

Supporting the establishment of effective school counselling services.

The project undertook a series of steps to assist schools in establishing effective counselling services, which went far beyond the training of school counsellors. The establishment of counselling services itself was directed through a circular of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training and is now also included in the Ministry's 'Guideline for Implementing HIV/AIDS and Life-Skills Education Programme in Schools' of 2004 and formed the basis for the measures taken. To summarize, a combination of interventions is required: the sensitization of the school community; election of school counsellors by students; training of counsellors; a counselling room; record keeping and networking; reference, audio-visual and student reading materials; a functioning School Counselling and AIDS Education Committee (SCAEC) involving members of the community as well as staff and students; supervision and monitoring – not to mention a supportive head of school.

The first step for the project had been a situation analysis in a number of selected schools which revealed that many schools had indeed selected school counsellors, but these were generally not well utilized by students and were frequently responsible for disciplinary issues. The shift from a counsellor as an adviser providing guidance and addressing improper behaviour to one seeking to support students through counselling, while leaving the decisions to the student, had not been well understood by the school community.

Therefore it was essential to first sensitize heads of schools and to discuss qualities and role of school counsellors with them, as well as to discuss and agree on the selection process of counsellors, which should include an election by students which had not commonly been done – previously heads of schools merely appointed the counsellors, usually older teachers with great authority, but not necessarily ones trusted by or close to the students. The need for a confidential space for counselling sessions, ideally a separate room, was discussed, and so was the need to avoid involving counsellors in disciplinary issues, as this would undermine students' trust.

An initial 2-week training programme for school counsellors was developed and later-on reviewed with officials from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. The first week concentrated on adolescence, reproductive health including contraceptives, STIs and HIV/AIDS, gender and specific problems such as those of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and children in grief. During the second week trainees dealt with communication skills, decision-making and counselling skills in general, with action planning, networking and record keeping. Both weeks were conducted in a very interactive and participatory manner, with counsellors practicing and reflecting on counselling sessions during the second week. A training manual for trainers was prepared together with a workbook with activities and reference materials for the trainees. To strengthen or establish a support network, counsellors received a resource file with factual information on a number of relevant issues (e.g. female genital cutting, drug abuse, nutrition for PLWAs, AIDS helpline).

Two refresher trainings of 3 days each were prepared which were conducted after several months of practice. Findings from school visits were used to prepare for these trainings. The first training very much served the purpose of sharing of experiences and discussing strategies on how to overcome obstacles. Counselling skills were again practiced and the need to document counselling sessions was emphasized – while confidentiality must of

course be maintained, recording of counselling sessions is essential for follow-up of cases and also to justify reduction of workload. The special needs of orphans were discussed as well as the effective use of educational sessions for groups of students. At the end of the training, counsellors worked in teams to prepare action plans.

The second refresher training provided further exchange of experience, practice of skills and the effective use of resources, such as videos, CD's, magazines and brochures. Counsellors received various class-sets of written materials and samples of videos, CDs and posters.

Supervision and monitoring of counselling services is done by the regional coordinator, sometimes together with other staff or a head of school. Feedback is given in detail to the schools monitored and overall findings are compiled annually.

The project always stressed that heads of schools needed to provide support to counsellors, acknowledge their efforts, avoid overburdening them by reducing their workload where possible and also by ensuring that they are pro-active. Teachers often tend to wait for students to approach them, while it is important especially in the beginning to gain both interest and trust of the students. One possibility to do so are open discussions during educational sessions. During the annual meetings with heads of schools, monitoring findings, feedback from school counsellors and experiences of the heads of schools regarding counselling were talked about and strategies to improve agreed upon. One of these strategies is the peer support by counsellors of a geographical cluster of schools. In one district, the heads of schools organized and financed such meetings of school counsellors.

The HIV/AIDS policy guideline of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training also stipulates the formation of a School Counselling and AIDS Committee (SCAEC) including the head of school, counsellors and other teachers, student representatives, religious and other community representatives. An analysis by the project showed that most schools had not established such committees, and where they had been established only very few had met. Obstacles, in particular the need to pay allowances to attract the members, were discussed, and the project provided orientation for representatives of these committees. More committees are now in place and have met, but the fact that financial support seems to be a prerequisite for these meetings to take place is a difficulty especially for small and rural schools.

To mobilize schools and their counsellors, the project offered small grants for successful, AIDS-related proposals. While some grants were used for activities, others were used for the furnishing of counselling rooms. As one of the counsellors excitedly exclaimed: "Since I have this nice furniture (a few comfortable chairs, a table and a shelf) I have so many more students to come here to sit and read in the booklets or ask me questions! And many of them ask to talk to me". (*N.B. this counsellor conducted more than 300 individual counselling sessions in 1 month!*)

Feedback from teachers who were trained as counsellors show that they found the training very helpful for their work and also, that they only now really understood their task. Classroom based observation conducted for monitoring purposes shows an overall positive picture: counsellors have started to develop a different approach to their

interaction with students. The evaluation with students is showing that their trust in the use of such services is growing.

After just two years of implementation PASHA is convinced that the approach has great potential:

- Counsellors have the potential to address student's concerns before they even arise or when they have nowhere else to go (personal problems, fears, bereavements, worries that affect their school performance etc.). They can thereby contribute to change the school environment into one conducive to the overall development of children and adolescents.
- Counsellors can provide important information outside the curriculum, especially on sensitive issues regarding reproductive health. This can be achieved by supporting the counsellors to use question boxes, organise educational sessions and use the counselling room as a student resource centre.

The MoEVT foresees that the school counsellors be the ones to introduce and supervise peer education in the secondary school setting. PASHA will further extend its training programmes to prepare counsellors for this additional task.

However, there are still difficulties and the introduction of school based counselling in the cultural realities of the Tanzanian secondary school has to be seen as a process.

Remaining challenges are the utilization of the services offered which requires counsellors to be pro-active. At the same time increasing workload forms a problem especially in small and rural schools, where teachers are often scarce and teaching loads cannot be reduced. Networking is therefore important, also because of the psychsocial support for the counsellors themselves. An incentive system such as improved chances for promotion, reduced workload or even an award can help to motivate hardworking counsellors. The project has therefore initiated a "counsellor of the year" award, where outstandingly committed counsellors received a small prize and were acknowledged publicly.