

Dlalanathi Report on Youth Bereavement

At the most recent Department of Social Development conference in May 2013, what came out clear as a theme is the emerging political and social will, driven by key social science research, to focus on the needs of youth. Much has been done for children and families and it appears that the policies and slowly the practice in relation to Children and Adults infected and affected by HIV is beginning to deliver the services promised.

Why there is a renewed focus on youth, intersecting challenges provide a very challenging context for youth:

- The peak of maternal loss due to Aids occurred in 2004/2005, thus those most affected are youth today;
- The services for young people, access to ARV's (anti retroviral medication) and the focus on PMTCT (prevention of mother to child transmission) only occurred from 2008/9 with real changes affecting very young children only being implemented following President Zuma's speech in December 2010. Thus a number of the youth contracted HIV prior to PMTCT; and have had limited access to ARV's;
- The impact of loss, poverty and higher risk of infection placed young people at the highest risk for developmental challenges;
- High levels of domestic violence;
- While access to schooling is wide spread, unemployment is very high particularly for youth;
- Forty Percent of our population is below 18

We are noticing significant levels of distress (symptoms of PTSD) more so than we have seen in adults in the youth we serve. Thus mental health activities and Psychosocial Support is vital, although not enough. Real development and employment opportunities need to be created for youth to contribute to their own lives, communities and the country.

It is with this at heart that **dlalanathi** made an intentional decision to work with youth. Firstly to focus on their emotional and developmental needs, but also because these young people are having children and are therefore parents themselves. Providing meaningful interventions for young people that offers them hope and healing is critical.

dlalanathi has designed and implemented a 9 session bereavement process for youth over this past year.

Statistics from the last quarter (July-September 2013):

- 112 participants in total - 63 Male participants; 49 Female participant (between 10-21 years of age);
- The range of school grades is grade 6 – 12
- Of the group 48 have lost mothers (43%); 1 mother is ill at home and 4 are absent
- Of the group 91 have lost fathers (81%); 3 have fathers who are absent
- This effectively means that 43 in the group have lost a mother and a father i.e 38%
- Most in the group 46 live with mothers, 45 live with a Grandparent, 2 live with their fathers and the other 19 young people live with other family relatives
- The participants report:
- 32% live in homes with 3 -4 children in the home;
- 34% live in homes with 5-8 children in the home;
- 13% live in homes where there are 9-16 children in the home – this is likely to be a rural homestead with a number of families living together.

Some comments by participants in the groups:

- This program is very nice program as you draw and play and listen to music and you are with other teens who have had the same things happen to them;
- It is very hard to talk about all the bad feelings that we have been carrying around;
- There is so much I have suffered that I think would not have happened had my parents still been alive. Accepting the loss and how it has shaped your life is hard;
- Because we don't have parents doesn't mean that it's the end of the world, there are other people who love us just as much as our parents did;
- It is sometimes hard as we are always reminded of the fact that we don't have our parents anymore by the little things that happen in our lives whether good or bad;
- The only time I ever speak about my mother is when somebody asks me about her. I have never been offered the opportunity to just speak about her. After doing the unfinished business I feel brave enough to go visit her grave and talk to her about certain issues on my heart;
- I enjoyed the sessions and being in this group even though it was emotional. I just wish that they can have a support group for orphans because from time to time we go through challenges in life and it feels like no one understands we are going through. Being in the group I feel understood and cared for.

A Story from Ngqayizivele High School, by Nontobeko Mpungose

In one of the groups I am ran this term I met a 17 year old boy who lost his father 5 years ago. When we had our first session he was very emotional. He was shaking when he spoke. He described what made his situation so sad for him, by explaining that when his father died he couldn't attend his funeral. He was told that the place where he was buried was too far for him. He spoke about how hard it has been not being able to say goodbye to his loving father. The other thing that worried him was that by not attending the funeral he had not been able to complete an important cultural ritual that he believes he has to do, in order to say goodbye in a way that honors his father in the way that one does in his culture.

This has worried him for 5 years. During the sessions he realized that he has never spoken about this to anyone and that his mother was not aware of how much this whole thing continues to hurt him and worry him. He said that the discussion in the group helped him see what to do and gave him the courage to discuss the situation with his mother. On the day of this awareness he said he would speak to her when he got home. He came back to group the next session he said he spoke about it with his mother and she was willing to take him to the graveyard.

The whole group celebrated with him and it really moved me as a facilitator to hear a report back from him in the 5th session saying that he had been to the grave and he feels so much better. He also reported that he and his mother have agreed that the farewell ritual will happen when his mother has saved enough money. I could clearly see the change in his behavior and his emotion wellbeing by the end of the 9 weeks together.

dlalanathi is excited to be serving young people. We always talk about youth as our future, but what does that mean if we do not focus and care for them well today. We continue to value deeply our partnership with Uthando Dolls, who walk a faithful road with us that touches children, youth and families is a way that truly brings value and meaning. For this we are deeply grateful.