus among various researchers that despite the clear need to provide support for vulnerable learners, this is neglected and there exists little understanding of how their needs can be met (Ishikawa, Pridmore, Carr-Hill and Chaimuangdee, 2010; Jordans, Komproe, Tol, Kohrt, Luitel, Macy and de Jong, 2010; Mueller, Alie, Jonas, Brown and Sherr, 2011; Ogunba, 2010; Xu, Wu, Rou, Duan, and Wang, 2010).

2. SOCIAL JUSTICE: CLARIFYING THE CONCEPT

As is the case with many other social concepts, social justice has varied and complex definitions. Among these, there exist common threads that hold the concept together, and give it shape and identity. An early explanation by Tsanoff (1956:12) suggests that justice derives from the phrase *sum cuique* or “one receiving their just due”. In addition, Coates (2007) postulates an alternative form of distributive justice wherein one receives fairness in social, political, and economic outcomes. Kose (2009:630) opines that some scholars argue against a definitive and universal conceptualisation of social justice, while many argue that social justice has to do with “recultivating individual and institutionalised practices rooted in low expectations, deficit thinking, marginalisation and cultural imperialism”. It can therefore be accepted that a general definition of social justice is hard to arrive at and even harder to implement. In essence, social justice is concerned with equal justice, not merely in the courts, but in all aspects of society. This concept demands that all people have equal rights and opportunities; everyone, from the poorest person on the margins of society to the wealthiest.

Theories of social justice advocate mechanisms used to regulate social arrangements in the fairest way for the benefit of all (Mncube, 2008). For the purpose of this article, conceptualisation of social justice hinges on Nancy Fraser's definition, of justice as “parity of participation” (Tikly, 2010:6). Fraser (2008:16) elucidates that “overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on par with others as full partners in social interaction”. Theoharis (2007) maintains that social justice is premised on the discourse of disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalisation and exclusionary processes. Social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition and empathy.

The presence of words such as 'demands, mechanisms, disrupting, subverting' in the definitions above suggest concerted action and seem to elicit revolutionary overtones.

Similarly, Calderwood (2003) adopts a revolutionary approach to social justice. She posits that it works to undo socially created and maintained differences in material conditions of living, so as to reduce and ultimately eliminate the perpetuation of the privileging of some at the expense of others. Fetchenhauer and Huang (2004) raise concern about sensibility toward social justice. They claim that sensibility should forego ethical concerns, commit to the structural analyses of ethical concerns, adopt an activist orientation and seek identification with others. Regarding the promotion of social justice, Calderwood (2003) is of the view that people need to act to reduce and eradicate oppression, however distant they may feel from the personal culpability of its enactment. The view is further emphasised by former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown who, quoting an unknown Greek philosopher, said: "When will there be justice in Athens? It will be when those that do not suffer are as angry as those that do" (Lesedi, 2009). Undoubtedly, there seems to be agreement that injustice is not only an issue that concerns those at its receiving end, but also those members of society who do not seem to be affected. The situation seems to further call for alertness, or what we may call thinking beyond the visible and the ordinary. An unfortunate reality about social justice is that the mechanisms of injustice are, to a large extent invisible, even to those who strive to live their lives and carry out their work ethically (Calderwood 2003; Solomon & Murphy, 2000). The question that may arise from the debate above is whether or not, and to what extent, providers (policymakers and administrators) are aware of the practices, processes, rules and regulations that perpetuate acts of social injustice and thus consider themselves as culpable. In summary, social justice can be understood as:

the exercise of altering institutional and organisational arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions (Goldfarb and Grinberg, 2002:162).

Questions relating to the proper distribution of benefits and burdens among sites have always posed a challenge for education institutions. Fraser's perspectival dualist framework interrogates the disparate distribution of goods and services and/or social structures that enable material inequality (North, 2006). Fraser (2008) also asserts that the increasing stress on sectoral politics undermines redistributive efforts that seek to improve the well-being of marginalised citizens. Her perspectival dualist framework views recognition and redistribution as the co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice. Social justice works to undo socially created and maintained differences in material conditions of living, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the perpetuation of the privileging of some at the expense of others (Calderwood, 2003). In order to promote social justice, we must act to reduce and eradicate oppression however distant we may feel from personal culpability for its enactment.

Sabbagh (2003) indicates that distributive justice includes at least three major components: the normative patterns that regulate resource distribution (i.e., justice principles and their derivative rules); the classes of social resources that are being allocated, and the valence-positive or -negative of the expected distribution outcomes. Arguments in this paper adopt a moral community perspective, viewing responsibility and care among members as central to social justice. Social activists advocate the need for social change in rural areas which is linked to social justice, using a process that is consultative, collective, participative and empowering. Connectedness and responsibility enrich the notions of fairness, and equality, thus extending the baseline of ethical practice (Baylis, Kenny and Sherwin 2008; Woermann, 2010).

3. CRYSTALLISING VULNERABILITY AMONG LEARNERS

Munyati (2006:6) conceptualises a vulnerable child as one who is living under difficult circumstances which include learners living in a poor household, with sick parents, learners in child-headed households, learners who head households, learners dependent on old, frail or disabled caregivers, and learners in households that assume additional dependency by taking in orphaned learners. It should be noted that there is no direct relationship between orphanhood and vulnerability. A child can be an orphan but not vulnerable, or be vulnerable and not necessarily be an orphan. Vulnerability or otherwise regarding orphans vests mainly in the support system available. Extended family structures in predominantly African communities are an example of the support system that may shield an orphan from vulnerability. The Free State Department of Education (Free State Department of Education - FSDoE, 2007:11) identifies vulnerable learners as orphans, learners from child-headed households, neglected learners and all learners who do not meet basic school needs, e.g. a school uniform. The department states that there are currently 70 000 such learners in the province.

Andrews et al. (2006:271) identify constructs that assist to measure vulnerability: death of or desertion by parents; severe chronic illness of parents; illness of child; disability of a child; poverty, including access to grants; poor housing; access to services, schooling, health, emotional problems, abuse and substance abuse by caregivers or the child (more difficult to measure). Smart (2003, cited in Munyati, 2006) examined vulnerability according to various African countries:

- Botswana: street learners; child labourers; the sexually exploited; the neglected; those with handicaps; those in remote areas who are part of indigenous minorities.
- Rwanda (in addition): learners with parents in prison; refugees or displaced persons; those married before the age of maturity; those in conflict with the law; those affected by armed conflict; those in foster care.

- South Africa (in addition): those with terminally ill parents; those born to single mothers; those with unemployed caretakers.
- Zambia (in addition): those learners not at school.

One of the implications of these hardships with which learners are confronted is that teachers need to grasp and grapple with the concept of responsive teaching through which they develop rudimentary understandings of the significance and importance of forming relationships with learners, families, and the community (Wade, 2000). Drawing from the social justice perspective, vulnerable learners are those whose basic needs (economic, social and emotional) are not met. Therefore, these learners' overall well-being adversely affects their livelihoods and access to education.

4. VULNERABILITY AND RURAL EDUCATION

The definition of 'rural' still eludes us due to its ambiguous connotations and the obvious and somewhat fallible comparison with 'urban' contexts. According to Sauvageot and da Graça (2007), rurality may be defined in various ways and no universal definition has been adopted in the history of human endeavour. Most rural dwellers work in agriculture, often for meagre rates of compensation. From a learner diversity perspective, public schools in rural areas do not have good track records in meeting the needs of diverse learner populations. A great deal of diversity among rural learners indicates both a challenge and an opportunity for the state to contribute to closing the many national achievement gaps (Ludlow and Brannan, 2010).

Rural students in urban areas are out of sight and out of mind. In the United States of America, the states where rural education most notably underperforms (that is, performance ranks worse than socio-economic challenges would suggest it should), are predominantly non-rural states, located on the East or West coast of America where the rural population is 'out of sight, out of mind'. Rural parts of China, Australia and South Africa are no exception. Poverty, fiscal incapacity, low levels of adult education, and low levels of learner achievement run in the same mutually reinforcing circles in rural areas. As expected, regions where the educational outcomes in rural schools require the most urgent attention are those with most impoverished minority and rural learners, where schools receive the fewest resources and where rural students attend the largest schools in the largest districts. While declining enrolment remains a significant factor in some rural school districts, rural enrolment on the whole is growing, while non-rural enrolment is declining. Most rural areas already face tremendous barriers to learners' high achievement and operate in less than favourable policy environments (Johnson and Strange, 2007).

The RSA Constitution guarantees the right to basic education. Education policy in South Africa dictates that no child should be excluded from school on the basis of non-payment of school fees and that full uniforms are not required

(Simbayi, et al., 2006). However, many schools continue to exclude learners on these grounds (barriers to access to education). Concomitants of vulnerability evident among rural learners include lack of love, attention and affection; vulnerable learners are more likely to be involved in child labour; cost of education, i.e., school fees and uniform; household duties; stigma and discrimination; and lower educational quality due to unmet psychosocial needs. The result is reduced or weakened access to education, marginalisation and inherent powerlessness (social injustice). According to Schudel, le Roux, Lotz-Sisitka, Loubser O' Donoghue and Schallcross (2008) social justice requires teachers to critically analyse the perceived realities of social and environmental injustices that affect teaching, learning and the curriculum.

5. PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE RURAL SCHOOL LEARNERS

According to Ebersöhn and Ellof (2006) the support of vulnerable learners in education is no doubt one of the greatest challenges faced in educational transformation. The authors advocate the development of sustainable programmes to provide educational opportunities to vulnerable learners. Simbayi et al. (2006:87) suggest two tiers of psychosocial support. The first tier is the provision of regular and predictable adult guidance and emotional availability to vulnerable learners. The second tier constitutes material support, as young learners and adolescents require the reassurance and stability which a caringly provided daily routine of physical containment and nurturance brings. Therefore, a child's emotional well-being is significantly influenced by household economic security.

Another project that assists learners from the rural village of Ga-Mathabatha in the Limpopo province of South Africa, the brainchild of a trained nurse, has three drop-in centres that provide both social support and psychological therapy. Learners are fed before they go to school, and given a lunch box and fed again after school. The drop-in centres are staffed by caregivers who provide after-school care services, supervise learners' homework and facilitate play. Some learners without homes are housed at the centre (PEPFAR, 2006). The use of memory approaches, e.g. memory boxes have also been found to play a major role in assisting vulnerable learners (Mathambo and Richter, 2007:19). These approaches are valuable for aiding the learners to treasure memories of events and individuals that were close to their hearts. Learners find strength in the good things and moments that they shared.

Developing resilience can conquer adversity (Brown, 2004; Dent and Cameron, 2003). According to Brown (2004) no one knows why some learners conquer their problems while others do not.

Resilient individuals seem to be able to understand what has happened to them (insight), develop an understanding of what has happened to others (empathy) and experience a quality of life that is often denied to others (achievement) (Dent and Cameron, 2003). In sum, while 'vulnerability' refers to an individual's susceptibility to adversity, resilience is viewed as the capacity to get back into balance after being pushed out of it and to surmount great problems without breaking down under the strain (Frerks, Warner and Weijis 2011).

Rebecca Doyle suggests the application of nurture group principles and practices in classrooms with up to 87% success recorded (Doyle, 2004). The emphasis in this approach is on emotional growth. Beefing up 'guardianship' within families has also been cited (Freeman and Nkomo, 2006). Conducting special programmes for grandparents who are caring for vulnerable learners has proved successful, as well as supporting guardians to be in a position to identify needy households, provide small amounts of material assistance and make referrals to other sources of support. The women volunteers who are recruited on the basis of their concern for learners provide moral support, monitor the learners' well-being and advocate on their behalf with political and traditional leaders, head teachers and health workers. Such community-based monitoring helps protect the vulnerable and allows a swift response when serious problems arise (Levine and Foster, 2000).

Keeping vulnerable learners in school has and continues to pose a serious challenge (Ebersöhn and Ellof, 2006; Ogunda, 2010). One of the approaches to addressing this challenge is Circles of Support (COS), a community and school-based multi-sectoral approach to meeting their needs. The approach has as its *raison d'être*, to provide basic needs and psychosocial support to vulnerable learners in order to enable them to remain or re-enter school, and in so doing fulfil their developmental needs. A COS is constituted from volunteers drawn from teachers at schools, called school convenors and community members, called neighbourhood or village agents (Diop, 2004; Diop and Diagne, 2007). Simbayi, Kleintjies, Ngomane, Tabane, Mfecane and Davids (2006:87) are of the opinion that the provision of regular and predictable adult guidance and emotional availability to vulnerable learners constitute an essential first tier in psychosocial support. Material support may be viewed as a second tier of psychosocial support, as young learners and adolescents require the reassurance and stability which a caringly provided daily routine of physical containment and nurturance brings. A child's emotional well-being is significantly influenced by household economic security.

6. REFLECTIONS ON CURRENT PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT EFFORTS FOR VULNERABLE RURAL LEARNERS

It cannot be disputed that psychosocial support adds value to the lives of vulnerable learners. However, it appears to be patchy, inconsistent, not well monitored nor organised, particularly in rural areas.

The loci of various support mechanisms are not clearly demarcated, i.e. school, church, community, social development, health care, etc. It is recommended that all partners need to strategise in order to mount, streamline and optimise a concerted effort towards psychosocially supporting vulnerable rural learners. All responses should be guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This convention has four main principles:

- A child's right to life, survival and development.
- A child's right to be treated equally. This means that no child should be discriminated against.
- A child's right to participate in activities and decisions which affect them.
- All actions should be based on the 'best interests' of the child.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is one of the most widely accepted international conventions. Almost all the countries have agreed to it; however, progress has been quite slow in putting it into practice. The reasons for this include misunderstandings about the Convention, which has been seen by some people as being 'anti-family' or simply about allowing learners to have their own way. Neither of these is true but these misconceptions need to be addressed when seeking to increase awareness of the Convention and what it means in practice. Poverty is a major barrier which prevents the implementation of the Convention (UNAIDS, 2001; UNICEF, 2000; UNICEF and UNAIDS, 1999). However, it can be used to guide efforts aimed at promoting development and eliminating poverty and will ensure that learners gain the maximum benefit from such actions. All responses should treat all learners and young people equally without discrimination. Stigma is based on beliefs and a person is 'stigmatised' when another person thinks negatively of them because of something they have experienced or because they belong to a particular group. Discrimination occurs when actions are taken (or not taken) on the basis of a stigmatising belief. Social justice works to undo socially created and maintained differences in the material conditions of living, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the perpetuation of the privilege of some at the expense of others (Calderwood, 2003).

7. CONCLUSION

Contemporary South African society is underpinned by the principles of human rights and social justice. Social justice is not achievable by handing out benefits to a passively grateful population, but is rather striven for by an alert and critical citizenry (NMF, 2005). One may further argue that even though psychosocial support is vital, it should be of a developmental nature. Support connotes immediate gratification and perpetual dependence, whilst development denotes empowerment together with the acquisition of a greater sense of coherence and subsequent emancipation.

Psychosocial support, guided by a developmental agenda, is more likely to yield meaning in life - the cognisance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of appreciating and valuing oneself. The success of psychosocial efforts is largely dependent on the will of people offering it. Munyati (2006) concludes that people who have a strong sense of assisting the less privileged contribute immensely to the success of psychosocial support and the realisation of social justice. In concurrence with Chitiyo, Changara and Chitiyo (2010) psychosocial support for vulnerable learners should take the form of a well-coordinated, school-community partnership the aim of which is to enhance the accessibility of educational services.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The article concludes with the following recommendations:

Multisectoral links. The direct involvement of multiple government agencies and community sectors in a concerted and coordinated manner may ease the burden placed on volunteers. This practice may further reassure teachers, who already think that they are digressing from their primary task of teaching and learning, when their contribution is made amid a plethora of contributions from other relevant sectors. According to Calderwood (2003:302) "social justice is the product of the virtuous actions of many individuals,"

Research targeted to local needs. A scientific enquiry into the needs of local communities may guide the investment made and reduce redundancies. Additionally, it will reduce unnecessary support and improve the focus on relevant issues.

Use of existing institutions. Instead of establishing and sometimes duplicating institutions, it would be better to use the existing ones. For example, the partnership between youth associations and public-sector health facilities resulted in an unusually high commitment by and retention of volunteers. Some teachers may find it useful to engage in psychosocial support initiatives if these were carried out in schools. The school can build or break psychosocial support efforts. Alemàn Jr (2009) maintains that even good schools often harbour toxic subcultures that can spread a sense of frustration, hopelessness and helplessness.

Asset mapping: It is important for each rural community willing to support vulnerable learners to determine an asset map. This will help them identify where, when, and what kind of support can be amassed by identifying, strengthening and using existing community structures to help learners remain in the community.

Various structures at community level include: child welfare forums – some communities have involved community leaders and other professionals in these; traditional healers; traditional structures – in some districts, chiefs and village leaders have become responsible for ensuring that orphans and vulnerable learners in their communities are supported by providing counselling to help them recover from trauma, (especially if a community has traditions for dealing with death and grief already in place); self-help groups such as buddy associations and youth clubs; and community-based volunteer groups for example, orphan visiting programmes. Community volunteers should receive some training and agree to visit regularly learners identified by the community as particularly vulnerable and their guardians. Welfare associations and faith-based organisations can also provide support and mentoring, and ensure that learners are cared for and involved in community activities. Therefore, teachers and religious leaders need to be trained to counsel learners. The author of the article concurs with Theoharis (2007:223) who believes that the appropriate and profitable utilisation of these assets will enhance “reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational and personal dimensions.”

Provide support for caregivers: Caregivers should be prepared for the challenges of taking care of vulnerable learners. This may include sensitising them to the psychosocial needs of learners. Areas requiring special skills and providing basic training should be identified; for example, parenting, health care, communication and income generation.

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