

A tale of two schools: Rural schools succeeding against the odds



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Johannesburg, November 2004

Photographs by Julie Dawjee and Blantina Shoko
Edited by Valda Strauss
Layout & production by CJ Graphics

Published by CIE Education Services

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Zenex Foundation for suggesting that we further investigate the teaching and learning at these schools. The grant to make this work possible is also acknowledged.

Our thanks go to Mary Glory Pitjeng for making it possible for us to visit the schools. We are most grateful to the principals, teachers and learners for welcoming us to their schools and sharing their stories and experiences so willingly.

Abbreviations

CIE	Catholic Institute of Education
EAZ	Education Action Zone
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team

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Classes are large but well organised with pictures on the walls



1 Background and rationale

A post-implementation study was carried out in 20 Limpopo schools in September and October 2003. These schools were selected because they provided a cross-section of rural, remote rural and Catholic and other public schools.

The post-implementation study made use of classroom observations and numeracy and literacy tests. In addition, researchers filled in a questionnaire looking at management and governance of the school. The purpose of this activity was to capture the context of the interventions. A team of seven researchers observed over 200 lessons.

Teachers in these schools face many difficulties, including poor resources, large classes and cramped working conditions. Despite these difficulties a number of positive aspects were identified in the study.

These included:

- well-kept schools
- good relationships between learners and teachers
- punctual teaching staff who spent the required time at school
- teachers trying out new teaching approaches
- teachers open to new ideas and being mentored
- praise and affirmation for learners when responding to questions or producing good work
- good story-telling skills displayed by teachers
- good classroom management.

There were large classes, which resulted in crowded classrooms. As a consequence teacher movement

was limited in classrooms where there were more than 50 learners. The absence of ceilings and insulation made some the classrooms very hot and learning became more difficult as the day warmed up.

The most common obstacles facing teachers on a day-to-day basis included:

- a shortage of learning resources
- a lack of teacher reference material and guides
- a lack of storage space.

Two schools, Riba Primary School and Mapangula Primary School, performed better than the other schools in the post-implementation tests, and the Zenex Foundation suggested we investigate these schools more closely to see whether there were any particular reasons for this.

A brief sojourn into the literature 2

School effectiveness research has blossomed over the past 30 years. The main concern of this research has been student outcomes; processes in the school were only important insofar as they affected these outcomes. A key feature of this body of research has been the description, often in list form, of the characteristics of effective schools.

Sammons et al (1995) provides a good example:

- Professional leadership
- Shared vision and goals
- A learning environment
- Concentration on teaching and learning
- High expectations
- Positive reinforcement
- Monitoring progress
- Learners' rights and responsibilities
- Home-school partnership
- A learning organisation.

However, developing an effective school is not merely a matter of identifying the factors that characterise effective schools. During 1996 and 1997 Christie and Potterton (1997) undertook a study in South Africa to identify the features characterising schools that operate well despite difficult circumstances. These schools, mainly located in townships and rural areas, functioned well while others failed despite the fact that they were severely impacted by factors like poverty and gang warfare.

Christie and Potterton were at pains to emphasise that the features identified should not be regarded merely as a list of discrete characteristics that can easily be applied as a formula for success in all school contexts. Rather, these need to be seen as

dynamic interactive features of changing school cultures.

Key features included the following:

- A sense of responsibility, including a willingness and ability to concentrate on apparently minor aspects, in and for themselves.
- Leadership involving at least some consultation and participation. The following characteristic features of leadership were evident: adaptability, flexibility of approach, purpose, concern for others and courage.
- Teaching and learning at the centre of the school's activities.
- Authority and discipline being applied in a consistent way to support the focus of the school.
- Concern for all involved in the school. There were personalised relationships between staff and learners and a concern for the wellbeing of learners.

The most pertinent recent local study has been *Getting Schools Working*. This work has its roots in research commissioned by the Presidents' Education Initiative published in 1999 as *Getting Learning Right*, and addresses the methodological and other shortcomings of the previous book. Nick Taylor, Johan Muller and Penny Vinjevold provide a sustained reflection and analysis through their detailed review of the stream of research between 1998 and 2002.

The authors note that considerable financial and other resources have been committed to schooling. Yet, despite allocating more funds to poorer schools,



Time on task

improvements have been slow to emerge. Increased financial allocations on their own are unlikely to have any significant effect on school performance. More has to be done to improve the quality of learning experiences in schools and classrooms to provide equitable learning opportunities for all South Africans. They briefly chronicle efforts on the part of NGOs to improve teachers' knowledge and practice, as well as the organisation of schools. The authors call this inside-outside reform. Rarer outside-in reforms are then discussed. These are characterised by putting in place accountability measures as well as offering support to schools. The controversial Education Action Zones (EAZ) model is examined here. This programme held 67 of Gauteng's worst-performing schools accountable to improve their matric results. The authors conclude that the monitoring strategies used in the EAZ approaches were very blunt instruments that did little to increase capacity within the department. The key assumption that the authors make is that any large-scale change requires key accountability and support measures at strategic leverage points.

The contested area of learner assessment is discussed. Opponents of testing argue that test results are inevitably used to judge learners, teachers, schools or interventions and are therefore largely counterproductive. However, the assessment data gathered by the authors and others uncovers some serious problems. At the end of the Foundation Phase learners tend to have only a rudimentary grasp of the principles of reading and writing, and this deficit is difficult to redress later in their school careers.

The authors provide a detailed account of the factors that influence learner performance. They set out to answer the question: Can schooling make a difference to learners from different social backgrounds? They examine the findings of large-scale descriptive and explanatory studies, as well as small-scale descriptive studies. Their analysis reveals that racial inequality and unequal resources do have an impact on learner attainment. Levels of parental education and wealth also have a strong association with outcomes. African and Coloured children who live with both their parents attain better schooling outcomes than learners who live with one parent or with guardians. Learners who are taught in a language that is not their first language are also at a significant disadvantage. This disadvantage is compounded where their teacher is also not a first-language speaker of the medium of instruction. Taylor and friends propose that teachers be better prepared in their training to deal with language challenges, and that learners be exposed to sustained practice in the language of the school. Schools also need to critically examine their language policies.

A social theory of schooling, based on the work of Basil Bernstein, has been developed to better understand the relationships between the forces that shape the learning experiences of learners.

This theory of schooling is based on three assumptions:

- The socio-economic status of a child's family has a powerful influence on the educational experiences of the child.
- Resource factors like learner-teacher ratios and teacher education levels are associated with

Limited storage space



- learner and school performance.
- Management and leadership factors within the school and district can inhibit or facilitate the progress of learners through the school system.

What emerges from the work of Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold (2003) are certain assumptions of what teaching and learning are about and these informal case studies highlight the following:

- Basic school infrastructure is necessary for teaching and learning to take place. Resources need to be well maintained and learning support materials should be managed effectively in order to ensure the longest possible lifespan.
- Time must be managed to ensure that the school day is used optimally.
- Teachers need to have a clear understanding of what they are expected to teach.
- Systems need to be in place to ensure that teachers plan to cover the intended curriculum.
- Teachers require adequate depth subject knowledge.
- The quality of classroom practice and the extent to which teachers successfully transmit knowledge are important.
- Learners benefit from regular and effective feedback on their performance – both in class and through formal assessments.
- Learners perform better if they have a good command of the language of learning and teaching.

It is not that difficult to isolate a list of factors that make for good schools in difficult contexts in South Africa. However, the particular dimensions of these factors are elusive and are not apparent in all

classrooms or schools. The briskness with which the fieldwork was carried out in this *Tale of two schools* project really only permitted for sketches to be developed for each of the schools, and this approach certainly did not do justice to the complexity of school cultures. As anticipated in the research design, the interplay and interconnectedness of the factors are not straightforward, and this project has not explored this dimension in much detail either.

3 Methodology & approach

A team of two researchers visited the schools for a period of four days. Their main brief was to investigate why these schools were successful and how they had achieved this. Prior to visiting the schools the teams examined the test results and the classroom observation forms collected at the schools in 2003. The visits to the schools involved conducting further observations and carrying out interviews with key staff members at the schools. More attention was paid to supportive features in the school, such as libraries, as these may provide insight into why performance in these schools was better than in other schools.

The research approach can broadly be described as case study. However, budget constraints limited the time the researchers were able to remain at each school.

These case studies are based on detailed information gathered at the schools and include the accounts of subjects themselves.

Case study is a form of qualitative descriptive research that looks intensely at an individual or small participant pool, drawing conclusions only about that participant or group and only in that specific context. It is therefore not the intention to focus on the discovery of a universal, generalisable truth; the emphasis is rather placed on exploration and description. However, the case study method incorporates the idea that people can learn from one another by engaging with each other and with each other's ideas.

In short, the following questions guided the development of these case studies:

- What is the nature of the context of the school?
- What happens in terms of:
 - curriculum and academic structure?
 - school staffing and organisation?
 - teaching and learning?
 - character of student life in the school?
 - governance?
- What forms of accountability exist in the school?
- Why does the school do well in its context?

Case perspectives: 4

Riba and Mapangula Primary Schools

Riba Primary is situated in Riba Cross village, about 10 km from the mining town of Burgersfort. It is a large school with 1 357 learners and 36 teachers. About 70% of the learners come from homes where parents are unemployed and some parents have work in the mines or in Burgersfort.

It is a very popular school in the area and children are bussed in from other areas. The school has won certificates for being well managed for two consecutive years. The school has a number of teachers with university degrees and generally a high percentage of male teachers.

The buildings are in need of paint and the schoolyard is unfriendly but functional. The school has a working library and a science laboratory. The administration block is fairly large and allows for individual offices for some teachers.

Mapangula Primary School is located west of Polokwane. The school is small and has 382 learners and 8 teachers. It has basic facilities and a number of trees, which provide shade in the playground. The windows are all intact, but the buildings are in need of some renovation. Walls need to be painted and some classroom floors also need to be repaired. The school has a fence, which also needs to be repaired. The school grounds are clean and all of the classrooms are also clean. There are no ceilings in the classrooms, which means that the temperatures in the classrooms are very high in summer.

The school has no staff room, library or laboratory and there is no clerk at the school.

Journey to Riba school



5 Case perspective: Riba Primary School

5.1 Background

Travelling through many villages and mountain passes (and avoiding goats and cattle on the road) about 14 km away from the town of Burgersfort Riba Primary School is finally in sight. The one sole blossoming jacaranda tree adds colour to the otherwise brown landscape where the sand and buildings all blend into a brown soup. Teachers' instructions could be heard above the happy sound of children's voices even as we approached the school gates. The school has a barbed-wire fence but the goats wander in through the gaps to nibble in the school grounds, and they bleat a happy welcome to all visitors.

The school was founded in 1980 with six classrooms from Grades 1 to 7 and serves 1 000 learners. The principal, together with the SGB, approached local businesses and the mines to raise monies to build more classrooms. Eventually, a local businessperson provided the school with building material but expected the community to build the classrooms. The school now has 27 classrooms and an administration block, but is proudest of its library. This was built and equipped with a help of a member of the Peace Corps working at the school who raised the necessary funds in the United States. Parents contributed R20 each to help towards building the library. It is well stocked with both fiction and non-fiction books and the range of books is suitable for all age groups. This is the only school in the region that boasts a library and great pride is taken in their achievement.

The school is located in a very rural part of Limpopo where 70 percent of parents at the school are unemployed and most eke out an existence doing odd jobs. Those who are employed work at the platinum mines. Single parents head a significant number of families. Although this is a very rural area there is very little subsistence farming because of the scarcity of water.

5.2 The school environment

The buildings are in good repair and the school has an administration block with several offices. Although much of it is dark, it is well maintained and very neat. The principal, Mr Alfred Mkhabela, sits behind his desk in a well-ordered office which proudly boasts the many awards the school has received for various activities including managing the school.

The classrooms are kept clean and are in relatively good repair. Some classrooms have good pictures and are child friendly. However, most classrooms are overcrowded with as many as 50 learners in some of them.

There is a lush vegetable garden run by volunteer parents, which supplements the school's feeding scheme. The children who were asked about the meals said that they enjoy the school meals and look forward to them. The surplus vegetables are sold to raise money for the school.

Learners outside Riba school



5.3 Life and work of the school

The school is well managed with clear processes in place. All the required policies for governance and management are well documented and from the records that were perused there was evidence that policies were being implemented. The school has a clear vision that is boldly displayed in the office: 'To create a vibrant school with good-quality education where everybody is involved. A school with motivated learners who are eager to learn and a school which the community will be proud of.' The principal has managed to align his staff behind this vision and we were able to conclude from our observations and conversations with the staff and management that the school attempts to live this mission.

The emphasis in this school is on learning and everyone places high value on achievement and on learning. The principal explained the goal of the school:

'Everything I do is for the child. We want to teach the whole child so that the child grows up able to face the world and is able to be economically active. Therefore the emphasis in the school is on learning. Everyone is encouraged to learn, including the teachers as well as our parents.'

Teachers are constantly encouraged to upgrade their qualifications and to attend workshops and in-service training courses:

'We are taught to put our children first and that has been the most motivating factor for us working so hard.'

Every quarter teachers meet to discuss results. Management expects to see lesson preparations from every teacher weekly or monthly and feedback is provided so that problems can be overcome and support provided. The school also has working subject committees where issues of teaching and learning are discussed. Teachers come together not only to plan their work but also to monitor each other.

According to the principal and teachers:

'Every quarter we get teachers together to hold a school-based seminar where teachers bring all the learners' books and staff evaluate the work in sub-committees. We then give comments to each other and make suggestions for improvement.'

The staff feel that by working together and by getting comments and suggestions from each other they can sustain the level of motivation to do better. Teachers are no longer afraid of having their work commented on and suggestions for improvement being made to them because the emphasis is not on criticism but on improvement.

The management is also encouraged to do class visits to monitor the work of the teachers. This is a negotiated process where teachers invite the management to observe their teaching. The class visits are not imposed and this helps with improving classroom practice. It is not seen as an 'inspection'. The fact that teachers were willing to be observed demonstrated a level of maturity and commitment that is rare in most schools.

Teachers also help each other by sharing resources and team teaching so that skills are easily transferred. In the junior primary section teachers



The school has a library and librarian

demonstrated areas in which they were competent to each other:

'We talk constantly about our work. We do not want to kill learning so that when we receive learners we always check the levels of the learners with their previous teacher and then we plan forward. Our teachers are very motivated and disciplined. We stay in until late to plan our lessons. The bottom line is that we want to make a difference in the lives of the children. The management supports us in all our efforts. This helps to keep us motivated.'

The learners are given homework almost every day and parents are encouraged to help if they can or at least ask their children what homework has been given for the day so that they can ensure that it is done. Many of the parents are not well educated and some have no schooling, but this is not seen as a barrier to support learning. The link between home and school is seen as being very important in ensuring that learning remains consistent and all pervasive. Parents are encouraged to visit the school in order to discuss the learners' progress. Once tests are written parents are invited to review progress. Problems with learner behaviour are also discussed. Parents are also encouraged make use of the Adult Education classes in the afternoons and, according to management, when children see their parents coming to school to learn they themselves become motivated. Learning becomes a family business. The principal elaborated:

'We see the parent as a key factor in the school's success. Without their involvement we cannot sustain high attainment levels. They are partners

in the work we do. We encourage parents to supervise homework and take an interest in their children's work. Parents, although poor and unemployed, all pay fees and support the school in everything we do. We have opened the library to give access to the parents as well because we want everyone to read.'

The school celebrates and recognises achievement by organising awards evenings where learners receive awards for all aspects of excellence in school life including uniforms and attendance. The school also focuses on sports and extra-curricular activities. The learners are taken on excursions to broaden their knowledge and experiences. The principal and staff had recently gone on an excursion with the learners to the coast.

5.4 Lessons observed in numeracy teaching

There was evidence of good lesson planning. Concepts were clearly explained. There was good evidence of progression from one grade to the next. Lessons were introduced with reinforcement of previous work. Most teachers explained the purpose of each lesson. There was also some evidence of differentiation although more could be done to help the learners who were struggling. Learners were encouraged to work co-operatively in groups. Some teachers gave learners problems to solve, thus encouraging critical thinking.

There was some evidence of continuous assessment where the teachers recorded learners' responses to questions. But assessment still needed more

Staff and learners on an excursion on the beach



attention as many of the lessons did not have any clear assessment mapped out that matched the outcomes. Teachers also created opportunities for learners to carry out their own investigations. For example, learners were sent out to find shapes in their environment, measure them accurately and calculate area. There was also evidence of some teachers using apparatus to teach concepts. Teachers used a range of approaches including whole-class teaching, followed by group work and individual exercises.

5.5 Lessons observed in literacy teaching

Most of the teachers were relaxed and friendly with learners. They used humour and encouraged learners to answer questions. Children were not afraid to make mistakes because of the positive teaching and learning atmosphere in the classes. Most teachers praised the learners. The teachers used a variety of strategies to teach literacy. Sometimes teachers switched language from English to Sepedi to explain meaning. Most teachers were comfortable with teaching phonics, word recognition and reading in English. They displayed a high level of confidence. Teachers also used good questioning skills and often asked 'why' questions to elicit more complex responses.

In all the lessons observed teachers were using the graded readers to good advantage and most learners were able to read from them and to respond to the questions asked. Teachers used flash cards, pictures and charts to stimulate learning.

The teachers who are part of the current CIE programme had this to say:

'This year the CIE helped us with practical workshops and material in literacy and numeracy. The learners use discovery methods to learn and they are really enjoying the work. Teachers have changed in the way they teach and the way we assess. This is because of the success of the CIE interventions.'

5.6 Areas for improvement in learning and teaching (numeracy and literacy)

In some instances learners seemed to rely on memory as opposed to demonstrating an understanding of concepts taught. Most of the lessons were learner-centred but a few were still using the 'cup-and-jug' method of teaching where learners were the empty cups that needed to be filled with knowledge.

Some teachers were giving formulaic definitions that were not linked to learners' experiences. In some classes the teacher used the 'Big Book' and learners at the back of the class struggled to read from it. In some classes the slow-paced learners were not given the attention they needed to help them with their learning. In most instances this was not possible because of the large class numbers.

Although English is the official language of teaching and learning, teachers often reverted to Sepedi to clarify concepts.



Teachers planning the curriculum

5.7 Strong, positive leadership

The principal, according to his staff and parents, is a very good leader and a good role model. His passion for learning permeates the organisation. Teachers and parents are encouraged to study, to read and to use the library. The principal is hard working and thus provides good motivation for everyone.

The SMT works closely together to support the principal's vision of a learning organisation. The staff is also involved in decision-making.

The teachers remarked that:

'At staff meetings we talk about ways to improve our learning. We also discuss ways in which we can improve attainment levels.'

The leadership also works closely with other schools as well as feeder schools so that standards are established and maintained. The principal is an activist. Several years ago, driven by a need to improve attainment, he approached the former Model C School in Burgersfort to assist him with raising standards.

He explained:

'You cannot wait for things to come to you but instead have to reach out to make things happen. That is our key reason for success. We reach out to parents, to communities and to other schools and institutions and get all the help we can.'

The relationship among teachers is also good and they expressed that they are motivated. When asked what made this possible they gave the following

reasons:

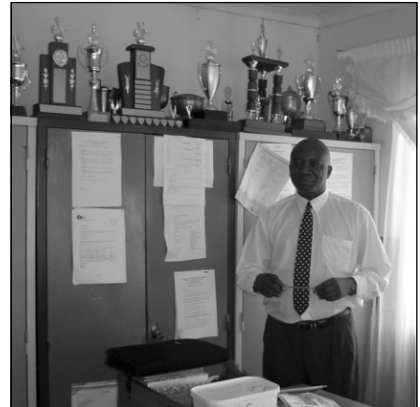
- They are well supported by management.
- The principal is focused and a good role model.
- They work well together, have known each other for some time and are not afraid of criticism from each other.
- Teachers who attend workshops report to the staff and are expected by the SMT to report and share the knowledge with the rest of the staff. This is school policy.
- They have good resources.
- Several of the teachers have received awards in the Best Teacher category in past years and this has encouraged healthy competition amongst staff who want to aspire to the same level.
- Parent and community support is good and affirms their work.

School policies are also developed by teachers to provide the school with guidelines for working together. The Whole School Evaluation Unit of the province had recently evaluated the school, and although no formal report is yet available the verbal feedback given is that Riba is a good school.

5.8 Challenges facing the school

The greatest challenge facing the school is to be able to maintain the levels of teacher motivation as the demands of the curriculum become more complex. The second challenge is creating distributive leadership. According to Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink (2004) one way for leaders to leave a lasting legacy is to ensure that others share and help

The principal's well-organised office.
Trophies boast of the school's
achievements



develop their vision. According to Hargreaves and Fink (2004:37):

'Leadership succession therefore means more than grooming the principal's successor. It means distributing leadership throughout the school's professional community so that others can carry the torch after the principal has left.'

There is also a lack of medium to long-term planning. The new revised national curriculum statements have not yet been used to plan across grades and phases. The suggested strategies in the RNCS documents for assessment also need to be incorporated in the plans.

Teachers have difficulty in teaching creatively in large classes. There are not enough desks and chairs to accommodate all learners. The unrelenting heat exacerbates the difficulty of teaching in overcrowded classes. The fact that the teachers who have left the school have not been replaced adds to the burden of the teaching load. The school does not have enough support staff and therefore teachers are also expected to help with administrative duties. For example, a teacher at the school spends 30 percent of her teaching time managing finances.

The school receives little support from the department officials who visit them only when there is a problem and very little curriculum support is provided.

6 Case perspective: Mapangula Primary School

6.1 Background

Mapangula School is located west of Polokwane. The school was founded in 1962 with 150 learners and now has over 300. It is a small public school situated in a rural village. The main activity around the school is agriculture with most people practising subsistence farming. Unemployment is around 60 percent and those who do have full employment work in the cities. Poverty is rife. Many learners live with single parents or with grandparents. The community faces many socio-economic problems and the principal explained that at least 39 learners had emotional problems whilst 38 faced poverty and hunger. There are a number of orphaned children who are either left alone or are being brought up by their older siblings but who have no adult taking care of them.

The school buildings are run down and the classes are overcrowded. The grounds are not developed but there are trees for shade under which learners play. The school is filled with the happy sounds of children, laughing and learning. These are the first sounds that welcome you and they are different from the usual sounds of teachers teaching above the voices of children.

6.2 Life and work of the school

The same sounds that greeted us outside were heard in the classrooms. Children at this school, although poor in appearance, smiled a lot, were eager to answer questions and were confident. It was when we went into the classrooms that we understood the reason for this. The rarest of occurrences was

witnessed here when a learner asked a teacher: 'Why does this happen Ma'am?' in a social science class and the teacher then asked the other learners if they could answer the question. This generated a variety of responses from learners and a good discussion ensued which was well managed by the teacher. It became apparent that this kind of discussion and questioning was common practice in this class. Also, the teachers had detailed lesson plans, indicating that they knew the content as well as the approach they were going to use. Being well prepared, according to the teachers, gave them confidence in the classroom. Almost all teachers observed taught with passion. There was evidence of logical and systematic construction of a single lesson. Although not all teachers could produce clearly documented methods of assessment, the teachers were beginning to think about and apply some strategies for assessment.

Many teachers displayed a sense of personal power and presence in the classroom. The teachers' explanations and expositions were all clear and deliberate but not tedious. Learners understood what was being explained. The books that were perused all had sufficient exercises and there was evidence of good progression. The learners were very keen to answer questions and the teachers' questioning skills were, although not always rigorous or challenging, good. The learners all displayed confidence and felt safe to make mistakes. This confidence was due largely to the fact that teachers were well prepared for the lessons. All the lesson plans included a section on resources used to find information. This was a standard requirement by the principal and forced teachers to improve their content knowledge. Good

Children playing happily
under the trees



use of textbooks was also in evidence and helped teachers to teach with focus and clarity. Teachers used praise and encouraged learners. In most classes we observed the teachers were beginning to think about differentiation and worked with slow learners while the rest of the class continued with their class work. The exercises for slow learners were also on a different level. Some teachers encouraged learners to think creatively and construct their own stories. The teachers explained that the training resources provided by CIE encouraged them to work more creatively and to think of interesting ways to teach.

6.3 Lesson observations in numeracy

The teachers observed all had detailed lesson plans with activities clearly written out. However assessment still seemed to be a problem as strategies were not always clear and sometimes did not match the purpose of the lesson.

The questioning skills of teachers were good and teachers asked probing questions, which kept the learners engaged. Teachers constantly reinforced basic operations and the learners could do quick mental calculations using all four operations. The teachers' explanations were very clear and concepts were well explained. Slow learners were given extra tuition whilst the rest of the learners carried on with their class work. However, insufficient challenges were provided for the fast learners who had finished their work. Children were given adequate homework to reinforce class work. The learners were eager to answer questions and no sooner had the teacher

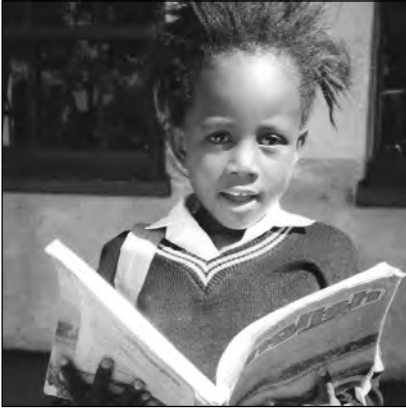
finished asking the question than they waved their hands frantically to be asked. The classroom atmosphere was relaxed and teachers joked with the children, making them feel safe and encouraging them even when they made mistakes. There was some but not sufficient use of mathematical apparatus to help learners understand mathematical concepts.

6.4 Literacy teaching and learning

In most of the lessons observed the 'Big Book' was used for whole-class reading. There was also evidence of individual reading done in some of the classes. The learners were able to read fluently and good links were made to previous lessons. Children were encouraged to relate their own stories and to construct their own sentences. There was also evidence of teachers contextualising stories effectively to engage learners. Teachers used a variety of strategies which included word-attack skills as well as reading for meaning. There was evidence of integration of reading and writing happening organically. Teachers asked good, probing questions that required learners to think about the issues being discussed in the stories. The graded readers were used effectively for progression. In many of the lessons observed the learners worked co-operatively in groups.

6.5 Areas for improvement

Teachers need to think about assessment strategies that match the purpose of lessons in detail. The



Literacy is encouraged at an early age

outcomes of lessons need to be explained to learners so that they understand what they are expected to know or to do. Although the large classes make co-operative learning difficult, paired learning and other forms of grouping can be used more effectively. Differentiated group work can encourage teachers to give more attention to slow learners as well as accelerate learning for the fast learners.

6.6 Strong, positive leadership

The principal manages this pervasive positive learning and teaching atmosphere. He is a strong instructional leader who is passionate about reading and writing. He believes that if the learners can master these basics, then they will be able to do anything else required of them and this is the reason why he is so passionate about reading and writing. This was evident in the lesson preparations of teachers and the delivery of lessons observed. The principal monitored and regularly supervised the work of each and every teacher. He checked teachers' planning books daily and made comments and suggestions.

The principal believes that:

'It is best to monitor work every day, otherwise you do not know what is happening. Teachers are changing but they are not consistent and often go back to their bad habits. They struggle with maintaining change. I have therefore to constantly monitor, encourage and praise them so that they can maintain the new ways of teaching.'

Although the teachers were not always comfortable with close supervision, they did agree that it helped them achieve good standards of work and attainment.

According to the principal, the learners' general improvement in reading and mathematics was attributable to the staff agreeing to focus on certain areas and to share test papers with other teachers. Also, the principal felt that the writing component of literacy had been largely neglected and he was therefore at that time encouraging teachers to give more written work, including paragraph writing, composition writing, creative writing and letter writing. The school was also experimenting with group writing where marking was not difficult and children could have fun working together. There was also a lot of peer work among learners as the older learners were encouraged to assist the younger ones with their reading and mathematics.

Teachers were expected to use new reference materials to prepare and thus they were also expected to be constantly seeking new ideas and be reading about their subject matter. Lesson plans had to reflect the resources that teachers were using. At the beginning of each year teachers administered baseline tests to determine the levels of the learners at the reception year. This helped them to plan for the year.

Although there was no cohesive documented curriculum plan at the school, planning was done per grade and concepts to be taught were discussed for progression purposes. The principal had set time aside for teachers to come together to prepare

The principal with some of his staff



lessons for phase and grade purposes. This was evident in the preparation books. This collaborative work ensured progression as well as inspired teachers to be creative. Teachers all agreed that they had learned from each other when they came together to plan. This experience had been translated to classroom practice where it was observed that teachers encouraged learners to learn from each other. The principal often carried out demonstration lessons for teachers and this also encouraged other teachers to do demonstration lessons for each other. These lessons were done in the class and the teacher who observed took notes and then practised some of the strategies under the guidance of the 'expert' who might be a peer or the principal. This practice has been modelled from CIE interventions. According to both the teachers and the principal:

'The intervention by the CIE has added good value to the work of the school. The programme is very practical and therefore not daunting for teachers. The lesson demonstrations have helped us teachers to actually observe how the lesson works. The resources, especially the graded readers, have made reading so much more interesting for the learners and easier for teachers to teach reading.'

The principal made decisions with one other member of his management team and then took the decisions to the staff for discussion. However, the teachers would have liked more direct involvement in decision making.

The governing body, according to the management, was very supportive and members attended regular

meetings, made valuable suggestions and were involved in all aspects of governance. According to the principal the SGB was a conduit for parents to become involved in the life of the school. Most parents helped ensure that the learners completed their homework tasks, thus maintaining the pressure for performance. The fundraising committee was not really functional because of the poor communities surrounding the school and the governing body had not found other ways to raise money. Therefore, buying additional resources to help with teaching and learning still remained a challenge.

The school did not have formal, documented policies but the principal was working on them. However, the school had processes that were working effectively and although there was no written vision and mission the school was driven by the unwritten vision of high-quality attainment. The financial records of the school indicated that the resources were well managed.

6.7 Challenges facing the school

Mapangula is a poor school working and succeeding against all odds. It has a strong visionary leader and the staff responses from the interviews suggest that without this leadership it would not have been possible to maintain the same levels of attainment. There is therefore no sustainable leadership in the school. Distributive leadership needs to be developed so that opportunities can be created for all staff to take leadership roles and also for succession planning.

Teachers commute to school from a distance and



Happy children at Mapangula

use shared transport that leaves at set times. This means that teachers can't always stay in school to do extra team planning when necessary. The new demands of the curriculum need to be integrated into the current framework and will add to the burden of teachers already stretched to their capacity.

The school also needs to develop extra-curricular activities to provide a more rounded curriculum and this will require more resources and time.

Lessons learnt from the case schools 7

The following key themes have emerged from the limited observations done in the two case schools:

- These show that rural isolation and limited resources in conjunction with large classes do not necessarily limit a school's capacity to improve.
- The added resources provided by the Zenex Foundation through the CIE, have enabled the schools to buy much-needed materials for instructional change to happen. Both schools manage the resources well and have put in place structures for their proper use.
- The schools have strong instructional leaders in their principals whose energies are focused on curriculum delivery. The targets set by the instructional leaders are focused on high-priority areas like numeracy and literacy. Both leaders are able to successfully align the people within the school to move in the same direction. This has helped to produce the changes needed for improvement.
- In both schools the leaders expect teachers to prepare in detail and this has helped the teachers, especially at Mapangula, to become confident deliverers of the curriculum and to encourage learners to ask questions.
- Staff learning and development are seen as a process and everyone is encouraged to learn both formally and informally. Intensive one-to-one training and coaching support provided by CIE as well as teams of teachers within the schools have assisted with changes in classroom practice. The CIE literacy and numeracy programme did not overwhelm teachers because it was a clearly defined, closely prescribed and scripted one, allowing teachers to work with small chunks of learning at a time, thus building confidence and competence step by step.
- Both the principals are aware of the difficulty in bringing about lasting change and have therefore provided both support and pressure by simultaneously monitoring teachers' and learners' work, coaching, evaluating classroom practice and giving feedback. The case schools have also made sure that time and space as well as opportunities for teachers to share knowledge and plan together have been made available to keep up the momentum of continuous improvement and change.
- Finally, involving parents and the community in supporting children's learning, particularly at Riba, has created opportunities for learner attainment to be sustained. This has also helped to build trust between the school and the community.

8 Conclusion

Although we were able to identify the above recurring factors in these two schools which helped the schools to improve learners' attainment levels in numeracy and literacy, we are also aware that change is difficult to maintain and that school improvement is the result of a complex interplay of factors. The nature of school improvement, especially in areas where the odds are stacked against smooth or rapid changes, has yet to be thoroughly understood and measured. There still remain further areas of enquiry into how and why severely disadvantaged schools succeed. These two schools have a major lesson to teach, and that is that every school has the opportunity to succeed against all odds. The opportunities for success do not arise under the same circumstances for all. On the contrary, they present themselves in many different ways, large or small. The key common denominator seems to be that if schools form a consistent habit of creating or taking advantage of these fleeting opportunities, the result is an accumulation of positive progress (Christie & Potterton, 1997). Schools need to be constantly learning in order to grow and to find new solutions as they face increasingly complex demands from their environment and from the education authorities.

In *The Living Company*, de Gues (1997: 50) suggests:

'To cope with a changing world, any entity must develop the capability of shifting and changing, of developing new skills and attitudes: in short the capability of learning ... the essence of learning is the ability to manage change by changing yourself – as much for people when they grow up as for companies when they live through turmoil.'

References 9

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