Holistic health and educational development to effect change: The case of Gugulethu, Cape Flats, South Africa

(Abstract id: 140608-L-1574) Dr Venicia McGhie and Prof Marion Keim

University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

This paper reports on a study that was conducted in Gugulethu, one of the Black townships on the Cape Flats during the 2013 academic year. The study resorts under the flagships of an organisation named Women for Peace in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. Women for Peace is a community upliftment organisation whose mission is to empower women, children and families. The study investigated health, nutrition and educational opportunities for residents of Gugulethu.

Introduction

This paper reports on an interdisciplinary study between researchers of the Faculties of Community and Health Sciences and the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. The study was conducted in Gugulethu, one of the Black townships on the Cape Flats during the 2013 academic year. The study resorts under the flagship of an organisation named Women for Peace in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. Women for Peace is a community upliftment organisation whose mission is to empower women, children and families to take charge of their futures. This is achieved through peace development programs and skills training in numerous fields, such as education, health and employment. This Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) is the oldest multicultural women organisation in South Africa, founded in 1989. The aim of the study, which is in line with the organisation’s mission, was to support residents of the townships through the provision of health services, nutrition, and the provision of educational development and entrepreneurial skills that could lead to employment and/or entrepreneurial opportunities, where these communities could become self-reliant and sustainable. Thus, this paper deals with the provision of educational development and entrepreneurial skills to a group of twenty seven Black African men and women from Gugulethu.

The context and living conditions these men and women come from are similar to many of the other Black townships on the Cape Flats and the other provinces in South Africa. A census conducted in 2011 by the City of Cape Town revealed that Gugulethu had a population of 98,468 of which 99% was Black Africans, with the remaining 1% a mixture of coloured Africans and other races. 31.5% of the adults aged 20 and older had completed their secondary schooling (Grade 12), while 47% had some secondary schooling. 5.7% of the adults who completed their secondary schooling career continued to higher education and hold a degree or diploma. According to the labour force indicators use in the census, of the 68,274 of the population who were at a working age (aged 15 to 64) in 2011, 44,382 (65%) had some form of employment, while 17,682 (26%) were unemployed. The majority of the employed people (28.9%) lived on a monthly income of between R1.00 – R1,600; 23.2% had a monthly income of R1,601 – R3,200; 15.3% had a monthly income of R3,201 – R6,400; 8.5% had an income of R6,401 – R12,800; and only 4.5% had a monthly income of R12,801 and more. 52% of the Black Africans lived in a formal dwelling (proper house), 6.3% lived in informal dwellings,
in backyards of someone else, and 41% lived in informal dwellings on an open unconfined piece of land (City of Cape Town, 2013).

The research participants formed part of the 26% of the population who were at working age but were unemployed. Three of the women completed their secondary schooling (Grade 12), 2 left school in Grade 9 and two only completed Grade 4. The majority of the men had a secondary schooling of Grade 8. These men and women are thus part of the Women for Peace organisation’s soup kitchen project, catering for 150 people who come to the organisation to receive a free meal once a day, five days a week. They formed the first group of men and women who indicated that they wanted to improve their health and better themselves educationally in order to become self-reliant. They signed up to be part of the organisation’s empowerment project. After a four week programme of holistic and spiritual empowerment sessions, the twenty men attended mentoring and practical skills training sessions offered by a pastor from one of the local churches in Gugulethu, while the seven women attended an educational training programme once a week for two hours, for three months during August until the end of November 2013. The educational training sessions were offered by one of the authors of this paper. In addition, the seven women also attended practical skills training in the constructing of ‘magic boxes’ offered by another member of the Women for Peace organisation.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework used for the study was based on Vygotsky’s (1979, 1994) social culture theory and Max-Neef’s (1989,1992) Human Scale Development theory. Vygotsky (1994, p. 352) argues that the environment in which human beings operate is the source of development of their personalities and characteristics. He explains “As an individual only exists as a social being, as a member of some social group within whose context he follows the road of his historical development, the composition of his personality and the structure of his behaviour turn out to be a quantity which is dependent on social evolution and whose main aspects are determined by the latter (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 175-176). To this extent he argues “human beings actively realize and change themselves in the varied contexts of culture and history” (Vygotsky, 1979, p. 131).

Vygotsky (1994, p. 176) further explains that the development of human beings gave rise to the underpinnings of capitalism: the division between intellectual and physical labour, the separation between town and country, the exploitation of child and female labour, poverty and the unequal development of human beings’ potential as one extreme thereof. The other extreme according to him - idleness and luxury, resulted not only in the single human type becoming differentiated and fragmented into many different social class types (such as very rich, rich, middle class, working class and the poor) and disparity, but also in the corruption and distortion of the human personality and its subjection to inappropriate one-sided development within all these different modifications of the human type. Vygotsky (1994, p.178) concludes by stating “As a result of capitalism, the development of material production simultaneously brought with it the progressive division of labour and the constantly growing distorted development of the human potential”. Therefore, Vygotsky’s theory accounts for the differences in socio-economic and political power and for the huge disparities in the labour force of a country and in the spread of wealth and resources, in his explanation of the consequences of capitalism. Vygotsky’s social cultural theory is thus framed within a social justice and social construction paradigm.
It is this “constantly growing distorted development of the human potential” that is evident among the majority of the Black African population in Gugulethu. As the statistics presented in the introduction showed, most of the population in Gugulethu had an inferior education to a limited level of Grade 8, due to South Africa’s apartheid history, which means that a large number of the people in Gugulethu were uneducated and unskilled, and thus, form part of the working class and poorer communities of South Africa. Their reality is informal dwellings (consisting mostly of cart board, plastic bags and old newspapers) and an average monthly income of R1 600.00. In fact, a related survey conducted in May 2013 by one of the authors from the Interdisciplinary Centre for Sport Science and Development (ICESSD), University of the Western Cape, showed that more than 60% of the people in the Women for Peace programme had health problems, that most people lived on R50 (5$) a week or in a household of 3 on R100 (10$) a week. South Africa is therefore a good example of how capitalism and the division of human beings into different social class categories impacted on its citizens. The apartheid ideology of the South African government pre-1994 resulted in an uneven and unfair distribution of economic, social and political power (Letseka, Cosser, Breier & Visser, 2010).

Max-Neef’s Human Scale Development theory concentrates on, and is sustained by, the satisfaction of fundamental human needs and the generation of growing levels of self-reliance (Max-Neef, 1992, p. 197). His theory acknowledges that due to the common human nature, humans need to satisfy some fundamental needs - common to everyone, in order to sustain a rich and meaningful life. Max-Neef (ibid) argues that, notwithstanding, in a fundamental way, needs as such are universally felt although potentially at varying degrees due to these different personal/collective attributes and contexts. Human needs, self-reliance and organic articulations are the pillars on which the Human Scale Development paradigm is based. According to him, Human Scale Development assumes a direct participatory democracy (Max-Neef, 1989, p. 13). He argues that Human Scale Development embodies the diversity as well as the autonomy of the spaces in which humans function and that must be respected.

Attaining the transformation of an object-person into a subject-person in the process of development is, among other things, a problem of scale. There is no possibility for the active participation of people in gigantic systems which are hierarchically organized and where decisions flow from the top down to the bottom. This new praxis starts from a theory of human needs for development. Human needs must be understood as a system; that is, all human needs are interrelated and interactive. With the sole exception of the need of subsistence, that is, to remain alive, no hierarchies exist within the system. On the contrary, simultaneousness, complementarities and trade-offs are characteristics of the process of needs satisfaction (Max-Neef, 1992, p. 199).

Max-Neef advocates that human needs can be classified according to many criteria, but two categories are most important, namely existential and axiological. These two categories demonstrate the interaction of, on the one hand, the needs of Being, Having, Doing and Interacting; and, on the other hand, the needs of Subsistence, Protection, Affection, Understanding, Participation, Creation, Leisure, Identity and Freedom. From the classification proposed it follows that, for instance, food and shelter must not be seen as needs, but as satisfiers of the fundamental need for Subsistence. In much the same way, education (either formal or informal), study, investigation, early stimulation and meditation are satisfiers of the need for Understanding. However, there is no one-to-one correspondence between needs and satisfiers. A satisfier may contribute simultaneously to the satisfaction of different needs, or conversely, a need may require various satisfiers in order to be met. Not even these relations are fixed. They may vary according to time, place and circumstance (ibid).
On the basis of the establishment of the difference between the concepts of needs and satisfiers, Max-Neef identifies two postulates: first, fundamental human needs are finite, few and classifiable; and second, fundamental human needs are the same in all cultures and in all historical periods. What changes, both over time and through cultures, is the way or the means by which the needs are satisfied. Each economic, social and political system adopts different methods for the satisfaction of the same fundamental human needs. In every system they are satisfied (or not satisfied) through the generation (or non-generation) of different types of satisfiers. We may go as far as to say that one of the aspects that define a culture is its choice of satisfiers. Whether a person belongs to a consumerist or to an ascetic society, his/her fundamental human needs are the same. What changes is his/her choice of the quantity and quality of satisfiers (Max-Neef, 1992, p. 200) In short, what is culturally determined are not the fundamental human needs, but the satisfiers for those needs. Cultural change is, among other things, the consequence of dropping traditional satisfiers for the purpose of adopting new or different ones. It must be added that each need can be satisfied at different levels and with different intensities. Furthermore, needs are satisfied within three contexts: (1) with regard to oneself; (2) with regard to the social group; and (3) with regard to the environment. The quality and intensity, not only of the levels, but also of contexts will depend on time, place and circumstances (ibid).

Vygotsky and Max-Neef’s theories complement each other in that they demonstrate that human development is socially situated and constructed; and that there is communality with regard to human beings’ development, needs satisfaction and overall well-being, wherever we are in the world. Our challenges is to understand these theories in an non-threatening way and that was why this theoretical framework seemed to be the most appropriate for the study.

Aim, objective, main research question and sub-questions

The aim of the study was to determine what the challenges, needs and aspirations of the research participants were. The objective was to develop an holistic approach that could address the nutritional needs, and the health and wellbeing needs of the research participants, as well as the problem of unemployment.

The main research question was: How best could the participants being empowered in order for them to become employable and/or self-reliant? Three sub-questions guided the investigation: What were the most pressing needs of the participants? How could these needs be met? What was the long-term plan/strategy for sustainability and overall well-being for the participants?

Method

This study is situated in a qualitative, interpretive research paradigm (Cresswell, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Stake, 1995). Creswell (2007, p. 42) states that “we conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored... because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue...we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature...because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issues”. Implied in this reason as to why we conduct qualitative research are at least three characteristics. Firstly, qualitative research is empirical in nature - researchers who position themselves in a qualitative research paradigm attempt to study human beings in their ‘real-life’ situations,
what other researchers refer to as a “natural setting” (Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Gillham & Holstein, 2000). Secondly, the definition provides a purpose — why researchers use a qualitative research paradigm and not, for example, a quantitative research paradigm. According to Creswell (2007, p. 39), “qualitative research is a form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. The researchers’ interpretation cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understanding”. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 3) speak about qualitative research as consisting “…of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible”. Thus, qualitative researchers make the world of their participants ‘visible’ through their understanding and interpretation of the data and narrating it as objectively as possible.

Thirdly, the process of conducting qualitative research involves the researcher as key instrument, however, also requiring his or her flexibility and sensitivity towards the participants (Punch, 2006, p. 52). “Qualitative research tries to establish an empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes thick description, conveying to the reader what experience itself would convey” (Stake, 1995, p. 39).

On this basis, the study attempted to investigate how the twenty-seven men and women coped and dealt with their everyday challenges of being unemployed, of not having proper food and shelter and health facilities, and how that impacted on the quality of their lives and their needs’ satisfaction.

Research design

We decided that a case study design was most suitable for the investigation because it was a specific, identifiable group that shared certain characteristics that made them a coherent grouping (Stake, 1995). Babbie and Mouton (2001, p. 281) refer to a case study as “an intensive investigation of a single unit”. Yin (2009, p. 18) takes it a step further and speaks about a twofold, technical definition that begins with the scope of a case study: “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. The central theme therefore is that of an in-depth investigation of a case within its natural (real-life) context, and the case could be a single individual, multiple individual units, a group, a treatment team, multiple units or a community (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Gillham & Holstein, 2000; Hammersley & Gomm, 2000). Yin (2009), Patton (2002) and Holliday (2001) all agree that case studies allow for ‘rich, thick descriptions’ of the phenomenon studied which generates a richness of perceptions ‘while reflecting and exploring data records’, discovering patterns and constructing and exploring impressions. They therefore “become particularly useful where one needs to understand some special people, a particular problem, or unique situation in great depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information” (Patton, 1990, p. 54).

In this research, the case study consisted of a group of twenty-seven men and women. They were randomly selected from the more than a hundred and fifty unemployed people who were coming to the centre for a free meal. Lastly, Stake (1995, p. 4) suggests that the first criterion in selecting a case is “to maximize what we can learn”, that is, to get as much information about as many aspects of the case as possible. We wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of the research participants’ daily activities, experiences and challenges. We wanted to understand what they think could be done to help them and empower them so that they could
change their lives for the better. Thus, following Stake (1995, p. 3), we had an “intrinsic interest” in this case and we could refer to the case as an “intrinsic” case study design.

However, it should be noted that the problem of unemployment, a lack of fulfilment of basic needs such as food and shelter, coupled with poor health and no medical assistance, cannot be situated only in the research participants. Their historical and social contexts played a major role in their circumstances and provided rich circumstantial data (refer discuss in the introduction and the theoretical framework). In addition, the data collection methods included an assessment of their writing abilities that was done at the beginning of the educational training sessions, a comprehensive questionnaire consisting of four sections, namely, a demographic section, health information section, a nutritional section, and a schooling history section. They also wrote a reflective written piece at the end of the educational training sessions.

Discussion and Findings

The discussion of the findings is structured around the three sub-questions, namely: what were the most pressing needs of the participants? How could these needs be met? What was the long-term plan/strategy for sustainability and overall well-being for the participants?

What were the most pressing needs of the participants?

The research participants indicated in their answers to the questions asked in the questionnaire that their most pressing need was to find employment. Thus, the fact that they were unemployed was their biggest concern, it diminished their dignity, self-respect and respect from others. That was why they wanted to educate themselves in order to start their own small business that they could sustain. A second most important need that they identified was to be healthy. They did not have healthy nutrition due to lack of income which resulted in them having various health issues ranging from diabetes, heart problems and obesity. The related survey conducted (in May 2013) showed that more than 60% of the people had health problems, that the main food was bread and melies and their favourite foods were “pap”, fatty foods and chips, resulting in some of them being overweight.

Another reason for being overweight could be that most of them indicated that they did not partake in any form of exercise due to the fact that they were demotivated and lazy. As far as their health was concerned, they were dependent on the free services offered by public clinics and hospitals. These services, however, cannot provide quality health care to them. Lastly, a third most important need was quality health care services that were not an option for them because they were unemployed and did not belong to a medical aid, nor did they have the finances to pay for private doctors or hospitals.

How could these needs be met?

The participants indicated that all their needs could be met through the provision of employment. However, finding employment was not easy because some of them indicated that they were already unemployed for a period of three years and longer. As reported earlier already, they indicated that they were living on R100.00 per week in a household of at least three persons, with one participant indicated that she was single and lived on R2.00 per day. Finding employment thus meant to them that they should be at least skilled in a trade in order to create their own employment opportunities. When asked what types of trades they wanted
to learn, the men indicated carpentry, building and plumbing; whereas the women mentioned sewing and baking and how to start their own small businesses.

It was clear that the participants viewed education and training as the vehicle through which they could achieve this objective. Education and training is indeed regarded as one of the best possible ways through which people could be empowered (Mandela, 1990; World Bank, 2013). It was also clear that they were quite hopeless and demotivated about their situation and requested counseling sessions to talk about their problems in order to gain hope and self-confidence. It was because of this finding that Women for Peace started with a psycho-social intervention before their skills training and a four week counselling programmes was added and provided by a pastor. This programme greatly assisted towards a more holistic approach addressing the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical needs of the participants. As stated in the introduction, the organisation’s aim is to support residents of the township of Gugulethu through opening up opportunities that could optimize their health, well-being and employment/business/entrepreneurial skills.

The educational training that the participants received focused on business communication and how to start one’s own business. The participants attended the training for a period of three and a half months, for two hours per week (August to November 2013). The training was offered at the University of the Western Cape, in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences. The content of the business communication was on business communication, critical thinking and solving problems, effective listening and writing skills, and presentation skills; while the section on how to start one’s own business focused on how to write a business plan, the components of a business plan, and how to market oneself. The participants completed only formative assessment tasks for each section, and will receive a certificate of attendance in May 2014.

In the final reflection at the end of the course, the women indicated that three aspects of the course were most valuable to them – the first was learning about critical thinking and solving problems. One participant wrote: “I experienced so much & learned things I actually didn’t know would come in handy in everyday life, for example, critical thinking. I seem to apply that to my everyday thinking now & put in more effect in problem solving”. Another participant wrote: “It [the course] also taught me how to be a critical thinker in terms of business, like how I must look at my competitors, what are their strengths and weaknesses and what are mine too!”

The second aspect that all of them commented on was the fact that the course helped to improve their communication skills, both in speaking and in writing. The fact that their writing skills have improved over the course of the three months was evident when I compared their first piece of writing to the way in which they wrote their reflections at the end of the three months.

The last aspect that all of them commented on was how much they have learnt and gained from the second part of the course – how to start my own business, how to write a business plan and how to market myself. The responses ranged from “I also learnt how to draw up a business plan when wanting to start my own business, and very important, that it should be a sustainable business or product that will play a vital role within the community” to “I hope to open my own business. I hope to follow everything I’ve learned in this course & turn the theory into something practical & see it materialised into a business that will bring in money
so that I can also create jobs for others & hopefully put my skills training into a venture that will benefit me & everyone in my community.”

These reflections indicated that the participants have learnt and gained not only new knowledge, but it also assisted in improving their self-confidence and self-worth. The responses above are testimony of that. A final comment in the reflections was that, because of attending the course and gaining new knowledge, they felt that they would want to continue to study and complete a degree. One participant indicated that she was so inspired that she not only wanted to complete a first degree, but post-graduate studies in order to complete her doctorate. Education is indeed a very powerful weapon that can change people’s lives on many different levels.

**What is a long-term plan/strategy for sustainability and overall well-being for the participants?**

As discussed in the theoretical framework, the challenges and unmet needs which the participants had to deal with, was to a large extent a direct result of the previous government’s apartheid ideology and governance. The Black African population, together with the coloured African population, were marginalised and deprived of physical, economic and social resources, as well as educational opportunities and wealth creation (Leibbrandt, Woolard, McEwen & Koep, 2009, p. 10). The participants’ experiences and unmet needs not only reflected the reality for a large number of the residents of Gugulethu, but for many other Black African and Black coloured communities in South Africa (ibid). Thus, their experiences and challenges clearly reflected the theoretical framework’s stance – that human development and well-being is socially constructed and situated, and that human beings have needs that are universal.

The social situated of human development is, first of all, illustrated in the fact that, when people are unemployed, they become financially needy and as a consequence, a liability to the state. A high unemployment rate in turn is not conducive for the economy and growth of a country (Liebenberg 2014). Secondly, when people are unemployed, they are prone to indulge in criminal activities for survival – the high crime rate and incidents of drug abuse, rape and murders in South Africa are testimonies to this fact (City of Cape Town, 2013).

Thus, how could the problem of unemployment and all the other related consequences thereof, be overcome? One answer is through a holistic approach of organisations such as Women for Peace who work on grassroots level, who know the circumstances of the people and who make measurable impact on their immediate communities. To illustrate this point - after the skills training, eleven of the male participants received the opportunity of a paid internship in the building industry. After their on-the-job training, they came together and registered their own company at the end of 2013.

Women for Peace as stated in the introduction, is one of many in South Africa that is attempting to improve the lives of Black South Africans in a holistic way. The organisation views health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. However, as many NGOs in South Africa, they are struggling to survive financially. Thus, a second answer is that government and big businesses should work together with smaller NGOs to eradicate poverty in order to uplift and empower struggling communities.
A major risk in the global development climate is unfortunately that big funding organisations prefer to support bigger and more strategic organisations in the countries which leave smaller community based organisations such as Women for Peace at a huge disadvantage. This approach should be revisited as log frame, monitoring and evaluation exercises are forced upon developmental organisations in the global South, focusing more on numbers and less on real qualitative impact to satisfy the funders often from the global North.

A third answer could be that developed countries could assist and provide humanitarian resources in the form of health and skills development programmes to communities such as Gugulethu on the Cape Flats and the rest of South Africa, and the African continent. However, this assistance should not be in the form of a donor–recipient function, but in an exchange of skills from organisations in the global South for example, conflict resolution, peace building, reconciliation and holistic development including spiritual and community development which could facilitate a more equal partnership instead of a condition of dependence and indebtedness.

Practical implications

Looking at the Millennium Development Goals that were set to be achieved in 2015 with the aim to address the global education, health education, and poverty issues, not much has changed. Key messages and issues emerging from discussions on the post-2015 development agenda include new challenges such as sustainable development, continuing conflicts, human rights, rising inequality and demographic pressures which need to be considered for the post-2015 development agenda of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The main questions which remain are: What is development? What is the goal of development? Is it to develop a certain number of interventions for a certain number of people in a certain time, or is it to assist people to understand their own challenges and find their own solutions?

We add our voice to Max Neef who says “In our opinion, the future lies in mustering all our energy to design imaginative but viable alternatives. The conditions for these alternatives seem to be quite clear… a new perspective is called for which aims at an adequate satisfaction of human needs. Furthermore, if future development cannot be sustained through the expansion of exports or through substantial injections of foreign capital, an alternative development must generate a capacity for greater self-reliance. (Max-Neef, 1989, p. 12). Most of the Millennium Development Goals are not being met yet and that is the sad reality.

Thus, two questions remain which the audience could engage in: How could the gap between the North (developed countries) and the South (developing countries) be bridged or narrowed? And, where do we go from here to do better for a post 2015 development agenda that is more inclusive, more holistic, more sustainable and more democratic?
References


