

Profile

Building Citizenry: The Soul Buddyz Club

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Background

Soul City is a national non-governmental organisation established in 1992 to promote health and improve the quality of life of South Africans. In 2003, following the success of the Soul Buddyz mass media initiative, Soul City started the Soul Buddyz Club intervention. This is a joint initiative of Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication and SABC Education, in collaboration with the Department of Education. The project was established in 2002 in response to an influx of requests from ordinary children in diverse South African communities.

The Soul Buddyz project is based on the South African constitution, the Children's Rights Convention and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Through the Soul Buddyz Club children learn about their rights and responsibilities in a way that has meaning in their own life experiences.

The vision of the Soul Buddyz Club is to create and sustain a platform that gives voice to and promotes action for children's health and well-being.

The objectives are to:

- create a vehicle through which children between the ages of 8-14 years can become accredited Soul Buddyz Club members;
- create an environment for ongoing learning with peer and inter-generational support;
- create a forum where children's needs and voices can be heard;
- promote schools as community resources;
- provide a positive social alternative for young people;
- encourage young children to have fun and be creative;
- mobilise children to participate in taking responsible action to shape their own lives and that of their community;
- support young people as agents for change; and
- provide young people with vital health information, especially around HIV and sexuality, in order to ensure they can take action to remain healthy.

Intervention

The Soul Buddyz Club promotes children as proactive, valuable and productive members of the community and sees children as responsible agents for change. The clubs also promote non-discrimination and gender equality. All activities are seen in the light of the best interests of all children and respect for the right to life, survival and development. Children and facilitators are encouraged to explore and interact with their environment and to encourage active learning.

Soul Buddyz Clubs are housed within primary schools and public libraries and are formally registered with the Soul Buddyz Club project. Educators or librarians are trained as Soul Buddyz Club facilitators, particularly to understand child participation and the club processes. Member recruitment commences as soon as the educator has been trained. There are about 20 members per club and each member is registered on the Soul Buddyz Club database.

Clubs are expected to meet regularly, usually once a week. They are encouraged to use these regular meetings to work through Soul Buddyz Club materials such as the Soul Buddyz Club guide, the club magazine and interactive posters. Activities undertaken by clubs vary from club to club, but include:

- discussing and debating issues raised in the Soul Buddyz Club monthly newsletter;
- involvement in projects relating to various health and development issues, e.g. HIV and AIDS and its impact on children, caring for the environment, bullying, nutrition and other issues;
- conducting research within communities about issues which affect children;
- identifying and assisting vulnerable children and families;
- preparing and presenting dramas in their schools;
- networking with local organisations such as clinics and community radio stations;
- entering competitions;
- participating in district and national meetings; and
- participating in grade 7 camps.

All facilitators attend an accredited training course and field-workers are employed to visit clubs to provide support and motivation. All information relating to clubs and their activities is stored on a central database and a grading system is in place to motivate clubs and submit reports.

Since the inception of the project in 2002, the number of registered Soul Buddyz Clubs has grown steadily from 1 800 in 2003 to 6 225 in 2010. There are roughly 20 292 primary schools in South Africa, which means that almost one in three primary schools (30%) has a Soul Buddyz Club.

Soul Buddyz Clubs – some examples

In 2009, a review of six Soul Buddyz Clubs was conducted.¹ Some of the key findings of the review are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Soul Buddyz Clubs and activities

Club and School	Area	School Profile	Project
Grace Buddyz Club Aha-Setjhaba Primary	Tumahole, Parys, Free State (rural area)	GrR – Gr7 1 020 learners; 31 educators No-fee school	<i>HIV and AIDS awareness:</i> In 2008 Buddyz visited their local clinic to gather information on HIV and AIDS in their community. They then set up information stations where they distributed educational material, information pamphlets and condoms and answered questions regarding HIV and AIDS.
Buffelsdale Soul Buddyz Buffelsdale Senior Primary	Tongaat, KwaZulu-Natal (urban residential area)	Gr5 – Gr7 240 learners; 11 educators School fees R630 per annum	<i>HIV and AIDS awareness:</i> In 2008 the Buddyz distributed blankets and teddy bears to children infected/affected by HIV at the Qalokusha Day Care Centre. They identified an urgent need for electricity at the Centre and wrote a funding request to the IBIS Caring Schools Fund. Through this they managed to access R4 800 for the installation of electricity as well as an additional R4 370 to buy school uniforms for vulnerable children at their school. They then organised an HIV prevention campaign together with three other schools in the area and networked with the local police and the Tongaat Health Centre which culminated in an event held at the Tongaat Town Hall where they performed plays, read poetry, sang songs and held a candlelight procession. The event was attended by 800 children.
Nobuntu Cares Soul Buddyz Nobuntu Senior Primary	Dimbaza Township, King William's Town, Eastern Cape (peri-urban township)	Gr5 – Gr7 204 learners; 12 educators School fees R20 per annum	<i>Coming together to care at our school – School feeding scheme:</i> In 2006 the Buddyz started a soup kitchen for 65 vulnerable learners. By 2008 this group had grown to 120 learners. They each receive a nutritious bowl of food three times a week, using vegetables from the Buddyz vegetable garden. Educators at the school donate R10 a month to buy the food and Buddyz also contribute food from their homes. Buddyz have mobilised the Roman Catholic Church who sponsor food on one of the days.
Small Buddyz Sesalong Primary	Buffelshoek, Capricorn, Limpopo (rural area)	GrR – Gr7 652 learners; 20 educators No-fee school	<i>Assisting orphaned and vulnerable children – the Child Support Grant Project:</i> In 2003 the Buddyz wrote a letter to the President of South Africa highlighting the plight of limited access to social services in their community, with a special focus on applying for social security grants such as the child support grant. This resulted in a delegation from the National Department of Social Development visiting the school and community. Measures were then put in place to assist community members to access social security grants.
Champions Club Winnie Ngwekazi Primary	Pimville, Soweto, Gauteng (urban township area)	GrR – Gr7 900 learners; 20 educators No fee school	<i>I can help you; you can help me – Establishment of a Trauma Centre:</i> In 2007 Buddyz in the Champions Club received a small grant from a donor. Feeling that learners needed a private space to discuss their problems with educators or counsellors, they decided that a counselling (trauma) centre was needed in their school. The Trauma Centre was opened in 2008 and is currently fully operational.
Z. P. Soul Buddyz Zerilda Park Primary	Lavender Hill, Cape Town, Western Cape (urban township area)	GrR – Gr7 1 130 learners; 31 educators School fees R150 per annum	<i>HIV and AIDS awareness:</i> In 2008 on World AIDS Day, Buddyz organised a 'red ribbon' campaign where all the children at Zerilda Park Primary school wore red T-shirts and sat together in the school courtyard in an HIV and AIDS ribbon formation. Buddyz spoke about HIV and read poems they had written. Arising out of this event, some educators have since volunteered to go for HIV testing.

Evaluation

In a three-year quantitative and qualitative study of children in Soul Buddyz Clubs, comparing them to both the baseline and control groups of children, the following key conclusions were drawn:²

HIV knowledge

Although children in the project group did not have significantly more factual knowledge than the matching control group, the qualitative evidence shows that the project group children were much more able to articulate and apply insights gained around HIV protection through their club membership than those in the control group. Girls, in particular, showed that they had gained confidence, assertiveness and a sense of agency in relation to their sexuality. This evidence of internalised information, the ability to act on it, and a sense of agency can be seen as a more valuable gain than mere information around HIV protection as it is commonly given to children in all schools.

Violence prevention

Children in the project group did not have higher knowledge scores than the control group although, qualitatively, children in the project group showed greater skills and, importantly, confidence in 'walking away' from violent confrontation than children in the control group. As was the case in HIV protection, this particular gain from their Soul Buddyz club attendance has significant implications in terms of these children's sense of agency in being able to protect themselves in the often very violent social contexts in which they live.

Access to services

The project group demonstrated an overall increase in knowledge of services in comparison to the control group. This finding was amplified through the qualitative analysis which revealed that children in the project group not only knew more about services that they were entitled to access in their locality but that they had also learned, through their club attendance, how to access them in terms of often quite complex processes. Given that such services – and children's capacity to access them – constitute a crucial protective resource for many children in high-risk social contexts, this gain for members of Soul Buddyz clubs cannot be underestimated.

Community involvement

There was a higher level of involvement in their communities (as reflected in out-of-school group membership) of the project group and also a higher level of responsibility and active engagement with community social problems than

was found in the control group. The qualitative data further enriched these findings with information on the concrete and committed nature of the children's actions.

Communication

By 2010 most of the project group children had developed quite sophisticated ways of communicating with peers on disagreements rather than by using violence and they were confident enough to resist peer pressure. Standing up to parents was still difficult for most, but many understood that talking to other trusted adults about a problem was important. These changes were not apparent in the control group over the same period. The focus on interpersonal communication skills – especially in relation to difficult situations for children of this age – is a crucial and extremely valuable element of the programme.

Gender

In terms of awareness of gender discrimination the project group demonstrated a substantial increase in mean gender awareness scores over the 2008-2010 period, in contrast to only a moderate increase in mean scores by the control group over the same period. The qualitative data revealed that, while in 2008 there was no apparent difference between project and control groups in terms of 'acceptance of difference' amongst people in their communities, by 2010 there had been marked positive change in the project group – particularly regarding xenophobic attitudes in informal township contexts. In terms of the effectiveness of Soul Buddyz clubs the outcome on this indicator, as specifically applied to awareness of discrimination within a democratic society, reflects very positively on the club programme.

Emotional health

Qualitatively there was no apparent difference in emotional health between project and control groups at the baseline in 2008, both showing distinct vulnerabilities around locus of control. By 2010 this picture had not changed for the control group but the project group children generally demonstrated increased empathy, a clearer future orientation, a greater sense of agency and higher levels of self-confidence. Since these quantities are essential internal protective assets needed to balance the developmental risks to which so many children in these social contexts are exposed, this evidence provides a strong endorsement of what the Soul Buddyz clubs are achieving.

Conclusion

Soul Buddyz Club is a primary school-based intervention dealing with health issues. The clubs not only build the children who participate in them but, through their community action, they impact positively on the lives of other children and adults. Through the clubs children are assisted in staying in school and learn skills that enable them to avoid getting infected with HIV.

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References

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