



Heroes Academy: 2021 Pilot Program Summary

In 2021, Heroes Academy launched its first pilot program aimed at supporting the personal development of young learners through socio-emotional learning (SEL) and life skills training. One of our core goals was to address gender-based violence in a proactive way—by helping boys build emotional awareness, empathy, and healthy models of masculinity from an early age. The pilot served as a testing ground for this approach and laid the foundation for the full program rollout that began in 2022.

The program was implemented at three sites across Cape Town, reaching primarily Grade 7 learners:

- **Dunoon Primary School (two groups)**
- **Nerina Primary School**
- **Philisa Abafazi Bethu**

Across all sites, sessions focused on helping learners build emotional resilience, empathy, and basic communication skills. Activities were interactive and reflective, encouraging boys to express themselves, manage conflict, and engage with peers in a respectful and thoughtful way.

Feedback from learners and community partners was overwhelmingly positive. Participants showed increased confidence, improved peer relationships, and a greater sense of belonging. Facilitators also gained key insights into pacing, group dynamics, and the importance of consistency and contextual sensitivity.

One of the most important lessons we learned was structural: starting the program in Grade 7 limited our ability to build long-term relationships. Many boys moved to new high schools in Grade 8, making continuity difficult. If we wanted to run a full five-year cohort and offer lasting impact, we needed to begin at the point of entry into high school. This insight directly informed our decision to start the full Heroes Academy program in Grade 8 from 2022 onwards.

The 2021 pilot confirmed the relevance and impact of socio-emotional learning in these communities and gave us a strong foundation for scaling the program. It also highlighted the need for ongoing facilitator support, which became a central part of our long-term strategy.