The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at: http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/

Available through a partnership with

Scroll down to read the article.
Imbali Guidance Project: Facilitating Development among Guidance Educators in Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa
SONJA GOEDEKE*

ABSTRACT

A project to assist guidance educators in developing their skills, resources and confidence in providing a mental health service to the learners in their schools, was set up as part of a wider school-based reform initiative. The project was structured according to the principles of community psychology: community collaboration and participation, empowerment, a needs-based approach, cultural sensitivity, a preventative/health promotion emphasis, and an awareness of the context in which individuals live and the macro system issues that may influence their everyday lives. Teachers reported feeling empowered both personally and professionally by the project, and that the service delivery to learners had improved. The experiences in this project affirmed the role of psychology in serving under-resourced and disadvantaged communities, and the value of a community psychology orientation in South Africa. Although the project enjoyed success in the short-term and adhered to many of the practices espoused by community psychology, the failure of the project to more fully address the socio-economic and political context creates uncertainty whether the positive benefit of the project can be sustained. Long-term follow-up will be needed to adequately assess this.

Background: The South African Context

The 1990s have been a period of enormous change for South Africa, with the country’s first democratic elections being held in 1994. Since 1994, the government has embarked on a process of transformation seeking to redress the injustices of the past, and to address pressing social and economic needs. From the outset, education has constituted one of the government’s key development strategies (Ndhlovu, Wedekind & Goedeke 1997). Under the apartheid government, the

* Lecturer at the Department of Educational Psychology, c/o Ms Jaqui Akhurst, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, Private Bag X01, Scottsville 3209, South Africa.
education system was characterised by division, discrimination and disorganisation. Educational planning and management was vested in seventeen education departments, separated from one another on racial or so-called ethnic or cultural lines (Christie 1991). The status quo was one that Kriegler and Farman (1994) describe as “special education” for whites, implying that resources and services were abundant in the traditionally white schools and virtually non-existent for pupils of other races, particularly black learners.

Since 1991, however, education has begun the slow process of reconstruction and transformation. Racially segregated schools have been removed, efforts are in place to eliminate prejudice and discrimination, and there have been major developments at the level of policy on curriculum and governance. These attempts have, however, been seriously impeded by the lack of resources needed to address the phenomenal backlog in basic infrastructure. Thus while teachers and schools have been expected to change discipline strategies (corporal punishment was abolished in 1996), management styles, assessment techniques, and begin implementing the new pedagogic styles associated with Outcomes Base Education (OBE), there has been no significant change in their basic working conditions. In fact, teachers have been expected to function without textbooks (as these haven’t been printed yet). There has been extensive redeployment, as well as early retirements, meaning that job security itself has now become an issue. So to summarise, while the 1990s have seen extraordinary social and political change in South Africa, this has generally translated into increased levels of stress for the teachers and school managers on the ground (Ndhlovu, Wedekind and Goedeke 1997).

This stress has been compounded by the range of emotional, behavioural and social problems that learners may present within the classroom. Although it is difficult, for a number of reasons, to specify the incidence and prevalence of child psychopathology in South Africa, the conditions of poverty, violence and institutionalised racism that existed in this country, place children at high risk for the development of psychological disorder (Robertson & Berger, in Dawes & Donald 1994). There is a lack of resources and staff to provide professional assistance to these children, and in most instances, teachers simply have to manage as best they can.

The School-Based Reform Initiative

In an attempt to positively engage with the challenges inherent in the above scenario, the School-Based Reform Initiative was set up as a joint venture between five township schools in KwaZulu Natal, the provincial education authorities, the
local university’s education department, the teacher training college, the local business community and various non-governmental organisations. Instead of attempting to intervene and bring about change in a pre-specified direction, the School-Based Reform Initiative (SBRI) emphasised processes which enable schools to begin to manage their own change. The project included aspects of school development such as: school governance and management, development planning, capacity-building for the school development committees, curriculum development, and community involvement (Ndhlovu, Wedekind & Goedeke 1997). The aim was to bring about whole school development.

A group of five secondary township schools within a specific geographic area formed the site of the SBRI project. Due to their geographic proximity, all the schools deal largely with the same socio-economic conditions, face similar problems with regard to community relations and make use of the same basic infrastructure (Ndhlovu, Wedekind & Goedeke 1997).

Background to Guidance Project

As the SBRI project unfolded, teachers responsible for guidance and counselling in the five schools approached the university’s education department. These teachers were concerned about the perceived large numbers of learners in need of psychological assistance. They described problems ranging from substance abuse, violence, relationship difficulties, physical and sexual abuse to learning problems. Most of the teachers felt that they were unable to cope with these problems, and needed to refer to professional expertise. One teacher expressed the belief that 20% of the learners in her school had a “problem” that she felt unable to address. In response to these concerns, the education department approached the university’s department of educational psychology and child and family centre towards the end of 1996.

Initial meetings between the university’s representative and the teachers revealed the need for intervention of a more systemic nature. The university’s resources would have been insufficient to deal with the large numbers of learners that the teachers perceived to be in need of psychological assistance. Teachers and university representatives together identified the reasons for the perceived need for assistance. Reasons identified included a perceived lack of skills and training, a lack of confidence, and a lack of access to resources. It was decided to attempt to address these needs by developing the Imbali Guidance Teacher Support Programme. The programme aimed to develop resources, skills, training and educational practices in the field of guidance. Unlike previous programmes that had been attempted in schools, the programme was developed and directed by the
teachers themselves. Teachers identified needs and together with a university facilitator identified possible solutions. In such a way, the guidance team (later renamed the pastoral care team) was formed.

**Reason for the University of Natal Involvement: A Community Psychology Orientation**

For the university's psychology staff, this project provided a unique opportunity to "take psychology out of the consulting room and into the community" (Orford 1992) and to address some of the criticism levelled at the profession, practice and theory of psychology in recent years.

Frustration has been expressed, for example, about the traditional form of service delivery, which has tended to be highly individualistic. Psychology, it is claimed, has focused on "blaming" the individual and seeking to change the individual in some or other way, with little awareness of the client's context and the impact of social influences upon the client (Foster & Louw-Potgieter 1991). Furthermore, it has been based largely on the medical model and has thus frequently been pathology orientated, retroactive and curative in nature, rather than proactive and health-promoting. (Daniels 1994).

Questions have been asked about the relevance, and appropriateness of psychological interventions. This is particularly true of psychology in South Africa, where, especially in recent years (1980s and 1990s), psychology has been described as in a state of crisis, and as "probably the most useless endeavour in society today" (Holdstock 1981:123). In South Africa, traditional service delivery has been largely elitist in terms of its client base. Existing mental health services have been geared predominantly towards a small, white, middle class client base who can afford psychologists' fees (Bassa & Schlebusch 1984, Dawes 1985, Manganyi & Louw 1986, Swartz, Dowdall & Swartz 1986, Lazarus 1988). Furthermore, the past tendency has been to select students mainly from the white middle class. Trainees have not received training that prepares them to deal with work in the community, and, owing to the small number of psychologists relative to the population, have little hope of reaching all those in need of services. Daniels (1994) sees problems concerning who has been trained, in the numbers that have been trained, and the client base for whom students have been trained.

Psychology has emphasised Euro-American theories. There have been insufficient multicultural emphases in theory and practice, and insufficient understanding of the issues facing communities and the relationship between mental health and environmental stressors. (Berger & Lazarus 1987). Traditional psychology has failed to adequately acknowledge that many South Africans, albeit
in an unsophisticated inarticulate form, see their mental health as inextricably linked to the political reality with which they have been forced to live (Daniels 1994). Thousands of South Africans have been victims of violence, oppression, prejudice, abuse and neglect, but these issues have remained largely unaddressed. In the past, psychology tended to remain silent about the evils of apartheid (Foster & Louw-Potgieter 1991). For a field of practice and research that claims to be concerned with mental health, this past (and some would argue, current) failure to acknowledge the influence of macro systems on the psychological health of the vast majority of the population has been quite ironic. Lazarus (1988) argues that psychology is not, as many would like to believe, value free. Daniels (1994) argues that we need a theory and practice that overtly takes into account the influence of our past and present sociopolitical context. South African health and social services need to be transformed into a non-racial, equitable, cost-effective system which emphasises primary health care and community needs, and is relevant to the people it hopes to serve.

University staff felt that this project would provide a unique opportunity to try to develop a mode of psychological service delivery that catered for more than just an individual, considered the context of the clients, strove towards wellness and health promotion, served the majority rather than the minority, and helped address the social and emotional problems resulting from South Africa’s chequered past. University staff hoped to assess to what extent the model adopted would be an appropriate community intervention model. The model constituted a shift in the service delivery of educational psychology: away from individualised work to systemic intervention and consultative roles. Finally, the project also aimed to provide training opportunities for teachers in training, masters students and interns, and staff members; in what was hoped to be alternative approaches to psychological service delivery.

The model adopted by university staff for this project was one based on community psychology principles. Community psychology has been seen by many as providing a form of practice and theory from which to address the problems outlined above (Lazarus 1988, Perkel 1988). Community psychology is overtly value-based or partisan (Rappaport 1977). Community psychology emphasises an understanding of the individual as part of a context; prevention and health promotion rather than treatment or remediation; competency, empowerment and social action, rather than pathology; citizen participation and consultation rather than unequal power relationships. Community psychologists generally work in the community, together with the community. Thus the assumptions about the causes of problems are different, and the levels of analysis are broader. In contrast to customary models of service delivery, the approach to planning services is more proactive and the attitude towards “sharing” psychology and
working with non-professionals is positive (Orford 1992). Locating the practice as close as possible to people's everyday context is attempted. Thus community psychology has not just tried to take psychology out of the consulting room and into the community, but it has sought alternative forms of practice, rooted in alternative theories of understanding human behaviour (Orford 1992). As yet, this is an emerging discipline, but one which several see as providing some of the solutions to the perceived crisis in psychological theory and practice.

Community psychology is thus characterised by:

- An ecological perspective. The emphasis is on understanding the individual as part of his/her context. "Blame" is not laid upon the individual, rather his or her "problem" is seen as being interdependent upon the environment the individual finds him/herself in.

- A preventative (or health-promoting) stance.

- An empowerment orientation. In community psychology, there is a shift from a pathology framework to a competency framework. Current resources and skills are identified and accessed.

- An openness to professional client collaboration or citizen participation. Community psychology strongly encourages self-help and working with non-professionals. Facilitation and collaboration are key elements.

- A commitment to oppressed, socially devalued, disadvantaged, marginalised groups.

- A social action orientation. Community psychologists attempt to facilitate disadvantaged groups to organise themselves.

- A commitment to addressing social policy issues, i.e., moving beyond work with the individual to addressing issues at the macro level that influence the psychological well-being of the individual.

- An action research approach. This approach locates much of the evaluation process and reflection on the intervention in the community itself.

- Self-reflection and critique.

- An approach acknowledging diversity, i.e., diversity in people, in aetiology, in solutions.

- Cultural relativity: community psychologists acknowledge that western frameworks of conceptualising and addressing psychological problems do not necessarily apply in contexts other than those in which they were
• A sense of community, i.e., "A feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (MacMillan & Chavis, cited in Lazarus 1988:346). Community psychologists differ quite considerably here from traditional individually orientated psychotherapists in that the boundaries between client and professional are less clear. Frequently the focus of interventions is the community and community processes, rather than individual issues.

To summarise, community psychology deals with issues of empowerment, consultation, social action, a needs-based approach, and accessibility (summarised from Daniels 1994, Rappaport 1977, Orford 1992). The community psychologist's role, together with the community, is to problematise, to raise consciousness about needs and the resources to address them. His/her role is to de-ideologise (eg., change views such as "We do not have the skills...we cannot do anything about it") and thus to assist the community in identifying and implementing solutions to perceived problems.

In this project, the aim was to assist teachers in identifying the needs in their schools, and developing appropriate solutions through interventions, such as skills and resource development. The aim was not to work with the learners themselves, but rather to empower the teachers (community) to cope with the situation they were faced with. This can be seen to constitute a form of mental health consultation, where the psychologist does not meet with the client directly. Rather, an attempt is made to influence the intermediaries (teachers) who have direct contact with the "clients". Teachers have an ongoing relationship with "persons-at-risk", but the work is not exclusively of a mental health nature. Unlike direct treatment strategies, mental health counselling provides a basis for modifying the socio-psychological environment represented by those in caregiver positions. "Mental health counselling with caregivers whose clients are children, such as teachers...has the promise of promoting primary prevention to the extent that the social environment of children is improved, sources of stress are reduced and enhanced coping skills result from the process" (Orford 1992).

The project also aimed to go beyond mental health counselling to empower the teachers by helping them to identify and develop their own resources. A community psychology approach was adopted, and it was hoped that the project would be characterised by the features and principles outlined above.
Description of the Programme

The first few meetings were spent trying to identify needs, establish what attempts had been made to address these needs and what explanations were given for the lack of success. Attempts to uncover available resources were also made. Initially, teachers had hoped that they would be able to address their difficulties by referring "problem" cases to the university staff. Discussions led to the realisation that the referral system would again take time, that therapists were frequently not fluent in the main language of the learners, and that the problem would continue to exist as new learners moved into the school. Teachers had a sense that they needed to do something, but expressed a lack of confidence in their ability and training. Discussions became more focussed and specific areas of need were detailed, leading to the development of a training and support programme. It was agreed to keep the programme flexible to allow for changes as needs modified or other needs were uncovered.

The initial programme was set up to include:

- Monthly meetings: serving as opportunities to structure, evaluate and revise the programme; provide support for each other, and discuss more "difficult" cases.
- Networking and visits: the team identified various non-governmental organisations and educational institutions that could assist or link up with the project in some way. These included the University's Child and Family Centre, Student Counselling, the council for substance abuse, the local branch of Pregnancy Crisis, and individual psychologists.
- Workshops: The facilitator made enquiries as to what training was available on a variety of psycho-social issues by various organisations and the local university. Teachers then selected those they felt related to their areas of need. A seven session basic counselling skills course was followed by shorter workshops in assertiveness training, conflict resolution, leadership skills, stress management, study skills, coping with exams, problem-solving, decision-making, and interviewing skills.

The initial programme was altered and added to as the teachers became aware of more specific areas of need.

- For example, on completion of the basic counselling skills course, teachers identified specific areas that they felt needed to be addressed to a greater extent. In response to these needs, the teachers signed up for a university course in Problems of Childhood and Adolescence, covering
areas such as: child abuse, disruptive behaviours, HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, violence and post-traumatic stress.

- As teachers became more confident that they could work with children presenting with such problems, they also began to question how they could help prevent some of these problems. This lead to workshops in which teachers developed resources to use in psycho education lessons with their learners. Teachers also linked up with other agencies and the university’s teachers in training, to build on their resources. The emphasis in the project thus started moving away from developing their own skills and resources, to how these could be shared with the learners. The emphasis moved away from a pathology orientation, to a desire to cover topics of a health promotion nature.

- In their planning and development of the above, teachers came to realise that much time and effort would be saved if they coordinated their teaching timetables and shared their resources. From this, a syllabus for the following year was drawn up.

- As teachers tried to clarify for themselves what their roles in the schools were, it emerged that teachers felt that their role was frequently misunderstood or undermined by other staff members. This lead to the development of a pamphlet outlining the role of the guidance teacher-educator and the principles according to which they work. It was posted on staff notice boards, individual class notice boards, and in some cases, formed part of school newsletters.

- Teachers began collectively organising workshops for their learners around areas of concern. Local agencies presented workshops on teenage pregnancy and abortion, HIV and AIDS, substance abuse, to name but a few.

- In the project’s second year of existence, teachers began to focus more and more on the learners. A winter school was set up, allowing learners to attend classes in subject areas in which they experienced difficulty. A Careers’ Day was planned, offering information about various careers and routes of entry. A project assisting learners who struggled academically was planned: this was to involve the educating of learners in practical skills such as plumbing, carpentry and so on. This was one project which did not materialise and will be discussed later.

- In its second year, teachers began to think about sharing what they had learned with other staff. Discussions were held about the possibility of the
team working with management and staff to develop leadership and communication skills and create an awareness of a range of psychosocial issues. This aspect of the project has not yet been fully developed.

Evaluation of the Programme

Data collection
Data was collected from a number of sources: extensive field notes and reflections on the process, diaries kept by the teachers themselves about the project, notes of comments and observations made by outsiders or workshop presenters on their impressions of the project, and interviews conducted by an independent interviewer with each of the participants.

Initially the intention was to use action research as one of the primary means of collecting data. It was envisaged that teachers would reflect on the project and their experiences by keeping detailed diaries throughout the project. This method appeared to fit well with the principles adopted in the project; specifically, the principle of making teachers full participants in the whole process of the project, from the planning and implementation, as well as the evaluation of the project. Although some use was made of this method, it was not as successful a method of collecting data as envisaged. English was a second language for all of the participants, and it was perhaps unrealistic to expect them to be totally at ease with writing in English.

In fact, one teacher mentioned that she was embarrassed to hand in her diary, because then people will see all my mistakes”. Several teachers expressed that they felt more comfortable talking to someone about the project, rather than trying to put their words down on paper. In the analysis of the data, the interviews revealed richer, more detailed information and reflections. Interviews were relatively open-ended, and conducted by an independent researcher, who had little knowledge of the project and had not met the teachers before. Teachers were asked what their experience had been of the project, giving reasons and examples. They were also asked to reflect on the future.

Data analysis and results
The data from transcribed interviews, diaries, and field notes were content analysed for meaning units, which were then categorised into broad theme areas. These are discussed below.
Value judgments about the project as a whole

The teachers were unanimous in expressing the belief that the project had been successful and worthwhile, and that they had benefited from the project, both personally and professionally. This is reflected in comments such as: “It’s good to be part of a winning team. It’s a project that has taken off.”

Things that made the project work

In response to the above, teachers were asked to explain what they thought had made the project a success. Comments highlighted their appreciation of the style of facilitation that was adopted. They described the facilitator as open, as treating them with respect and not dictating to them. Teachers seemed to place a great deal of value on being “allowed” to express their own views. This is nicely indicated in comments such as:

“I had the opportunity to add and even object to some of the issues discussed”.

“For the first time we were asked what were our needs, where do we fall short of rendering effective service, from there the university pointed out where it can help”.

“You know, coming from a legacy of apartheid, coming from a legacy where we are normally waiting for somebody to take control and to receive instructions and follow those instructions... when the project came it said to us, we’ll do what you think is right. For the first time the project provided us with an opportunity for us to say what we think. It’s our need. We had people who were willing to listen to our needs. People who were willing to say OK, these are the needs, what is the way forward. We will help you along. For the first time. Nothing like that has ever happened to us.”

The facilitator had hoped to avoid casting herself in the role of the expert, but to communicate to the teachers that they themselves had the resources to address the problems they were faced with. This appears to have been well received: “She has a belief that the people she is working with can do it. In many ways she portrays this feeling to us, that we can do it, and because of that feeling we are prepared to try harder.”

The facilitator also tried to be sensitive to cultural differences. This was picked up by the teachers: “I do not think many, especially ‘white guys’ could have understood, could have a willingness to know about us and our culture...”.

“Working with our coordinator, it was the first time to work with a white person. Previously I thought white people, ughh. But she is a good listener and takes each and everybody’s point of view seriously. And you could feel in the discussion that your point had been taken and acknowledged, even if you talked nonsense. She doesn’t say this, she acknowledges it and makes you feel that
whatever you say it’s OK because it’s what you thought. It’s OK even if you are wrong... and if it’s wrong then accept it”.

The feeling of being supported, of having others to share with, was described as an important factor in explaining the project’s success. The teachers valued the atmosphere of mutual respect that developed, the opportunity to collectively plan and make decisions about issues affecting them. A gap appeared to have been filled for the teachers. Most of the teachers had operated on their own as guidance teachers in their respective schools, in spite of being situated close to one another. Previously there were few opportunities to consult with other colleagues to discuss ideas and give support. Several of the teachers felt that their work was misunderstood by other teachers and management in the school. This project afforded them with the opportunity to work with others, sharing common needs and goals. “You get a feeling that it’s OK to say what you think and other members will listen and a decision will be collectively taken”.

“You feel part of the team in every respect”.

“It’s working with people that’s number one. People who are also inclined, who share the same ideas and also other people’s skills”.

“We’ve had meetings together and decisions were taken together. That’s really the thing, everyone’s idea was discussed and put to the test and we’d all understand what was happening”.

“We are able to share things happening, share our problems and success together.”

A sense of cohesiveness developed in the group as the project unfolded and teachers got to know each other. Personal relationships were formed, and teachers began phoning and visiting each other independently of the project. Birthdays, important occasions were noted and remembered. Social get-togethers were organised to mark important milestones in the project. “We have times of happiness...we share experiences for the benefit of all.” This group process appears to have been a key aspect to the project’s continuing success. One teacher described the group’s unity as being: “the chord that keeps us together”.

Teachers also expressed satisfaction that the project had been developed by them, based on what their perceptions of their needs were. There was a sense of ownership of the project. This is reflected in comments such as:

“Many organisations, they come to us and say: let’s work in partnership. And we think, eh no... They come here and they tell us what to do and what we need... but this was different. Here we said, we’re working in this SBRI as Guidance Teachers, we want help... and they came here and said, here we are. What can we help with, how can we help? We’ve decided the direction of this whole project ourselves. It’s the first time that I have been part of a project that is not driving me to the left and to the right; it’s worked out by us. We’ve decided what goes into
it and what we need. You guys have just been filling in the gaps... and that's why I am here.”

The fact that the facilitator tried to help the teachers uncover their own existing resources was appreciated and worked successfully. “We were able to work with the skills and tools that we already have.” Interestingly enough, little mention was made of the value of the actual content, for example, of workshops in accounting for the project’s perceived success. Clearly the process was more important than the content itself.

Teachers’ comments on the effects of the project were divided into three areas: personal effects, professional effects and the effects on the school as a whole.

**Personal**

Teachers described feelings of empowerment as a result of the project. They referred to gains in self-confidence, the ability to assert themselves, the ability to put ideas into action, feeling more motivated. Two of the five teachers commented that through their experience on the project they had felt able to stand for their school’s management team, and been successful. They reported feelings of being able to make a difference and effect changes. Feelings of helplessness and burnout appear to have dissipated. “The project gave us the initiative power. We all have goals up in our minds, but the biggest problem is where to start and how to go about”; “... sometimes you see all these things and then you just sit back and do nothing... you burnout in a way... and you see, this has changed now”; “The project was like... it opened us and said to us the sky is the limit. It opened avenues that we never thought you know, I as a neglected child, can actually do such a thing.”

**Professional**

These personal effects appear to have spilled over into the professional lives of the teachers. All teachers commented that they felt that their experiences on the project had helped them in their dealings with the learners in their classes. They felt more easily able to understand and assist them, reported increased attendance figures at their lessons and in their consultation times, and more respect from the learners. Several teachers expressed excitement at seeing the effects of the skills and practices they had learned. “For me it was like YES! ... Do you know what it feels to see learners doing the ‘right’ things and knowing that you have contributed towards their success? There is nothing as fulfilling as that... It was this kind of joy that actually pulled me to the whole Imbali Guidance Project.” This type of feedback contributed to teachers’ continued involvement and commitment to the project. Teachers felt that they had learned something: “We always come out having learned something. Otherwise we wouldn’t have attended because we
don’t get paid for this... but this is a self-development thing."

Teachers used their newly developed skills not only in the context of guidance, but also in the school as a whole, with colleagues, management, as well as at home and in their personal relationships. Again, the positive feedback they received motivated them further. “You know and this is something I now am just trying with my class...we had this thing of, no, wrong answer, bad. Now you say, OK, what are others thinking of this? We don’t damage each other’s confidence anymore. So it helped with good techniques with working with others. Even in meetings in our school and even with my child.”

School
The Guidance Support Project formed part of a wider reform initiative implemented in the five schools: The School-Based Reform Initiative. At the time that the guidance project was set up, several other projects had already been initiated, but appeared to be making slow progress. The guidance team organised themselves quickly, and involved themselves in several visible projects. Guidance projects, aiming to benefit the psychological and social health of the learners, by their very definition involved and had to be made known to all in the school. Collaboration, cooperation and agreement had to be sought, and so the team became visible. Some of the team members experienced this positively, and received feedback from colleagues and management that motivated them to work even harder. Others reported feeling that there was a level of resistance and resentment towards the team, “for moving too fast and showing them up.” One teacher commented: “Sometimes I think we scare other people.” Several teachers expressed disappointment that the project had not as yet been extended to other staff in their schools.

Future
Team members expressed positive views of the future of the project. The facilitator resigned from her post at the university, and thus had to start gradually withdrawing herself from the project. This meant that ultimately, the team would be “on their own”, with the university facilitator not being available. Team members responded with sadness at the facilitator’s departure, but were also positive about their ability to take the project further. “Well it will survive but it will be different.”

“It helps to know that we will survive because we’re accomplished now. I think it will survive”; “We have learnt skills of organising and planning and I feel confident that the group can move forward.”

“She is not a selfish person. She knew she would not always be with us. She let
us do things on our own and she went through them slowly. And right now we are moving forward without her and still we are moving forward. Yes there is a gap without her but we are still doing... Now I can see she’s no longer with us and it’s not that painful. Maybe it would have been worse if she’d just stopped suddenly but she did it slowly and I am kind of getting used to not seeing her and having her around for decision-making.”

Some team members commented that continuous support was not essential, but that it would be reassuring to have some ‘backup’. “We can do things by ourselves but it would be nice to have someone to consult with.”

Also positive to note was that team members had several ideas about projects they wanted to implement in the future. They also expressed the belief that they had the ability to achieve these. “Now we look forward and say, what else can we do to improve the quality of learning and teaching?”

Discussion

It is clear from the above that the teachers on the project felt that they and their learners had benefitted from the project. Furthermore, it appears that some of the reasons for the project’s perceived success were related to the community psychology model adopted.

For example, it is obvious from the above comments made by teachers that the collaborative approach, emphasising a belief in the teachers’ abilities and resources, was well-received. The facilitator resisted casting herself in the role of the expert, but undertook to facilitate the process rather than dictate it. Initially, teachers relied quite heavily upon the facilitator for guidance. The approach taken was to reflect constantly upon what the areas of perceived need were and to question what solutions could be tried out. The facilitator resisted taking all the responsibility and offered tentative suggestions only. This proved to be a time-consuming, and at times, frustrating process. Solutions often appeared obvious to the facilitator, who found herself holding back to allow the process to unfold. The facilitator was careful to ensure that every member had an opportunity to express ideas and concerns. This required sensitive monitoring of the process, and asking each member for his/her opinion through questions such as: “What do you think, how do you feel about... how do you see the situation...?” It is interesting that the facilitator’s field notes from a meeting early on in the second year, recorded an observation/reflection that team members were using the same questions and phrases in the discussions with each other. This may in part be due to modelling, and in part to the match between this approach and cultural values.

The project also followed community psychology principles because of its
emphasis on the community's needs as a starting point. The project was developed, based on the expressed needs of the community and by the community. Previous programmes offered in these schools had apparently come in with prepackaged workshops, notions, and ways of operating.

It appears that this approach was culturally appropriate for a community that believes in cooperation and consultation, as well as careful deliberation before making decisions (rapid decision-making seen as being careless and disrespectful). Cultural sensitivity also came into play in the initial stages of the project. Early on, teachers were quite shy to express views. In Zulu culture, it is inappropriate to express your views to someone you regard as being in a position of authority. As teachers came to regard the facilitator as part of the team and not as the expert, more openness developed. Zulu culture also emphasises the importance of the group rather than the individual. This is nicely expressed in a Zulu saying which reads: "I am who I am because of others". Along the lines of community psychology practice, the project attempted to foster a sense of community. Teachers clearly identified and valued this.

The group consisted of six members: five teachers and one facilitator. Perhaps if the group had been larger, the same sense of community, of caring, would not have been possible. It is interesting to note that the sense of cohesion remained in spite of occasional changes in membership. The first occurred when one teacher went on maternity leave (she returned once her maternity leave was complete and even attended some of the scheduled workshops whilst on maternity leave), and the second when one teacher was called upon to act as deputy principal of her school. In the latter, a colleague of the teacher attended instead, and kept the "original" teacher informed of what was going on. Other group members also kept in touch with these teachers. The group appeared to take on a life of its own, and it became more and more common to hear teachers referring to their group as the "team". The group clearly functioned not only as a programme development unit, but as a support group. One teacher who had come to two meetings early on in the project, withdrew. Attempts were made to include her and minutes of meetings were regularly sent to her. Other team members explained her lack of interest as a lack of commitment, but it would be interesting and informative to discover what the reasons for the lack of participation were. It is perhaps noteworthy that this particular teacher was not one who had expressed a need for assistance from the university; rather, she had been "roped in" by virtue of her position as a guidance teacher in one of the five schools falling under the umbrella of the SBRI. This highlights the importance of community interventions being based on needs.

The facilitator tried to guide discussions from the identification of needs, to talking about possible solutions, to assisting in breaking the solutions down into smaller, manageable tasks. Team members were then each encouraged to take on
a few of the tasks. Initially, the facilitator took on quite a few of the more demanding tasks, and was concerned that this was not really following community psychology principles. As the project progressed however, the team members assumed more responsibility. By the second year, team members were initiating tasks and assuming all the responsibility, whilst the facilitator became more of an observer and commentator on the process. At one stage, the facilitator went on an extended holiday. It is noteworthy that during this time, the team continued with their work, and even drew up and presented a new policy document outlining the role of the guidance team (now renamed the pastoral care team). As the project unfolded, it became apparent that the team members were becoming empowered to act on their own initiative, independent of the facilitator. This can be seen as a very positive development. Empowerment must be seen as a developmental process. In the early stages of a project, a community may need more guidance and direction. As the project unfolds, this can be reduced.

In the course of the second year the facilitator started to withdraw gradually from the project. Results indicate that team members feel confident in being able to sustain the project, even though the facilitator will no longer be a part of it. The teachers appear to have become empowered to continue the work on their own and even spoke of a plan to initiate and develop further projects, as well as extend their model of working into neighbouring schools. These developments are particularly encouraging in view of the feelings of burnout, inertia, and helplessness reported at the outset of the project. Community psychology interventions aim to become self-sustaining, and it appears that this project will be sustained. Long-term follow-up will be needed however, to assess this.

The initial focus of the project was to assist teachers in some way in coping with the huge numbers of so-called “problem” cases in their schools. It is encouraging to note that the emphasis shifted in the course of the project, from a pathology orientated framework, to a more preventative/health-promoting framework. The emphasis shifted from teachers asking “what is wrong” with the learners to “what do we want to see”, and to “what do we want” for our learners. This can be seen in the change of the nature of topic areas in the workshops teachers attended (a shift from basic counselling skills workshops, to workshops on various pathologies, to health-promoting topics like stress management and assertiveness). It can also be seen in the activities that teachers organised for the learners (from topics such as coping with teenage pregnancy, to focusing on relationships, to the planning of a careers’ day). It is difficult, of course, to assess the long-term effects of such a change in emphasis. To assess the impact and value of such workshops and projects, long-term follow-up of the learners would be needed. Nonetheless, the change in emphasis falls in line with community psychology’s emphases.

The project’s perceived success may in part be due to a sense, on the part of the
teachers, of having learned something and of being actively involved in making a difference. Many teachers from the five schools had expressed frustration that there appeared to be a lot of talk, but little action, both in education at the national level, and also within their own schools. Becoming involved in a project with clearly set out tasks and the occasional high profile project, was valued by the teachers. Similarly, all teachers on the team commented on their satisfaction with having produced the “guidance pamphlet”. In the face of uncertainty and inertia, being active and producing concrete evidence of work appeared to be beneficial to the teachers in terms of their self-image and anxieties.

There was also a need to be sensitive to the conditions in the community. At the outset of the project, there were times when teachers arrived late for meetings, or not at all. The facilitator had to put aside her preconceived notions, for example, that not arriving or being late indicated a lack of interest. The facilitator had to learn to understand the behaviour in terms of the context within which teachers worked. Teachers were often faced with “crises” at schools, like strikes, riots, and boycotts. On one occasion, a teacher arrived late because there had been a stabbing incident at her school. Several of the teachers also worked under conditions of chaotic management and planning: a staff meeting could be called unexpectedly, or would not have been communicated to all staff. Furthermore, as teachers themselves acknowledged in the interviews, they were initially sceptical of the project. As the project progressed and teachers gained a sense of ownership of the project, it is interesting to note that attendance improved dramatically and there were very few occasions when attendance was not 100%.

On reflection and on analysing the interviews of the teachers, however, it appears that insufficient cognizance was taken of the context within which teachers worked and lived, of the macro issues both influencing and being influenced by this project. The team always sought to gain the approval and comments from the coordinating committees of the various schools and the executive of the SBRI. At times though, feedback was requested and not obtained, and the team then simply went ahead with plans without further enquiry. The comments in the results section above, highlight that greater cognizance should have been taken of the influence of these broader issues upon the project. Although it did not appear to impede the development of the project, it is possible that with more widespread support from colleagues and the SBRI, the guidance team could have shared to a greater extent in its successes.

Various members of the team expressed such a desire to share what they had learned with fellow colleagues. At one stage, a letter was sent out to principals explaining what the team had been doing, and what they felt they could offer to the schools and staff. This was not responded to, and the team did not follow up on these ideas. The plans for 1998, in which the Guidance Team became the
Pastoral Care team, indicating its broader function and change from being “just one of the projects” to one of five key areas of the SBRI, workshopping with other teachers was emphasised. Again, this has not materialised. The relationship between the team and the school, the wider SBRI project and its structures, was not sufficiently explored. This is an area of weakness in the design and operation of the project.

Likewise, insufficient attention was paid to the social and political context in which this project was embedded. As outlined in the introduction, the state of education in South Africa, especially in Kwa Zulu Natal, is undergoing tremendous change. In the past few months, teachers there have been faced with tremendous uncertainty as retrenchments and possible redeployment have become more of a reality. Guidance teachers felt particularly at risk, since they felt the department regarded their role as peripheral, and not central to the functioning of the school. These issues were discussed at length within the group, and team members offered support and reassurance to each other. Little was done to address the issue on a broader level however, by seeking contact, for example, with provincial education authorities. One meeting that was set up (to discuss one of the projects) was not attended by the provincial representative.

The extent to which the project was then able to shape practices and policies on a broader level can thus be disputed. Little was achieved in changing the structures within which guidance teachers work, little was achieved in terms of changing policy and practices at a wider level. Practices and policies may have changed within the school, but this means little when such changes are not necessarily supported by the educational authorities under whose jurisdiction the guidance teachers fall. This project will have achieved little if after all the effort that team members put into it, guidance teachers end up being retrenched as part of the provincial education department’s rationalisation process.

The project needed perhaps, to have been more proactive and more efforts could have been made to liaise with provincial education authorities. Similarly, although teachers may through this project, be successful in assisting learners with their problems, in teaching them skills that promote psychological health; the structural risk factors contributing to the development of problems such as poverty, oppression, violence, were not in themselves addressed. If these social conditions continue to prevail, the successes that could stem from the teachers’ efforts may be limited. For example, the project that teachers had hoped to introduce for learners struggling academically in their schools, failed to materialise because of a lack of funding, and because of a lack of response from the non-governmental organisation responsible. In terms of social action, in promoting true empowerment, it is debatable how much was achieved. Individuals and groups may feel empowered after affirmation of existing skills and learning new
skills, but this does not change the socio-economic and political context. As Orford (1992) points out, interventions may be doomed to transitory or ineffective actions unless this is done.

Community psychology emphasises the role of the community in participating in the research process. It was for this reason that the facilitator wanted to use an action research process as the primary means of data collection. As commented on above, this was not as successful as the facilitator had hoped. The facilitator then changed her approach and asked the teachers what method of research they thought would be appropriate. Following from this, the facilitator kept extensive notes on meetings and feedback and comments made, asked other people who became involved in the project to reflect on the process, and concluded with interviews by a researcher not involved in the project.

Action research is frequently the research method of choice when the aim of the intervention is to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences, and in so doing, inform and feed back into their work, for example, as teachers. The failure of the action research process here does not constitute a failure on behalf of the teachers to critically reflect on their experiences and use these observations to change their practice. Teachers reflected openly in meetings and discussions with each other. As mentioned before, the problem with the action research method appeared to lie more in its reliance on written expression. Nonetheless, although the facilitator was disappointed that the action research process was not successful, the teachers still participated in the research process and evaluation of the project. The fact that team members were consulted as to how the project could be evaluated, contributed to a sense of control and ownership over the project.

Community psychology interventions and traditional individual psychotherapy share both similarities and essential differences. In individual therapy, the therapist and client work together towards resolving the client's issues. The therapist guides and reflects, but does not offer fixed solutions. The goal is for the client to become independent and take control of his or her life. The aim is that the client will be able to terminate therapy and cope independently. So too, it is this author's belief that community psychology interventions depend to a certain extent on the relationship between the facilitator and the community. Likewise, the aim is to allow the community to help itself, and for interventions to become self-sustaining. On the other hand, in traditional individual therapy, the focus is usually on the individual as the locus of change and problem behaviour. Little recognition is given to the systems of which the individual is a part. Community psychology emphasises the need to look beyond individuals and their behaviour to the context. Perhaps herein lies part of the problem with this specific project. The facilitator comes from a background of training in traditional clinical psychology. Although she subscribed to the ideals and principles of community
psychology, it may have been difficult to leave familiar practices and ways of conceptualising human behaviour. Although the project was held by its recipients to be a success then, the fact that the focus was still too individualistic will limit its long-term viability.

Concluding Comments

When one analyses the responses of teachers and participants in this project, it is clear that the project achieved a measure of success. On further analysis however, it is uncertain what the long-term effects will be. As an emerging discipline, community psychology still needs to identify explicit bases for the evaluation of elusive, but clearly valued effects.

Nonetheless, the experience of this project affirmed the facilitator's belief in a role for psychology in serving under-resourced, disadvantaged communities. It affirmed the value of a community psychology orientation as a means of working in the South African community. The principles of community collaboration, a needs-based approach, empowerment, and the broadening of levels of analysis are all supported by this project.

The experience of facilitating this project restored the facilitator's faith in the value of psychology in a developing country such as South Africa, and it appears that there is much truth in Perkel's words: "It is not so much the clinical skills that need redirection, it is rather the ideological foundation that instructs to whom and how these skills are applied that requires attention" (Perkel 1988).

References


Perspectives from South African Research. Cape Town: David Philip.