Social Accountability & School Governance

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Launched in 2011, the “Social Accountability and School Governance” (SASG) programme aims at increasing the understanding of school communities and other stakeholders in education of their roles and responsibilities in the management and monitoring of the education system, especially at school level. The pilot programme was implemented by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (MoEAC) with support from UNICEF and the European Union (EU).

Traditionally, school principals are largely seen as holding a position of autocracy within schools and in the community. This social position is often associated with both fear and respect, and schools are often seen as the domain of the school principal, where learners, parents and other community members have little say.

This is problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, parents and the greater school community, feel that their responsibility for their child’s education lies solely with the school. Parents often know very little about their children’s conduct and performance at school and are detached from their child’s learning. In households where parents haven’t benefited from education, they feel unable to speak out about the functioning of schools.

The second problem is that the school itself is unsupported and unable to reap the skills and insight that are available in the community. The school is often dealing with the symptoms of problems which originate within the homes and broader society. Tackling symptoms, such as violence, bullying, drug and alcohol use, and low self-esteem, at school level are ineffective without a joint effort to address the source of the problem.

The SASG programme is working to build bridges and strengthen relationships between the schools and the communities through a number of interventions targeting different levels of society.

These are:

1. Edu-tours: A high-energy sensitisation event, which makes use of the ‘Edu’ character to promote learner governance, social accountability and an anti-bullying message.
2. Anti-bullying Campaign: A nation-wide anti-bullying campaign which held sensitisation meetings on the issues of bullying, with an accompanying media campaign.
3. Edu-circle training: Edu-circles are learner governance groups, who work hand-in-hand with the school board. The groups bring a learner-centric stance to decision-making and ensure that the learner voice is represented.
4. School Board Training: A practical school board training manual was developed which has been used to train school board on their role and responsibilities. The manual also provides the school boards with a tool which they can refer back to throughout the year. Prior to the training, many board members were uncertain about their roles, legitimacy and mandate.

The programme so far has seen a significant change in attitudes in the pilot schools, however, there are still areas which require additional support. The stories in this booklet come directly from information shared by school stakeholders. The stories detail the lives and reflections of principals, teachers, learners, and school board and community members, which together create a picture of the school, and their implementation of the SASG programme.

Introduction

From 2015 to 2017: 148 School Boards Trained
1627 Edu Circle Members Trained

Quick Facts

1100 Board Members Participated in Training
57418 Learners reached in the Edu-Circle Anti-Bullying Campaign
Despite being a school in a community which speaks mainly Khoekhoegowab and Afrikaans, Rehoboth Primary School is keen to ensure that all of its learners are also confident in the nation’s official language, English.

“Goeie more” Mr Van Wyk greets the Rehoboth Primary School receptionist in Afrikaans, as he drops his daughter off at school.

“Daddy, you mean Good Morning,” she corrects him, “on Tuesdays we speak English.”

Her father laughs and apologises to his strong-willed daughter. He should have remembered, as every Tuesday at school, all the learners and teachers speak only English. ‘On Tuesdays, we speak English’ started as a way to get the pupils more comfortable with the language before it becomes their language of instruction from Grade 4. However, ‘English Tuesday’ has become so popular, that the children are even speaking English in the playground when not supervised, and are bringing the habit home, encouraging their parents and siblings to speak English for the rest of the day.

Through donations from the community, and inspired by the SASG Programme, the school received a large computer lab and educational programmes. The learners are excited to make use of this technology to practice their English skills through educational games and are motivated to work on their English this way, so much so that they are even practicing during break times or after school.

The parents are also thankful for the initiative, they feel that fluency in English will open more doors for their children, and the practice is also helping them. One mother explained how her daughters’ encouragement was making her more confident in the language and helping her at work.

The family and community enthusiasm for this small school initiative is just one example of the incredibly successful buy-in of the SASG programme, at Rehoboth Primary School, which was introduced in 2013, by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, with the support of UNICEF.

“What we are humbled to see,” says SASG focal teacher, Ms Visagie, “is that the principals of the programme have spilled over into other organisations.” Perhaps before long, on Tuesdays, the whole town will be speaking English.
prior to the implementation of the Social Accountability and School Governance programme, school management at Eenhana Primary School held the responsibility for all school-related matters. This was not because they wanted to be controlling, but simply because this was perceived as the customary way to manage a school. Traditionally, the principal held the role of autocracy and the school board was a present, but only semi-functional body which operated on a need-to-know basis.

Change started with a sensitisation meeting when the school began holding evening workshops to engage with parents and community stakeholders. This allowed parents and community members the opportunity to express areas where their involvement would be valuable. What changed, says school principal Mrs Nekale, “is that we started asking for help from the community, the parents, and even the learners themselves.” The school board training followed, with a period of a few months where the notion of power-sharing was eased in, and a transition time that allowed for a new model to be adopted comfortably. Mrs Nekale, was astounded by the positive response that she received upon asking the board, parents and town for help.

Eenhana runs a school feeding programme, providing a daily meal to the least fortunate children at the school. The government provides fortified porridge for the children, but since the SASG programme, the community now helps to ensure that the school always has firewood for cooking and helps to contribute food donations to diversify the meals.

Learner governance is also encouraged at Eenhana Primary School. These learners are the voice of their peers, relaying information to the school management about their ideas, concerns and priorities. The learners are also, in turn, held accountable for their own actions and are expected to be contributing to the good of the school. These young leaders have been actively involved in fundraising for their school hall, and promoting wholesome afterschool activities, such as sports clubs and cultural groups.

Eenhana Primary School is located in the suburbs of Eenhana, the regional capital of Ohangwena, close to the Angolan border. Eenhana is a small town with a population of just over 5000 people, with newly built infrastructure and the home of regional trade links. The school has 642 learners and 20 teachers and has been implementing the Social Accountability and School Governance programme since 2015.
In the outskirts of Mariental, the capital of the southern region of Hardap, sits the brightly coloured Sonop Primary School. The school is the centre of a community struggling with unemployment, poverty, alcohol dependency, and absent parents. Although, walking around the clean, cheerful school, filled with bright-eyed learners you would never think this was the case.

The school has a group of extremely dedicated teachers who work tirelessly to support, feed, encourage, and build-up their learners. The learners themselves are bubbly, well-spoken and self-assure. The school grounds are spotless, and the classrooms are cheerfully decorated. The school promotes the importance of a strong moral compass and this is evident from the playground to the classrooms.

Despite their successes, the school has felt increasingly disconnected from their town and the broader community. In 2013 school fees were abolished by the Namibian Government, and according to the principal, Mrs Christiaan and the Life skills teachers, many of the parents saw this as being synonymous with the removal of all responsibility for their children’s education, and the wellbeing of the school.

The town itself is a hub for the agricultural and tourism industry, which are the main economic activities of the region. There are a number of thriving businesses and enterprises in and around the town, which contribute to some of the more prominent schools. However, tucked away in its dusty suburb, Sonop felt that they were being forgotten. Community members, business owners, and even parents were reluctant to involve themselves in the school’s activities.

In 2014, Sonop Primary School was identified as a good candidate for piloting the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture’s Social Accountability and School Governance Programme. With this programme came a change in the relationship between the school and the town. In implementing the programme, Mrs Christiaan and her team arranged a ‘Sensitisation Parade’ to raise awareness in the town about the school, their success stories, and the role that the community can play in enriching the lives of the learners, and the quality of the school.

The parade went through the town with songs, costumes and banners, highlighting their activities and programmes. The school approached the line ministries that the school works with, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, and the Ministry of Health and Social Services, as well as local businesses, the police, and school alumni to join forces with them for the event. Shops in the town, and the national telephone service providers also joined in the parade to show their support for the sense of community that the school is cultivating.

As well as the parade, the school hold monthly ‘sensitisation’ events to share information about their activities, challenges and needs. These events have seen people following up with donations and attendance at school events. This school’s Lifeskills teacher, Ms Campbell, has also been working hard to build ties with social workers and referral services to improve the health and psycho-social support available to the learners, both in terms of time and quality.

“We have made great progress, but there is still a lot that needs to be done,” explains Ms Campbell. “We have to keep reminding parents, families, and the community to get involved with the school, and with their children’s lives.”

She adds that at this stage, when the school makes a big effort to reach out, they see results but that “a long term change in mindset is needed”, adding that “the more we do this, the more results we will see.”
Promoting the Learner Voice

Governance styles in Namibian schools have traditionally been authoritarian and top-down, with learners playing a passive role, expected to follow rules that they had no voice in creating.

As part of the SASG Programme selected learners from Rehoboth High School received training and mentoring in launching a learner support and governance group called Edu Circles with the intention to become learner-lead change agents within the school community.

When learners are given no responsibility and are not constructively engaged in shaping their environment, they become passive, disenfranchised, and disconnected from their school, and the paths of their lives, explains the principal. The school feels that the Edu Circles helps learners to realise that they have the ability to make the changes they wish to see. This skill can then be applied when they are faced with daunting challenges and influences in their communities.

Social problems are persistent in the community. There is large-scale substance and alcohol abuse, unemployment is high and poverty is prevalent. Bullying has also been a major problem in the school as the learners copy the use of violence in their homes and the community, and have few healthy outlets for frustration and aggression. By becoming active members of society, and confident in their decisions, learners are also better equipped to address the pressures that they face out-of-school.

Life skills teacher, the formidable Mrs Jarmann, saw great potential in the Edu Circles format to provide support and structure to the children, especially those without parental presence and has encouraged the meetings with great enthusiasm. While the circles are very much coordinated and run by the learners, Ms Jarmann makes herself available to assist and guide the learners.

Gashuan Eiseb, a committed Edu Circles member has great admiration for the group. Meeting up to three times a week, the Edu Circles group allows the learners to discuss school issues, but it also goes beyond only matters arising in the school. Providing a close bond, the Circle in a platform on which the learners can discuss social issues, their own challenges, study together and plan improvements for the school and their peers.

Gashuan has seen his school results improve since he joined the group, and he says he feels happier and more confident. Gashuan has volunteered to become a ‘Peer Educator’. In this role, he works with his fellow learners and tries to address bullying, by addressing the root causes, as equals.

The Edu Circles feed the outcomes of their meetings and engagements with peers back to the school management, and advise the school management on learner issues. A learner is also nominated to attend school board meetings, both to raise concerns voiced by the learners, and to relay information back to the peers.

Eighteen-year old Samuel Mallett has been sitting in the board meetings and feels that the learner’s voice is being valued. As the Edu Circles see their call for improved conditions in the school’s hostel, more afterschool activities and a change in the school monitoring system being implemented, they feel pride and empowerment, knowing that their voices can create change.
The aim of the SASS Programme is to create a sense of community ownership for each child’s education and for the governance of the school. At Rehoboth Primary, the outcome has exceeded expectations.

Although the school is located in one of the town’s poorer neighbourhoods, with many learners living in informal settlements, they pride themselves in having a world standard of education. This sense of pride is palpable. The children carry themselves well, smartly dressed, with heads held high. Each classroom is immaculately decorated with vibrant posters, cheerful curtains and displays of the learners’ work.

Being a pupil of Rehoboth Primary comes with a certain identity stemmed from the achievement of the school. The learners are respected by the teachers and their peers, and they, in turn, offer respect to those around them.

The success of the programme in the school comes down to the culture they have created in which each stakeholder is happy and proud to go the extra mile. The teachers felt that meals provided as part of the school feeding programme could be more diverse, so they established a vegetable garden to supplement the government-issued maize meal, while parents donate meat and fish. They felt that having clean school grounds was not enough, so they started to clean up their surrounding neighbourhood and encouraged others to do the same.

The school leadership is determined that its learners should not feel limited by their humble backgrounds. The school encourages them to take part in regional and national events, such as sports competitions, talent shows, art projects, and charitable campaigns. When their learners exceed, as they often do, the whole school celebrates the successes.

As a result of these initiatives and supportive attitudes, a deeply entrenched culture of leadership and care has been established in the school. So much so that when the house of a learner from the neighbouring informal settlement burned down, it took only a matter of days for the school community to rally together, and raise enough funds and support to build the family a new home. As one of the girls who spearheaded the fundraising said, “At Rehoboth Primary School we look after each other.”

HIV and AIDS is prevalent in Kalkrand and is a cruel reality to many of the children’s lives. The small town is a throughway for trucks from South Africa and sex work is prevalent, intensifying the spread of the virus in the community. In 2016 alone, six learners have lost a parent to the disease. Many children are living with surviving relatives and six learners from the school have lost a parent. There is an alarming number of child-headed households. Many of the children are on antiretroviral treatment and the school helps to ensure that they are adhering to this.

Kalkrand is a village of around 3000 people situated halfway between Rehoboth and Mariental, along a busy trucking route from South Africa. The community of Kalkrand makes its livelihood from selling provisions to travellers, running small micro medium enterprises (SMME’s), and through small livestock farming.

For children growing up in Kalkrand, being part of a nuclear family unit is extremely rare. There are limited opportunities for employment in the area, and many families are separated because parents move out of town seeking work on the commercial farms. Social fragmentation, coupled with high rates of poverty in the area, have contributed to widespread substance abuse, high rates of violence and prevalence of HIV and AIDS.

In order to create a sense of ownership and meaningful community involvement in the school, the Social Accountability and School Governance Programme was introduced introduced by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, with the support of UNICEF. The warm, no-nonsense principal, embodies the programme values and is driving it forward. A priority for the school management has been to ensure that the school becomes, and remains a consistently caring, and safe space in the lives of the learners.

The teachers take the time to talk to learners about their living situations at home. Teachers get to know their learners, who their guardians are, and try to gain an understanding of their home lives. Being a small, close-knit community and having a culture of open communication between the teachers and the learners, the school can quickly respond should they have concerns for a learner’s wellbeing.

This open communication between the school and communities has led to improved teaching and learning outcomes, and behaviour of the learners, who now know where to seek, and receive help.

Whenever there is a death in a family, the principal herself will visit the child in their home, to express her condolences and to show the child that they have the school’s support. The support continues beyond the initial loss. Orphaned children get assistance from the school to identify what social grants they are eligible for, and they are helped to apply.

The school also has an active school feeding programme which provides a hot mid-day meal to over 200 learners. This is due to the high poverty rates in the village. Learners are given a fortified maize meal porridge, supplied by the Government and the school tries to collect money and donations to supplement this meal to provide a balanced diet.

The social problems are persistent, but the teachers at Kalkrand Primary School are determined to break this cycle. They are driven to commit their own time, resources and boundless energy to create a generation of citizens who grow up feeling loved, respected and empowered.
“This event is not the result of one person’s hard work. It came about from many hands, many feet, many hearts and many minds.” These were the words of renowned Namibian singer Lize Ehlers, speaking at a fundraising gala dinner organized by the Sonop Primary School as part of the Social Accountability and School Governance programme.

Lize Ehlers is a popular entertainer who grew up in the southern town of Mariental, in the Hardap region of Namibia, the home of Sonop Primary School. Ehlers has become a household name in Namibia for her singing, her unique sense of style and recently, her expansion into theatre.

In the capital city, Windhoek, almost 270 km away from Mariental, the annual Jazz Festival is taking place. The festival is a highlight on the social calendar, and performers normally jump at the opportunity to take the stage. This year, however, Ms Ehlers has declined the invitation. She chose to rather volunteer her time, and her name, to attract people to this school fundraising event. “My mother worked at Sonop Primary School, and my mother was my best friend,” says Ms Ehlers, “I was happy to miss out of the Jazz Festival, in order to help support the school and this great cause.”

The gala dinner was arranged by the school board, management, and teachers to raise money for a new school hall. Local business people, the town council, and past teachers, learners and parents were encouraged to buy tickets for the event. There was an exceptional turnout and the venue was vibrant with chatter, colour and music. The build-up to the event was a testament to community spirit. Teachers and parents had spent two days cleaning and decorating the hall, families had donated drinks for the evening, a local butchery had gifted the school with meat for the caterers, and DJ’s from the regional radio station had agreed to offer their services free of charge for the night-long celebration.

The gala dinner’s role was also to foster a sense of joint responsibility, which the school hopes will continue to grow with ongoing events and engagements. As well as singing, Ms Ehlers was making use of her platform to encourage the crowd to keep up their good relationship with the school. She spoke passionately about the sense of identity that has always been synonymous with the southern communities of Namibia.

One of Ehlers’ initiatives is a talent identification and mentoring programme called ‘Song Night’. She works with young performers to hone their talent and helps them to secure record labels. One of her protégées is a young man from Sonop Primary School who she identified through her involvement with the schools SASG Programme. “That’s what is so exciting about this project,” says Mrs Christiaan, the Principal. “The benefits are so wide ranging.”

With such encouraging outcomes so far, the school is determined to ramp-up their SASG Programme with increased vigour. As the evening comes to an end, and the party-goers make their way home, the spirit of the event goes with them. Singing can be heard as the supporters of Sonop Primary link arms and take the music with them down the street.
Despite being illegal, corporal punishment is still taking place in many Namibian schools. Traditional approaches to dealing with instances of learner bullying or violence, such as punishing the child without consideration of the underlying factors, have been adopted by some schools.

Rehoboth Primary School is promoting rights-based education practices across the country. At Rehoboth Primary, a holistic approach to the prevention of hostilities and bullying is taken. Rather than simply having a teacher-centric anti-bullying message, the school leadership groups, Edu Circles and school monitors, were consulted to get their ideas on how to prevent bullying. The children got together to do talks and presentations about the effects of bullying, they also encouraged their fellow learners to work together, out with their usual cliques, in fundraising and school improvement projects.

When instances of bullying do arise, they are handled with kindness and consideration. Life skills teachers, the school counsellor, and the principal will speak to the children, both the bully and the bullied and try to establish the root causes of the problem. They then continue to meet with both regularly, following up with areas of concern. Depending on the severity of the cases, the parents may be involved, not to chastise the children, but to form a united front in solving the underlying problems. If deemed necessary, social workers from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare may be consulted.

Repeat offenders are encouraged to get involved with afterschool activities, school clubs and sporting events. “Sometimes the children just need an outlet for frustrations and more confidence,” says Principal Mr Vries. “We also try to give the children an opportunity to take up leadership roles, as this gives them confidence they may be lacking.”

“We encourage them to get involved in regional and national events, through sports, or art clubs, their churches, or even talent shows and beauty pageants. It’s good for them to feel proud of representing their school and town, and to get exposure to the bigger world.”

Bullying is a big problem across Namibia and one which many schools struggle to bring under control. Violence across Namibian culture materialises in many forms, and worrying data from the Global School-based Student Health Survey 2013 shows that 46.4% of Namibian children aged 13-17 had experienced bullying and violence in schools in the past 30 days.
School board training provided a turning point for many of the schools under the SASG programme, as it spurred on numerous activities which benefited the school. However, it was also reflected that the training, ideally, should take place every six months or year to be truly effective and should be conducted in the local languages.

The notion of learner governance was considered to be fairly novel for the schools when Edu-circles were initially introduced. To enrich this project, Edu-circle training should take place at least once a year, and a focal teacher should be trained in the coordination of the group. Further, the development of an Edu-circle curriculum and tool-kit would provide the circle with a better structure to plan their activities around.

Life Skills teachers have a large and wide-ranging number of responsibilities. They are able to play a vital role in supporting learners and addressing psycho-social issues in the school and community, however they need better support and resources. According to the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture’s staffing norms, schools should have one Life Skills teacher for every 250 learners, however, this is often unattainable, and many schools are not making that quota.

School community sensitisation has been highlighted to be one of the most critical aspects to get right for the SASG programme to succeed. The sensitization should cover the role of communities, the role of School Boards, the importance of learner governance, and the national problem of bullying and violence in schools. These sensitization meetings ideally should be taking place every six months to progressively change attitudes and behaviours.

While great progress has been made in enriching school engagement with parents, the methods of communication used have been identified as a bottleneck by the schools’ management. Some teachers feel that the use of more efficient technology for school communication could provide improved results.

These methods reduce printing costs and allow the schools to better ensure that their messages are being received. It also helps to de-formalise the relationship between schools and parents and shows the parents that communication can be two-way.

What has become evident is that the schools which have implemented SASG with success have done so largely due to strong leadership of the principal. There have been incredible examples of leadership within the schools, however, where leadership has not been as strong, the project has not become integrated into the school’s daily activities and has seen fewer successes. Workshops with school principals, and SASG focal teachers would be very beneficial for the sustainability of the programme.

The pilot schools have played a pivotal role in the SASG programme, as they have allowed the MoEAC, and the development partners to identify the strong and weak points in the implementation. The next phase of the SASG programme has taken these finding into account and the modalities of the programme have been updated in an attempt to better institutionalise the programme, ensuring sustainability.

The MoEAC with the support of UNICEF will continue to implement the SASG programme towards ensuring quality education for all children in Namibia. Together with learner, parents and community members- education will remain our shared responsibility. School Governance is everybody’s business, and accountability starts with every one of us.