



Community Participation and Mobilization Through Dialogue

By Jayne Westerlund

Once a month at our secondary school in rural southern Africa, a verbal notice was sent out to the surrounding community announcing a parent teacher conference. The purpose of the conference was to discuss disciplinary actions, student issues and the future of school programs. No one came.

There always seemed to be a tirade over why parents did not show up. Many teachers complained that the community was apathetic, parents whose children were not at our school did not care or that some did not like the principal because he was from another area of the country. Through talking with students, I found that many leaders in the area felt that the community was not being heard in these conferences, did not have any sway, and felt generally ignored by the teachers and regional offices.

As stated in the "Practical Guide" of this CD, community involvement can be facilitated through invitations to school activities outside of formal meetings that might be intimidating and not conducive to encouraging parents and those who are not parents in the community to get involved. Through open days, sport days, and persuading professionals in the area to assist with special classes such as health classes, agriculture, or crafts, the community can get to know the school. Students can learn from and appreciate the knowledge and talent in their community.

Although this sounds great, I know that when I was a teacher, I was also informed about these ideas but I found it difficult to teach almost every class during the day and find time to help out with extracurricular activities. It is a lot to ask teachers to also put together presentations or some sort of party for those in the community with almost no resources - not even tea to offer the parents when they came. The teachers were embarrassed and did not have the time or energy. Although, if left to the students, the teachers said, nothing would take place.

Most of the teachers at the school, including myself, were not from the area and did not know the local language fluently. This made it especially difficult to try to identify not only who was working in a science field but also who was knowledgeable and respected by the community and the students. This took a lot of effort and extra help from local teachers. Even the extracurricular activities were difficult to implement because of the burden on overloaded teachers and school management. Two activities that I was involved in with other teachers- sport coaching and the school newspaper- were sporadic due to resource and time issues.

However, teachers should note that nothing elaborate needs to be put together. Something as simple as assigning the students to investigate professionals and others in the community through interviews, will allow students to evoke information and knowledge about their community with minimal help from teachers. In History class the students can interview older members of the area to elicit stories and personal recounts of events in the country; in Agriculture or Life Science class students can interview local farmers or game wardens; in Life Science or Biology class students can interview health workers; etc. Teachers can use creative assignments to involve the community without adding additional work for themselves. Motivation of learners to take the initiative on their own can be fostered through school assignments and fund raising programs. Integrating activity with the community into the curriculum is an excellent way to promote learning.

Motivation can come in the form of grants and scholarships as well. Another school in the center of the country where I was teaching put together a cultural celebration and invited students from many different schools to showcase their singing, dancing, and music abilities. Our school also joined through donations from the government in order to share their culture with others in the country.

In a geography class that I taught, we studied reading and interpreting maps. One of the assignments I gave the students was to map the school and surrounding community and then share them with the class. This gave students the opportunity to practise their spatial and communication skills but also encouraged them to explore the surrounding area, consult with community members and express themselves creatively.

In addition, a Student Representative Council can be assigned the task of seeking out the leaders of the community to interview them on their feelings about the school. Students can brain-storm questions that they would like to ask the community leaders such as what they appreciate most about the local school's teachers, the students, or the programs. The question could be phrased as "When have you felt most welcome in the school?" or "Describe a time when you feel the school was working at its best. What was happening?" or "Tell a story about when you were a child and the community was very involved with what was happening at school. How did the parents participate? What encouraged them to participate?" These questions can then be focused on the current school and current atmosphere. "Based on your answers to the previous questions, how can this school encourage more participation?" or "What are you willing to do or to contribute to this school?" The students could then report these findings back to their fellow students through oral presentations.

Crisis, unfortunately, also motivates and brings people together. In the school where I was teaching, we had many problems with the students who viewed the principal as unfairly strict, arrogant, hypocritical, and suspect of being corrupt. While the principal was at times stubborn and self-centered, I think the real problem laid with his inability to communicate effectively with the students and community as well as his overt tribal links. This crisis came to a head with protest marches of the students which turned violent when some of the students began throwing garbage and stones

at the principal. The principal was removed and placed in another area for his own safety and the regional offices were called in. News of the issue reached the Minister of Education who was a former principal at the school and whose family lived in a village close to the school. He and his assistants participated in a school and community wide meeting to analyze the situation.

The Minister of Education was able to bring people together because of his reputation, political power, and his standing in the community as one of the most respected people in the country. People came from all areas surrounding the school in order to hear him speak; people believed that things would change not only in the school but in the whole district because he was willing to take charge of the situation. Through these perceptions, things did change. The community was made aware of the issues facing the school, more through the dialogue with teachers and students than through the Minister's presence. I don't think that every school would be able to invite the Minister of Education, but by asking respected members of the community to attend meetings or conferences, whether those living in the community or those who are living outside but still have power and influence in the area, the neighborhood would be more willing to attend because of the belief that their ideas, thoughts, and participation would be appreciated and valued.

Another idea to bring people together is to ask many students to interview members of the community, teachers, and other students as a school wide project to combat apathy, inspire more active participation among community members in the school and among teachers and students within the community. The focus could even become broader than the school and incorporate community based projects to improve the local environment, health, or economy. Students may integrate this assignment into a writing or journalism class. Through questions that inspire thoughts of the best qualities of the community, teachers, students, and the school, a positive focus on what can be built up, improved upon, or celebrated will be an antidote to the discouraging, often defeatist blaming of "outside factors" or "things beyond our control." Believing that the school is part of the community and the community is part of the school enables students, teachers and community members to take responsibility, feel in control and build the school into what they view as their own.

Other ideas for involvement/participation:

- Community art projects/beautification
- Parent/teacher Associations
- Environmental awareness projects in the community
- Community members on the schoolboard
- Hiring a community liaison to the school
- Community craft fairs or food markets to raise money for the school
- Talent shows, plays, or concerts put on by the students
- Community cookbooks which can be sold to raise funds for the school

Or, each grade can choose a topic from the above list as their "grade contribution or project" and have a competition between grades for amount of money raised, number

of community members involved, or awareness of the event in the area.