

# **'WE USE OUR PROBLEMS NOW TO ACHIEVE, TO DO BETTER': A RESILIENT SCHOOLS STUDY IN KWAZULU-NATAL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Located within international traditions of research which includes global trends on school improvement, this paper explores the reasons why some South African schools succeeded 'despite the odds' while others failed. Despite many South African schools still facing social, economic and political challenges after the dawn of democracy, some schools have risen above the odds and offer quality teaching and learning while others, in similar contexts, are floundering.

Replicating a local study conducted by Christie and Potterton (1997) the qualitative study on which this paper is based took place in 18 schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Using a case study approach, individual interviews were conducted with the principal, another member of the School Management Team and a teacher at each school. During school visits formal observation was done using an observation schedule. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis.

This paper describes the five key findings from this research and discusses the extent to which these reflect the findings of the original study. In brief the findings relate to the centrality of teaching and learning, the importance of good leadership and management and discipline as a good indicator of school resilience. These findings were similar to those of the original research. Furthermore, the role of the department of education in supporting schools was still regarded as problematic and schools turned instead to local community partnerships for support. However, the role of the school governing body emerged far more strongly as an indicator of resilience in schools today in comparison with the findings a decade ago. Overall, the paper highlights the central role people play as they work collaboratively from within schools with the little they have to bring about improvement.

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Our study was located within international traditions of research on school improvement as opposed to school effectiveness. While school effectiveness literature, according to Heneveld and Craig (1996), looks at outcomes of schooling and the in-school and contextual variables that contribute to those outcomes, school improvement literature is more concerned with the process through which successful change is introduced in schools. Levin and Lockheed (1993) have shown that the checklist approach, which characterises the school effectiveness tradition, is generally unsuccessful in developing countries because of inadequate provisioning in terms of the minimum requirements for teaching. In line with this thinking, we agree with Gray and

Wilcox that good teaching and learning “can’t be captured by a checklist or a calculator” (1995: 30). Instead we located our study more specifically within school improvement literature which concentrates its research more on the understanding that schools can change and explores how change occurs in the school system (Bennett *et al*, 1992). Within a more whole school development framework, we understand schools as complex ‘systems’ which are not easy to change because they “interact with and shape and are shaped by their context in ways that are complex and variable” (Christie, 2001, p.40). Thus the role of the individual in school development is crucial and, as Dalin (1993) argue, systemic change involves fundamental cultural change. Here the culture of a school is taken to mean the values and norms which constitute the ethos of the school. Working from a development perspective, Davidoff and Lazarus (2002) offer an organisational development framework for South African schools to use to improve themselves. In their framework, made up of interrelated elements, culture is placed at the centre, because, as Davidoff and Lazarus argue, “it both determines and reflects how the elements of school life develop” (2002, p.21). School culture is powerful because it is determined by people and it is “the people in schools who make a difference, and without people changing, shifting attitudes and behaviours, very little change can be anticipated” (Davidoff and Lazarus, 2002, p.xviii).

Still within a school improvement framework, Christie and Potterton’s (1997) work with 32 South African schools aimed at developing a research based contribution to local knowledge about school quality initiatives. They found that their 32 schools were remarkable in that they managed to survive, if not thrive, in contexts where neighbouring schools remained in crisis. They termed these schools ‘resilient’ because of their ability to survive and develop in contexts of extreme adversity (Christie, 2001). Quoting Valliant (1993), Christie describes how the term ‘resilience’ conveys “both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back” (2001, p.268). The common features of resilience across the 32 schools in the Christie and Potterton study included the schools’ sense of responsibility, the central place they gave to teaching and learning, strong leadership, safety and organisation, the importance of authority and discipline, as well as a culture of concern. Christie and Potterton (1997, p.19) had further anticipated that school governance, parental involvement and relationships with the education departments would feature as characteristics of resilience but these did not feature strongly in their study.

This paper presents the overall findings of a research project carried out by a group of post-graduate students in the Faculty of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2007. The research aimed to replicate Christie and Potterton’s ‘Resilient Schools Study’ (Christie and Potterton, 1997), referred to above, to determine, a decade on, whether the features of school resilience had changed or remained the same. We wanted to explore, in the context of a sample of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) schools, what it was that made some schools succeed despite the odds while their neighbouring schools remained in crisis. In other words, we wanted to determine what it was that contributed to the ‘resilience’ of these successful schools.

## **THE STUDY**

### **Research design and methodology**

In replicating the Christie and Potterton study, our project pursued the same research question, followed the same design and used the same methods (with relevant revisions and adaptations) as those of the original study. The question that guided our research was simply: Why do some schools succeed despite the odds while others, facing similar difficulties, fail and which features contribute to the resilience of these successful schools?

Our study was located within the interpretivist paradigm and used qualitative research methods to collect data. Eighteen schools in KwaZulu-Natal were selected using both convenience and purposive sampling. We deliberately selected KZN schools in relatively poor socio-economic circumstances, schools with a history of previous disadvantage in order to foreground the contexts of “mainstream” schools. Christie, Butler and Potterton usefully use this term to refer to the majority of schools in South Africa. In so doing, they challenge us to reposition the mainstream and value it because the mainstream is “important in finding strategies to achieve equity and quality for all” (2007, p.100). Thus, of the 18 schools in our study, nine were rural, four were peri-urban and five were urban. Of the schools, 3 were ‘no fee’ schools for 2007 while 9 set their annual school fees at R150 or below. Three schools set their annual fees between R150 and R450 while the 3 most expensive schools’ in 2007 were in the R450 – R880 bracket. The educator : learner ratio on average across the 18 schools was 1 : 36 with the lowest ratio 1 : 27 and the highest 1 : 45. Of the 18 schools, eight had only one support staff member, four had two support staff members while the balance had three to five support staff members. The schools in the study were mostly primary schools (70%) with the balance being secondary schools. A further criterion in our school selection was that the school must be perceived by the community as operating well despite difficult conditions. In a way, our selection of schools was similar to the selection process Lightfoot used in her study of good high schools where she chose schools “because of their reputation among school people, the high opinion of them shared by their inhabitants and surrounding communities, and because they offered easy and generous entry” (Lightfoot, 1983: 11).

Our study opted for a case study approach which allowed us to focus on the school as our unit of analysis and enabled us to gain a deeper insight into what the factors were that made each school succeed despite the contextual difficulties faced. For us, significance rather than frequency (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2001), is a hallmark of case studies and, as researchers, we wanted to gain insight into the real dynamics of situations and people. At each of the case study schools, three research participants were identified and interviewed. These participants included the principal, a member of the school management team (other than the principal) and a teacher. The primary method used to gather the data from each of the participants was the semi-structured individual interview which was audio-taped and transcribed. Observations, which included how the school was organised, what curriculum was offered and how the teaching and learning happened, were recorded using a structured observation schedule during the two-day school visits. Our aim, in line with the original study, was to develop brief sketches of the schools in order to illustrate some of the dynamics of the schools and then to analyse across schools for themes and patterns. The individual school sketches were taken to the schools for comment as a validity measure.

Challenges to the research included issues of access to the schools as well as availability and willingness of the participants to be interviewed. One of the major limitations in the study was the number of researchers (18), all of whom were novices. To overcome this limitation and to ensure the researchers gathered data in similar ways across all schools, all were involved

throughout the planning process as well as in the process of evaluating the research instruments of the original study. The 18 researchers were of the opinion that the original interview schedule was too loosely structured and so the entire team worked together on the instrument to structure it further in order to develop a scaffolded approach to the interview process. We also set up mock activities prior to the inception of the research in which researchers could practice the art of interviewing and observing in a learning situation.

The analysis of our data involved two phases. The first phase involved individual researchers working both inductively and deductively with their school's data. Using a grounded theory process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), each researcher firstly allowed the data to 'speak' and initial concepts and themes were generated through the process of coding. The themes that emerged from this process were then compared with the themes generated by the Christie and Potterton (1997) study. Individual school portraits were then developed. The second phase involved analysing the school portraits to find the most common themes across the 18 schools.

## **DISCUSSION**

Quoting a major finding of the 1966 Coleman Report to the US Congress on *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, Christie *et al* reiterate the point that the over-riding influence on learners' life chances is the influence of social context and home background rather than school qualities (2007, p. 24). Supporting this view, our study attempted to capture and describe the social context of the majority of schools in this study in an effort to understand the context within which in-school resilience worked. The majority of schools in the study were situated in communities wracked by poverty, unemployment and sometimes violence as the following quotation starkly depicted:

People are struggling. People are poor. There is no food to eat and there is no work. Then there is the problem of AIDS. Many children are heading families because their parents have passed on or are too sick. Many parents are illiterate and uneducated about the disease.

Poverty was a recurring theme in all 18 schools. In the majority of schools, the level of poverty was evident in the central (and essential) role the school feeding scheme played in the lives of the learners. For example, a teacher described how her school "has a feeding scheme. For many learners this is the only nutritious meal for the day. There is always leftover food that is given to families that are battling". The stark impact of the effects of poverty on learners was evident in the story of another teacher:

It happens sometimes that you receive a letter reporting that the child is unable to come to school because she is ill. But during lunch time you see that learner in the (food) line and disappear after that. The attendance is good because of the nutrition programme.

In this context of poverty, unemployment and HIV/AIDS, the schools were often viewed by the learners as a place to which they could escape from their domestic challenges, despite the fact that many of these schools were under-resourced with no electricity, running water or proper toilets, and with no access to telephones, computers and duplicating machines. As one teacher

explained, “They see the school as a safe haven. For some it provides them with an unspoken sense of hope”. Given these contextual hardships, a principal summed up the reason for his school’s success in the following way: “The smooth running of the school and just being able to continue the day-to-day activities despite the problems our learners face, is an achievement”. Despite the grave odds, what these schools were able to provide was a purposeful and supportive framework for learning and teaching for its learners and teachers. Almost all the schools prided themselves on their general tidiness and litter-free surroundings. Schools were orderly, learners were in-class under teacher supervision and there were no signs of loitering. Learners were neatly dressed and in uniform with books which were covered. During break times, the grounds were abuzz with children’s voices as they played with friends or simply chatted with each other.

In presenting the common themes across the schools in the study, it is important to emphasise that what follows should, in the words of Christie and Potterton, “not be read as a checklist of discrete characteristics that could be unproblematically transferred from school to school” (1997, p.10). Rather we hope the features discussed below will be read within an understanding of schools as complex, dynamic and unique *systems* where school improvement is understood as an ongoing process requiring different strategies at different times. Our research suggests that resilience in the study schools stem from a range of different and overlapping sources and we have extracted from the data, for the purposes of this paper, the five most common features which contributed towards resilience across the 18 schools.

## **The centrality of teaching and learning**

### *Teachers and teaching*

It is evident from the data that teaching and learning was viewed as the primary purpose in each of the 18 schools. The schools were functional and attended well to the basics of good teaching, defined by one teacher as follows, “Learners like the fact that teachers do go to class. They teach, unlike in other schools where learners are left unattended”. A teacher from another school put it in the following way: “Teachers make sure they teach and the learners do what their teachers tell them to do”. Yet another teacher responded as follows:

Teachers are committed although there are frustrations from the department at times, but the teachers try harder to minimize those so that the learners are not affected. I observe the way teachers ‘fight’ for the periods of absent teachers, so teachers are committed to going to class.

The schools were proud of the fact that they offered quality teaching and learning which, in many cases, they attributed to their dedicated and committed teaching staff. A deputy principal mentioned that the reason for his school’s success was because of “the passion his teachers have for teaching and the fact that they take ownership of the school”.

Another participant explained how the staff “depends on a collegial work ethic and, despite their differences, they share mutual respect”. Thus the team work of staff members at the schools and their ability to network with other stakeholders was a prominent feature of our research. It was evident from the data that through working in teams, people learnt more from each other and were able to achieve more for their school than they would have done had they

operated individually. At many of the schools, the good performance of teachers was attributed to “the staff functioning and working as a team which I think leads to teachers achieving their learning outcomes”. Some of the teachers used the metaphor of a family when describing their school and saw their learners as an integral part of this family unit. Teachers were seen as professional people who were also care givers, working to develop a culture of care, tolerance, co-operation and support. This pastoral care aspect of their work is similar to what Noddings (1986) calls a “pedagogy of care” and what Christie and Potterton refer to as a “culture of concern” (1997) and was captured in the words of one of the participants: “Pastoral care is something that stands out. You can’t beat our teachers for pastoral care. I think it’s the years experience in this environment... in this community. They look after each other and provide pastoral care to the learners”. A tangible example of this pastoral care work was given by one teacher who explained that “teachers fundraise to assist indigent families with school fees” while a principal in another school described teacher agency within the pastoral care role: “If our teachers find out about a free donation, like a feeding scheme other than that offered by the department (of education), we act on it”. This determination of teachers to assist learners was commented on by a principal: “Teachers haven’t given up. They haven’t burnt out. Their coping skills are excellent”.

‘Time-on-task’ was a further fundamental characteristic of these resilient schools (see also Christie *et al*, 2007, p.66). Teachers wasted no time in starting and ending instructional activities and they selected curriculum materials which were appropriate to learners’ abilities. As a result, learners enjoyed the lessons and understood the imperative to attend school, as a participant explained: “The learners at this school are highly motivated because they see a need of coming to school. The educators are trying their best to instill the educational values and explain the worth of being an educated person in society”. Punctuality of teachers was, for the most, good across all the schools in this study and deemed a crucial factor in school resilience. A principal explained that they had no problem with teacher attendance as “teachers are punctual so as to ensure that they make the necessary preparations for the day”. Another participant described how “we stick to timetables and spend the correct contact time with learners. Teachers and learners are punctual; there are very few cases of late coming”. The commitment of educators was evident in their willingness to ‘go the extra mile’ and to “work beyond the demands of conventional timetables” (Christie *et al*, 2007, p. 98) as the following participant explained: “The teachers are very committed in such a way that if work is not finished during school hours, they finish off late or even come back during weekends”. But it was not only teachers who ‘went the extra mile’. One teacher described how her principal ‘went the extra mile’ to support the teaching and learning process:

We hand in our worksheets to the principal and she takes them home and rolls them off. Yes, she is very good at that. We feel proud when the children are presented with good quality worksheets so that they will want to work at their best. It also makes us want to work and do our best.

### *Learners and learning*

In the majority of the schools in this study, learners were motivated to attend school, as a participant described: “Learners enjoy coming to school. Their attendance is good. Even when there are taxi strikes they find their way to school”. It appeared that learners enjoyed the structure, order and routine of the system which contributed to their sense of belonging and of being in a safe environment. Furthermore, teachers did their best to motivate learners through

the use of learner-centred methods and the creation of a positive learning environment in an effort to “make sure that our teaching is not boring to our learners”. A learner-centred approach was advocated because, as a principal of one school explains: “we are giving the learners an opportunity to give more answers and encourage them to do the projects. They are made active”. In another school, a principal described how the educators tried really hard to create a positive learning environment for the children, despite the fact that they have limited resources at their disposal: “As you can see, they try to make the classroom as pleasant as possible for the learners so as to provide that culture of teaching and learning. The teachers are very eager to try out new things. They see it as a challenge”. Teachers, for the most part, grappled continuously with the new curriculum and did their best, despite their meager resources, to deliver as broad a range of learning areas as possible for their learners. For many schools, a holistic education offering a balanced curriculum was of paramount importance. While offering a broad academic curriculum was deemed important, the value of the social and creative subjects were not overlooked, as the following quotation highlighted: “The school recognizes that what makes learners enjoy the school is the Arts, such as music, cultural festivals and artist-in-residence programmes. Consequently this has improved the learners’ attendance and minimizes absenteeism and late arrival”.

Assessment was another common thread that ran through the data in this study. Participants spoke proudly of their schools’ engagement with assessment, shared stories of their struggles in coming to terms with continuous assessment and acknowledged the benefits of the various forms of assessment. A principal shared one of the benefits as follows: “The teachers are finding that the continuous assessment is not that bad and that by this method they understand the child better. They get to know each child on a different level”. Another participant described the assessment process in the following way:

formally through tests, examinations and supervised tasks. Informally through observations during lessons, participation in class, homework class work and many more. Feedback on learners work to parents is through contact with parents twice a year and report cards are issued at the end of each term.

## **Leadership and management**

The complimentary processes of leadership and management constitute the second feature of resilience in this study and confirms other research which claims that purposeful leadership is an important component of successful schools (Christie and Potterton, 1997; Fullan, 2001; Muijs and Harris, 2003). In our study and for the purpose of this article, ‘leadership’ was understood as the process which works towards movement and change in an organisation while ‘management’ was understood as the process which works towards the stability, preservation and maintenance of the organisation (Astin and Astin, 2000). We worked from the premise that these two processes complimented each other and *both* were needed for an organisation to prosper. A further premise underpinning our study was that leadership should not be equated with headship (Grant, 2006) or with “status, authority and position” (Muijs and Harris, 2003) but should rather be “seen as an activity in which all members of educational organisations engage” and should “not be seen as the task of a few” (DOE, 1996, p.27).

### *Leadership processes*

The school principals in our study were generally regarded as 'good principals' who demonstrated a healthy balance of both 'management' and 'leadership' competences. In exploring the leadership processes within these schools, we found that the majority of the principals displayed a sense of direction and vision for their schools. Their enthusiasm about the vision was evident in the way they went about sharing the vision with both teachers and learners alike, as the words from a teacher in the study demonstrated: "He motivates you, he convinces you to buy into what is proposed and that is a quality that I admire in him". It was clear from the data that the visionary nature of the principals, in particular, was a motivating factor in the ongoing improvement and achievement of these resilient schools. Educators were not satisfied with maintaining the status quo but instead were constantly searching for alternative ways to address the challenges they were facing. We got the sense of the development of "a sense of agency and responsibility at school level" (Christie, 1998, p.20). For example, one of the participants offered the following as the reason why her school was successful: "our commitment, since we always work as partners in education, doing what we can in order to improve the educational climate of our school". A principal of another school explained how: "We use our problems now to achieve, to do better. That is our learning curve". The schools clearly did not run away from their problems but instead interrogated them and used them as a springboard from which to learn and improve, confirming the view of Hopkins *et al* who argue that "school improvement, like the human condition, is largely about problem solving" (1994, p.4.) In a similar vein, Christie *et al* are of the opinion that "the sense of inner agency, and mustering resources to solve problems, should be viewed as a strength in schools" (2007, pp. 101 – 102).

Engaging still with leadership processes, the importance of ongoing professional development and teacher growth was highlighted as an important aspect of school success. Principals were aware of the importance of keeping teachers motivated and many spoke of their conscious efforts to encourage staff members to further their studies in an attempt at both personal and professional development. It was with a sense of pride that principals shared the successes of their staff members, as the following quote attested: "My teachers are all busy studying and improving their qualifications and that gives them greater autonomy within their classrooms which is important". In the majority of schools teachers operated as professionals and involved themselves in school-based as well as out-of-school curriculum development where they could. For example, one participant described how the school "follows the new curriculum with many teachers eager to learn more. They go on workshops and call outside people in to assist them in areas of need". At another school teachers used their "networking resources outside of the school context for the benefit of the school in general". For another school, and in the interests of improvement, teachers were "compelled to attend workshops and give feedback to the staff, submit lesson plans and work programmes for monitoring purposes once a week. In this way, teachers are empowered to perform better in their classrooms and extra-curricular activities".

#### *Management processes*

In exploring the management processes across the schools, we found that the daily school programme was in place, well planned and well organised which contributed to a steady and healthy school routine. Systems were in place to maintain the teaching and learning process. These systems, together with school rules and regulations, were deemed essential in holding the schools intact and ensuring resilience during rough times. Systems were important at a macro school level as a principal explained: "our administration controls the movement of the people and the organisation of the school. Major decisions revolve around our administration". Systems

were also viewed as important at a classroom level, as a participant explained: “Teachers have registers for learners; everything must be planned. Registers, school calendars and timetables, all these are part of administration, so they are very important”. Our findings support the view of Christie who, in her study of dysfunctional schools, argues that for a culture of teaching and learning to operate, it will be necessary to “establish proper and effective management systems and structures with clear procedures and clear lines of authority, powers, responsibility and accountability” (1998, p.12?). Engaging further with management processes, the role of monitoring to ensure quality teaching and learning emerged as another common characteristic in many of these resilient schools. In one of the study schools the head of department (HOD) explained the importance of checking books “for it somehow keeps educators in check and up to date with their work”. A principal, while speaking of the impromptu checks she did of books and files of both her educators and her learners explained that: “this is not seen as policing the educators but it serves as a means to let educators know we are concerned with the progress and quality of the work of both learners and educators”.

### *Delegation and participation*

While leadership styles in this study differed across schools, and according to changing contexts, the participatory approach to leadership was perceived to be the most common in the majority of research schools. Leadership was, in most cases, described as a shared endeavour and there was recognition that teachers participated in decision-making, reinforcing Christie’s point that “building leadership effectiveness and participatory management teams needs to be a priority” (Christie, 1998, p.20). Many of the principals maintained that they encouraged teachers to “lead and to take on that role of leadership”. However, the levels at which teachers were involved in leadership and decision-making were seldom made explicit and varied from school to school. A discourse of delegation was the norm where delegation, after Jackson (2003), involves a manifestation of power relations and involves the handing down of tasks within a managerial structure. Within this bureaucratic organisational framework, a principal reasoned the importance of delegation: “I view delegation as very important, because it is one of the cornerstones in ensuring responsibility and accountability”. There was evidence from the data of authorised forms of distributed leadership (Gunter, 2005) where work was distributed from the principal to others and was accepted because of its legitimacy within the hierarchical system of relations and was evident through “teams, informal work groups, committees, and so on, operating within a hierarchical organisation” (Woods, 2004, 6). In other words, the majority of principals, while sharing aspects of leadership and management processes, retained their positional authority and firmly controlled their schools from the top but in an inclusive way. For example, there was reference to an “open door policy” and open communication through dialogue by “inviting people to a fair hearing, sitting down with staff and speaking informally because formal speaking increases the tension”. Participants spoke about the importance of trust and teachers, for the most part, felt that they could speak confidentially to their principals and that “the information that is spoken is not spread afterwards”. Leadership involved a sense of accountability to the staff and to the department of education. There was a tangible sense of urgency, ownership and accountability, as well as a sense of perseverance and tenacity on the part of many school leaders. However, not all leadership was experienced as participatory and inclusive. In a few of the schools, according to some of the teachers, leadership was autocratic and stifling. For example, one teacher explained how “the principal at times refuses to listen to our views. Issues are discussed but, however, what the principal says goes”. Another teacher lamented that “our views are not considered by the school management system” while for

another teacher “the principal is hard headed and does not listen to anyone’. One principal in the study had the courage to acknowledge that “I am autocratic depending on the situation”.

## **Discipline**

A further common indicator of resilience that characterised our research schools was in relation to orderliness and discipline, as the following comment highlighted: “The school’s reputation of high discipline makes it a target for parents who want their children to go to a disciplined school”. The importance placed on learner discipline was summed up by a teacher: “We place a lot of emphasis on discipline, getting learners to practice the art of self-discipline”. This emphasis on discipline emerged out of a concern that learners would “remember their rights but not their responsibilities”. The importance of teaching values, as the previous quote suggested, was central to the core work of teachers. Another teacher articulated this view in a different way: “We try by all means to promote good educational values like regular attendance by the staff and the learners, punctuality, discipline and serious teaching”. As can be seen from these words, the issue of discipline did not only relate to learners but to teachers as well, a view endorsed by yet another teacher: “Being punctual for school is of great importance to the educators and the learners. It sets the tone for the day”. In the context of another school, a teacher elaborated further: “We strongly discourage bunking of classes, absenteeism, late-coming and failure to complete the given homework, tasks and assignments”. Some teachers developed a set of rules to keep order in their classrooms, as the following teacher explained: “These rules were formulated by me, as the class educator, together with the learners, so that it will be easy to refer to them when learners behave badly in class”.

The issue of discipline, although a core function of teachers’ work, was not restricted solely to the school but involved the parents and community as well. Parents were invited by principals to involve themselves in issues of discipline in relation to the learners in a number of ways. For example, one principal outlined how he worked with parents in relation to learner discipline: “I issue the learner with a letter for the parents and the child can only return to school with his or her parents ... and the parents co-operate. We seldom have serious offences but then again we call in the parents and most times we sort out the problem”. Community involvement in and ownership of schools was another indicator of resilience which contributed to, amongst other things, ensuring that schools were safe places in which teaching and learning could occur (See also Christie and Potterton, 1997). One powerful strategy used by rural schools was to involve the local chief as spokesperson for the school in relation to issues of parental involvement, and community ownership. An HOD at one such school explained the critical role of the local chief in challenging the community to support and protect the school:

We normally arrange meetings where we invite the local chief; the ‘induna’ to come and address people on how they should value the presence of the school in their area and how and its worth to the lives of their children and the community at large. Workshops are conducted on the ‘sense of ownership of the school’. The local chief goes to the extent of threatening the community by chasing away all those guilty of vandalism of the school property.

It emerged, though somewhat subtly, from our interviews and observations that corporal punishment was still being used as a form of discipline in some of the schools in our study,

despite its legislated abolishment. One of the members of our research team, on her second visit to a school, reported that “one of the teachers was carrying a plastic pipe to class and I knew that this would not be used as a pointing stick”. In another school, a deputy principal remarked that “sometimes the parent is called in to discipline the child and in many of these cases corporal punishment is used by the parent”. Here we got the sense that if corporal punishment was sanctioned by the parent, then it was used as a form of discipline. However, there was also evidence of alternative discipline strategies being practiced in the schools for misdemeanors. Some schools developed a discipline policy which included a graded system of punishment. For example, one teacher explained how “we also use verbal and written warnings for disciplining actions”. For minor misdemeanors, learners were sometimes tasked to pick up litter and tidy the school grounds or clean the toilets during their break time or at the end of a school day.

### **Relationship with the Department of Education**

A minority of schools in our study had a good relationship with the DoE. In the one case, the school was situated close to the department offices and was frequently visited by the SEM (Superintendent of Education Management) and subject advisors. The implication of this was that teachers and learners were always on their best behaviour and “the presence of the SEM nearby keeps everyone on their toes and serves as a good control of bad habits”. In another school, participants spoke of the departmental interest in the welfare and upkeep of the school. As a result, the school regularly received all the latest bulletins and circulars and was also frequently visited by the SEM who was impressed with the work of the school. Some participants described the important role of the DoE in “offering good courses so as to upgrade educators for the benefit of the school”.

However, departmental relations in the majority of schools were poor. When asked what support schools received from the DoE, one principal replied: “nothing that I know of” and explained that the school did not rely on the DoE but instead “we do things for ourselves”, supporting Christie and Potterton’s finding that schools “did not rely very much on them for instructions or concrete support” (1997, p.20). Another participant in our study described the relationship in the following way: “the department has a very distant approach to activities at school” while an HOD at another school shared his concern that “we have never met our SEM. I don’t think many teachers know his name”. Yet another principal went so far as to say that “they are not teaching us, we are teaching them ... (I have) given them my PowerPoint presentation to use to conduct workshops”. This is line with the research of Christie and Potterton that “principals regarded themselves as better informed than their district offices, and sometimes a resource for them” (1997, p.20). For yet another principal, the department’s inability to resolve a year-long disciplinary matter in his school was a real cause for concern.

In cases where departmental support to schools was poor, schools turned to community partnerships for support. These included relationships with the community police forum, the South African Police Services (SAPS), the Department of Health, local clinics as well as community non-governmental organisations. In other words, schools took the initiative and drew assistance and resources through networks, attempting what Christie *et al* suggest of resilient schools: “to draw support from whatever sources are available, and to build on networks of social capital wherever they can” (2007, p. 101).

## **School governance and community involvement**

School governance was a strong indicator of resilience in the majority of schools in this study. However, two conflicting views emerged with regard to the effectiveness of the school governing bodies (SGBs) in the research schools. In many of the schools, and the more rural schools in particular, the participants held the view that their SGBs were supportive and truly representative of the communities they served. They believed that the governing bodies fostered a positive relationship between schools and the communities and inspired a high level of trust as the following quotation attested: “The SGB stands in trust towards the school, acting in fact all the time”. Another school described how they had

a legally constituted SGB that is fully functional, that is always up to date with the new changes in the school. Members of the School governing body are given the new school policies to familiarize themselves with the contents. They are fully functional, supportive, keen and diligent.

This view is further endorsed by an educator from yet another school:

The SGB is very active within the school. We are very pleased with the contribution made by the SGB. They have a good working relationship with the educators, and are well known by them. They further work hard when it comes to fundraising and securing sponsorships from outside organizations and businesses for the school.

Most educators from these schools agreed that their SGB formed a strong link between the school and the community and were of the opinion that a good relationship existed between the SMT and the SGB. Issues that the school could not handle were referred to the SGB for their opinion. SGB members were, generally, always prepared to co- work with the school which led to strong bonds being built between community and school. However, in contrast to the positive views on SGBs expressed above, a minority of schools in the study were unimpressed with the work of their SGBs. In these schools participants cited incompetence, a lack of capacity and a lack of motivation on the part of the SGB members as reasons for their ineffectiveness. For example, a HOD at one of the schools explained that most governing members of the school were “uneducated, under-empowered and illiterate. Many do not have the necessary skills to hold that position. Therefore, deliverance is poor”. In line with this view an educator bemoaned the fact that:

They are not effective at all. They will only appear when there are money issues. They do not help the school to fundraise at all. We do not even know who they are, for we have not been formally introduced as a staff. The school functions regardless of their input. Teachers take on the roles that the SGB should be taking. Meetings are minimal, twice a year I think. The SGB does not interact with the staff, or rather chooses not to.

## **CONCLUSION**

A decade on from the resilient schools' study led by Christie and Potterton (1997), and we have recurring features of resilience emerging in the research into resilient mainstream schools. The five most common features of resilience that were evident across the majority of schools in our study, in most instances, mirrored the findings of the original study. The first four of the five features of resilience discussed above replicated closely the findings of the original study, while schools' relationships with their governing bodies emerged as a much stronger indicator of resilience in our research a decade on from the original study.

One might argue that the centrality of teaching and learning, as the core feature of resilience, ought to be a taken-for-granted and common sense feature of schools. However, we agree with Christie and Potterton that it is imperative to emphasise sufficiently the incredible importance of this "essential source of resilience and one of the key characteristics of success against the odds in disadvantaged schools in South Africa" (1997, p.14). Working from this premise, it stands to reason that if only non-resilient schools could just gather the energy to reintroduce the basics of teaching into the school day, they would be well on their way towards resilience. This essentially requires people doing nothing out of the ordinary but doing the in-school basics well: teachers in classrooms teaching with their learners learning in a disciplined way, and principals fulfilling their leadership and management roles.

In other words, if people work together and do the basics of their jobs well, schools will improve because people make a difference, and when people change, the norms and values of schools shift and schools change from within (Davidoff and Lazarus, 2002). It is therefore resilient people who are central to resilient schools. And if resilient schools are made up of resilient people, we have to ask what it is that makes teachers' resilient? What is it that makes a teacher cope and refuse to be taken down by contextual difficulties when teaching while another teacher, facing similar circumstances, is broken and gives in to the challenge? Similarly, what is it that makes a school leader cope and refuse to be taken down by contextual difficulties when leading a school while another school leader, facing similar circumstances, is broken and gives in to the challenge? These questions, while interesting, are beyond the scope of this paper and require further research. But we can conclude that resilient schools in a developing country such as South Africa are, by and large, doing nothing extraordinary. However, given the overwhelming starkness of their social context and the derived school challenges they continually face, we fully endorse the view of Christie *et al* that their achievement of "the rhythms and practices of 'ordinary schooling' is an extraordinary feat for these schools" (2007, p.58).

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