

Catch them in the crèche: A collaboration to improve education

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Community engagement is at the centre of any meaningful impact on a society. Constructive interactions with the community make the need for engagement not only desirable, but very necessary as it brings about more sustainable, equitable and viable change within the community of interest. The University of Pretoria, through the Faculty of Veterinary Science, has been carrying out various research activities on veterinary and medical diseases in the Mnisi community in Bushbuckridge for the past decade.

These research activities have been conducted at the Hans Hoheisen Wildlife Research Station, one of the University's satellite campuses. The Faculty has been able to

establish a community veterinary programme that supports many farmers and provides health care and clinical support to pets and livestock in the Mnisi community.

Since the rural community of Bushbuckridge experiences a high level of unemployment and high dependence on grants, collaborations and community engagement activities are needed to bring about sustainable change and improvements.

Through the collaboration and engagement activities undertaken in 2017, the team developed a collaborative relationship with the Ngalava 'Noah's Ark' crèche in the community. The crèche was founded

in 2014 by a community health worker from the area who offered home-based care for children who were left alone at home while their mothers went to fetch water from the community water point, or went to search for jobs. Initially the crèche was attended by only three children, but over the past years the number has grown significantly to more than 103 children ranging in age from a few months to six years.

The school, which is staffed by very committed and energetic community volunteers led by a very passionate principal, relies on school fees paid by parents to cover running costs and the provision of two daily meals for the children.

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Many parents are unable to pay, and no funds or material support is provided by the Department of Education or the Department of Social Development. As part of the collaboration, funds have been raised through personal donations, the Friends of Ngalava and Rotary member support from a club in Johannesburg.

To demonstrate their buy-in and how invested they are in this project, members of the local community have donated some building materials and manual labour to improve the state of the school.

This collaboration has resulted in the installation of a Jojo tank-water system, the building of a new classroom, new toilets to replace the pit latrines, repairs to the original classrooms and the provision of learning materials, carpets, curtains and cushions.

The building and renovation projects also provided much-needed work opportunities as only labourers from the community were employed.

Since this is a farming community that resides at the wildlife-livestock-human interface, the kids in the crèche are taught and exposed to

the importance of the One Health concept, which is a collaborative approach to common health that emphasises the fact that the health of humans and that of animals are interlinked as they live in a shared environment.

It is therefore clear that many benefits could be derived from working across and within disciplines to confront issues that are prevalent at the interface of different sectors. In July 2022, a group of delegates from the Faculty of Veterinary Science, under the auspice of the 'Dean's walk-shop' visited the crèche to further assess the progress of the engagement activities.

During the visit, the kids welcomed them with a song about the coronavirus and how to keep safe, but even more interesting was the song they sang about the importance and place of One Health in their community. There is no better time to capture the minds of the little ones than while they are still available to be 'caught'.

This crèche does not serve only the children and the community, but has become a centre where students from the University of Pretoria, especially from the Department

of Veterinary Tropical Diseases, are taught about the need and place for community engagement in building sustainable and equitable communities.

In February 2023, a group of students and employees from the master's programme in Global Health which is a degree

offered jointly by the University of Pretoria and the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) in Antwerp, visited the day care centre. The students and staff, who came from different countries across the world, visited the Mnisi community and more importantly the crèche, as part of their orientation workshop.

They were welcomed to the facility and informed on the history of the place and the roles of other individuals, societies, organisations and the University in sustaining the facility and how this has impacted the kids. The students reflected on how motivated they were to establish such engagements in their various communities and places of endeavour.

To conclude, parents would be well advised to consider what Charles Portis says in his novel *True Grit*: 'If I had received good instruction as a child, I would be with my family today and at peace with my neighbours. I hope and pray that all you parents in the sound of my voice will train up your children in the way they should go.' It is safe to say that it is cheaper and easier to raise a child well than to repair an adult, and this can only be done through collaboration as it takes a village to raise a child.