

RECLAIMING THE SPIRIT OF VOLUNTEERISM IN THE AFTER SCHOOL SECTOR

Eastern Cape Community of Practice



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THE
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BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Volunteerism, defined as “the practice of doing work for good causes, without being paid for it,” has long been a cornerstone of the after-school movement. The sector grew from passion, community spirit and the belief that young people’s futures can be shaped through collective effort. The introduction of stipends through programmes such as the Social Employment Fund (SEF) and other short-term employment initiatives reshaped how organisations engage volunteers.

While stipends brought much-needed capacity and financial relief in a context of high unemployment, they also shifted the meaning of volunteering and sometimes blurred the line between service and paid work.

When SEF funding paused in 2025, organisations suddenly found themselves without the staff support they had come to rely on for daily operations, learner supervision, and programme delivery. This abrupt loss prompted reflection on what volunteerism once looked like, how it has changed, and what it could become again.

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A SPIRIT OF JOY, PURPOSE AND COLLABORATION

Before stipends and structured funding streams, after-school spaces were filled with joy, spontaneity and a strong sense of shared purpose. **“It was fun and full of laughter,”** one participant recalled. **“People felt freer and contributed more openly.”** Another added, **“People focused on the mission and impact, not the money.”** Volunteers arrived because they wanted to, not because they had to.

Organisations described a time when programmes were rooted in relationships and community trust. One remembered having “too many volunteers from Rhodes University, we had to turn people away.” The sector felt alive, imaginative, and driven by the simple joy of contributing to something larger than oneself.

Stipends brought undeniable value. For many organisations operating with minimal staff, SEF felt like a lifeline. Suddenly, there were extra hands for homework support, activity supervision, admin tasks, and new initiatives such as gardens or improved systems. “Now we have the manpower,” one organisation said, reflecting genuine relief.

THE IMPACT OF STIPENDS

However, the increase in capacity came with new pressures. More people required more administrative responsibilities, such as attendance registers, timesheets, reporting, and HR processes that many organisations had never needed before. “We never had proper systems in place,” one person admitted. “We were not ready for the influx.”

Over time, culture shifted. Work that once felt like service began to feel like employment. Tensions emerged around expectations, roles, and entitlements.

Collaboration sometimes gave way to competition. The heart of volunteerism dimmed under administrative weight and economic pressure. As one leader noted, “When the stipends are gone, the people are not there.”

Yet pauses in funding also revealed that people continued to show up regardless. These individuals, motivated by purpose rather than payment, remind the sector that **authentic volunteerism still exists and can be nurtured.**

Volunteerism remains central to the identity and sustainability of the after-school sector. Stipends have offered immense value and strengthened programmes and continue to be needed.

They have also highlighted the need for intentional, relationship-driven approaches to volunteer engagement. Moving forward, the opportunity lies in designing volunteer experiences that are purposeful, supportive, and grounded in community, where people feel a sense of belonging and choose to contribute from a place of genuine commitment.



REIMAGINING VOLUNTEERISM

Practical Ways Forward

The Community of Practice (CoP) explored how to rebuild a volunteer culture rooted in purpose, clarity and connection.



Be clear on **WHO** you need and **WHY**

Clarity helps avoid mismatched expectations.

- Operational volunteers who support daily activities, homework sessions, classroom management, and sport.
- Specialist volunteers such as tutors, artists, IT support, social media helpers, or gardeners.
- Knowing who you need helps attract volunteers who genuinely want to contribute in that way.



Recruit through **PEOPLE**, not only platforms

Participants emphasised relational recruitment as people join because they feel personally invited and connected.

- Use WhatsApp groups, community meetings, school assemblies, and parent gatherings.
- Partner with university Community Engagement offices for academic volunteers.
- Encourage board members, parents, and current volunteers to spread the word.





Keep induction **CLEAR** and **SUPPORTIVE**

Volunteers thrive when expectations are simple and supportive.

- Use a light agreement or pledge instead of a formal contract.
- Capture basic information through a paper or digital sign-up form.
- Pair new volunteers with a buddy for orientation and support.



Retain volunteers through **MEANINGFUL CONNECTION**

Belonging is the strongest retention tool. People stay when they feel valued and supported.

- Hold weekly group/individual check-ins where volunteers feel seen and heard.
- Listen to volunteers' ideas. Many bring fresh energy and solutions.
- Celebrate small wins and keep joy present in the work.
- Give clear instructions and manageable tasks.
- Address practical barriers such as transport when possible.



Reward volunteers thoughtfully

Recognition does not need to be financial to be meaningful.

- Certificates, reference letters, or digital badges.
- Social media highlights or blog posts celebrating contributions.
- Tea and biscuit gatherings or simple team-building days.
- Branded items such as T-shirts or notebooks.



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