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Fighting crime in schools : the case of the Community Shepherds Project in Ficksburg, Free State Province.

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Abstract

The Department of Social Development introduced the Community Shepherds life skills Project at two schools in the Ficksburg community, in the Thabo Mofutsanyane district of the Free State in 2007 due to the high rate of crime that occurred in the schools. The project targeted children with a history of criminal behaviour and learners who exhibited other forms of anti-social behaviour, and provided them with life skills that could help them face life challenges. No systematic evaluation of the project has been made since its inception and, therefore, the aim of the study was to investigate the perceived impact of the Community Shepherds Project in reducing crime in schools in the Ficksburg community in the Free State province. To achieve the aim the following objectives were identified: To establish the perceived impact of the Community Shepherds Project's life skills programme on the behaviour and conduct of learners who are participating in the project; to identify factors impacting on the successful implementation of the Community Shepherds project; and to suggest ways of strengthening the Community Shepherds Project. The study population consisted of learners who were members of the Community Shepherds Project in Ficksburg, who had participated in the project since its inception, and their parents. Teachers from the schools participating in the project and the police in Ficksburg constituted the key informants. The sample included 15 learners who were participating in the project who had been arrested for committing different offences and who displayed anti-social behaviour at home and in school, their 12 parents and 4 key informants from the police and the schools.

A qualitative research design was used to collect data from the participants in order to obtain in-depth information concerning the perceived impact of the life skills programme on the behaviour and conduct of learners who participated in the programme. Different semi-structured interview schedules were administered to the learners, their parents and the key informants. The findings reveal that the perceptions of the respondents was that the life skills programme had an impact on the behaviour of learners because the life skills that they had gained from the programme helped them to stop committing the offences that they used to commit. The life skills also helped them to stop displaying the anti-social behaviour that they used to exhibit.

The findings revealed that the factors that contributed to the success of the project included the approaches that the facilitators used to run the project, like motivating the learners in everything that they did, and the cooperation between the facilitators, the school and the parents. The findings also reveal that the good team work that occurred between the learners, support from the parents, as well as support from the Department of Social Development, all contributed to the success of the project. The suggested ways of strengthening the Community Shepherds Project were that the project should be implemented in all schools in the community, including the primary and multiracial schools. It was also suggested that the project should include all youths in the community. The final suggestion was that the project should include all stakeholders in the community. The life skill projects should target unemployed youths in the communities so that they can gain skills that can help them become self-employed. The study also recommends that the life skills project should be implemented in all schools in South Africa to provide learners with life skills that can help them to face life challenges. Learners who have been involved in criminal activities should not be the only ones who are taught life skills – all learners should have the same opportunity.

Key words: Crime in schools, life skills programmes, crime prevention, behavioural problems, Ficksburg.