Effective social programme implementation through participatory learning and action

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Abstract
The article presents an overview of participatory learning and action as a useful approach to the designing of an ‘in service’ capacity development programme for state-appointed social workers employed within the field of victim empowerment in South Africa. Experiential problem based learning and psycho-social empowerment approaches are applied in this case study to strengthen potential for self-growth and the empowerment of a number of the social workers. The programme offers insights with regards to group process, participatory research and the role of the healthcare professional in creating opportunities for empowerment and self-growth. The usefulness of applying models from the disciplines of adult education and community psychology in the capacity development training of the participants is highlighted.

Keywords: capacity development; community psychology; experiential learning; in-service training; participatory action learning; social work; victim empowerment programme

South African conflict is founded on a history characterised by institutionalised apartheid (Naudé, 2000). The social dysfunction inherited by the 1994 democratic government is reflected in widespread poverty, violence, unemployment, crime, and high rates of HIV. Barolsky (2007) states that the promise offered by the outcome of South Africa’s first democratic elections in 1994 was that, with the end of apartheid, levels of violence in South African society would drop significantly. However, various forms of violence at all levels of society, ranging from armed robbery to sexual and domestic violence, have remained at high levels. During 2008/2009 a
total of 2,098,229 (approximately 2.1 million) serious crimes were registered in South Africa (South African Police Service, 2009).

Post-1994, a radical transformation was called for that would address poverty, violence, lack of resources, and unemployment and would help to rebuild communities. There are a number of community and governmental programmes currently implemented in South Africa that are meant to address the legacy of poverty, violence, and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (Aids). All of these programmes fall within the mandate of the Department of Social Development (DSD). These include, among others, the Victim Empowerment Programme (VEP). Although social workers, healthcare professionals, and managers are given these social programmes as part of their portfolios, they may lack training in coordinating and integrating group processes.

The first author presented an ‘in service’ capacity development course for state-appointed social workers working within the field of victim empowerment (VE) in the six districts of the Limpopo province of South Africa. The main aim of the course, which was designed to meet some of the training needs identified in previous research, was to nurture the VE coordinators to the point where they could take responsibility for their organisational processes and roles within the VEP.

The course was grounded in the developing discipline of participatory learning and action (PLA). PLA is an umbrella term for a wide range of approaches and methodologies. Action learning uses some intended change as a vehicle for learning through reflection. Participatory action research (PAR) forms part of the process of reflection. It informs the direction of the changes that should take place (Dick, 1993). This article reviews the value of using a PLA approach when developing the capacity of state-appointed social workers who render services within the field of VE.

THE CONTEXT AND THE PROBLEM

VE coordinators are social workers who are employed by the government (DSD) to render services to victims of crime and violence. Ideally a VE coordinator is appointed by the DSD per district or region within the nine provinces of South Africa. Each VE coordinator is tasked with supervising or guiding a sub-district coordinator. All of the appointments within a province are overseen by a provincial coordinator. The portfolios of both (district, sub-district) VE coordinators include the facilitation of community programmes such as rape care centres (Pretorius & Louw, 2005).

In addition to the rape care centres, the VE coordinators are also responsible for the coordination of services for survivors of sexual offences and domestic violence. Other responsibilities include developing and maintaining shelters for women and children as well as victim-support rooms at police stations. A key aspect of the VE
coordinator’s function is assistance in capacity building of NGOs and community based organisations (CBOs) in the VE sector. The training of front-line workers, the monitoring and evaluation of programmes and the establishment of advocacy and awareness campaigns all form part of the job description of a VE coordinator.

In two studies conducted by Nel and Kruger (1999, 2004) concerning local initiatives involving VE service delivery by the DSD, NGOs, and CBOs indicated that much training and capacity development was required in the field of VE service delivery. One of the training priorities identified in the Nel and Kruger (1999, 2004) research included the skill of dealing with trauma and crisis, basic counselling skills and how to manage trauma workers. The service providers also displayed a lack of knowledge regarding the referral of clients and networking with other stakeholders. The participants indicated that they received no standardised generic VE training and therefore an integrated overview of victim empowerment and support was not fully understood. Furthermore, Nel and Kruger (1999, 2004) found that specialised training on guidelines for sexual offences, domestic violence and child abuse was necessary. As managers, the VE coordinators needed project management skills that included fundraising as well as how to manage the finances and resources in a project. One of the training priorities mentioned by the respondents was the need to learn how to cope with stress and burn-out as many of the respondents suffered vicarious trauma. In response to the results of Nel and Kruger’s (1999, 2004) research, the first author piloted the ‘in service’ capacity development short course adopting a PLA approach aimed at addressing some of these particular training needs and priorities.

**Capacity development**

Capacity development goes beyond the conventional form of training. The management of change, institutional pluralism; resolution of conflict, enhancement of coordination, fostering communication, and ensuring that data and information are shared require a broad and holistic view of capacity development (Allen, 2007). Personal time management, programme and financial management skills, combined with more intangible characteristics such as creativity, initiative, compassion, enthusiasm, benevolence, honesty, and the consistent personal exposition of ‘professional’ values and ethics are all considered crucial for working within communities (Clark, 2005).

**Theoretical approaches that informed the design and implementation of the short course**

The theoretical underpinnings that informed the design and implementation of the short course entitled ‘Group process and capacity development for effective social programme implementation’ included approaches that emerged from the discipline of adult education or experiential problem based learning along with models from the discipline of community psychology.
Adult experiential problem based learning

Experiential learning and self-directed learning are considered to be fundamental aspects in adult education (Zepke & Leach, 2002) and therefore ‘fit’ with both the aims and the objectives of the short course. Experiential learning emphasises life experiences and one’s background as necessary building blocks for learning.

A number of scholars (Knowles, 1994; Kolb, 1984; Lewin, 1948; Mezirow, 1991) have contributed to present social scientific understanding of experiential learning. Kolb’s model of experiential learning was selected because it has been applied to educational settings (Kolb, 1984, McCarthy, 1990) and has been successfully adapted for use in experiential workshops (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999). It has also proved to be successful in group situations and to be applicable to adults and emphasises multi-dimensional learning (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 2005). The ‘in service’ capacity development course, which was held in a series of workshops, encouraged the sharing of prior learning and experiences for individual meaning ‘making’. Adults learn best when experiences are a starting point for learning (Brookfield, 1996; Knowles, 1994). But to make the best use of the experiences reflecting on those experiences and linking them to emerging knowledge structures is critical.

Psycho-social empowerment

Seedat, Duncan, and Lazarus (2001) are of the opinion that the most important contribution to social change that community psychologists can make in South Africa, is to help foster a sense of community wherever dysfunctional systems exist. In the community psychology literature (Bergold, 2000; Laverack & Wallerstein, 2001; Nel, 2007) three concepts are central: prevention, empowerment, and participation. All three of these concepts are defined according to individual scales of value, intentions, processes, and perceptions of outcomes.

Lawson (2001) discusses some notions of our perceived control over our lives (which is ongoing) such as self-efficacy, and autonomy. Rappaport (1987) believes that the aim in empowerment theory should be to enhance the possibilities for people to have control. This not only includes what people ‘perceive’ as control, but also their legal rights, political power, and social power. Bergold (2000), on the other hand, claims that the aim of researchers in the field of community psychology is to ensure community participation and empowerment.

As the VE coordinators were working with individuals and within communities it was important that not only were they empowered but that the communities in which they rendered services, were encouraged to find ways of empowerment. Therefore aspects of empowerment theory were incorporated in the design of the short course. See table 1 below for an outline of the initial objectives of the short course.
Table 1: The initial objectives of the short course

- To conduct a participatory situational analysis with six VE district coordinators and the provincial coordinator in the Limpopo Province in order to identify viable activity concepts and to develop a concept note;
- To understand development problems, underlying causes and potential solutions within a project management and action-learning framework;
- To develop responsive and technically sound activity design capturing the commitment of key stakeholders;
- To gain an integrated understanding of what Victim Empowerment entails;
- To build a common vision at district level of activity success: develop clear roles, responsibilities and time lines for implementation;
- To facilitate group facilitation skills, situational analysis skills and project management skills;
- To facilitate in the compilation of a resource directory of services and volunteers within the six districts of the Limpopo Province;
- To contribute to the learning and planning processes of research participants by activating their prior knowledge and by giving voice to their current ideas and thoughts on victim empowerment in South Africa; and
- To enable the district VE coordinators to design, manage, and present the ‘in service’ training course using PLA methodology to the sub-district VE coordinators.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in the capacity development short course was grounded in a PLA approach which includes the process of PAR. PLA is a powerful, creative method of involving the participants in their own learning processes that enables them, in their workplace, to investigate issues of concern and to plan, implement, and evaluate development activities. An important feature of PLA is its dialogical nature that enhances participation (Bachmann, 2000). The central tenet of PLA is the promotion of interactive learning, shared knowledge, and flexible, yet structured analysis.

The handbook, *Tools for Development: A handbook for those engaged in development activity*, developed by the Department for International Development (2002) at the University of Wolverhampton in the United Kingdom, was used as a starting point for the short course, as it offered a PLA approach to project management. The handbook draws together a range of techniques designed to help British Development officers and others undertake development activities and interventions of any size and kind. It was ideally suited to guide the composition of the capacity development short course since it would strengthen the project management skills of the VE coordinators in this study. Aspects of the PLA approach in the development of the course included critical reflection; the logframe (a tool used to develop the overall design of a project); visioning; team building; problem tree analysis (a tree diagram used to map out the anatomy of a problem); stakeholder analysis; key
informant interviews; stakeholder mapping and project management principles as well as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis.

PLA allows for participants to present evidence relating to their concerns and to formulate a mutually shared and acceptable change to the system. There was also a focus on: the skills necessary for effective group facilitation and training; the exploration of group dynamics and on how to build interdisciplinary teams; training on how to design, organize, and present workshops; and on knowledge dissemination of the structural and clinical requirements for the prevention of stress and helper burnout.

**Participants**

The course was conducted in the Limpopo Province as it is one of the poorest and most under-resourced provinces in South Africa. Most of the economic regions of Limpopo are struggling to overcome abject poverty but also lack productive capacities to move out of the poverty trap of high unemployment and low levels of income, gross fixed capital formation and growth (Limpopo Provincial Government, 2009). The population of the province is estimated at 3.6 million, of which 51% are women, 49% men and 36% youths (National Development Agency, 2008). The unemployment rate is at 48.6% and the HIV-infection rate is at 22.9% (National Development Agency, 2008).

The participants were purposively selected and each participant represented one of the six districts of the Limpopo province and district VE coordinators. As these districts have limited access to travel funds (hence they do not meet regularly). It was argued that the district VE coordinators would benefit from sharing among themselves their experiences and skills as well as from broadening their base of resources. There were two groups of participants in this study. There were seven participants in Phase One of the study (the provincial VE coordinator was also included). The provincial VE director, nominated the target group. The provincial VE coordinator and the district coordinators had previously attended a short course on VE at the University of South Africa and therefore had an understanding of the components of the VEP. The table below outlines the distribution of the age and gender of the participants in Phase One of the study.

In Phase Two the sample consisted of 29 sub-district coordinators, who were coached by the six district coordinators and the provincial coordinator, who had participated in Phase One of the study. The two most represented age groups were 25 to 31 years (42%) and 32 to 38 years (42%). The remaining 16% were 46 years old and older. Five of the participants were male and 24 were female. The table below outlines the frequency distribution of the age and gender of the participants in Phase.
Table 2: Frequency distribution: Age and gender of the participants in the Phase 1 of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tr>
<td>25–31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>32–38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>39–45</td>
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<tr>
<td>46–65+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
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Table 3: Frequency distribution: Age and gender of the participants in the Phase 2 of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>32–38</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>39–45</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>46–65+</td>
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DATA COLLECTION

Action research is founded on a holistic approach to problem-solving rather than a single method for collecting and analysing data (O’Brien, 2001). The various methods used were semi-structured interviews, participant observations and reflections, questionnaires, field notes, and a reflective journal kept by the first author (as both facilitator and research coordinator). Shared presentations were included as a further method of data collection. The facilitators presented their findings to the group. These were then checked, discussed, and adapted where necessary to reflect consensus amongst the participants. Brainstorming on the problems in VE service delivery was conducted in joint sessions.

The feedback from the VE coordinators and their perceptions of the short course and the follow-up workshops were an integral part of the ongoing development of the short course in the follow-up workshops. In Phase Two of the study, when the initial participants conducted the short course themselves, both the first author and the seven coordinators wrote memorandums on their impressions of the unfolding participative learning and action process. The 29 sub-district coordinators then also
gave feedback to their peers in the form of responses to open-ended and Likert scale questionnaires. All the participants acted as project designers and co-researchers throughout the duration of the study.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The main aim of the analysis was to translate the cycles of participatory reflection into learning and action. A secondary aim was to record the concerns and insights of the VE coordinators and to accurately reflect the uniqueness of their experiences within the field. Another purpose was to identify the range of skills and abilities needed to initiate and maintain viable social programmes such as the VEP. Data in the field notes and the reflective journal as well as the participants’ written appraisals, comments, and suggestions (gathered at the end of every workshop and coaching session) were analysed and thematically grouped. The themes were derived by classifying the information into units of meaning which were then combined into more comprehensive and mutually exclusive themes (Babbie, 2008). During the initial phase of analysis, focus was placed on the identification of themes that described action plans, as well as themes related to participation. The information that was gathered, was then reviewed a second time with a different focus, namely to describe the interactive processes that took place during the different meetings. Notes and participant comments, appraisals and the reflective journal were examined and interaction processes in each group were described. The analyses were compared and integrated to compile a descriptive account of the action learning process that took place over the four years duration of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2002).

**RESULTS**

The thematic coding of the process notes, the reflective journal, and the written comments of the participants, yielded the following common themes.

**Personal growth**

The most common comment from the participants was that personal self-growth was experienced and a sense of self-confidence was fostered. These are important in the field of empowerment, as research has shown that the quality and nature of the health professional’s care of the client is directly determined by his or her own self-understanding (Lauterbach & Becker, 1996; Valkin, 2006). Hence a reflective understanding of the self by health professionals may impact on the degree to which interactions empower or disempower the client (Oosthuizen, 2008).

A quotation from one of the participants demonstrates the level of self-growth that was created:
I have experienced self-growth and am confident about my skills. This has enabled me to deal with all the other stakeholders in the victim empowerment programme.

After 11 months, the six district coordinators and 29 sub-district coordinators emerged with positive attitudes towards their work responsibilities, motivation, optimism, the willingness to fight for VE rights, the knowledge of how to avoid apathy and fatalism, and a vision of what is possible:

I am able to provide more than just a sympathetic ear now – I can add value and provide a real service. – VE coordinator interviewed for SABC 2’s ‘Kaelo: Stories of Hope’ in 2004

The information received from the training has answered most of the questions that one has with regard to VEP. VEP was a big concept for me, but through the training it showed that it needed someone who is dedicated to deal with victims and perpetrators. I didn’t like talking in front of people, now I am presenting a workshop – it’s amazing! – VE sub-district coordinator, Limpopo, 2006

Increased confidence brought out leadership abilities in some of the participants. This is vital in communities that are disempowered through poverty, violence and HIV/Aids as leaders are able to influence communities. Bartle (2007) elucidates that participatory leadership is the most effective and sustainable style of leadership. He considers leadership styles that are totalitarian, authoritarian, and dictatorial as disempowering for communities. Through the use of a PLA approach the VE coordinators were exposed to the value of participatory leadership. This was evidenced when sub district VE coordinators were afforded opportunities to conduct meetings and workshops that would have previously been run entirely by the district VE coordinators.

Networking

During the interviews probe questions were used to clarify issues of concern. Several themes surfaced quite frequently, regardless of the particular topic being discussed. The most important of these themes dealt with the administration of the VEP and the role of the VE management team. The VEP was described by one participant as an octopus with many tentacles. The different government department members and community members who were the ‘tentacles’ were primarily concerned with their well-defined roles, but were not able to see the overall possibilities of the VEP.

There are problems of achieving vertical alignment and coordination of VE policy and initiatives between government at the local, provincial and national levels (Macelli, Allie, Rauch, & Lomofsky, 2005). Also, horizontal coordination between departments is difficult to achieve (at all levels) and the VE ‘forums’ or ‘programme management teams’, which are supposed to have been established at national and provincial levels, operate with varying levels of success. Not every government department has a dedicated VE coordinator and VE is often described
as an add-on activity. This is evident in the fact that not every department has a clear human resource plan for VE and that there are no dedicated budgets for VE activities in some provinces (Unisa Centre for Applied Psychology & Southern Hemisphere Consultants, 2009).

An important comment noted by several participants was that the short-course approach brought together a group of health care providers that traditionally would not collaborate with one another. Through contact with other participants, networking could be established to initiate future efforts. This may help to address the problems with horizontal and vertical coordination within the VEP.

*The VEP is mushrooming and we are even thinking of creating an NGO forum.* – A VE coordinator, Limpopo, 2005

**Collaboration with communities**

Collaboration between communities and service providers was noted as a challenge that was present throughout the duration of the project. Nearly all of the participants acknowledged the importance of their presence and time in the community to gain the trust necessary for a successful initiative such as the VEP. A previous ‘top-down’ mentality had not fostered trust within communities. Participation and democracy are fundamental aspects of social development practice, and the participants realised the value of this approach.

*Our communities are so difficult; they come with their own ideologies and agendas. It can be difficult. As a facilitator I have to control and guide if I want progress. I didn’t realise this before. It was always just an argument and people left meetings.* – A VE coordinator, Limpopo, 2005

**The institutional structure of government departments**

The institutional structure of local authorities, which is bound by tight cycles of planning, consultation, and contracting, could also threaten the effective implementation of PAR projects (Aimers, 1999). This too was a recurring theme that was raised on numerous occasions by the participants. The participants would often leave after a workshop with great enthusiasm about changes that they were going to make in their departments and communities, only to have their enthusiasm thwarted by bureaucracy.

A hierarchical authoritarian managerial style of some government departments is not conducive to implementing PLA approaches. An example of how this type of functioning affected the VE coordinators was that even after they had personally sent out invitations to other departmental heads involved in VE to attend a one-day VE conference in Limpopo, management did not attend. Rather officials some of whom had no prior experience of VE services and who were ‘not busy’ were sent.
This took place in 2004, but by 2006, a greater awareness of VE programmes by all departments had been established by the VE coordinators in the Limpopo Province. This was evidenced by a significant number of Limpopo delegates who attended the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the VEP on 18 to 20 August, 2008, in KwaZulu-Natal.

**Critical reflection as a learning tool**

According to Le Roux and Steyn (2007, p. 345), critical reflection yields greater insight at the end of an experiential learning process when new knowledge becomes the participants’ own and is filed away for easy future recollection. In this study, the ‘aha’ moments were frequent for all the participants. Change did not merely occur at the end of the study, but throughout the process as questions were raised such as ‘What was being done?’, ‘Why was it being done?’ and then, the important question, ‘What next?’ In this way the participants created change that was responsive and relevant in ever-increasing spirals of action-reflection-change.

The responses to open-ended questions that were used at the end of each workshop revealed that numerous different knowledge elements had been transferred to the participants. The participants also stated that they had learnt various skills for managing and implementing VE practices, coaching and mentoring, as well as how to take action, particularly in teams. The participants further maintained that they would approach their projects differently in future, with considerably more emphasis on participatory methods and collective teamwork.

**Mediation and conflict resolution**

It became very clear during the short course that mediation skills were required on a daily basis for VE coordinators. Sully (2000, cited in Patel, 2007) identifies important components relevant to understanding the causes of conflict, namely the availability of resources, identity, power, social and economic change, and gender and social status. The VE coordinators used mediation skills to solve problems in human relationships such as divorce, or going to court with a victim/offender. One of the lessons learnt by the participants was that mediation requires delicate skills of impartiality, building trust, understanding human relationships, active listening, interviewing, and facilitation.

> It is difficult for me to listen to the elders in the community but at the same time understand the conflict of the young people who seek to live outside of the small communities because they want to have a new life in town- I have to try and understand both sides. – A sub district VE coordinator, Limpopo, 2006

**Self-care and supervision**

The participants expressed a constant experience of stress due to a lack of resources,
vicarious trauma and a lack of management support, as well as a lack of ‘in-service’ debriefing and supervision. In the design of the capacity development course, attention was paid to this need. The initial slot of each workshop was called ‘Reflections’, and on occasion, visualisation techniques, psychodrama, music and games were used for self-care. Relaxation exercises were also learnt over the months of training. These activities were based on an exploration of the self, as in ‘knowing the self’, an individual will identify his or her own way of coping and dealing with stress (Burnard, 1992, p. 105). A quotation from one of the participants demonstrates the environment of caring that was provided:

*This was an extremely worthwhile session – we really need supervision and we need more time on this.*

**DISCUSSION**

There were many challenges faced in implementing the short course and its follow up workshops. Initially the provincial VE coordinator found it difficult to let go some of her responsibilities, but she learned through the programme to allow for a more democratic and participative leadership style. However, as the short course proceeded she learnt to allow processes to unfold. The VE coordinators were at first hesitant about voicing their opinions or questioning authority. An underlying tenet of PLA methodology is that people are experts in their own experiences and have many different ways of knowing and getting information about their conditions (Bachmann, 2000). It took time for the participants to realise that they controlled the gathering and use of information about their communities. They could decide what information they needed to make use of, the changes they wanted, and how to get more information. They decided what questions they needed to answer.

The gender mix was also a factor in the group dynamics. In Phase One there was only one male who was looked upon as the patriarch and many of the activities and responsibilities for the team were delegated to him. The facilitators raised this issue in one of the sessions but the group found it hard to let go of this perception and at times it frustrated the process as the individual clearly did not have necessary skills to cope with the responsibility and became anxious. In Phase Two there were five men and when the group was asked to choose a rapporteur who was confident and understood processes, they always chose a male participant. It was subsequently established that it was considered ‘respectful’ for women to choose men to facilitate or become the rapporteur.

The different levels of academic background of the participants slowed processes and other more suitably qualified members tried on occasion to dominate the group. This was addressed in the groups as it was felt that the younger and more recently educated members were becoming too controlling and were causing discomfort in other less self-assured members. The groups discussed previous alliances of members
who were familiar to each other and stated that this was destructive to the group process. Previously whenever the facilitators tried to split members into new groups some members would try to remain in the same groups with friends. One alliance within Phase Two admitted that their alliance was not very productive for the group. This was a significant mental shift as in Phase One the VE coordinators could not accept criticism and considered it to be destructive rather than constructive.

Some anxiety was evident in the group due to the lack of clear policy and guidelines for carrying out their work. Social work, particularly VE was considered generic, and therefore many problems that were being dealt with were not in accordance with roles. Vicarious traumatisation and burnout was evident in the group. Members stated that their irritability and anger as well as high blood pressure were as a result of their line of work. One member felt indifference or numbness and recognized this as potential for burnout.

**Capacity development**

In designing ‘in service’ capacity development courses careful consideration should be made as to whether the needs of the participants are being met. This can be addressed through PLA methodology, as it then becomes the participants who dictate what they consider as ‘learning’. In recent years, social work educators have referred to experiential learning theories as a source of knowledge for developing models for social work education (Goldstein, 1993, Gould, 1996, Yelloly & Henkel; 1995, all cited in Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang, 2008). Experiential problem-based learning enabled the participants to reflect critically on their practice and to share experiences with each other, which became a scaffold for their learning.

Group processes and group work have much to offer in capacity development. Groups are the optimum medium for empowerment (Drower, 2005). Elucidating on this, Drower (2005) writes of the group as a mutual aid system in which members share resources and learning experiences, problem solve together and bring about growth and change and in doing so, empower the potentialities of all group members. Group work can lead to transformation, as both interpersonal and intrapersonal growth is required. The group work method has the potential to socialise individuals into becoming a more caring society (De Maré, Piper, & Thompson, 1991). By raising the consciousness of the group, the VE coordinators became more aware of the alternative options and resources that were available to enhance their daily activities in delivering VE services. They were able to encapsulate the vision of the VEP, and make it their own, which in turn, fostered a sense of belonging and being part of the programme.

Another aspect of the group work was the collective reflective space provided in every session that allowed for a ventilation of the difficulties encountered in the profession. These frustrations became a collective reflection on the previous month’s work and allowed the group to re-examine and find creative solutions.
to their problems. The collective presence mirrored, affirmed and comforted the participants. This then became the care-giving space (Boer & Moore, 1994).

Becker (2005) argues that group action can bring about positive changes and encourage commitment. The VE coordinators generated their own form of power, both as individuals and as a group. This was reflected in their influence on DSD managers, in raising awareness of the VEP, and advocating for dedicated VE staff. The group’s analysis exposed processes that undermined the organisational functioning of the VEP became apparent, and participants searched together for solutions.

Networking skills were developed in order to address a core principle of the VEP. Poor communication means a weak organisation or community. Useful linkages were created both within the group and with others outside of the group. The more effective the network, the stronger the community or organisation will be. One of the findings mentioned by the participants was that after the short course, there appeared to be wider intersectoral collaboration, as other role-players within the Limpopo Province started to recognise the DSD as the leading department in the field of VE. Intersectoral networking has long been regarded as a crucial component of VE (Nel, 2007). The participants regarded the development of networking relationships with NGOs and members of the SAPS as mutually beneficial. Dialogue, which was aimed at improving problem-solving and ultimately improving services to victims, was created by these partners.

CONCLUSION

Through the use of combining the tenets of experiential problem based learning and psycho-social empowerment theory from community psychology, social workers employed by the DSD to offer VE services to victims, were guided through a new model of capacity development.

On a meta-level, the capacity development course addressed the component of community empowerment. The PLA tools require that communities become equal partners in any project. The VE coordinators, through their individual processes of empowerment, should be able to empower their communities in the future planning of community projects.

The capacity development course also addressed organisational empowerment. According to Peterson and Zimmerman (2004), organisational empowerment first includes characteristics that represent the internal structure and functioning of organisations; second it provides the infrastructure for members to engage in proactive behaviours necessary for goal achievement, and third it includes the linkages between organisations and the relationships and collaboration across organisations. Technical knowledge and skills – such as project management, workshop design and monitoring and evaluation tools – in the capacity development course all addressed the organisational level of empowerment.
Psychological empowerment took place on a micro-level. The state-appointed VE coordinators gained different psychosocial skills and tools. These skills and tools then modified their behaviours, beliefs and competencies as evidenced in their quotations. This modification came about through the emancipatory category of knowledge via reflection. Reflection took place on three levels. Initially there was individual self-reflection on previous experiences and the way in which these related to present experiences. On the next level, reflection took place on the relationship between themselves as individuals and the group. Finally, there was reflection on what their relationship would be in the community when equipped with PLA tools. This deeper and broader dimension of reflection was actively encouraged in the capacity development course. Figure 1 demonstrates the three levels of empowerment addressed in the short course.

![Figure 1. The meta-, mesa- and micro-levels of empowerment created in the capacity development course](image)

Gray and Mazibuko (2002) stress that social work within the developmental welfare system takes on a gaze that requires multidisciplinary interventions that focus on whole communities and social policies. This is a challenge that calls on social workers to make a impact on the problem of mass poverty, unemployment and social deprivation through greater use of diverse social work methods, such as advocacy, community development, empowerment, consultation, networking, action research and policy analysis.
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