APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY OF A MENTORING PROGRAMME IN SOWETO

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ABSTRACT

Education support services are aimed at addressing learner well-being holistically. Learner performance is linked to sufficient psychological, medical and social support. This study was an evaluation of a non-governmental organisation aimed at providing learners with psycho-social support and used the application of an Appreciative Inquiry approach. An Appreciative Inquiry approach is a method for generating change within an organisation by looking at what works in the organisation and facilitating active participation. The main findings from this study were that the programme seems to have positively affected learners' performance both academically and behaviourally; the programme was perceived to have raised the general standard of academic performance at the school.

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry; Social Construction; 4D process; mentoring; programme evaluation; formative evaluation

The move toward utilising community as a vehicle for addressing social issues has seen an increasing trend toward utilising non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to implement development programmes (Romi & Schmida, 2009). This trend has led to a symbiotic relationship between international donors and NGOs (Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, & Wolf, 2002). Donors, through governments, are increasingly channelling funding to NGOs in all sectors and NGOs in turn increasingly become more reliant on donor funding (Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, & Wolf, 2002). The critical role of NGOs in achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of Education for All (EFA) by providing universal and equitable quality of education, was recognised and acknowledged in summits held in Johannesburg and Dakar (Miller *et al*., 2002). *White Paper 6* outlined the need for developing education support services to address barriers to learning by systematically addressing learners' social, psychological,

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and medical wellbeing (Department of Education, 2001). Central to this is health promotion, as a resilience factor in schools, which represents a move away from a deficit orientation, with its emphasis on individual accountability and failure, to a focus on personal and environmental factors that encourage a healthy culture of learning (Nel, Lazarus, & Daniels, 2010). Within this approach educational support services that focus on the psycho-social development of learners find their space.

This study focuses on a mentoring programme in Gauteng, South Africa that focuses on the psycho-social development of learners with the aim of facilitating a healthy learning environment. This organisation was evaluated using an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. The research process as it relates to the findings presented and the findings of the inquiry are discussed in this article as linked ideas. This article, therefore, does not strictly delineate between research process and research data, but links the two concepts with the aim of providing thick description (Babbie & Mouton, 2008).

THE ORGANISATION UNDER STUDY

The organisation under study is a non-profit organisation which aims to broaden the platform for generating more solutions toward a better education for all. The mission of the organisation seeks to address the national imperative of increasing the level of literacy in black communities by normalising the learning and teaching environment in township schools (Matoane & Fynn, 2010). The various components of the organisation include mentorship, financial support, learner empowerment and research. The organisation aims to provide learners with both academic and psycho-social support by placing each learner with a mentor and life skills workshops (Matoane & Fynn, 2010).

The mentorship component of the support is designed to assist learners to deal with the aspects of their curriculum that they find challenging. The mentors are young professionals from a range of fields that include Engineering, Law and Financial Specialists who offer their services on a voluntary basis. The mentors act as role models for the students to model attitudes, behaviours and skills that the learner will need to be successful in life (Matoane & Fynn, 2010).

The organisation intervenes in a context where there are high levels of poverty and unemployment and where some learners do not have access to basic learning resources which hampers their ability to learn (Matoane & Fynn, 2010). The organisation also provides financial support to the learners selected into the programme. The financial support of the learners aims to provide the learners with the basic materials needed to ensure that teaching and learning takes place (Matoane & Fynn, 2010). This includes purchasing school uniforms, stationery, text books and additional study material (Matoane & Fynn, 2010).

The psychological, academic and social development of the learners is the core

objective of the organisation and as such the learners are also required to attend a series of workshops aimed at personal growth and development (Matoane & Fynn, 2010). The workshops emphasise experiential learning and place the learners in situations where they can practice the skills taught to them in these workshops (Matoane & Fynn, 2010).

OVERVIEW AND MOTIVATION OF THE RESEARCH APPROACH

This study sought to embody key participatory ideas such as participatory involvement, action, dialectic dialogue and change (Babbie & Mouton, 2008). Participatory evaluation aims to bridge the divide between evaluators and stakeholders to develop a collaborative model of evaluation that draws on the strengths of all stakeholders (Makgamatha, 2009). In this approach the researcher's position can be described as the depowered expert (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This describes a state of being where the researcher remains an expert in research and theoretical expertise but is only part of a larger team of collaborators, each individual with a particular area of expertise (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). The primary benefits of this approach is that it enhances deep understanding of the phenomenon being studied, greatly aids the generation of buy-in into interventions and facilitates sustainable change (Reed, 2007).

AI, as a participatory approach, aims to explore ideas that people have about what is valuable in what they do (Boyd & Bright, 2007; Reed, 2007). It also aims to work in ways that build on the strengths of what people have achieved in their organisation, rather than concentrating on their problems. By focusing on the shared strengths and achievements of the organisation, the AI framework posits that individuals within the organisation will come to realise what has been achieved and their role in these achievements, and will build on these achievements rather than becoming bogged down in perceived problems and failures (Bushe, 2007; Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

A key feature of the AI approach is that it is based on the principles of Social Constructionism which seeks to analyse how social institutions, signs, images, identities and our experience of these are constructed through a system of meanings and practices to create what we experience as reality (Burr, 1995; Denzin, 2001; Maxwell, 2005; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

One of the key features of Social Constructionism is the principle that knowledge is created and sustained by social processes (Bradley & Morss, 2002; Bryman, 2007; Burr, 1995; Liebrucks, 2001). Social Constructionism posits that knowledge cannot be produced objectively as an outsider (Bradley & Morss, 2002). AI is seen as 'Social Construction in action' (McNamee, 2003), and this is enacted by bringing participants together to share what has worked with each other to develop knowledge

that can shape social interactions in the organisation in future (Reed, 2007). Implicit in this enactment of Social Construction is the principle that knowledge and social action go together (Burr, 1995). In other words developing an understanding of the world changes the way we think, act and behave, which in turn changes the way that others act, think and behave around us, which theoretically changes an entire organisation or social institution if this knock on effect is maintained (Reed, 2007). Within the conception of Social Constructionism described above, the act of research is a social act and involves a discursive construction of what constitutes research practice (Liebrucks, 2001). According to Liebrucks (2001) the discretion exercised by researchers in determining the research question, type of instrument, population, sample, methods of analysis and the reporting of results is part of a social negotiation process. The argument being made here is that the process through which scientific knowledge is constructed does not rely solely on the mental capacity of individuals, but is a result of social interaction (Liebrucks, 2001). Following this principle the AI framework posits that the construction of a positive, capable organisation that manages to achieve success despite the challenges faced every day should lead to the organisation becoming successful because the individuals within it will act in a manner that reinforces the reality of this construction (Reed, 2007).

The AI approach is focused around a consultative summit which includes as many stakeholders in the organisation as possible (Reed, 2007). The summit is structured around the 4-D process that provides the overarching framework for all interactions that take place during the summit.

The 4-D process governing the Appreciative Inquiry

The 4-D process (see Figure 1) is the most often used process in the AI approach (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). This process is often perceived to be action oriented as it takes place during the implementation of the programme and the last phase of this process continues indefinitely into the implementation of the programme. The 4-D process or cycle has for distinct stages that are named Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny.

The Discovery phase of the 4-D process aims to appreciate what gives life to the programme (Reed, 2007). This is the opening step in the process and is often participants' first exposure to the approach. In this phase the aim is to discover what stakeholders value about the programme and what they perceive as the strengths of the programme. It is during this phase that the most crucial decision in the AI process takes place: The topic choice (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The topic choice provides the core focus of all four of the phases in both the 4-D and 4-I processes. The information generated in the Discovery phase provides the foundation for the implementation planning that takes place during the Destiny phase which essentially means that the seeds of the future successes of the programme are planted during

the Discovery phase (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The topic choice is always "home-grown" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; McNamee, 2003) which means that it is carefully selected by the participants in the summit.

The Dream phase of the 4-D process aims to encourage participants to envision what might be (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The Dream phase is where participants work together to develop ideas of what the future might or could be. Participants are encouraged to think creatively and to let go of the constraints the programme currently faces. The rationale behind dreaming big is that it provides a long term goal to collectively strive toward. This phase builds on the positive aspects of the programme identified during the Discovery phase. The Design phase aims to determine what will be and brings participants closer to the real world of the programme (Boyd & Bright, 2007). The Design phase is where participants work together to craft plans for the future by developing provocative propositions which are statements about what the programme wants to achieve (Reed, 2007). These provocative statements are essentially collectively designed values and objectives put forward by the stakeholders of the programme and represent a commitment to achieving them. "These statements are set out as unequivocal ambitions with no caveats or conditions" (Reed, 2007, p. 33).

The Destiny or Delivery phase entails planning what will be, and is the phase where the energy moves towards implementation planning (Bushe, 2007). This phase requires participants to work out specific steps that need to happen for the programme to realise the commitments made in the previous phase. This stage draws on all of the previous stages, especially on the Discovery phase which highlights past successes that can contribute to the future success of the programme.
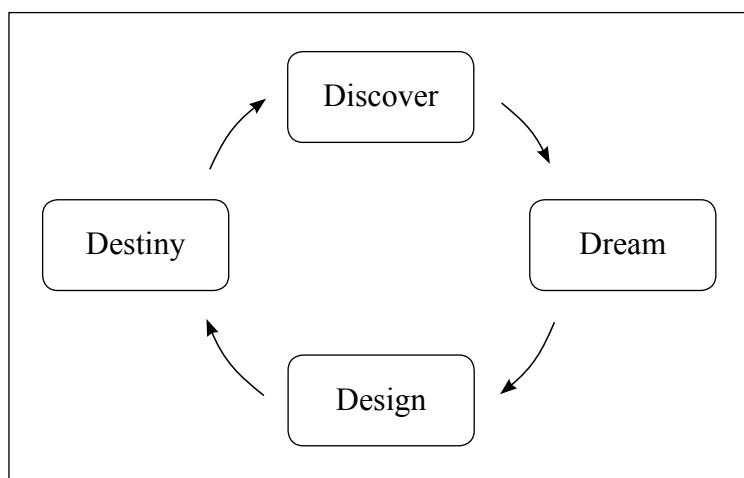

Figure 1: The 4-D process

Study sample and how it related to quality of data

The population groups for the study were the learners who were selected to participate in the organisation scholarship programme, the parents of the selected learners, the School Governing Body (SGB) members, interested members of the educator body, the mentors who represent the organisation scholarship programme and members of the board.

The learners who were selected to participate in the organisation scholarship programme form part of a larger group of learners at a school that was identified as a viable location for intervention. The learners span a variety of grades from Grade 9 to Grade 11 and essentially form a pre-selected sample for this study. The learners are all from Soweto in Johannesburg, South Africa, which is a predominantly black township, and as such the learners are of the same race. The selection of these learners as a sample unit is motivated by the fact that they are the group most directly affected by the organisation scholarship programme and they are the group for whom the organisation scholarship programme's objectives are designed. This group could provide insight into the deep change, if any, generated by the organisation's scholarship programme.

The parents of the learners are a crucial stakeholder group who can provide valuable insight into the lives of the learners in social settings outside of the school. The inclusion of this stakeholder group was intended to assist the research team in developing a well-rounded understanding of the impact the programme could have. Understanding behavioural change outside of the school setting is crucial to determining whether the values and skills the learners glean from participating in the scholarship programme have been internalised. This is because the behaviour will be enacted outside of the regulatory and structured environment of the school. The parents are also a crucial group whose support and buy-in could provide the organisation with the leverage necessary to negotiate with the education system. This is due to the fact that the parents are ultimately the body who hold the system accountable for the provision of quality education. The power this group has comes from their ability to simply remove a learner from the school and place them in another if they are dissatisfied with the service delivery.

The SGB is a regulatory body appointed in terms of the National Education Act (No. 27 of 1996) (South African Department of Education, 1998) by parents and educators to oversee the management and administration of the school. The SGB is comprised of educators, parents and other relevant stakeholders (Bushe, 2007). The SGB acts as both an advisory committee and auditor of the School Management Team (SMT). The rationale behind the inclusion of the SGB was that they could potentially provide the perspective of stakeholders who understand the needs of parents, educators, learners and the SMT. This stakeholder group could potentially provide insight into whether the organisation is meeting the broader community needs through their scholarship programme.

The inclusion of the educator body as a stakeholder group was motivated by the fact that they have the longest standing relationship with the learners within the education system. This stakeholder group could provide valuable insight into the lives of the learners within the school setting. This stakeholder group can potentially most accurately observe whether the intervention approaches of the organisation are meeting the needs of the learners and of themselves as educators. This group could also potentially strengthen the organisation's approach to academic support by providing suggestions or recommendations for the organisation to implement.

The mentors who volunteer to provide academic and personal guidance to the learners of the organisation programme are the stakeholder group who are most closely linked with the intervention strategies employed by the organisation and as such are critical in the evaluation of these strategies. This group also aims to develop a close bond with the learners during the course of the intervention and are critical in documenting the observed changes in the learners and highlighting difficulties experienced in delivering the intervention strategies. In addition, the mentors could provide critical insight into the experience of being a mentor in the organisation and aid in forming recruitment strategies for additional mentors.

The organisation board is the stakeholder group responsible for the oversight of the organisation's activities, which includes the scholarship programme. This group consists of the founding members of the organisation and as such have an understanding of the initial assumptions, objectives, values and approaches that facilitated the formation of the organisation and shaped the nature of its interventions. This group is critical to establishing whether the organisation is meeting the expectations that were set out when the organisation was constituted. The board is also the stakeholder group that will primarily execute the Destiny phase of the intervention which entails the ongoing monitoring and formative evaluation of the programme on a day to day basis. For this reason it is crucial that they collaborate in developing and refining strategies that are in the best interests of all the stakeholder groups above and more importantly that they believe they can attain and sustain the aims of the organisation.

METHOD

The first phases of the study required interviews with the founding members of the organisation. Only two of the founding members were available for this phase of the study and as a result only the organisation's Executive Director – who is the individual who conceptualised and constituted the organisation – and the head of research for the organisation were interviewed as a pre-evaluation analysis. The purpose of these interviews was to discover and unpack the initial assumptions, beliefs, values and motives for establishing the organisation. These interviews therefore provided the background information necessary to establish whether the organisation is at a phase

in its development that allows for evaluation. These interviews also provided the historic context of the organisation to aid holistic analysis of the data. One of the additional objectives behind the process of working with founding members, was to establish the organisation involvement in the research process. This was done by teaming up with the Executive Director and the head of research formed part of the research team along with the author. All references to the research team will therefore refer to the three individuals described here.

The second phase of the study, once the initial assumptions and motives for the AI were unpacked, involved a series of workshops with the stakeholder groups described above. A description of the process behind the workshops follows.

Data collection process

The AI approach collects data in the consultative summit during which participants are divided into focus groups (Reed, 2007). Each group also had the opportunity to see and discuss the information provided by other focus groups which acts as a built in member checking mechanism (Bushe, 2007). This entailed consultation with the entire population of the study as described above. A large consultation summit which hosts all of the stakeholders is the standard method of conducting and Appreciative Inquiry (McNamee, 2003). What arose from the recruiting process was that the majority of the stakeholder group could not afford to attend the stakeholder summit. This forced a change in the inquiry approach from a large consultative summit, to a series of smaller summits. The smaller summits were comprised of members of each of the sample groups described above. Each of the summits would then select ambassadors who would go on to represent their views and comments at the next summit to ensure that their voices were heard by others in the organisation. In this way the research team attempted to ensure the intra-organisational knowledge transfer, that marks AI as a unique PAR method, would still take place (Patton, 1999).

Data Sources

For AI, the sources of data included transcripts from the summit focus groups, the documented ideas generated by workshop participants and field notes made by the research team. The workshops involving the learners and mentors took place first to avoid conflict with the examination schedules of the learners. The workshop was attended by 20 learners (who formed the total number selected for the programme) and 12 mentors. The workshops that followed included a mix of parents, SMT, SGB and educators and had between 6 (in the first workshop) and 15 participants.

The participants were placed in smaller work groups in which they will document their discussions on flip charts which were collected after the workshop. In addition to this the research team made process notes to highlight group dynamics at various phases of the data gathering process. These process notes aided the research team in establishing a richer context in which the data could be interpreted.

A third source of data was meant to demonstrate the effect on student performance by the programme of intervention. This data was meant to be appraised by obtaining the academic records of the students who were selected to participate in the organisation scholarship programme. This data was excluded as a source due to the fact that the various stakeholders in the organisation were unable to agree on whether it served as an accurate indicator of the development of the learners.

The AI of the organisation described in this article was a process aimed at uncovering the strengths of the programme and highlighting the dreams or future plans that each stakeholder has for the organisation to inform future planning.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study formed part of the requirements for a Masters dissertation and ethical clearance was obtained from the ethics committee at the University of South Africa. The consent of the organisation board was also obtained prior to the commencement of the data collection process. In each of the consultative summits described below, participants were informed of their rights and provided verbal consent to process as the majority of participants were only functionally literate and could not read the ethical consent forms. The participants expressed discomfort at signing forms they could not understand and a consensus was made to accept verbal consent. Verbal consent is acceptable under circumstances where participants cannot or are unwilling to sign forms (Babbie & Mouton, 2008). Underage participants obtained written permission from parents and guardians to participate in the study and provided assent to participating in the research process at the beginning of each summit.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The main findings from this study were that the programme seems to have positively affected learners' performance both academically and behaviourally; the programme was perceived to have raised the general standard of academic performance at the school – all learners (even those outside of the programme) are motivated to perform to the best of their ability; the effect on learners outside of the programme was that they appeared to compete with the higher standards set by the group of learners in the organisation; and participants from all the stakeholder groups valued the fact that the learners have grown in confidence and are now able to present in public spaces.

The role of the mentors in developing the confidence of the learners was highlighted as a critical success factor by participants. The role of the mentors should be explicitly stated and clarified to avoid uncertainty in role definition and role boundaries (Jones, Doveston, & Rose, 2009). The lack of clarity on the role definition can lead to mentors struggling with their professional identity within the school and consequently make it difficult to gain appropriate recognition from

teachers (Jones et al., 2009). In the context of the organisation, clarifying the roles of the mentors can move the organisation away from the ameliorative emphasis that the programme currently has toward the transformative agenda set in their vision and mission. The role clarification can also assist the mentors in developing a more collaborative relationship with the educators where the mentors take primary responsibility for the informal learning that places emphasis on developing those skills needed to succeed in the post-school career and where educators remain responsible for the formal, classroom bound learning. The mentors are expected to model and transfer social norms that emphasise discipline, self-control, hard work, respect, accountability and honesty to the learners (Matoane & Fynn, 2010). The primary risk here is that the approach could portray learners' current social norms as deviant, insufficient, inappropriate and ineffective at facilitating access to a tertiary education and a competitive career (Jones et al., 2009). This stance could alienate the learners from the community and their families. It could also create resistance in the community to the programme. While it appears that this is not the case with the organisation, it is important to acknowledge that the potential for a skewed perception of the learners and their social circumstances can exist. It is therefore important that the mentoring aspect of the organisation be linked to an intensive effort to acknowledge and appreciate the ways in which the learners are adapting to their environment and to accept that, in some cases, the individuals are doing the best with what they have.

The learners in the programme highlighted the empathic, affirmative approach of the mentors as a motivating factor which corresponds to the literature on mentorship which describes the approach as person-centred and based on unconditional positive regard (Jones et al., 2009). Some of the recommendations made by participants were that measures should be put into place to facilitate communication between the mentors and the educators to align the outcomes of the mentorship sessions with the processes in the classroom and that it is important for organisation (through the mentors) to collaborate with the teachers in order to impact maximally on learners' academic performance.

The AI approach implemented in this study works on the community psychology principle of making the familiar unfamiliar by asking participants to examine every day experiences from a fresh perspective by searching for the success in what they do (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). This critical reflection on practice is aimed at further embedding a culture of reflexive intervention in the organisation. Whether the study achieved this objective is unclear and would require a follow up study to ascertain whether the organisation has incorporated the collective constructions of the organisation into their practice.

A further limitation of the study was that the traditional AI process was not followed in that an AI summit with all the stakeholders in one room was not held. This was due to resource constraints and the tight time schedule that the research

was forced into. The implication of this was that the summit was divided into a series of data gathering workshops where organisation stakeholders were consulted in smaller groups. As a result, the intra-organisational transfer of knowledge was not as comprehensive as it could have been and the collective authoring of the organisation's future was fragmented and had to be integrated by the research team as opposed to the organisation stakeholders.

While the value of the AI summit is apparent, the reliance of this method on a large event involving the entire organisation makes the AI approach cumbersome to implement in a context where there are few resources and where the organisation cannot afford to commit all of its members to a week of brainstorming. The stage of development that the organisation is in leaves it with little resources available for any activity beyond the scope of everyday practice.

Finally, there is a need to conduct reflexive research on the implementation of AI internationally, and specifically in the South African NGO context. It would be of particular interest to see whether the challenges experienced in this study are common to other contexts. It would also be of interest to see whether the AI process is successful in changing the underlying discourses of dysfunction, deficit and deprivation in the South African context of rapid transformation and development.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Angelo Fynn is a lecturer in the department of psychology, Unisa. His research focuses on facilitating greater access to the education systems in South Africa through community driven initiatives that place the ability to alter the education agenda back in the hands of the learners, educators, employers and parents who are most affected by the education system. He is currently completing his doctorate in Psychology.

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