INSIKA YOUTH PROGRAM
ADDRESSING AN EDUCATIONAL CRISIS IN
SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

This article highlights a project undertaken by a rural South African youth organization. The uniqueness of this particular organization was its grass-roots development in the midst of a very demoralizing environment - that of a rural apartheid-based homeland. With the successful organization of community members seeking to improve their living conditions, an urgent request came to enhance career opportunities for the youth. These young people, engaged in a seemingly insurmountable struggle, work hard to become successful in the South African educational scene. The key to the success of this youth organization was engaging the youth in the implementation of African-style democracy to identify and solve their problems. This is a report of their first project and its results.

Introduction

Change in South Africa is coming about at an accelerated rate. It was the February 1990 historic watershed speech of the newly appointed State President, Mr. F. W. DeKlerk that created the momentum. His intention was to put away apartheid (meaning separateness) with all its vestiges and to usher in a "new and just" democratic South Africa (Walker, 1990, p. 14). This created a mixed reception by all South Africans. However, the real show of genuineness prevailed when the long-imprisoned Nelson Mandela was released from prison a few days later. Euphoria characterized the majority of the black population (Cassidy, 1990, pp. 28-29). It was not long before many young people were disappointed! The 1990 academic year was filled with unrest, school boycotts, and strikes rivaled only by the 1976 Soweto uprisings. The test scores on the end-of-year exams were "...the worst in black education in South Africa" (Taylor, 1991, p. 8).

Today the educational system for black South Africans is in shambles. The unemployment rate is extremely high. A recent IMF paper estimates the nonwhite underemployment rate of 1990 to be 41.7%. The recent and ongoing educational "brain-drain" of emigrating professionals has created a vacuum. What remains is a majority population that is ill-fit to function in a modern and technical South African society (Williams, 1991, p.11). These problems are further exacerbated by the underdevelopment of rural South Africa. The task seems insurmountable considering the impoverished economic, political, and social conditions that exist.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to describe a youth organization within a non-governmental rural development association and its attempts to address one of its needs. This is a situation where youth have taken an initiative after having been provided a forum and framework in which to function. It "demonstrates the effectiveness of the informal delivery mode of youth development education and its flexibility to respond to local needs" (Rennekamp, 1992).

Statement of the problem

The black population has long realized the inequalities existing in education. Various
self-help projects have been undertaken to improve the situation with some promising and hopeful outcomes (Kallaway, 1984, pp. 184-265). The Insika Rural Development Association is one such organization that was initiated in 1983. Insika is a Zulu word which means center pole of the Zulu house. This is the most important structure in the traditional house - equivalent to the keystone. The formation of this organization began when a group of farmers approached a trusted community leader requesting him to organize and administer their own perceived agricultural and community needs. After several years of working on projects, Insika grew in number and scope. Eventually funding from interested development organizations further accelerated this organization to be a catalyst for rural improvement.

In 1989, several members approached the director requesting Insika to address the needs of their children. The issue of the young people had become of increasing concern to the Insika members. Many of these youth were illiterate, unable to continue formal schooling, or unemployable due to lack of adequate skills acquisition. With this urgent need at hand, the board of directors agreed to have a youth organization established for the purpose of addressing the needs of their young people. Thus the Insika Youth Program (IYP) was created. The main objectives of Insika Rural Development Association would thus be: to promote the self-help development of member communities in agriculture, basic literacy, and youth.

Method

Insika members, in their respective communities, requested their children to attend an organizational meeting in the winter of 1989. The young people gathered one Saturday morning and the director discussed the idea of starting a youth program that would focus on their critical needs and aspirations. Furthermore, he emphasized that this program was to be organized and run by themselves, thus allowing for leadership development. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the announcement and an election was held to choose an executive committee. Most of the members chosen for the executive committee were already recipients of an Insika higher education scholarship and as part of this funding were required to spend time, whenever possible, assisting ongoing Insika projects. Subsequent to the election of officers, a lengthy forum followed where needs within their community were identified. The items were recorded and the meeting adjourned. Later, the newly elected leaders met to discuss ways of addressing the issues and to draft a constitution. The foremost need was additional instruction in the formal secondary curriculum. Other needs were skill training for employability and ways to enter and finance education at the college level. However, requests for advancing on to tertiary education initially overshadowed the needs of the un-schooled.

In South Africa, all high school seniors must take and pass examinations in a minimum of six subjects in order to earn their high school diploma. These examinations are centrally administered for all students in the country. In January 1990, the IYP executive committee met to devise a way to address the secondary students' need to prepare adequately for these end-of-year high school exams. The committee agreed, by consensus, that a winter school should be held during the three week school vacation. Unfortunately, due to improper planning and lack of directed leadership this was not realized. Shortly thereafter a concerned educator, interested in the ongoing educational crisis, approached the director of the Insika Rural Development Association. His concern about the student strife and the bleak prospects of this year's academic results lead him to volunteer his time to encourage the Insika youth. The board of directors, looking for someone to assist the youth, took him on as their IYP coordinator.
Procedure

The IYP coordinator met with the executive committee and the Insika director to determine the ways to address the formal educational needs of the secondary school members. Upon reaching a decision to hold ongoing classes on Saturday mornings, the executive committee and IYP coordinator called an organizational meeting of the relevant members. This enabled all senior secondary school IYP members to have a direct say in the content and control of the Saturday classes. A written questionnaire was issued for members to select the four most crucial subjects to be offered. The data were compiled and presented for discussion. IYP members arranged for their own evaluation and control of the program, and the IYP coordinator was given the responsibility to locate certified teachers from local colleges to volunteer their time to teach.

Classes were conducted from July 1990 to November 1990 to prepare for the National school-leaver examinations held annually in November. Each student attending the classes paid a token fee to cover incidental costs. This cost was R15 ($6) per course for a maximum of R50 ($20) for four courses. External funds provided for an incentive allowance to attract high caliber teachers. These teachers assessed the needs of their students and organized instruction and evaluation to meet those needs as well as the requirements of the syllabus.

Results and Conclusions

The students participating in the five months of readiness classes for the senior certificate school-leavers examination said it was very encouraging to have these sessions. Some of the students were unable to attend their schools due to sporadic uprisings that would occur in their areas. This is due, in part, to South African black youth holding strong allegiances to a political view. Conflicts would therefore arise as a result of the two political parties, the Africa National Congress and the Inkata Freedom Party, presence in the area. At times the schools would become the focal point of gang wars and thus the normal school routine would be disrupted. Several students suffered intimidation by their peers because of differing political ideologies. Other students, who were able to attend their schools regularly, said they were better prepared to take the external exams due to the high caliber of the teacher/volunteer encouraging them.

Other positive results of the organized nature of this undertaking were the appeals from the un-schooled members requesting relevant programs for them. An educational tour was planned for members to attend a nearby career awareness seminar. Younger members requested English speaking classes to help them in school and to communicate more effectively. A volunteer teacher used a drama approach to involve the members in English speaking parts of various relevant scenarios. Even a choir was established as a form of recreation.

Finally, the students' examination results were encouraging. To pass the exam the average score from a minimum of six subjects tests must exceed 33%. Most of the students who attended the Saturday classes reported that their average score exceeded 50%. Country-wide only 36% of black pupils passed their exams (Taylor, 1991, p. 8). KwaZulu students exceeded these figures with an overall pass rate of 46% (Shabalala, 1991). One could argue that these young people already exhibited initiative by being willing to better themselves and would therefore perform better than average. Their personal reactions indicated otherwise. They expressed much appreciation for the efforts of the Saturday classes.

Educational Importance

Black South African youth have been excluded from having a voice in their education. The initiation of a rural youth program has had an impact upon their quality of life. The following are the major results of this program:
1. Young people were allowed to indicate their needs and to choose the curriculum.

2. Young people chose their leaders and allowed them to lead democratically.

3. Leadership was developed through the provision of responsibility and freedom to perform in an environment of encouragement.

4. Success of the program centered on the efforts and initiative of the IYP members with direction and guidance from the IYP coordinator and Insika director.

5. Students were better able to perform on the exams, and many qualified for college-level education who would otherwise not meet the entrance requirements.

6. Additional programs involving non-school IYP members were developed.

7. The following year a guidance coordinator joined Insika to assist school leavers to identify and apply to relevant vocational/academic institutions.

8. Work is currently in progress to establish a youth development program similar to the 4-H program in America. The organization's desire is to have on-going, non-formal, small group educational programs in agriculture, home economics, literacy and entrepreneurship.

Recommendations

The Insika Youth Program has experienced a fruitful beginning. Success is needed in the rural black communities of southern Africa. Young people need ongoing encouragement to carry on with projects and programs. It is recommended that the academic classes be continued as long as the unrest prevails in the area and the members feel the need for additional instruction. This enhances the opportunities for students to be better qualified for higher level educational opportunities.

The needs of the un-schooled members, and the high unemployment rate, require that there be a skills analysis with subsequent non-formal, vocational instruction. This will help youth be better prepared for local employment opportunities. Very few young people can express themselves adequately in the businesses' medium of communication (English & Afrikaans). Therefore, language/communications skills enhancement would also be of great benefit. A further recommendation would be to identify small business opportunities and target needs for training in self-employment/entrepreneurship.

Finally, it is important to develop leaders in the membership. The IYP is organized to encourage this through its African democratic decision making process and the identifying and planning of programs. The director of Insika Rural Development Association and IYP coordinator must continue providing the environment for their youth to participate in every aspect of the Insika Youth Program.

References


