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REVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

- The Disposable Generation:
The Role of Vocational Education in Youth
Unemployment
- **CLING Women Facilitators:**
**The Lifeblood of Community Education
in Freedom Park**
- Workplace-Based Learning (WBL):
A Conceptual Frame for WBL Pedagogy



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CLING Women Facilitators: The Lifeblood of Community Education in Freedom Park

Thamsanqa Hamilton Hukwe

Introduction

Women are at the centre of Community Literacy and Numeracy Group (CLING) activities in Freedom Park. In this article, I will attempt to show the important role they play as facilitators in community education programs in Freedom Park. This offers a window into understanding the agency of women facilitators in addressing the numerous challenges in Freedom Park through CLING.

The article begins by providing a brief history of Freedom Park and its harsh socio economic conditions. This will enable a better understanding of the role CLING women facilitators are playing and the importance of their efforts to improve literacy and numeracy skills in Freedom Park.

Background and Living Conditions in Freedom Park

Freedom Park is situated about 30 kilometres south of Johannesburg, close to Soweto. It was formed in 1993 after the unbanning of liberation organizations and shortly before the first democratic elections in 1994. At the time, the community in Freedom Park was made up of migrants from the neighbouring hostels and backyards rentals in the industrial areas of Johannesburg. Initially, Freedom Park was to be developed as part of an expansion of Devland industrial area. However, since 1993 the occupation of Freedom Park by an increasing number of shack dwellers changed Freedom Park into a residential area.

Over the years, Freedom Park has become a site of resistance to evictions and service delivery protests. As a result, from 2000, three primary schools, a high school and a clinic were built. After 2002, public housing was provided for the community and this led to the recognition of Freedom Park as a formal township.

Freedom Park resembles many communities in South Africa that are excluded from decision making and feel alienated. On high illiteracy levels, the late Ward Councillor, Mr. Mbuyiselo Dokolwane (2014) said:

“... when you don't see a lot of people going to libraries, when you don't see a lot of people reading newspapers, when you don't see newspaper stalls around, when people do not read their bills, to me it tells that its either they don't like reading or they cannot read. If you see a lot of bills not opened, it tells a story – that they cannot read or write”.

This draws attention to the problem of illiteracy resulting from the socio-economic conditions under which Freedom Park residents live. More than 63% of families live on less than R2000 per month, and over 80% live on less than R3000 per month (Hoag, 2009). Of the families that receive social grants, over 70% of them receive less than R800 per month from the grant (Hoag, 2009). Almost 30% of the families are female headed households, compared to just 8.1% which are headed by single fathers. At the time of the survey, 12.4% of families had orphans and were not receiving social grants (Hoag, 2009).

This gives a snap shot of the difficult living conditions under which CLING women facilitators run community education programs.

CLING Women Facilitators and their role in community education in Freedom Park

Any narrative of CLING in Freedom Park cannot be separated from the experiences and critical contributions of women facilitators. Not only are the majority of CLING facilitators women, some of

them have been with CLING from the very beginning and have been the lifeblood of the group.

Out of the six women facilitators in Freedom Park, five are single mothers between the ages of 22 and 45 years. All of them have high school education with a minimum of grade 10. They also hold part time jobs as domestic workers in Eldorado Park.

These women constitute the core group of facilitators in terms of day to day administration, operation and implementation of CLING activities. They are bound together by a need to improve their literacy and numeracy skills as well as that of the community. They have also worked in the local schools as assistants and established good working relationships between CLING and local schools.

In the quest to advance their personal development and improve their facilitation skills, they have attended educational workshops and seminars organised by Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT). As a result of this, they have developed activities such as 'homework assistant', afternoon classes and a drama group with a view to provide learner support programs. Their role as community educators continues to evolve as they now also provide counselling services to the children who experience different kinds of abuse in their homes. However, they face numerous challenges which they have worked to overcome.

Julia Mamushe, a CLING woman facilitator, has also pointed out how workshops and seminars organised by Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT) has improved their capabilities in listening with empathy and conducting afternoon classes for learners. She added that 'the training we got from Ivor and Britt helped us with skills to improve our learning activities ... in the afternoon classes'.

There is a high level of enthusiasm about CLING among women facilitators. When asked about this Zusange said 'we feel happy about the work we do in reading clubs because the learners that are attending have improved their reading and writing skills. They can paint the picture and also separate colours'.

CLING women facilitators have also ensured CLING in Freedom Park is sustained. This was illustrated when CLING was inactive for eight months in 2009. CLING women facilitators were able to revive the group after which it became dominated by highly motivated young women (Kgobe and Sotuku, 2012).

Parents have also noted how CLING women facilitators have an effect in helping them to manage stress related to their children's education. When asked about the role of CLING women facilitators, Mrs. Tsholo, who is a parent, affirms this: "...it... helps us as parents because we don't have time and when children are from CLING they come home, done already with their homework (sic)" (Tsholo, 2014).

Parents also view CLING women facilitators as keeping children focused. "CLING has really improved the quality of my child's life...she used to out playing after school but now from school she goes directly to the CLING centre" (Mncube, 2014). This also shows the transformative aspects based on CLING women's contribution to the community education.

Similarly, Mr. Khumalo said "CLING plays a very critical role in taking children off the street. There is a lot of 'nyaope' abuse in the area, it is our responsibility as parents to work hand -in -hand to encourage our children to attend CLING classes and stay off the streets. As you can see, all the medals are proof of her [referring to his daughter] improved performance" (Khumalo, 2014).

Their work has also been appreciated by educators from the local schools who have observed the difference between learners attending CLING activities and those who do not. When Mrs. Modikwe was asked about CLING she said "... it is helping learners even when you check spelling, expression, they differ...than those who do not attend CLING classes" (Modikwe, 2014).

However, even though CLING facilitators are highly motivated by the work they do and the positive effect it has, they operate under very depressing conditions which limits their potential.

A CLING woman facilitator, Patience Mashaba describes this.

"...there are lot of challenges; we do not have financial support to run our programmes. We don't have toilets and access to water. We rely on our neighbour for water. Our place is small since we operate from a container. One part is used as a library, yet we still have to work from there, there is no privacy" (Mashava, 2014).

Mr Khumalo a parent echoes this view:

"Children suffer a lot during winter because the zinc structure is cold in winter, and because the containers are so small, in winter they struggle fitting in the container ..." (Khumalo, 2014).

A CLING woman facilitator adds:

"We are volunteers and we do not get paid. In as much as we try to recruit new volunteers we end up losing them because of these challenges. At the end of last year we had 20 something volunteers now we only have 7 left..."

There was a time when CLING facilitators did receive a stipend, but this has ceased. Zusange Hukwe, one of the women facilitators, highlighted how '...there was a time when we [the women facilitators] met and agreed to contribute money and cook for the children when we were still receiving stipend from the government' (Hukwe, 2014).

Another challenge pointed out by them is a lack of a feeding scheme.

'...most of the children come directly from school and they are usually hungry by the time they get here. Ideally we would have wanted to give the something to eat but we are forced to teach them on an empty stomach which affects their concentration levels. As facilitators we find ourselves helpless since we cannot even offer them a snack to get them concentrate again.'

CLING women tried to secure support in terms of food for CLING activities from local chain stores. However, this has been erratic and some classes were suspended as a result.

Conclusion

CLING women facilitators have had a profound effect on community education at Freedom Park. This has been shown by the views shared by both CLING women facilitators, parents and teachers with children attending CLING activities.

So far, support for CLING has primarily focused on training to improve facilitators' skills. CLING activities must also be understood as instruments to analyse power relations in society to develop educational programs that respond to the needs of communities. A crucial issue is how this relates to the experiences of women and their agency in addressing the challenges facing the Freedom Park community.

There is also an urgent need to address the difficult conditions in which CLING activities are conducted. Government institutions, in particular the Departments of Education, must support initiatives such as CLING. This can contribute to consolidating the work already done and ensure this can be expanded to address the numerous challenges facing learners in communities like Freedom Park.

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