

Learner, parents, community, teachers, government: The critical partnership



Bongwiwe Gambu

is a government communicator and Media Practitioner at Government Communications (GCIS) where she is Director for Media Liaison. She is a former journalist with more than 10 years experience. She was also the Spokesperson for the National Credit Regulator, and the Moloi Board of Inquiry on former Police Commissioner, Bheki Cele.

According to an old African adage a child is raised by a community. When I was growing up this was how we lived, and was applied in all spheres of life in each society. Each adult was responsible for all the children around her, and even those she came across in life. Children's upbringing was a collective project so much that in some areas children were named by neighbours. Their progress throughout life was supported and nurtured by all. An African child was a special child.

As a young mother of two I have benefited from this practice and I strive to do the same for all children I meet. I take it as a responsibility not because the parents are not there, but because it is my duty as a member of society as I try to build a better future for my own children and their peers.

People often frown when I tell them I was raised by neighbours. Not because my parents were not there, but because members of my township, White City Jabavu in Soweto, practised this adage that I rarely see in suburbs, something which I believe is a crucial part of nation building.

When we were growing up life was very challenging because as a youngster you were watched by everyone you came across. If an older person found you on the streets doing something wrong they would immediately reprimand you and even go as far as walking you home so they could explain why they had to discipline you. It was tough. We simply couldn't understand the motive; but I am glad it happened to me. One had a deep sense of responsibility because it felt as if there were guardians everywhere who wanted only the best out of us.

This practice not only covered behavior but the wellbeing of the kids in the township as well. In my area no child went without food because you would be offered food when you went out playing with friends. Even those who couldn't afford "Christmas clothes and presents" also received something from a kind neighbour who understood the situation but did not judge. Your neighbours knew your shoe size! This was partly because as kids you would exchange shoes with friends, ending up in confusion and a few squabbles about lost shoes. It was also because the neighbours were there when you were born. They assisted with transport or gifts of clothes and many other essentials. There was always a sense of family and life was the better for such people. So, beyond our parents, the community were our partners in the difficult business of living well.

Once we were at school, we acquired specific partners to promote our educational progress. The older girls took it upon themselves to allocate themselves one of us younger kids to mentor and guide. This meant little time for playing if you still had homework. Parents knew of this system and therefore when they arrived back from work they would check what had been done. This was even more important in those households where the parents were absent or in the case of parents who couldn't read and write. The partnership between the young child/learner and her mentor

Our teachers were a bunch of hardworking and committed women who devised ways to get help even for those kids who were struggling. This was not easy but those learners who did better were required to assist others. Education was a collective responsibility.

was a major factor in the education of the child. I have fond memories of my friend's sister, Sasa, who taught me how to write and mentored me throughout my primary school years. She was a personification of a boarding school matron. My school days included a session with her every afternoon including Sundays when we would prepare for the week. Despite her age, she commanded respect. With the years passing, she became a member of my family and my mother supported our relationship.

When I was a teenager I read *Maru* by Bessie Head. Even as a young girl I understood what Margaret

Cadmore said. She was a teacher in the book who had recently joined the school in Dilepe village. In the book she argues that it doesn't matter if the child is intelligent or not. If the environment is conducive, even a learner who was not born intelligent has a chance to succeed.

As I read the book, and based on my experience then, I decided that the conducive environment was that critical partnership between the parents, community, government and teachers, with the learner in the middle.

My primary school teachers knew my parents and made regular contact about progress. This was not a given in every township in the early '90s. Teachers were each allocated 40+ learners and the system expected results with limited support. Our teachers were a bunch of hardworking and committed women who devised ways to get help even for those kids who were struggling. This was not easy but those learners who did better were required to assist others. Education was a collective responsibility. This did not negate individual excellence. Somehow we had to help the learners who struggled, and do enough work for a place in the coveted top ten. We competed with one another and also helped. The individual and the collective existed comfortably together. High school was slightly different. Again, partnership was expected, but this time between parents and learners. On the first meeting with learners and parents, our teachers made it crystal clear to our parents that they had a role to play in making sure we pass and progress in life. As part of the same meeting, parents were called into a separate room where the principal flanked by his army of teachers presented the "agreement" for all parties to adhere to. Parents were informed that we would knock off at 4pm daily to allow us to do our homework, or the bulk of it. They were even advised that chores were to be kept to the minimum in order to allow us to study.

The response from parents was one of cooperation and, at the end of the meeting, we had an agreement that would be implemented and monitored. Learners were allowed to be children and our only goal was to study, work hard and pass. I still remember my then Economics teacher, Mrs. Visser say to us "you are going to work hard and pass, whether you like it or not!" We understood the passion in that

statement and did exactly that. She, like all my high school teachers, kept reminding us that they themselves had taken an oath to act in our best interests and ensure we were prepared and ready for the next phase of our lives.

At home things were the same. Parents were aware of our studies; they could and often did contact the teachers to get feedback on conduct and performance. The partnership was in full force. Each party fulfilled its own responsibilities and our results showed.

Unfortunately the school I mention above was not in the township. It was a special school created by the then Rand Afrikaans University through a system of selecting learners with potential but who could not afford “private” or “Model C” education.

The practice done in primary schools seem not to have succeeded in most township high schools. There were less and less high school graduates who gave of their time to assist others and so the African child started to suffer. The good schools started to suffer because of demand from parents who wanted a better education for their kids. The best teachers left the township and sought work elsewhere. I remember feeling very sad one day when I realised that the young girls I went to primary school with were stuck in bad schools and there were no mentors for them, or for me.

... I have learned to appreciate the significance and integral role played by society, government, teachers, and parents. They form what I like to call a sacred square, within which the learner may thrive.

I was fortunate because of the support Rand Afrikaans College for the Advancement of Learning and Leadership (RAUCALL) had for me. Even when the late Dr. Nthato Motlana came to our school to announce the partnership Metropolitan Life had started we realised how special we are. I was sad nonetheless because I began to realize that there was still something missing from the partnership. What about people to whom the resources of this special school were not available? Where was government?

I was lucky. I owe my educational good fortune to the partnership that formed the basis of my formative years as far as education is concerned. This partnership transcended all areas of my life and contributed to the person I am today. On the other hand, my peers were not so lucky. They only benefited partially. Their parents were not fully involved, unfortunately. That critical link between the parents, learners and teachers was broken and my friends suffered the consequences. This has also created a gap between us now that we are parents.

Looking back, I have learned to appreciate the significance and integral role played by society, government, teachers, and parents. They form what I like to call a sacred square, within which the learner may thrive. Without full participation from these four stakeholders, collectively and equally, the full potential of a child cannot be fulfilled. The conducive environment I mentioned earlier cannot be realised if these four parts of the sacred square do not work together.

Of course, the role of the learner within the sacred square is not a passive one.

Parents:

Have a duty to actively participate in the strengthening of schools through the school governing body. I should know; I was once a member when I was a teenager representing my parents and now as a mother. More than this, parents

must be present in their children's schooling and life in general. We can no longer make the excuse that parents are busy. We must make the time to see progress, time to encourage, time to engage.

Community:

ALL children in the neighbourhood are our collective responsibility. Do not be afraid to stop a child and find out how they are doing at school. Create an environment where those children in need are allowed to receive help and encourage mentorship of the young ones by the older children. Create role models within the neighbourhood.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

– Nelson Mandela

Develop support systems for the families in areas you live in, but also keep a close eye on misbehaviour. We are not allowed to turn a blind eye whenever we come across wrong doing by children while we say “It's not my child; it's not my problem.”

Government:

Can do much more than just build schools. We need a working partnership, and the involvement of committed teachers cannot be over-emphasized. The Inspectors need to create an environment where the governing bodies and government collectively work towards goals and priorities that will ensure a better future of a child who is prepared to enter the next step of their lives.

Teachers:

Must go back to basics and remember the passion they once had when they decided they wanted to become teachers. They must take their rightful place in society and demand support from parents, government, communities and hard work from the learners.

The above are anchored in the old African adage that a child is raised by a village. In order for us to secure a future for our children the sacred square of education and learning must be formed, strengthened and protected. If adopted, it could form a strong basis for the development of a child. The involvement of each society in the upbringing of children cannot be over-emphasised. Education and learning are integral parts of child rearing and therefore all parties: parents, teachers, government, and the learners themselves must commit and work together.

Learners:

Need to appreciate that education is a non-negotiable. The future does not start tomorrow but now and hard work cannot be put off for another day.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.” – Nelson Mandela.