

BOHLABELA – BACK TO SCHOOL

Placing Community Work Programme (CWP) participants in schools as education assistants is a win-win solution with schools benefiting and unemployed matriculants both improving their skills and getting valuable work experience.

The Bohlabela CWP operates in the Bushbuckridge Local Municipality in northern Mpumalanga, 90km north of Nelspruit. The population is estimated at just over half a million people living in 135 villages. The CWP is working in 21 of these villages and the work covers a range of activities in the sectors of agriculture, construction, healthcare and education.

More than three quarters of Bushbuckridge residents have no income. For those with an income, more than nine out of 10 report an income of below R 1 600 a month. Almost half the adult population has no secondary education, only 14.5% having completed Grade 12, and 8% completed tertiary education. The province frequently makes the headlines for the worst Matric results. According to newspaper reports in 2009 Mathukwane Secondary School in Zoeknot had a 4.5% pass rate, with only two of the school's 45 Grade 12 learners passing. At Qokiso Secondary School in Demulani only seven of the school's 182 matric learners passed, 4% pass rate.

Bushbuckridge has 213 primary schools which serve an average of 454 pupils a school. There are 119 secondary schools for about 95 000 pupils. However, poor infrastructure, overcrowding, learning material shortages, and a general lack of educators in technical subjects such as science and maths all contribute to poor academic results, visible in Grade 12 pass rates.

Lima Rural Development Foundation, the local implementing agent, decided to fashion the education component of the programme around these shortcomings, with many positive outcomes, for both schools and participants.

The model is simple. Participants who have passed Grade 12 are placed as education assistants in schools in their resident villages. Some of them are taught computer and administration skills. The assistants are not allowed to take on academic tasks, but rather engage in administrative relief to free the teachers to

concentrate on academics. Activities include marking school registers, truancy control, filing documents, assisting in the library, photocopying, patrolling the playground during breaks, assisting with feeding schemes, coaching extra-mural activities, homework assistance and helping teachers to monitor the students as there can be up to 80 students in a class.

"It's a chance to improve my living standard and get experience so I am able to find proper employment," says education assistant Sekatane Thato.

So far, in partnership with Local School Governing Bodies, the Bohlabela CWP has placed 550 education assistants in 105 schools, made up of 50 primary, 29 secondary, 25 creches and one centre for children with disabilities, and the request for education support is growing. At present most of the education assistants are women, many of whom now want to pursue careers in education.

Early childhood development (ECD) is another priority and an assessment of crèches supported by the CWP in Bushbuckridge has been conducted, focused on institutional arrangements, infrastructural conditions, and the availability of learning materials and capacity in the crèches. Educational toys are being distributed to crèches, and a capacity building programme is being developed for ECD co-ordinators and CWP participants allocated to the crèches.

The CWP also helps schools in other ways such as planting vegetable gardens. Crops grown are used either for feeding schemes or to support orphans and vulnerable households. Several schools had been painted. Participants also assist in building toilets and kitchens, fixing doors and repairing fences.

This integrated response to school needs has been received positively. In a village called Ludlow, a local high school approached the CWP to assist with repairing the school fence as well as re-painting walls.



The CWP also helped with a kitchen for the school's feeding scheme.

Also in Ludlow, the CWP team helped with a library at a school. In partnership with the English teacher, who once worked as a librarian, they solicited donations of books from Rotary Club in Johannesburg. They are now trying to source funding for book shelves, tables and chairs.

At Malamule High School participants have cleared away bush in preparation of their new sports field. "It was hard work but we were proud of what we've done," says Sam Magagula, a builder by profession who joined the programme in November 2009.

Another school that has benefited since education assistants joined is Jameyana Primary School in Cottendale next to Acornhoek. According to Somisa Nyathi, the principal, the role of the teachers goes far beyond the task of teaching. "We are everything", says Deputy Principal Robert Chiloane. "We are teachers, social workers, health workers, community builders, lawyers, and police. Everything is on our shoulders and we are too stressed out."

"It is not easy to be a teacher in a poor community. Some of the children have got no uniform, many are hungry and they therefore lack concentration. Others have psychological problems such as stealing. So, instead of being a teacher you become a counsellor," confirms Head of Department Gebrued Ndlovu.

In spite of these challenges, Jameyana Primary School has gained tremendously from CWP. Apart from building new toilets, a kitchen for a school-feeding scheme and a thriving vegetable garden, participants

have made their mark in education. Three young men in particular have made strides that have made the principal extremely proud of her school and CWP.

Joshua Masia helps with typing and managing school files. His long-time dream is to study public administration and work for the government.

Wiseman Mathebula's love for music has seen the school winning trophies at all the choir competitions in the area. While this might seem like an extra-curricular activity without benefits for the academic performance of the school, the principal says that many of the learners are now proud of their school. This boosts their self-confidence – which creates a positive environment for teaching and learning.

Winslow Mathebula's love of soccer has driven him to become a mentor for the school's soccer team. This year they won all the local soccer fixtures. One of their prizes was a game drive at a local game farm in Hoedspruit. The possibility of going on a game drive would have remained a distant dream for the learners if CWP was not involved.

To demonstrate their appreciation for the positive effect of the CWP at the school, Jameyana Primary School Management has agreed to pay for Wiseman's further education tuition. When I asked him what his challenges were he responded: "I wish I could have a melodica and a piano. This would help me in improving my love for music and thereafter give back to the learners."

For Winslow, his dream is to get second-hand soccer boots for the school team who won all their matches playing barefoot.

Assisting the assistants

Dumisani Mdhuli is a facilitator and oversees the different work sectors in Bushbuckridge, including education. "The education sector of the CWP is effective because it offloads work from the teachers so that they can focus on their teaching. The educational assistants also help the teachers to control the students because there can be 86 students in a class which is difficult to handle for one teacher," he says. "There is now less stress for the teachers and therefore many of the schools have improved their results. We have found that many of the school also want more assistants."



Dumisani says that the programme has also helped young people. "There used to be many young people that would wander around the area without jobs or any focus. Now that some of them are involved in the CWP it has provided them with employment and some focus in their lives. Some participants have started getting better jobs because they have gained confidence with their skills development. Some even get jobs in rural development or become supervisors in the CWP. The programme also gives them a small salary which helps them to better their living standards. Even though it is a small amount, it is much better than nothing."

"I enjoy working for the CWP. I am representing the poor, the voiceless. This is God's work and I am serving with a clear conscience, touching people's lives," he says.

This profile is part of a series that looks at local innovation in the South African government's Community Work Programme (CWP). It was produced by Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) for the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCoG). For more information about the CWP go to www.cogta.gov.za/cwp.