

The blackboard sanctuary

Faced with a growing number of Aids orphans, a Pretoria school has come up with a model support scheme, writes MOSHOESHOE MONARE

KHANYI Mothutsi is a bubbly, talkative and smart 15-year-old pupil at Bokgoni Technical High in Atteridgeville, outside Pretoria.

"Hi, I understand you are looking for me," she says, with a twang in her voice that is mocked by her peers as a product of her schooling at a former white suburban school.

But behind her lively, broad smile lies a traumatic loss. Her nine-month-old brother, father and mother died last year of a "mysterious illness". And her name is not Khanyi Mothutsi, but that is what we are calling her to protect her.

The girl's life-orientation teacher, Sithokoziso Blom, says Mothutsi is putting on a brave face, but inside she is emotionally hurt.

"She seems okay on the surface but deep down she is deeply traumatised by what has happened in her family," Blom says. "She needs emotional support."

Mothutsi says she is well looked after by a relative, but adds: "I miss my mom. I wish I could talk to someone."

Her teachers say her performance at school, once above average, has deteriorated since the deaths.

Blom says a number of pupils at Bokgoni are experiencing emotional breakdowns due to the loss of their parents.

"They are often teased by other heartless children, especially on Mother's Day about who are they going to give gifts to," Blom says.

Mothutsi is one of the 32 orphans at Bokgoni High; 17 parents have died since January due to what the school community euphemistically terms "mysterious illness".

And the number is rising. This week alone, two deaths were reported.

George Sono, a teacher, says the pattern of deaths and the nature of ailments suggest the true reality of Aids. "It's difficult for children to open up, but we talk to them and we get a sense of what's happening in their homes," he says.

Deputy principal Vivian Bopape says: "We just announce at the assembly that they [the parents] have died due to illness. As long as children don't disclose [the cause] we don't inquire, because there is a stigma attached to Aids."

The situation has turned teachers into social workers and the school into a charity organisation.

The government's nutritional scheme has not yet reached secondary schools, but Bokgoni did not wait for a government intervention programme. Instead, the school started a tuck shop, making and selling *sephatlo*, Pretoria's street sandwich (loosely translated as 'half').



HEARTFELT: Bokgoni Technical High's Sepedi dance group performs to raise money for Aids orphans

Picture: SYDNEY SESHIBEDI

This is a quarter of a loaf of bread filled with chips, cheese, polony and mango atjar, explains teacher Violet Raphiri.

"We give [sephatlo] to the orphans free of charge. We noticed they were hungry most of the time and couldn't afford to buy something to eat. This affects their attention span and performance in class," says Raphiri.

Orphans such as Kedibone Rakgotso (not her real name), 16, who lost her parents this year, benefit from the school's feeding scheme. She and her brother live with an aunt who earns R320 a month. And while there is enough money for food for about two weeks, she has come to rely on the

school's *sephatlo*.

"Our aunt just buys us cake flour and we are able to bake dumplings. But if the flour is finished, there's no money to buy bread," says Rakgotso.

But some pupils tease them. "Some orphans end up not going to get their free lunch, but we often intervene and talk to them," sighs Blom. "Some of these children can be cruel, you know."

Ignatius Jacobs, Gauteng Education MEC, says his department, along with the social welfare department, are investigating the extent of the problem and the number of orphans in the province.

"We are going to introduce a smart

card that will give orphans free access to basics such as food and clothes," Jacobs says.

Elsewhere in South Africa, similar situations exist. There are 25 000 orphans in schools in Limpopo Province and Mandla Msibi, spokesman for KwaZulu-Natal's Education Department, says a major challenge is to train teachers to deal with orphans.

Mpumalanga also has what education spokesman Thomas Msiza calls a "serious problem" with Aids orphans. "We don't have programmes for material support as yet," he says.

Apart from food, many of Bokgoni's pupils have other needs that need to be

met. Bopape says the school's alumni donate uniforms. "We also ask our teachers to donate their clothes, which we give to some of the pupils for the matric dance. They don't feel out of place and lonely that way."

But the most daunting challenge to teachers is meeting the orphans' emotional needs. "We are faced with traumatised learners who need [psychological] counselling and understanding. These are realities in our communities. Aids is threatening our education system," Bopape says.

Blom is Bokgoni's only life-orientation and guidance teacher. Although she is not a qualified counsellor, she

'We're faced with traumatised learners who need counselling and understanding. These are realities in our communities. Aids threatens our education system'

craft college. (It now offers mathematics and science as compulsory subjects.) Pupil numbers grew from 130 in 1997 to more than 1 307 this year. As a result, teachers have been forced to use classrooms at two neighbouring schools.

Bokgoni's results have also improved dramatically. In 1994, the 18 matriculants who wrote the final exams all failed. Last year, 88% of the 34 matriculants passed.

However, like at any other South African school, keeping quality teachers is a huge problem. The school is feeling the effects of the Gauteng Department of Education's strategy of making most posts temporary. Out of Bokgoni's 40 teachers, only 17 are permanent. The rest are employed on a three-month contract basis.

Still, after realising the true impact of HIV/Aids on their school, pupils have decided to bond together and form a "front" to deal with preventive measures and educational campaigns.

"We have realised the only way to deal with these problems is to encourage learners to get involved," says Raphiri. The school has selected 18 pupils to form a "cabinet", with each learner allocated a "ministry" or portfolio. These include the ministries of environment, education, health, sports and welfare.

"As minister of health my responsibility is to come up with a plan that will help us to spread the Aids message to the school, youth and the community," says Kholofelo Mokwena, 16, a Grade 10 pupil.

"I would want my mother to talk more to me about Aids and sexuality, but she doesn't. Hence I am leading this campaign to get more Aids education and parental involvement," Mokwena says.

Chairman of the cabinet, Kgaohelo Ramohwebo, 16, says their biggest struggle is to raise money to fund programmes and help orphans.

"We came up with a plan to donate at least R1 a month, but it is difficult to get money from pupils because most of us are from poor families," he says.

The pupils have formed a Sepedi dancing group as part of their fund-raising efforts. The group's colourful costumes and heartfelt performances stand for strength, hope and determination to overcome the social hardships facing their classmates and their school.

At Bokgoni, teachers and pupils have managed to turn a centre of learning into a compassionate home for pupils living with pain and emotional emptiness.

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