

# **PART 2**

## **The Experiences of the Children affected by HIV/AIDS**

# HIV and Education

1



# 1.1 The right to go to school and to get an education

The Constitution says:

- Everyone has the right to a basic education.<sup>2</sup>

## What does this right mean for children?

- The right to basic education means that the Government must take steps so that everyone can receive basic education immediately.
- All children between the ages of 7 and 15, or in grades 1 to 9 must go to school.<sup>3</sup>
- It is the responsibility of a child's parent or caregiver to ensure that the child attends school.<sup>4</sup>

The Department of Education needs to ensure that:

- Children have access to a school near to where they live. If the school is far away, transport should be provided or made available in some way.
- The education provided is of an acceptable standard
- Schools are kept in an acceptable condition and have the necessary facilities.
- No child is refused admission to school or sent home because he/she is unable to pay school fees.<sup>5</sup>
- No child is discriminated against in any way as a result of not being able to pay school fees.<sup>6</sup>
- No child is discriminated against, treated unfairly or harassed at school because of their HIV status or because someone in their family has HIV.
- Teachers do not beat children.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2 Children's experiences

Some of the strongest themes to emerge from the National Children's Forum relate to children's experiences of school - exclusion from school and discrimination at school. Apart from the intrinsic value of education, the

“ I walk a long distance to school. I don't even wash properly when I go to school. ”

school environment provides an opportunity for identifying, supporting and referring vulnerable children and it is therefore essential that we ensure that children affected by HIV are able to attend school.

Children's drawings and stories at the National Children's Forum portray school as both a safe haven - a place to escape the difficulties of life at home and perhaps to receive a meal through the school feeding scheme – and a place of hardship – discrimination, teasing, abuse and exclusion.

The quotes below reflect the children's experiences of school.

### 1.2.1. "I walk a long distance to school"

For many of the children at the forum, transport to and from school was a problem. Often children are forced to walk very long distances, sometimes through areas that are unsafe.

**Bheki, 17 years old:** "I wake up at five. We leave for school at six as it is very far. It takes about an hour to get to school. I walk a long distance to school. I don't even wash properly when I go to school."

**Vincent, 13 years old:** "It's quite far, I must walk. It takes me about 50 minutes to get to school."

**Mary, 8 years old:** "I stay here. This is my house. There is a bush. No one likes this bush. Snakes and ugly men are there. They hurt children. There was a helicopter flying above the bush, the children ran. They found children who were dead. We must chop the bush down. They put the children in bags and took them away. He was my brother."

### 1.2.2. "When they want school fees I go home - They send me home."

Many children described being denied access to basic education and the associated benefits because they do not have money to buy school uniforms or to pay school fees. Children who are unable to pay school fees report being expelled from school, being held back a grade, having report cards withheld, being threatened by teachers, being excluded from the school feeding scheme and being embarrassed and teased. While the legislation prohibits the exclusion of children on the basis of non-payment of school fees, schools rely on the fees to be able to maintain their services.

**Mawabo, 11 years old:** "My mother is not working. She has got HIV and my little sister too has got it. I am worried because I have not paid school fees in the past three years. I am sent back home every time they want school fees and I do not have."

“ I am sent back home every time they want school fees and I do not have. ”

**Boitumelo, 9 years old:** "After my mother died, my father started behaving funny. He's often drunk. He locks us out of the house and we have to sleep under a tree. He doesn't buy us food. I can't go to school because he hasn't paid my school fees for two years. Teachers at school say we cannot go to school without paying. At school they want money for school fees and R5 for raffles. Sometimes they want R15 for funerals. My father is not working. When my father comes home late at night, drunk, he swears at us. He beats us and chases us around."

**Nonceba, 16 years old:** "I come from Northern Province. Problems that I have at home are that my parents are not working and they have HIV together with my baby sibling. I have not paid school fees that year, last year and this year. When I was supposed to go to grade 3 they made me repeat grade 2 because I had not found school fees. When they want school fees I go home. They send me home."

**Karabo, 9 years old:** "I come from Winterveld. My mother has passed away. I have not paid school fees. At school they say that they are going to chase us away at the end of this month if we have not paid school fees. When we tell my grandmother she says that she does not have money."

**Sizwe, 11 years old:** "Another problem is that they [children who have been orphaned] do not have tracksuits for school, and then they struggle and they cry to have uniforms."

### 1.2.3. "At home there is no food most of the time...I need food."

For many children, the meal that they receive at school is the only meal they eat that day. Children who attended the National Children's Forum described how they were unable to concentrate at school because of hunger and that they were sometimes punished or teased for falling asleep or collapsing in class.

**Vuyiswa, 8 years old:** "I do not have a mother. I stay with my grandmother and my father. At home there is no food most of the time. My grandmother and father do not have money. They are not working. My father is ill. I need food."

**Nosi, 10 years old:** "I do not have parents. They are chasing us away where we are staying now. My grandmother does not stay with us. She sleeps out at work. We do not have food or money for rent."

**Bheki, 17 years old:** "Once when my sister collapsed at school, the other children laughed at her and teased 'awubuke lokhu kuwiswa indlala' [Look at this, it falls from hunger]"

“ Once when my sister collapsed at school, the other children laughed at her and teased 'awubuke lokhu kuwiswa indlala' [Look at this, it falls from hunger]. ”





“ It feels bad because always at school she is thinking when my mother is going to get fine and when my mother is going to die. ”

**Lumka, 13 years old:** “When your mother has HIV but she’s got a small baby and she dies and leaves that small baby also with HIV, then you have to go to school, but also to look after the baby.”

The psychological impact on a child of losing a parent to HIV/AIDS often goes unacknowledged. The children at the forum talked about how they were often unable to concentrate in class because they were worried about returning home to find that their mother / father had died.

**Sbongile, 11 years old:** “It feels bad because always at school she is thinking when my mother is going to get fine and when my mother is going to die. Every time she has to sit with the teacher there because if she’s sitting alone, she’s always thinking. It is difficult to concentrate. Teachers don’t understand, they think you are day-dreaming.”

**Nthabiseng, 16 years old:** “Children stop going to school because they don’t concentrate when they think that they left their parents in bed. They think that anytime they can ‘clocksa’ [die].”

The children spoke about how teachers at their schools were often unaware of their home circumstances and sometimes punished them for falling asleep in class or for not completing homework.

**Zama, 11 years old:** “I used to work and get late for school and then get hit, 4 or 5 strokes.”

**Tiko, 13 years old:** “This is the problem I was facing when I was still staying at home. At first, my mum was an alcoholic, so by the time I was 10 or 11 years old, she used to come at home midnight, and I would have to,

“ They call you names like ‘skinny bones’. ”

**Tebogo, 11 years old:** “My problem is that I haven’t paid school fees and my mother has passed away. I am staying with my aunt who does not pay rent for the room, and the owner of the room fights us. At home it is me, my little sibling, my mother’s elder sister, her husband and my brother. At school they still want school fees. My aunt sells alcohol. Sometimes when the alcohol has not been bought we sleep with hunger. We do not take a lunch box when we go to school. Sometimes we do not eat in the morning. At school they don’t give me food from the feeding scheme because I have not paid school fees”.

#### 1.2.4 “I couldn’t concentrate at school for all the things I had to look after”

Many of the children who attended the forum are caregivers and breadwinners in their households. They spoke about how difficult it is to attend school while caring for sick parents or younger siblings or trying to earn an income.

**Thembisa, 13 years old:** “It is hard to look after a sick parent and younger siblings and try to be at school.”

**Sindile, 14 years old:** “I want someone who will look after my grandmother when I am at school. You find that you don’t have money to help her when she is ill. We are far away from the hospitals. I wish we can get help from government. The government can help children who are affected by HIV/AIDS by giving them opportunities like other children.”

each and every day after school, I would have to be a mum, babysitter, washing nappies, dishes, all the jobs in the house I was doing by myself. And when she came back, she would shout and beat me. I was also beaten at school. My teachers didn't understand I never had time to do my homework. It was very hard for me. Sometimes she would go and stay away for a whole week, leaving me and the 6 years and the 2 years and the 9 months baby. I couldn't concentrate at school for all the things I had to look after."

**Babalo, 12 years old:** "At school when children are beating me sometimes the teacher does not care for me. Like when I am sick she says come on, learn - you do not know your work. And I think I want to leave school because this teacher does not like me. I think I will go to another school because education is important."

### **Babalo, 12 years old writes about school:**

“ I think a child who is HIV-positive at school, when you tell them that you have HIV they don't love him because they think they will get that disease. And they don't want to touch him and they start to hate him and fire him [beat him] at school. The child will cry and say 'I want to die' because people they do not treat him the way they were treating him and his friends don't play with him in the street. They start to hate him, or they talk about him and his family. They don't want to eat at the same dish or they don't want to live with him. Even when he wants to go outside, they want him to live [stay] in the house. ”

## 1.2.5 "They say I'm dirty... I play alone"

Every one of the 9 groups of children reported that one of the biggest problems HIV affected children face at schools is **bullying and teasing**. Children are teased by their peers if they are HIV+ or if they are living in an HIV affected household.

**Sisi, 17 year old girl:** "If children get to know about this [that the child's parent is HIV+], they start running away from you without you knowing why they are running away. These are some of the problems. Sometimes it happens you get into an argument with someone and she says to you 'This thing - its father has got AIDS.' Then other children avoid you and you find yourself sitting alone. It then looks like you are the one who has got AIDS."

**Mduduzi, 12 years old:** "They call you names like 'skinny bones'. They also give you names like 'Red Ribbon', 'Millionaire', '4x4', 'skeleton'

I think a child who is HIV positive at school when you tell them that you have HIV they don't love him because they think that they will get that disease and they don't want to touch him and they start to hit and fire him at school the child will cry and say I want to die because people they do not treat them the way they were treating him and his friends don't play with them in their street they start to hate him. or they talk about him and his family they don't want to eat at the same dish or they don't want to live with him even when she/he want to go outside they want him to live in the house



“ And the teacher might tell his/her favourite that so-and-so has got AIDS and don't go near her... a teacher who does that should be chased away from work. ”

**Wilma, 12 years old:** “My father is sick, and my brothers. I don't go to school all the time because I look after my brothers. I go to school sometimes, but the children don't stand next to me. They say I'm dirty, they don't want to hold my hand. I play alone.”

**Boitumelo, 9 years old:** “Other children think that they will get AIDS by playing with that child. Children do not go to school because they do not want other children to laugh at them.”

**Karabo, 9 years old:** “Some say that they'll be beaten at home if they play with that child. Some children do not go to school. They are abused by older boys. When the child goes back to school no one wants to play with them.”

### 1.2.6 “Teachers tease me”

The children objected to being treated differently to other children in their class (even if this meant being excluded from a class punishment). They also reported that some of their teachers were not supportive and teased children who lived in HIV affected households or who were HIV+.

**Ncediswa, 14 years old:** “I stay with my granny and a baby girl. I study a lot because I like to be educated but I don't like school because the teachers tease me.”

“ When I went to register at school, one girl said to me: ‘Yo! You are still alive. We thought you've long been buried!’ ”

**Nokuxola, 12 years old:** “School is okay but there isn't much peace there. Teachers like to look and call children names and tell children ‘You're dead due to AIDS and will never get to my age’.”

**Themba, 9 years old:** “The school teachers treat you differently. In class they won't shout at you or beat you like the rest of the class.”

**Lefa, 10 years old:** “Other teachers try to find out about you. Other teachers discriminate against you. They make you responsible for every wrong thing that goes on in the classroom because they do not like you.”

**Sindile, 14 years old:** “The teacher likes to swear at us. I don't like that. Sometimes they punish us for something that we don't understand. We have tried to speak to the principal to stop them to use big ‘words’ when they speak to us. She calls us names like ‘the spare wheels’. She likes to tease people about their body. She doesn't accept them the way they are.”

**Ncediswa, 14 years old:** “Sometimes a teacher finds that he has sworn at you about AIDS. Then after school he calls you privately to ask for your forgiveness. In class you become a joke because children believe things when they are said by the teacher.”

### 1.2.7 “Teachers do not keep our problems as secretive as possible”

Some of the children reported that when the school authorities were informed about their home circumstances, the disclosure of this information led to teasing and abuse. As a result, some of the children did not feel comfortable disclosing their problems to teachers or asking their teachers for help.

**Ayanda, 18 years old:** “Like me, my problem when I went to register at school, one girl said to me: ‘Yo! You are still alive. We thought you've long been buried. It was well known here at school that you've got AIDS,’ the girl said. Our teachers do not keep our problems as secretive as possible.”

**Thalani, 14 years old:** “This is the mother and the father they were both HIV positive. The father is the one who infected the mother. The mother had three children. The mother went to the school to tell the principal that

one of three children is HIV positive. Children were then told by the class teacher and other children started to have a negative attitude towards these children. Most of the parents took children away from this school. Government should tell people that HIV/AIDS does not kill if we share a cup, bath together, playing, sing, kissing, etc. Children treated this child as if she is not a human being. People think that people with AIDS they lose their dignity. This child attended the school until she died last week."

**Nontobeko, 16 years old:** "Teachers can know the problem but maybe learners should not know it. Teachers have got favourites at school. They too are wrong because they discriminate against children. You'll find that Babalwa is loved by this teacher, and because she does not have this problem. And the teacher might tell his/her favourite that so and so has got AIDS and don't go near her. Then Babalwa tells her friends and this becomes known. Then the whole township and the whole school get to know about it. Principals and teachers do this. A teacher who does that should be chased away from work".

**Ayanda, 18 years old:** "There was one group that came to run a workshop at our school. They disclosed their status. Learners listened and some of the learners said that they could not stay with members of their family who are HIV positive, because they do not know what the future holds for them. Then I asked what would they do if there is one child here at school who wants to share her problem with them. – One raised up his hand and said we can talk and be positive at school but when learners are out of school they will point fingers to the learner who has disclosed. So children at school agreed that there can be no confidentiality at the end."

### 1.2.8 "A child was expelled from school because he was HIV/AIDS infected"

The children talked about how HIV-affected children and their caregivers are sometimes discouraged from participating in school activities and, in some instances, HIV+ children are expelled from school.

**Ithumeleng, 11 years old:** "A child was expelled from school because he was HIV/AIDS infected from birth. He told his friend, who told other children. The other children would gossip about him, when he comes they call him names like 'pin code'."



**Wendy, 13 years old:** "If parents are infected, they are not allowed to go to meetings at school."

### 1.2.9 "Some teachers, who are informed and know facts about the disease, support the children."

While many of the children reported negative experiences of school, others saw their teachers as a valuable source of support. The children made the comment that teachers who were well informed about HIV tended to be supportive and those who were less informed were less supportive.

**Sipho, 10 years old:** "Some teachers beat you all the time. And there are those who give you food and stuff that you need."

**Ndileka, 12 years old:** "At school I am helped. I get help sometimes, and sometimes I don't get it. They know that there is no one who works at home."

**Mzingisi, 16 years old:** "This is the school that I attend and I am in grade 10. This is my home, my neighbour's house and my friend who passed away last year. I have one older brother and a sister. On weekends I play soccer. My father went away while we were still young. I am staying alone at home. My family is not staying with me -they are in the rural areas. My mother passed away. My friend's mother provides me with food. At school they treat me well, because they know."



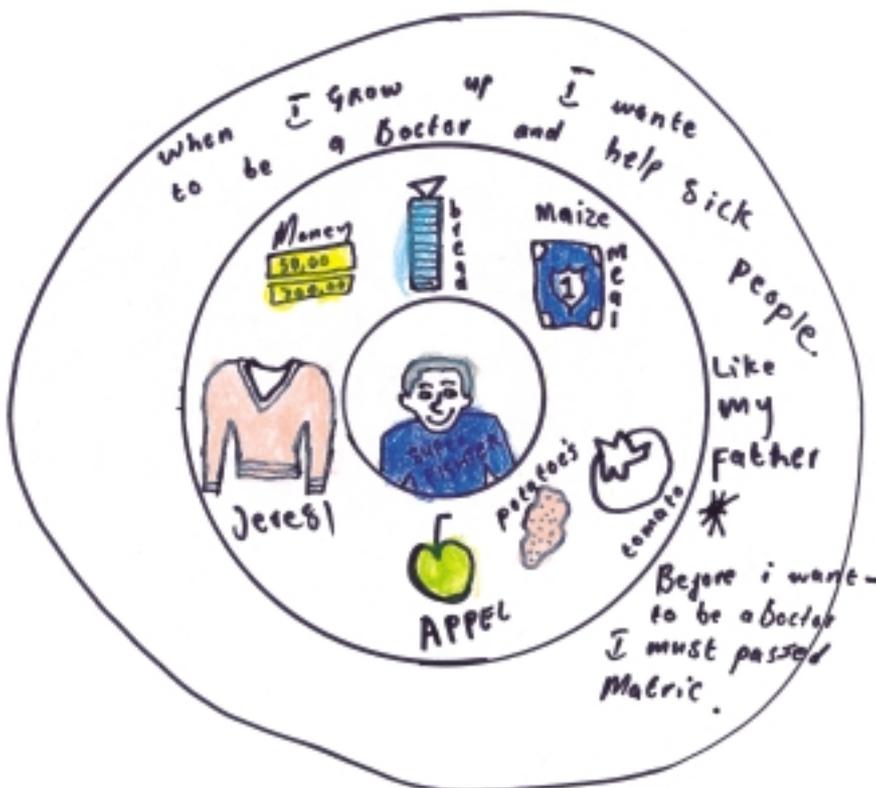
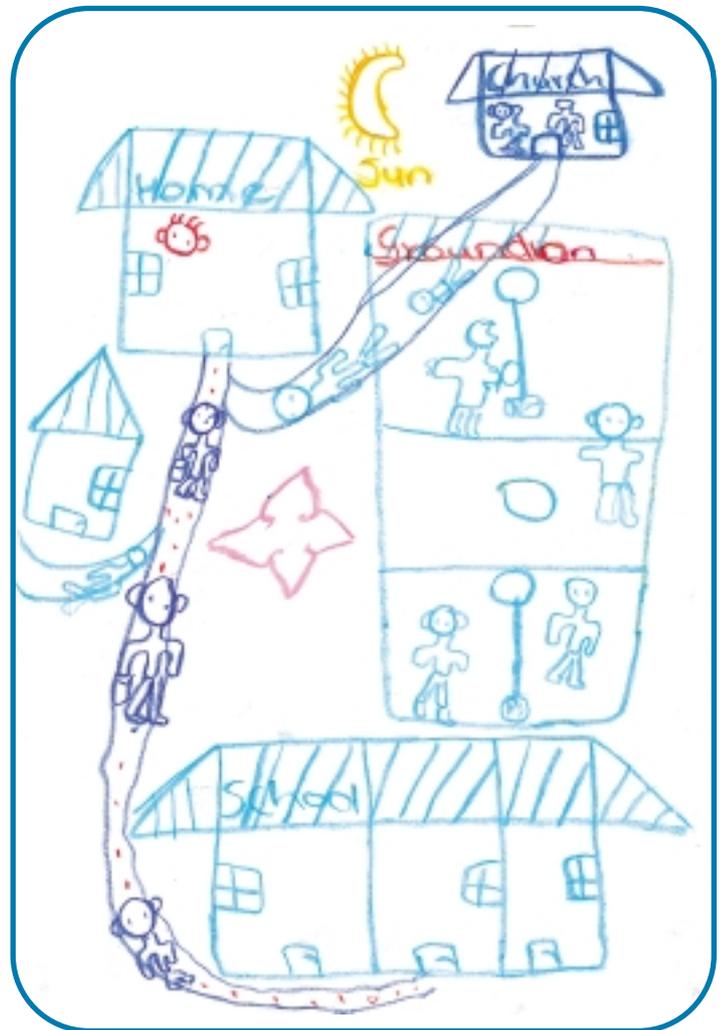


**Tebogo, 11 years old:** "I want to be a social worker when I grow up. I have to work hard and be educated in order to be a social worker. I'll also have to have a good heart, be patient with people. I also have to love people."

**Tebo, 15 years old:** "My grandmother gives me power because she is very supportive and she tries her best to make me look like other children. She is always there for me. I am confident, I always try my best because I believe that anything is possible only if I work hard. My biggest problem is to go to University or Technikon. I don't have anyone who will help me to reach that goal of being something in my community."

**Boitumelo, 9 years old:** "I need food, clothes. At the moment I am given these by mummy [neighbour who has taken the children in]. But I do not have food. You should understand that she also has got children of her own and is struggling. I want to be a police. To be a police I need happiness, love that I have, and determination."

**Itumeleng, 11 years old:** "When I grow up I want to be a doctor and to help people who are sick. But I can't be a doctor. Can I?"



**Itumeleng, 11 years old.** Itumeleng has drawn himself in the inner circle. In the middle circle he drew all the things that he needs now but does not have (eg. money, food, a jersey) and in the outer circle he talked about his dreams for the future.

## 1.3 Conclusion

The school environment presents a valuable opportunity for the identification, monitoring and support of vulnerable children yet very few schools seem able or willing to take on this role. Children are being held back, expelled, teased and discriminated against because they are unable to pay school fees. In some instances where children or caregivers have discussed their home circumstances with school staff, this disclosure has led to further abuse and discrimination.

Many of the problems faced by these children are a result of the combined impact of HIV/AIDS and poverty. Children are starving and therefore struggle to concentrate in class. Many primary schools do not provide a regular school feeding scheme and some that do, exclude children who have not paid their school fees. Transport to school is seldom available and children often have to walk long distances, sometimes on an empty stomach.

As a result of HIV/AIDS, many children are caregivers and breadwinners in their households. Children are either unable to attend school or are unable to perform adequately at school because of the duties they are responsible for at home. Many teachers are ignorant of the children's home circumstances and are therefore not able to address the social needs of the children in their classes or to refer them appropriately. Mechanisms need to be put in place to help teachers to identify and assist vulnerable children.