



Thabo Mohlala discovers alternatives to violence



Sessions are activity-driven: Participants dramatise real-life scenarios to reinforce the concepts

# Helping learners cope with conflict

The classroom looks like any other, its walls adorned with an assortment of charts and posters. On the chalkboard are notes, probably scribbled during the last period on the day the school closed for the Easter holiday. A few cream-white chairs, which have been arranged in a circle in the room, seat a group of casually clad youths, aged around 18, and a few adults.

They are grade 10 and 11 learners and teachers of Suncrest Secondary School in the south-east of Gauteng, who have sacrificed two days of their holiday to attend an Alternative to Violence Project (AVP) workshop organised by the NGO Phaphama Initiatives Resource Centre (PIRC).

Judy Connors, the director of the PIRC, says the workshop aims to equip learners, teachers and parents with the skills necessary to handle potentially violent situations.

She quickly adds: "We do not offer mediation services, but give skills on

how to prevent violence."

The facilitators, who themselves have attended AVP workshops, believe the project works. Reginald Mareletse says he used to lead a wicked life. "I was under the influence of peer group pressure and the things we used to get up to were just silly. It was thanks to AVP that I began to be responsible."

Says another facilitator, Mandla Tshabalala: "AVP is not about telling people what to do, but prepares them to deal with violence in a controlled and sensible manner. People get to know how to manage their anger, emotions and feelings."

"I used to be rebellious at home. I would not listen to my mom and I was always in a foul mood. It was not until my mom persuaded me to attend AVP's workshops that I started to turn a new leaf."

Tshabalala says it took only one session for him to feel completely transformed. "It was a liberating feeling indeed."

Connors says that since the project started a few years ago, AVP has been invited to 12 schools. The NGO relies on word of mouth, and having a workshop at a particular school by no means suggests that the school is violent. It may rather be a case of hearing about the benefits of AVP.

The circle arrangement of the chairs is part of the exercise. Connors says this format is one way in which the organisation creates an appropriate atmosphere for inter-

action, openness and equality among participants. The workshop revolves around five core themes: affirmation, communication, community building and trust, cooperation and transforming power.

Sessions are activity-driven and participatory. Participants dramatise real-life scenarios to reinforce the concepts. For instance, the group will act out altercations between lovers, parent-child fallouts and other typical potentially confrontational situations.

This is followed by a moment of reflection, where the group explores other ways in which the differences could have been handled. The idea is to cultivate certain key principles, such as being a good listener, exercising patience, showing sympathy, thinking creatively in resolving conflicts, and learning to take responsibility in conflict situations.

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## 10 steps to violence prevention

Violence that exists in schools has its roots in broader family, community and societal issues. Thus "quick fixes" are not likely to work. Building relationships that are based on respect, trust and affirmation are more likely to create healthy, happy achievement-oriented schools in the long term. The following guidelines could assist in achieving this:

- At the start of every term develop a boundary agreement between learners and educators outlining the kind of behaviour that everyone in the classroom agrees to. Review this agreement on a regular basis.
- Have a minute of silence for a peaceful thought at the start of each class.
- Look for things you can affirm in every learner — genuinely and repeatedly.
- Do not use sarcasm; rather express yourself honestly and authentically, for example: "I feel worried when you don't do your homework because I know you can do well."
- Find ways to get parents and guardians more involved in the education of their children. Parents can share their skills or talk about their life experiences; together parents, educators and learners can raise funds for the school.
- Spend extra time helping learners who are having difficulties with school work.
- Take time to talk about non-school issues with all learners individually and listen carefully to what they tell you about their lives.
- Invite organisations to work with learners, parents, educators and the school management on specialised challenges such as listening skills, conflict resolution, peer mediation and HIV/Aids.
- Make time to support one another and to share success stories about how you and your colleagues have dealt constructively with anger, conflict and violence in your school.
- If you are an educator, affirm yourself every day, reminding yourself of the invaluable role you are playing in raising the future leaders of our country.

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