

Evaluating the Zimiseleni researchers' project: participatory research as intervention with "hard-to-reach" boys

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Introduction

Twenty-five kilometres outside the city of Johannesburg in South Africa is a large sprawling urban settlement known as Kathorus. Over 2.5 million people live here in apartheid era township housing and mostly unserved shack settlements. In spite of the fact that the area has been the focus of recent government upgrading, the area is characterised by extreme poverty and violence and is the home to many criminal gangs.

In this setting, the Zimiseleni project involves 12 to 16 year old "hard-to-reach" boys in exploring the reality of children living in a context of poverty, deprivation and criminalisation. The research engaged in by these boys in itself becomes a therapeutic process and creates a model for effective intervention in their lives.

The Zimiseleni boys

Ekupholeni Mental Health Centre is a non-governmental organisation offering an innovative and comprehensive mental health service in this area. The Zimiseleni Group is composed of 15 boys who have been referred to Ekupholeni because of behavioural problems. When the group started, about half of the boys were in school and the other half out of school. All of them live in deep poverty and all come from difficult and deprived home situations. Most of the boys are involved in crime. This ranges from petty crime to rape and gang involvement, though those involved in gangs are still on the edge of criminal gang activity because of their age. The criminal activities these boys are engaged in have, in most cases, not yet been identified and/or acted on by the law enforcement authorities. Some of the boys are also involved in substance abuse. The boys meet in the Zimiseleni Group after school once a week for two hours, at least three times a year for a day, and once a year for a weekend camp.

The boys represent a microcosm of boys around South Africa who are on the edge of criminal activity and are likely to become fully part of it in a few years' time. The boys themselves acknowledge this fact, sometimes with a sense of powerlessness and inevitability regarding their

journey in life. This is what Sbusiso said while playing a game about the future:

In 10 years' time I will be a killer and in jail. For boys in Kathorus that is all there is. Crime is all there is. The only university you go to is jail. Boys in Kathorus become gangsters.

From a psychological point of view, it was evident that all the boys had had severely traumatic experiences in primary relationships with their parents, and as a result, had defended themselves against any kind of meaningful relationships, which in their experience had only let them down. Sbusiso's story illustrates this well:

I was born in 1982 at Thembisa. I stayed with my mother. I was still young and unable to recognise her although that mutual attraction between a mother and child was there. I didn't know what kind of a person she was. In 1983 I came to Katlehong to stay with my father and his mother who was my granny. I realised that my mother was not showing up to see me grow. I started to ask "who is my mother?". I kept wondering. Other people too asked me who is my mother. In 1985 I was still staying at Hlahatsi wondering and thinking who is my mother. But I was still young and didn't take too much note of it. It never troubled me much because I never saw her. In 1990 I started school and I kept on asking, "who is my mother?". In 1998 I started searching for my mother. My mother who was my granny told me that my other mother stays in Thembisa. Somewhere there. Sometimes when I had money I used to go and search for my mother because my mother's absence hurt me. Even if I find my mother I won't go and stay with her because I don't know what kind of person she is and what she thinks for me. Maybe she thinks evil for me. I do not know her, what kind of person can leave their child like that.

This defence against meaningful relationships was one of the main reasons why the boys initially resisted any therapeutic intervention.

The group was established by Ekupholeni in the middle of 1999 but struggled for months to achieve a sense of

identity, purpose and cohesiveness. Members drifted in and out of sessions, found it difficult to contain anger and deal with conflict and actively refused to identify themselves with any kind of healing activity. The Ekupholeni team was desperately looking for a way of reaching and assisting these boys to grow through the emotional difficulties that were pushing them into the criminal underworld.

Research and therapy

The idea of creating a research project that would at the same time develop into a therapeutic intervention was born in early 2000 when the Ekupholeni staff met with Glynis Clacherty, a specialist in participatory research with children. This researcher wanted to explore the realities of boys living on the edge of crime and to use their experiences and perceptions to make child-centred recommendations to policy makers and service providers alike, particularly the National Department of Safety and Security, who were interested in crime prevention programmes.

The researcher, the psychologist and the lay counsellor began to brainstorm creative ways of reaching these very defensive, yet vulnerable and emotionally needy boys, and at the same time undertake research into the lives of boys on the edge of crime. Driven initially by the research need to document the reality of boys on the edge of crime, the decision was made to use a participatory research approach and make the boys researchers into their own lives. The staff at Ekupholeni knew, however, that the boys were too guarded to talk about their own lives, so the decision was made to make the focus of the research 'the lives of boys in Kathorus'. What emerged as the project developed was a powerful model for intervention based on the idea of youth as researchers.

The main research tool used by the boys in the early stages was disposable cameras. These provided a way of catching the boys' interest, in that the technology was inherently interesting.

The boys took photographs that illustrated the "lives of boys in Kathorus". Time was spent labelling the photographs and talking about them: all the time with the boys in the role of "objective" researchers. This discussion was taped and became the qualitative data that the adult researcher used to develop a picture of the reality of boys on the edge of crime and what pushed them into crime. The research was "real" research, and this fact was reinforced when the boys presented their findings at an academic conference of psychologists. In addition, a research report *The Lives, Needs and Experiences of Boys on the Edge of Crime in Kathorus* (Clacherty, 2001) was produced.

Alongside this research process, something else was also happening. The research approach provided a unique

means of overcoming the defence mechanisms the boys had built up because of their experience of relationships in the past. By making the boys researchers into the "lives of boys in Kathorus", they were able to explore and discover their own difficulties and processes from a relatively safe distance. While looking at the realities of other children, the group was exploring their own reality, without unduly threatening the defensive structures that had been built up over the years, which had, in fact, helped the children to survive.

It is important to note that this process had to be done with extreme caution. It would have been destructive to strip away these defences too quickly and leave the boys exposed and vulnerable. For this reason, the process described here took many months and required frequent contact with the boys.

This approach is aligned to the narrative therapy paradigm which recognises the importance of helping children, in particular, to view their problems from a distance, to depersonalise them and find active means of reasserting control over their own behaviours and experiences (Freeman, Epston and Lobovitz, 1991). In this way the child is freed from the label of "problem child". Instead he or she is seen as an active agent who labels, confronts and deals with the problem behaviour.

A model that uses research as an intervention has emerged. It is summed up in Figure 1 which describes the dual role of therapy and research and how they worked together.

The boys began to use the research to provide insights into their lives and the context they lived in. The cameras and role of researcher provided the distance they needed to "see" their own problems and they slowly began to own them.

Thabo's and Sbusiso's stories illustrate how this worked in the boy's lives. Thabo took photographs of boys smoking dagga (marijuana) and sniffing benzene. This is what he said about the photographs:

Boys from Kathorus smoke dagga, drink liquor, do not respect their mothers and swear at old people on the streets. They go to shebeens (taverns), fight and go home to swear at their parents. Some go to the streets of Jo'burg, smoke glue then get mad. Some smoke dagga because they want to see themselves as clever. Their friends tell them they are stupid when they don't smoke dagga. Then they chase them away. To be accepted they end up smoking dagga too. And they also start seeing themselves as clever. Some smoke pills. Some see themselves as strong after drinking liquor and smoking pills. Sometimes they smoke because they are not treated well at home. Afterwards they go and stay in the veld (bushes). Some no longer stay at their

homes. Some smoke cigarettes and dagga and they see themselves as old enough as a result. Some get sick and taken to doctors. It is a problem when they start smoking dagga and drinking alcohol. They are used to alcohol already and it is difficult for them to stop.

As we got to know Thabo better, we realised that what he was telling us was his story. The research focus of "boys in Kathorus" allowed him to externalise the problem of substance abuse so he did not feel threatened discussing it in the group. Taking the photographs and talking about them in the group allowed him to explore the issue of substance abuse. As we talked about his photographs and began to analyse in the group what he said about them, he was able to reflect on his own problem and slowly take ownership over it. Over a period of weeks, as we worked with the photographs, Thabo began to say, "Sometimes I smoke dagga, sometimes I smoke pills (mandrax) too". A few weeks later, he was saying, "I want help to give up smoking". He had begun to want to take control of his addiction. His context has made it very difficult for him to act on his wish to escape his addiction, but he has taken the first step of problematising it and asking for help.

Sbusiso is the oldest boy in the group and the one most ambivalent about being part of it. He felt a strong pull to belong to the gangsters who the boys call "clevers". He took photographs of the clevers. Talking about these photographs and explaining to the researchers why they were called clevers allowed him to explore why he was attracted to joining them. In analysing his description of them he began to question whether they really were clevers; he began to problematise his reality:

This one (referring to a photograph of a gangster) has been in jail and wants to influence the young ones. This kind of brother smokes dagga and pills and when we pass they intimidate us. They have toy guns and they chase people at night and take people's money from them.

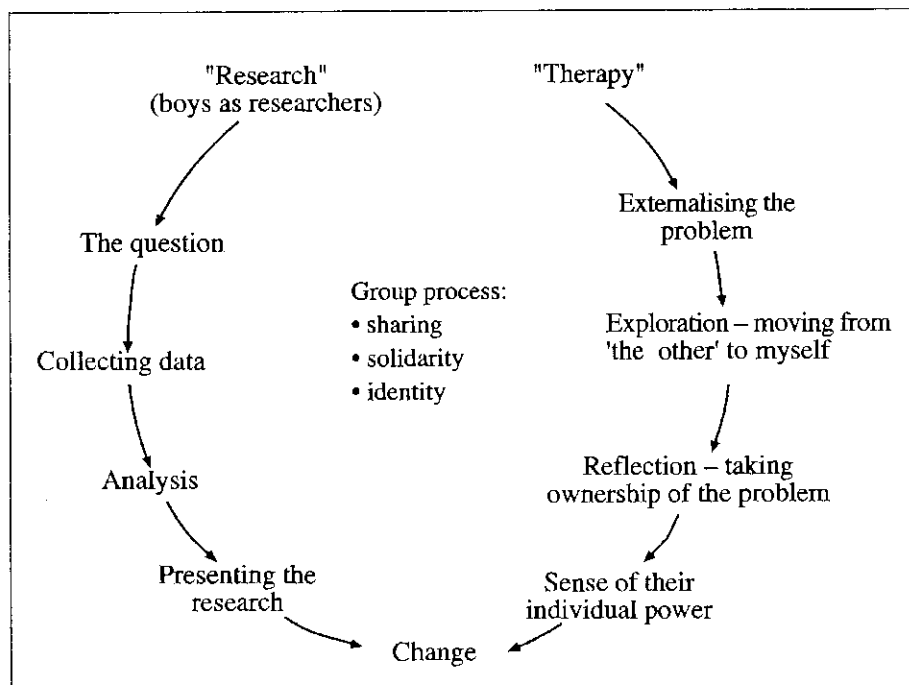
They think they are clevers. When you smoke dagga you think you are clever. To be clever is to think you are something, you are powerful and stronger than older people. Clevers get involved in crimes as young people.

Over a period of about a year, Sbusiso has begun to take control over his situation and to make different choices. He is now very clear about what makes someone a "true clever":

A true clever learns at school and succeeds. It is hard to be a true clever because some people don't like school and they find it hard. It is also hard because bully-brothers pressurise you to join them and when you get into their group you will never be a true clever again. You will never listen when your parents talk to you and you will fail at school even if you were doing well. One way to stay a true clever is to be in a good group.

True friends will encourage you to stay a "true clever". The Zimiseleni Researchers group helps me to think about good brothers and true clevers. The cameras gave us a job to do and that also helped – it was not a game to play. These boys tried to take my camera away and I said, "This is not a game, I have a serious job to do".

Figure 1 Research as therapeutic intervention



The Zimiseleni group and the cameras were an opportunity. After school I usually didn't have things to do and now Ekupholeni helps me to see ways I can do it for myself.

In addition to beginning to "own" their problems, another process was taking place. The apparent focus outward gave the boys a chance to build meaningful relationships with each other, the researcher and the therapists in a safe, task-centred context. Once such relationships had been tried and trusted, the boys were more able to use the process to heal their own issues of deprivation, abandonment, abuse and neglect.

The process also allowed the boys to take on a new image of themselves.

They began to see themselves as "researchers" rather than "problem kids". The significance of this new image is illustrated by the quotations in the following section,⁷ which need to be juxtaposed with the things the boys were saying about themselves when the process began. Becoming part of a crime gang was no longer the inevitable path.

The group continue to operate as researchers and they have taken on commissioned research from agencies interested in the lives of boys living in a context of poverty and crime. For example, a local gun control advocacy group, Gun Free South Africa, has commissioned the group to do research on the role of guns in the lives of boys in the Kathorus area. An educational television programme, Soul Buddyz, commissioned them to do research on substance abuse. In both cases, the dual process of therapy and research has been used. As the boys did research about substance abuse and guns, they also dealt with their own addictions and attitudes to guns and their experience of gun violence.

Evaluating the programme

The National Department of Safety and Security was interested to see if the project could be replicated in other areas. The question they wanted answered by an evaluation was: "Could the intervention model that has emerged be replicated in other areas as a crime prevention project?". To answer, we would have to assess whether the project has changed the boys' behaviour on a long-term basis and ultimately prevented them from getting involved in crime.

There are some indicators of success. All the boys are now in school. They all attend the group faithfully every week. The group can cope with conflict and can engage in problem solving. Most of the boys are now staying at home with their families. They have risked creating relationships with Ekupholeni and the team who work with them every week. During the week or whenever they need practical or emotional support, most of the boys come to Ekupholeni to see the team members (whom they have consciously or subconsciously designated as substitute parents). The group has become an alternative family and the Centre an alternative home.

Many of them have begun to articulate life paths for themselves apart from crime. Vezi's story illustrates the kind of progress made by many of the boys. In the following quotation, Vezi describes his home situation:

My father does not live with me. I am not living with my mother. She lives with another father and her other children. I am living with her sister. At home they are always fighting each other. Every weekend, Friday to Sunday, fighting all the time. There is a shebeen there

and a lot of noise every night. I cannot study because of noise. There is always fighting. I started to drink alcohol. The reason was not for me to think too much. Because every time they were fighting with me.

In an activity done when the group first started, the boys described how they were seen by other people. Vezi had this to say about himself:

People see someone who drinks alcohol. Someone who is bad. A person who kills people. Bad boy. A person who robs people. The way people see me will be this way until I die.

Over time, as Vezi has been involved in the group, he has begun to make changes in his life:


I asked my father if I can move from that house. He said there is not anything he can do. So I made another change. Now I can go to school and study and I go to sleep in time.

Vezi and another boy from the group built a shack of their own and they now live alone, supporting themselves with odd jobs and with some help from Vezi's father. Both attend school and the group regularly. Though the situation is far from ideal, the decision to move from a negative situation was something Vezi would never have had the confidence to do when he first joined the group. Recently, Vezi expressed the fact that when he has left school, he would like to be a doctor.

The context

All of the boys have made progress, but as a team we continue to question whether we have made a long-term impact on their lives and whether we have helped them to stay away from crime. The behaviour of the boys shows how difficult it is for them to take some of the things they have learned from the group back into their context. Sbusiso recently beat his father badly, Vezi assaulted his aunt, and Thabo brought a cell phone he had stolen to the group. The poverty they live in continues to push them towards crime. The following is a transcript of a discussion held recently by the boys:

- *At Ekupholeni you help us but ...*
- *The main thing is poverty. Perhaps you need to help us get piece jobs.*
- *We need tackies (shoes). The others laugh at us because we have old tackies. The girls laugh at us because we look poor (he points to the holes in his shoes). I want nice shoes and not to look poor. The tsotsis (criminals) started like us, worrying about shoes and they just said "Ag!" and started stealing.*
- *It's hard sometimes, we just want to have shoes that the others don't laugh at.*



The transcript shows some shift in attitudes, but the power of their context weighs heavily on the boys. It is hard to stay away from crime in this situation. In addition to the context of poverty, the boys have to cope with their families, which have not changed as they have. Within their families, the boys have been assigned roles as “patient” (or criminal). This is critical in maintaining a balance of relationships and interactions. If a boy was freed from that role, the family would be forced to look at its own dysfunction or choose another child to play the role of “patient”. If Vezi were to be seen as an intelligent, talented contributor to the family, his mother’s rejection of him would no longer be justified. It is clear how this contextual issue impinges on Vezi’s ability to be anything but the “problem child”.

Similar issues confront the boys in their relationships with other role players in their micro and meso contexts. As long as the Principal of the local school defines a “criminal” as some one who wears earrings, the boys’ enhanced sense of self-confidence, self-expression and freedom is unlikely to be understood or evaluated positively.

This context still exists for these boys, and that context will not change easily, nor can it tolerate their new identities. As a team, we have had to acknowledge this fact by becoming mediators of the context for them.

The Zimiseleni adult team now plays the role of enlightened witness (Miller, 1990). We mediate between their context and the boys’ new life scripts. When Vezi was told he would be expelled for having six earrings in his ear, we discussed it in the group, explored the authoritarianism of the principal and contextualised the Principal’s response. As a result, Vezi decided it wasn’t worth antagonising the Principal and agreed to take the earrings out. We helped him to reflect on the context, while at the same time accepting him unconditionally and not condemning him.

Through the experience of love and support from the adult team as well as the use of critical analysis in the group, the boys are being led to an active and aware confrontation with an environment and context that is, by its very nature, extremely authoritarian and inflexible.

Conclusion

The entire programme has been underpinned by an ongoing process of reflection. This has been valuable in uncovering the layers of systemic interactions that affect the boys’ lives. Given these complexities, it remains extremely difficult to evaluate the programme as a model of intervention and to say with any certainty at this point whether it is succeeding (or failing) in its attempt to keep the boys from crime.

However, what we have learned from the project is that it is impossible to develop a crime intervention programme that does not take into account the complexities of the context. It is not possible to deal with the profound and complex realities of boys on the edge of crime in a short six-week intervention, for example. Two years with ongoing support is a more reasonable commitment, with some form of contact available for the boys to come back to when they face problems.

It is possible to encourage boys to think critically about their own reality and to begin to write an alternative life script for themselves. But if the change is to be sustained, the team of adults working with the boys needs to remain available for a long time. Any attempts to replicate the Zimiseleni Project must adopt a long-term approach. Without ongoing support and context mediation, the chances of long-term crime prevention in the boy’s lives are small.

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