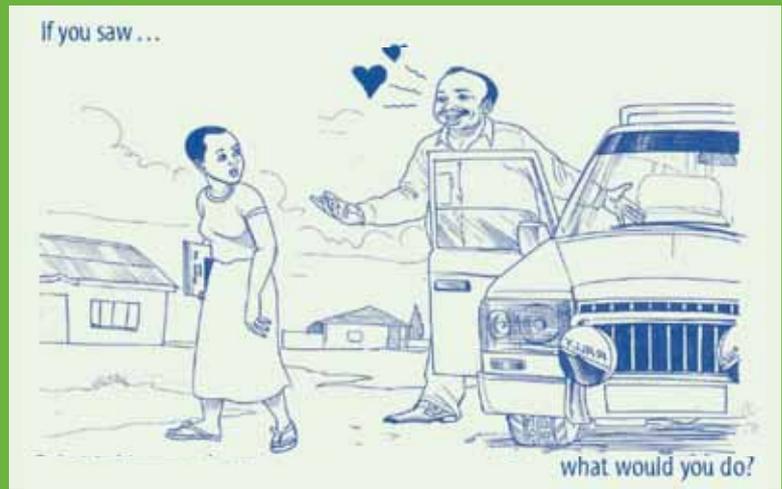


Addressing sexual violence in the education system

Bashi Devnarain and Meda Couzens



Crisp empowers girls to deal with such situations

South Africa has high HIV incidence and prevalence rates, with sexual violence identified by research as one of the drivers of the twin problem. The number of sexually abused children in South Africa is not known, as statistics from the South African Police Service do not provide a breakdown of the age of the victims of sexual offences. However, sexual violence against children is common, and some studies show that 20 percent of women and 13 percent of men have been sexually abused by the age of 18.¹ A study by Tropical Disease Research Centre (CIET) concluded that seven percent of the respondents in a study in South African schools reported that they had been forced to have sex in the past year.² The same study reveals that a history of sexual violence correlates positively with increased risk of HIV infection. This is the background against which the activities of Crime Reduction in Schools Project (Crisp) are undertaken in KwaZulu-Natal.

Crisp is an NGO based in Durban, South Africa, which aims at promoting children's rights and community development in rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal province. We have been involved in various programmes such as preventing violence in schools, promoting girls' education, improving food security and facilitating co-operation between NGOs and local authorities. During 2005-2007, Crisp implemented the Whole School Development Programme, linking home, school and the community, in approximately 50 primary and secondary schools in the province, situated mainly in rural, deep rural and peri-urban areas. The programme supported by Oxfam Novib, had two main components: working with children in schools; and creating a multidisciplinary forum to bring together representatives from various state departments and civil society in each of the five communities where the programme was implemented. This aimed at connecting schools with communities and with the resources that could be used by schools for the best interests of children.

Part of the Whole School Development Programme was a comprehensive HIV and AIDS education project aimed at raising awareness on both, the epidemic as well as violence and abuse. A total of 7,864 children aged seven to 18 years have directly benefited from the

project, while some 39,000 children have been reached indirectly through cascading of information by the direct beneficiaries, or through materials distributed by Crisp at school and community events.

Our intervention in schools took place within the mainstream education through modules specifically designed to address sensitive and useful topics such as human rights, HIV, gender and violence, sexual abuse, character building and self-esteem. The topics were delivered within the Life Orientation classes, based on training manuals prepared by Crisp and adapted to the requirements of the school curriculum. The teaching method employed by facilitators was flexible, and incorporated pictures, role-plays, drawings, story telling and use of newspaper articles to stimulate discussions. Critical and analytical thinking was encouraged to enable children to make informed choices and challenge the status quo. It stimulated the participation of children during class debates and in selecting the topics for class discussions. Some of the topics included human rights, rights and responsibilities, public speaking skills, gender and gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS, sexual abuse and its management. The programme's success was a result of having one session per week (of

Lessons learned

- Facilitators found that creating a good relationship with children in class, stimulating their participation by both listening to them and creating an environment where they can express ideas, contributes to a better comprehension of the educational message.
- As HIV and AIDS issues are related to sexuality, we learned that some educators are reluctant to discuss it openly, which might have a negative impact on the accuracy of the HIV information transmitted to children.
- The knowledge gathered by children through participation in the programme filters down to peers, family members, and members of the wider community. Its potential impact extends beyond the school community although the programme is school-focused.

approximately one hour) involving facilitators and children, and by working jointly with the school management.

Reluctance to discuss sex

Although topics related to HIV and AIDS are included in the school curriculum, Crisp supplemented the efforts of educators. As HIV and AIDS issues are related to sexuality, we learned that some educators are reluctant to discuss it openly, which might have a negative impact on the accuracy of the HIV information transmitted to children. We have always encouraged the inclusion of Life Orientation educators, who teach life skills, during the sessions. However, this presented us with two challenges: the apathy and the reluctance of some educators to discuss sexual matters; and the opposition of a great majority of children, who told us that the discussions might become constrained by the presence of the educators. Every attempt was made by the facilitator and educator to highlight to children, aspects such as confidentiality, trust and ethical conduct by educators and to stress to children that the educators played a pivotal role in lending support to the challenges they faced beyond the Crisp support. In some instances where topics were feared to be of a sensitive nature, there was agreement between the facilitator and the educator for the latter to be allowed to leave the session.

HIV and AIDS topics have not been approached in isolation. The programme aimed at empowering children by providing them with the necessary knowledge to protect themselves against HIV, and impressed upon them the need to act speedily when risks of infection occurred, by for instance, accessing post-exposure prophylaxis. Gender and violence, management of child

abuse and human rights are inextricably linked thus forming a core part of the discussion. During the gender-based violence lessons, our facilitators discussed the health hazards of unprotected sex, sexual abuse, and the measures children should take in order to prevent HIV infection, pregnancy and STI infections. Issues such as stigma and adherence to treatment are also included in the teaching content. Children are also informed about professionals and their roles and authorities they could approach in case of sexual abuse. An important element that is emphasised is the socio-legal aspect of sexual abuse, which is the preservation of evidence, which the prosecuting authority needs to secure a conviction. In every locality where the programme has been implemented, the Crisp management facilitated a forensic expert from the Department of Health to provide training in forensic aspects of sexual abuse.

Critical thinking skills

Feedback received so far has been positive. Critical thinking skills are applied by children in their day-to-day life, and this is an encouraging sign of their further development. Girls and boys pointed out discrimination entailed in virginity testing, and underlined the health dangers posed by the procedure. Children revealed that during such tests, a glove was used for testing more than one girl.³ The procedure posed real danger for their health and had exposed them to the risk of HIV infection.

According to an external evaluation undertaken in July 2007, children regard Crisp-facilitated classes as 'safe places' where they can speak freely and be listened to in a supporting manner. They said they received useful information which they could apply in their lives like what to do in cases of rape or abuse; and had their misconceptions about HIV and AIDS corrected. One such myth is that sex with a virgin can cure AIDS. Some quotes from children illustrate the impact of the Whole School Development Programme:

"I don't allow harassment any more. I can tell what is bad and what is right. I ignore boys when they tease me."

"I'm more careful, especially with boys who didn't take Crisp lessons. I'm scared of outsiders. I know they can be users [manipulators] and that they lie."

"I've helped with information about teenage pregnancy, abuse and rights."

"I helped someone who was raped ... family rape ..."



A Crisp facilitator, Ms Thando Dlamini, recounted the benefits of the children being exposed to content related to the forensic aspects of sexual abuse: “One girl was raped and she told her grandfather what he had to do to help her and take her to the police station.”

This is possibly one of the ultimate goals of the programme where young people can and do act on the information they receive during the lessons in order to inform others and protect themselves.

The internal as well as the external evaluator indicated that the knowledge gathered by children through participation in the programme filters down to peers, family members, and members of the wider community. Therefore, although the programme is school-focused, its potential impact extends beyond the school community.

A key challenge, however, pertained to discourse on eroticism when dealing with sexuality issues. This challenge has been noted and earmarked for attention in the next phase of implementation. It is hoped that through direct and indirect learning, children as well as communities’ knowledge on HIV and AIDS will improve, and this will contribute to changes in behaviours that lead to high numbers of infections; increase the protection against infection; enhance positive health-seeking behaviour; and increase awareness of the link between medical and legal aspects of sexual abuse.

Lessons learned

Several lessons emerged from our experience in schools. Facilitators found that creating a good relationship with children in class, stimulating their participation by both listening to them and creating an environment where they can express ideas, contributes to a better comprehension of the educational message. Issues regarding sexuality are still largely regarded as taboo in the South African society, and often, parents and educators find it difficult to discuss it with children. This exposes children to risks such as HIV infections, STI, sexual abuse, and teenage pregnancies. The professional capacity of our facilitators enabled us to approach this delicate issue, encouraged in this endeavour by both educators and parents. We learnt that building trust and openness between educators and children enhances the impact of the education message. Facilitators were confronted with difficult circumstances whereby children said that the rights-oriented information received in class is inconsistent with the way in which children are generally treated in their families and society. Sometimes facilitators had to deal

with complexities around misconceptions regarding HIV, many stemming from traditional beliefs.

The pilot project ended in May 2007. Programme support resumed in January to end in June 2008. Crisp’s proposal to extend funding up to February 2011 is being assessed by Oxfam and Novib. In future, Crisp will intensify its activities in schools around issues of sexuality, HIV and AIDS and gender. The external evaluation recommended that the content on gender regarding sexuality and power dynamics be strengthened.

More attention will be paid to the educators and parents within communities in order to enhance the sustainability of the project. Trainings will be organised for educators in schools on using the same tools as those applied by the facilitators. Relevant modules for HIV and AIDS and gender-based violence will be presented to the parents of in order to ensure that parents and children are exposed to the same messages. This approach is a response to the concerns expressed by children themselves that the information they receive at school conflicts with various practices within their families. Eventually, the experience accumulated so far will be used as an advocacy tool with the Department of Education for better implementation of the current education policies and also for supplementing training of educators on the issues of sexuality and sexual abuse.

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