

## Experiences of learners from informal settlements

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The purpose of this article is to describe the experiences of learners from informal settlements at predominantly Indian secondary schools in Lenasia, as well as their experiences at the informal settlements themselves. Grade 8 learners from the Thembelihle and Hospital Hill informal settlements in Lenasia, Gauteng province, were identified as the target population in the study. A qualitative research design that was explorative, descriptive and contextual was used. Data were collected through individual interviews, focus group interviews, life studies/essays and a projective test. Analysis of the data revealed that learners experience a variety of negative feelings, that they were misunderstood by their educators and other learners and that they experienced racial discrimination, bullying and ganging-up. On the positive side, however, they felt privileged to be in schools where there was a good quality of education. At the informal settlement they experience difficulty in studying. Unemployment and poverty further add to their negative experiences, and make the learners feel disempowered. On the basis of the findings, several recommendations are made for an ecosystemic intervention with the learners, with specific roles of families, government, schools, and the community in the empowerment of learners from the informal settlements.

### Introduction and rationale

The key principles adopted by the government with regard to the systemic transformation of education are: redress, equity, democracy and accessibility (ANC, 1995:4-5). Such principles have paved the way for all public schools to be open to all learners, irrespective of race, gender, class, religion, culture or disability (Engelbrecht, Kriegler & Booysen, 1996:34). This means that schools can no longer exist as learning institutions for exclusive groups but will have to become desegregated (Beckmann, 1992).

Whilst the government has been able to facilitate structural and systemic change at certain government levels it has not been able to do likewise with regard to personal and interpersonal level changes. However, this is not the sole responsibility of the government, but a collective responsibility of all individuals, communities, religions, institutions and organisations. Research in the South African context has indicated that, when learners from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are brought together, several problems emerge, such as: conflict (Sasinsky, 1993), social adjustment (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 1999), behavioural and emotional difficulties, learning difficulties (Donald *et al.*, 1999), poor self-concept and self-esteem (Atherley, 1990; Whistler, 1991) and language difficulties (Donald *et al.*, 1999). Most studies have indicated that black learners are negatively affected in open schools, especially when they are a minority group (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) observed that some black learners in the United Kingdom experienced difficulty in open schools largely as a result of an omission to consider a critical factor that contributes positively to their development, that is the social context, including socio-economic conditions, ways of life and cultural patterns. He has developed an ecological model that explores different systems within a social context. A blend of ecological and systems theories has given rise to the ecosystemic perspective which provides the theoretical background for this study (Donald *et al.*, 2002).

Ecological theory focuses on the interdependence and relationships between individuals and their physical environment, viewing "different levels and groupings of the social context as systems where the functioning of the whole is dependent on the interaction between all parts" (Donald *et al.*, 2002:47). For example, a school is a system with different subsystems comprising staff, learners, curriculum and administration, interacting with other outside systems, such as the family or local communities.

Learners' interaction in the school and environment have an impact on their academic and social development (Donald *et al.*, 1999; Engelbrecht, Green, Naicker & Engelbrecht, 1999). If schools do not take cognisance of the environmental contexts of learners, or of their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, then both learners and educators are likely to have negative experiences at their schools. This

problem is further compounded if educators are not trained to work with learners from diverse backgrounds (Donald *et al.*, 1999; Kruger & Schalkwyk, 1997; Lemmer & Squelch, 1993). The tendency is then to locate problems that emerge with the learners themselves rather than within the system that needs to be modified (Pillay, 1996). The assumption that learners from informal settlements might be disadvantaged with regard to their academic development, as a result of their environmental conditions, will be further explored by describing the experiences of learners from the Thembelihle and Hospital Hill informal settlements in Lenasia.

### Statement of the problem

In 1994 the schools in Lenasia admitted black learners who lived in the informal settlements. Not long afterwards many Indian educators began to express their difficulties with them, especially with regard to language, teaching and learning (Pillay, 1996:2). In addition, there were several complaints about the behaviour of these learners and their inability to complete their schoolwork. Educators also complained about them regularly coming late to school, as well as perceiving reluctance on the part of the learners from the informal settlements to socialise with Indian learners. The writer, in his capacity as a school psychologist, visited the schools in Lenasia to address the above problems. However, it soon became apparent that the 'problems' the educators were identifying were symptomatic of deeper underlying behavioural patterns that were generated by the experiences of learners both at their schools and the informal settlements themselves. Hence, their experiences needed to be explored in a holistic and integrated manner to obtain a thorough understanding thereof.

### Aims and objectives of the study

The purpose of this research was firstly to provide a detailed description of the experiences of the learners from the informal settlements both at the settlements themselves and at the schools they were attending. The second purpose was to make recommendations on the basis of the findings for a comprehensive programme of intervention to support these learners.

### Research design and method

A qualitative research design that was contextual, explorative and descriptive in nature was used in the study. The researcher attempted to learn about and present the experiences of the learners as they described themselves (Coe, 1991; Zaharlick, 1992). It is contextual since it focuses on a specific social and educational context, that is the experiences of Grade 8 learners from informal settlements at schools in Lenasia. Exploration is used in this study to gain insight into the experiences of the learners both at their homes and schools.

Data were collected from the respondents using two individual

interviews as a pilot study (Oppenheim, 1992), three focus group interviews with eight to ten participants per group from three different secondary schools (Morgan & Spanish, 1989; Wilson, 1989), two life studies/essays (Wolcott, 1988) and a projective test with ten learners from the five secondary schools chosen. The use of more than one method and source of data collection allowed for triangulation, which contributed to the reliability and validity of the study. It also allowed for a dense description of the experiences of the subjects concerned.

The central questions asked of the learners were:

- "What are your experiences in your present school as a learner from the informal settlement?" and
- "What are your experiences as a resident of the informal settlement?"

The population in this study consisted of individuals living in a specific informal housing community in Lenasia. The sample was purposively selected from the target population with subjects chosen according to specific criteria (Burns & Grove, 1987:218). The following criteria were used to select the respondents: Grade 8; gender; attendance of an Indian secondary school in Lenasia; conversant in English; voluntary participation; and informed consent to audio-taped interviews.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and the transcripts read and analysed to gain a holistic picture of the experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 1985; Kerlinger, 1986). The researcher highlighted thoughts, words, phrases and actual quotes that reflected possible themes. He then identified major categories into which units of meaning related to them were underlined and placed. Sub-categories within the major categories were then identified. Relationships between major and sub-categories were identified and reflected as themes. Finally, the results were prioritised according to the number of participants who had experienced the same aspect. The researcher then gave the transcripts to a panel of experts for their independent analysis. This panel comprised four people experienced in qualitative research. The researcher met with the panel after it had completed its analysis of the data to reach consensus on the findings.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985:290-300) model was used to ensure reliability and validity of the study whilst several ethical measures were adhered to. These included the informed consent of the participants so as to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were informed that involvement in the research was on a voluntary basis and they had the freedom to withdraw without any penalty (Mason, 1996; Silverman, 2000). A plan was drawn up to provide them with regular feedback on the study.

## Results

### Experiences of learners at secondary schools in Lenasia

The common feelings expressed by learners as a result of their experiences at the schools in Lenasia are dealt with in turn below:

#### *Fear and anxiety*

Both learners who were interviewed individually expressed their fear and anxiety at being at the schools in Lenasia. In this context these were due to the fact that they were not Indians: "The first time I went to Indian school I was scared because the school did not belong to the blacks". There was also a fear of educators and a fear of active participation in classroom lessons: "I get scared the teacher would scold me. I fright when I spell or read" and "I don't answer questions because I am afraid that I would get the answer wrong." Sometimes they were afraid to let other children in their class know that they had not done their homework because they reported it to the teacher: "The children tell I did not do my work ... I get afraid". St John (1975:49) found that black children in a new and unfamiliar setting experienced social threat and anxiety, which inhibited their progress. The fear and anxiety of learners from the informal settlement could be further exacerbated by the fact that they are a minority group in their schools.

#### *Anger*

Both learners who were interviewed indicated that they became angry

when Indian learners mocked and teased them: "the Indian children start laughing ... I get cross." This feeling of anger is further confirmed by the anger expressed by learners in the focus group interview. They also became angry when the teachers and Indian learners were racist towards them as well as when Indian learners fought with them: "We get angry because both the teachers and the Indian children do this [referring to being racist] to us" as well as "the children hit us at school and this makes us more angry".

#### *Sadness*

Learners felt sad when teachers insulted them and treated them differently from the Indian children: "She gives us work but shouts and tell us [referring to black learners] how to do it". Some learners were so sad that they wanted to go back to their previous schools, even if the quality of education they received there was not as good as at their present schools: "Sometimes I wish I can go back to the school in Soweto". The feeling of sadness is further reflected in the sentence completion projective test where 43 out of 50 learners indicated that they felt sad and 37 of the learners indicated that they were unhappy at their schools.

#### *Loneliness*

The feeling of loneliness was evident in the following statements made by two learners: "I did not have a friend ... I was lonely" and "the first time I just sit quietly the whole day". The learners from the informal settlement felt lonely when the Indian learners did not want to socialize with them, indicating that the latter had a tendency to stick together and thus making them feel isolated: "The Indian children stay together and leave us all alone." Black learners in turn remained in their own groups. This finding indicates that educators' perceptions mentioned earlier in the statement of the problem, that learners from the settlements were reluctant to socialise with Indian learners, is only partially correct. It is a two-way process where both groups of learners are equally responsible for socialising.

Similar results have been observed in other studies (Christie, 1990; Sasinsky, 1993). Case studies documented by Frederikse (1992), about the experiences of black learners at Zimbabwe's open schools, indicate that black learners from the low socio-economic areas in the townships are isolated from black learners who come from more affluent homes. He also found that black affluent children socialised more easily with white children. Similar results were observed in the present study. Learners from the informal settlements indicated that black learners from the townships did not want to associate with them: "Some Indian children do play with the black children, but the black children they not from the camps. They from Soweto and other areas."

In an earlier study, I found that learners from the townships did not want to associate with learners from the informal settlements because they perceived themselves as being of a higher class based on them having their own houses and material possessions (Pillay, 1996). I also found that learners from the informal settlements were an embarrassment to learners from the townships, especially when they were seen as dirty, untidy or lacking basic essentials.

#### *Shame and embarrassment*

Learners from the informal settlement feel ashamed and embarrassed, especially when they are unable to do their homework and the educators and Indian learners characterize them in pejorative terms: "I feel shame because I did not complete my homework, but I know that I am not lazy. They think that I am stupid and lazy but I am not". Learners also felt ashamed when they were picked on because of their bad odour: "I am ashamed ... the children say I smell". Other writers also found black learners from low socio-economic backgrounds to be embarrassed because they were perceived by their educators to be stupid (e.g. Sanders, 1987).

#### *Misunderstanding*

Learners felt that teachers and other pupils in their class, who think that they do not want to learn, misunderstood them. These people did

not have an understanding of what it is like to live in an informal settlement: "everyone in the class think that I don't want to do my work. They need to understand what I do at the camp" and "the teachers don't understand our problems at the camp, they say I am lazy".

Christie (1990) found that black learners believed that white learners and educators had no understanding of their lives, confirming the findings in this study that black learners felt Indian learners and educators had no understanding of their difficulties at the informal settlements. For instance, the completion of homework was made a tedious task when there were no candles to study at night, inadequate facilities to do their schoolwork as a result of overcrowding and many household chores that reduced their study time.

#### *Envy and privilege*

Learners from the informal settlement were envious of the Indian learners as well as other black children from the townships because they did not have the luxuries these other children possessed: "The black children [referring to the children from the townships] come from the rich houses and they want to be like the Indian. We also want to be like the Indian but we not rich."

On the other hand, one positive feeling emerged, and perhaps one that can give hope for the future, was that of being privileged at having the opportunity to be educated at an Indian school: "I am here to get education" and "I get education then I get good job". This is further confirmed by the findings of the projective test where 40 out of 50 learners indicated that they liked the schools in Lenasia because they received good education.

#### **Behaviours experienced by learners**

Certain repetitive behaviours emerged from the data:

#### *Racial discrimination*

Both pupils in the individual interviews mentioned the practice of racial discrimination: "They would not play with me because I am black" and "... because I am black I told myself don't talk, just close your mouth and do your work". Learners in the focus group interviews confirmed the practice of racism by both Indian educators and learners by making the following statements: "She [the educator] separates us from the Indian children, she does not teach us properly because we are black" and "we have problems with the Indian children because we are black". The practice of racism is further confirmed by the responses of the learners in the projective test where 43 out of 50 pointed out that racism was the thing they disliked most at their schools. In addition, 41 of the learners believed that Indian educators were racist whilst 45 learners experienced Indian learners to be racist in their behaviour.

Research by Hickson and Kriegler (1991) and by Christie (1990) has indicated that racism has negatively affected the lives of black children more than it has those of other children in South Africa, even though all children have been affected by it. Jablensky (1977) noted that racism negatively affected the mental health of black children by denying them essential experiences such as a sense of security and warmth, freedom for personal growth and identification with a community of equals.

In the light of the above research findings, one may argue that racism at predominantly Indian schools is likely to have a negative effect on the experiences as well as the mental health of black learners at these schools. The finding of racist behaviour in this research is confirmed by similar results in the study conducted by Cassim (1992), who points out that educators are still racist even though schools are now open.

#### *Bullying*

Brown (1997:31) defines bullying as "the use of power by one or more people intentionally to harm, hurt or adversely affect the rights and needs of another". Even though there are several other definitions of bullying (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Roland, 1993; Tattum, 1993),

all of them are characterised by some common features. Krige, Petti-pher, Squelch and Swart (2000) identify these features to be wilful, harmful behaviour; ongoing patterns of harassment and abuse; whether physical, verbal or psychological. They also indicate that fighting, teasing, mocking and name-calling should be viewed as different forms of bullying.

In this study, fighting was identified as one of the physical characteristics of bullying: "The Indian children fight with and push me" and "some Indian children worry me ... because they fight and bully me". Bullying is also confirmed in the focus group interview: "The Indian children hit us at school." Furthermore, 21 out of 50 of the learners in the projective test indicated that Indian learners fight with them. Name-calling was also evident with learners from the informal settlements stating that they were mocked, teased and called names by Indian learners: "They laugh and tease me and they say I am stupid". In the projective test, 28 out of 50 learners further confirmed that they were called names and mocked by Indian learners. Troyna and Hatcher (1992) indicated that learners call each other names for different reasons, sometimes as a result of racist attitudes and at other times to achieve social dominance. They argue that name-calling may have an instrumental function, expressing anger or revenge, or it may have an expressive function because of the beliefs they have about a particular racial group. The writer agrees that name-calling may not always be due to racist attitudes alone, even though it may be interpreted by some learners as being so.

#### *Ganging-up*

Sasinsky (1993) found that one of the ways learners approached conflict was by 'ganging-up', at times to defend themselves against other racial groups. However, in this research, ganging-up was not only evident when Indian learners got together against black learners, but also when black learners from higher socio-economic classes joined forces against black learners from the informal settlements. This may indicate that classism is a stronger issue than racism.

Most of the learners in the current study indicated that ganging-up was apparent in two instances. Firstly, black learners from the townships joined the Indian learners to intimidate learners from the informal settlement: "they [learners from the townships] fight with us and want to be friends with them Indian children". In the second instance the learners reported that some educators and learners ganged-up to pick on them: "The teachers and some of the Indian children get together and pick on us."

#### *Avoidance*

Avoidance emerged as a coping mechanism by black learners when they experienced difficulty with Indian learners and did not want to get into trouble at school: "I must not fight because they may send me back to the black school"; "I feel bad but I tell myself don't do anything or say anything, I just keep quiet" and "I don't want trouble".

#### *Language difficulties*

Both learners in the individual interviews indicated that they experienced difficulty in understanding what had been taught due to English not being their first language: "Another thing is the language ... sometimes I don't understand" and "I write English and I talk English but it is difficult". Both learners who wrote an essay on their life experiences at their school also expressed their difficulty with English as a language: "I had no problem because it was DET [Department of Education and Training] school and we did our languages as first subject then English was coming after our vernacular" and "I don't understand the English". The difficulty with English is further supported by the fact that 22 out of 50 learners indicated in the projective test that English was difficult for them.

The findings on language difficulties are corroborated by Engelbrecht *et al.* (1996:331), who indicate that there are disparities in black learners' proficiency in English and what was expected of them at their schools. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (1999:157) argue that langu-

age, thinking and learning are all closely linked to each other and if learners are not allowed to use their first language, this could have a negative impact on their cognitive development and scholastic performance in particular. Furthermore, they indicate that such learners become doubtful of their competence and confidence and often adopt a negative self-concept.

#### *Value of education*

Both learners in the individual interviews perceived education to be valuable: "I must go to school, education is important"; "I want education, I try hard, I just want to learn" and "I get education then I get good job". These quotations indicate that these learners believe that the education at predominantly Indian schools is of a higher standard and this would give them a better future. Learners in the focus group interviews also express this belief: "I want to prepare for the future" and "I watch the other children who go to college and university. I need to and want to be like them." The value that learners from the informal settlements place on education is further evident in the projective test where 40 out of 50 stated that they liked their school mainly for the good education it provided.

#### **Experiences at the informal settlements**

According to McCoy and Sherman (1994), the place of residence of a learner is often a source of separateness and group antagonism, clearly revealed in this study. Domestic experiences of the learners at the informal settlements appear to be mostly negative, and two major themes emerged from the data analysis, namely study difficulties and practical problems.

#### *Study difficulties*

Both learners interviewed indicated that they had to engage in a variety of chores at the informal settlement that left them with little time to complete their homework and often made them late for school: "It's not easy. I have to work. I get up early. I get up 4:30 in the morning because I must get water to wash myself"; "I must get wood in the morning to light a fire" and "I try to do my homework first ... my mother want me to clean the house". Learners in the focus group interviews related similar experiences: "In the morning I have to get firewood and fetch water. I must boil water to bath. This takes time so I get late and sometimes I come late to school".

Overcrowding made studying at the informal settlement a difficult task for learners: "the houses are close to each other and they full of people, this makes it difficult for us to study". In addition to the overcrowding there is a lot of noise at the informal settlement that also made studying difficult. This is made worst when people abused substances: "The people drink and make a lot of noise in the camp. We can't study." This statement is confirmed by the results of the projective test where 32 of the learners indicated that they could not tolerate the substance abuse and noise at the informal settlements. Studying was also made difficult by the absence of electricity, learners having to study by candlelight and often not having money to buy candles: "My parents say don't waste the candles we don't have money" and "it's difficult to learn ... sometimes the candle get finish ... I can't learn like this."

#### *Practical problems*

Some of the practical problems encountered by learners are a result of travelling long distances to schools located far from the informal settlements. Often they do not have money so they have to walk to school and this makes them late: "I walk to school ... it is far"; "sometimes I come to school late" and "there's no money for transport".

The lack of water and lighting at the informal settlements makes life difficult. Learners felt embarrassed that they had to wear dirty clothes to school and sometimes they had a bad odour because they were not able to bath: "Sometimes we don't have water to wash our school clothes", "we come with dirty clothes to school" and "I feel bad, the other children say we smell." In the projective test all 50 learners

identified the lack of water and lights as a serious difficulty for them. In addition to this 41 were unhappy with the toilets and 39 were unhappy with the houses that they lived in.

Many learners indicated that unemployment and poverty contributed to their negative experiences at the informal settlements: "My parents don't have work" and "we have to buy things for school and we don't have the money". This is further confirmed by the results of the projective test where 36 learners indicated poverty and 29 unemployment, respectively, as being major difficulties at the informal settlements.

The negative experiences at the informal settlements were a source of anger, frustration and embarrassment for learners: "We get angry because sometimes there is no water and no food"; "It's frustrating to live in the squatter camp" and "the teachers say we must bath with soap and all the other children laugh. It makes us feel so bad". The negative feelings of learners towards the informal settlement is further confirmed by the results of the projective test where 42 of them stated that they did not like anything at the informal settlement, 48 said they did not want to live there, 46 felt bad and 41 were simply unhappy.

#### **Recommendations**

The findings in this study indicate that grade 8 learners from the informal settlements in Lenasia have many negative experiences at their schools as well as their homes. Their experiences at the informal settlements have an impact on their experiences at school and vice versa. Therefore, it is proposed that any intervention with these learners should adopt an ecosystemic approach. This means that intervention should not be limited to the school but should cover a variety of systems in the lives of learners, such as the government, the school, the family and the community.

Firstly, government has to play a central role in changing the negative experiences of learners from the informal settlements. It has to find ways of creating jobs for the many unemployed parents so that learners can afford to go to school. It has to provide water and electricity so that learners are better able to study and do their homework, without having to waste time collecting firewood and water as part of the household chores. The different government departments need to work together in improving the situation of the learners. For example, the Department of Health could implement nutritional and feeding schemes both at the settlements and schools. The Department of Safety and Security could make learners feel safe, especially from adults who abuse substances and disturb learners when they study. The Departments of Finance and Social and Welfare could provide financial assistance for learners, especially for transport to school, books and school uniform. The Department of Education has to ensure the implementation of policies, for example the language policy that assists learners who use English as a second language.

Secondly, interventions in schools should commence with some form of personal and group empowerment. In this context learners should be exposed to activities that help them to change their negative perceptions about themselves. They can be taught that even if they come from poor surroundings they can still feel worthy and be encouraged to grow as persons. They can still feel comfortable with themselves as well as with others and develop trust and confidence in themselves as well as in others. This could be done in schools through life skills programmes, workshops on team building, conflict management, diversity management, anti-bias practices and the establishment of support groups. I suggest that the groups should include both learners from the informal settlements and Indian learners so that they could learn to appreciate and respect each other as human beings.

Once the learners are able to accept themselves and their situation there should be an opportunity for them to share their experiences about living in the informal settlements with Indian learners and educators. This should help to sensitise the latter about the feelings and practical difficulties experienced by the learners at the informal settlements. In this way the educators and Indian learners may become more

sympathetic and supportive of learners from the informal settlements, especially when homework is not done and when the learners are not able to prioritise hygiene within their immediate environment.

Schools could also find some practical ways of helping learners to improve their situation. For example, classrooms could be made available for learners to study after hours and extra lessons or bridging and support programmes could be designed to help learners with English. The experiences of learners could be included as part of the curriculum, for example if a lesson on different types of homes are taught, the educator should not have pictures of middle and upper class homes only, but pictures of shacks should also be included. In this way all learners may learn that a home is a place where they get love and support.

The above discussion implies a significant change in how schools should meet the needs of contexts. They would have to change their ethos so that they could accommodate a variety of different learners with different needs and aspirations. This means that schools would have to change to accommodate the needs of learners rather than vice versa.

Thirdly, it is essential for families in the informal settlements, especially parents, to take an active role in improving the experiences of their children. Some of them could start by refraining from substance abuse as indicated by learners in the study. Parents should also become active members in school governing bodies. In this way they could make the plight of their children known to the school staff so that they could work together in improving their experiences.

Lastly, there are many organisations and structures within the community that could play a relevant role in improving the experiences of learners from informal settlements. For example, non-governmental and religious organisations could establish support programmes for learners and their families, such as in nutrition and life skills. Businesses in the community could establish a library as well as a community centre at informal settlements so that learners would have a place to study. They could also sponsor small business initiatives so that people could learn to sustain themselves. Civic organisations could mobilise people from the informal settlements to unite in their struggle to improve their situation.

## Conclusion

In all of the above attempts to improve the lives of learners from informal settlements in Lenasia, I have recommended that a clear process be followed. It should start with personal and group empowerment of the learners through psychological interventions. Once they have accepted themselves as well as their situation they should brainstorm ideas to change their situation for the better. This involves cognitive empowerment. This process should also include Indian educators and learners who have to make changes in their perceptions of learners from the informal settlements. After strategies are well planned they should be implemented. This brings about behavioural empowerment to improve the situation of learners. It is important for people from the informal settlements to take the lead in improving their circumstances and it is also essential for others, especially the Indian educators and learners, to provide support during the process.

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