Distance Education as a vehicle for the professional development of carers: the case of the Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland

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Abstract

The Certificate in Psychosocial support was initiated by the Regional Psychosocial Initiative (REPSSI) after observing that in most Southern African countries there were few opportunities for carers to get formal training. REPSSI offered the programme in eight countries as a pilot project centrally by the University of KwaZulu-Natal. After the pilot phase, the University of Swaziland offered the programme as one of its distance education programmes, retaining the delivery approach. This paper explores carers’ perceptions of the programme’s benefits and challenges for themselves and children in their care. The study used qualitative methodology to explore Manzini learner carers’ perceptions of the distance education programme. Data was collected through an open ended questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Results show that the distance education programme served as an effective vehicle for the professional development of learner carers in that there was positive development in learner carers’ knowledge levels, attitudes and general disposition to caring. In addition, children in their care indicated that the level of care they were receiving was much higher. However, while the programme targets carers, because of the large numbers of applications, the university is recruiting even people who are not carers as long as they hold the required qualifications. This has left out first line carers who do not have the secondary school qualifications yet are the ones who need this training most. The certificate programme clearly demonstrates that distance education can be used successfully to create space for the professional development of carers while they carry on with their caring responsibilities.

Key words: carers, vulnerable children, psychosocial support, distance education
Background to the study

Distance education allows people to pursue their studies around home, work and family. The learners manage their own studies and can study at their own pace, wherever and when they wish. Vioreanu (2016) highlights the six characteristics of open learning as open access, freedom to choose when to study, where to study, pace of study and freedom to choose the courses to study. In addition just as in fulltime programmes, the learners acquire useful and transferable skills such as planning and research which assist them in their lives. Other benefits of distance education are providing new ways of interaction among learners cost effectively, acquisition of high quality professional development, new learning cultures, new and alternative learning opportunities and upgrading of skills (UNESCO, 2002). While distance education can be isolated and lonely because learners are separated from other learners and the institution (Holmberg, 2008), this can be reduced by some contact sessions. Many distance education institutions have dedicated learner support services whose purpose is to reduce problems learners face with their studies. One variant delivery mode of distance learning is the situated supported distance learning. As a situated programme, learners require the skill to adapt to local contexts. The learners are supported through peers/colleagues within the mentor groups, by mentors, country supervisors and module coordinators. It is distance learning offered in context and in-service professional training for the well-being of individuals, communities and learners (University of KwaZulu Natal, 2011). The certificate programme offered by the Institute of Distance Education (IDE), University of Swaziland used this mode of delivery.

Swaziland is a small country with a population of about one million (1090000) people. It is estimated that it has an adult HIV and AIDS prevalence of 27.4% (UNAIDS, 2013). In addition, 26% of its children are orphaned and vulnerable and about 19000 children live with HIV. According to the Swazi government, there should have been 130000 to 189000 orphaned children by 2010 (The Government of Swaziland Psychosocial Strategic Plan (GSPSP) (2008-2010)).

Such orphaned children face food shortages, poor schooling, loss of inheritance and physical and sexual abuse; emotional instability and negative development of the child as an individual. Available support for the orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC's) currently relies on volunteers and community-based Government and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) personnel (GSPSP, 2008-2010). NGO provide services to reduce vulnerability to HIV among children, support the mostly volunteer carers, keep children in school, protect their legal and human rights and cater for their emotional needs. While the statistics above show the situation in Swaziland, similar problems exist in many Southern African countries. After observing this dire situation with regards to the care of orphaned and vulnerable children, and discussion with UNICEF, the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) established a university accredited Situated Supported and Open and Distance Learning (SSODL) programme for community-based personnel working specifically with children affected by HIV and AIDS in the region, as available training was not adequately addressing the needs of caregivers.

The situated, supported open and distance learning (SSODL) programme started with a pilot cycle which ended in 2010. Afterward this phase, five African countries, including Swaziland, opted to participate in Stage 2, the localisation of the programme. The Government of Swaziland, through the National Children's Coordination Unit in the Deputy Prime Minister's office, partnered with the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) and UNICEF (Swaziland) to offer the programme. In the University of Swaziland,
the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) houses the programme. The REPSSI materials such as modules and guides) and pedagogical approach were adopted. UNISWA provides overall programme coordination including the training, supervision and support of mentors and the marking of assignments and examinations. The recruitment of learners remains a shared responsibility among partners REPSSI, UNICEF, UNISWA and the Deputy Prime Minister’s office.

Statement of the problem

UNISWA has been offering the programme since 2011 and altogether, about 300 learners have graduated. There is urgent need to determine the extent to which the programme has provided the required accredited professional development to carers and improved the level of support offered to orphaned and vulnerable children in care. For the purposes of monitoring and evaluation to meet the needs of the technical partners and the university in general, there is need to establish if the programme is achieving the intended objectives.

The problem of this study is: -

How has the distance education programme offered to carers affected them and the children in their care?

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the study was to assess how the distance education Certificate programme has affected the cycle 3 Manzini learner carers and the children and youth in their care.

Objectives

- To find out what knowledge and skills learner carers had acquired from the programme
- To assess if the distance education programme has provided the requisite professional development of the learner carers.
- To determine how the programme has affected children and youth in the care of the learners carers.

Materials and methods

The study intended to generate intensive and in-depth data from the learner carers in the second year of the third cycle and some of the children in their care. Consequently it used qualitative methodology and the interpretivist philosophical perspective (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research enabled the researchers to probe deeply into the often hidden meanings of the carers. Three data generation techniques were used so that we could confirm and cross validate data from the three techniques. Purposive sampling was used to select Manzini learners who form about one third of the year group; while convenience sampling was used to select children and management staff at one organisation.

Care was taken to ensure that those who participated did so willingly after the researchers explained what the research was about, how it was going to be carried out, the effect of the study on the participants and what the results were going to be used for (informed consent) (Boddy et al. Undated). Researchers assured the participants that their names and the names of their organisations would not be revealed and pseudonyms would be used where names were required. Extra care was also taken to protect children by securing permission from the authorities of the particular organisation after the researchers explained what the research was about. The authorities then sanctioned the focus group discussion with children. The researchers were careful not to ask any emotive or harmful questions.
Data generation

Data was generated through three data collection instruments - an open-ended questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). An open-ended questionnaire was administered to all Manzini year 2 learners (39). In addition, 12 of the learners and four children at one centre were conveniently sampled to take part in the focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two learners in their organisations and one senior official in that organisation. Data for the study had to be viewed from the perspectives of the learner participants, their organisations and some children in their care, in line with the interpretivist philosophical perspective. Data was triangulated to ensure that it was consistent, well-developed and comprehensive (Biddix, undated).

From the inception of data generation, I used content analysis to analyse data, making reflexive field notes, as I reviewed questionnaire responses and transcripts of the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I reviewed the data to identify categories of texts with similar meaning and developed themes. I adopted an emic focus which prioritised the meanings participants placed on the certificate programme and its value to them (Creswell, 2003). I watched out for patterns and relationships across data from different sources and came up with the themes used to present the data. Qualitative data analysis is iterative so I had to go over the data again and again to ensure that I did not lose any meaningful data. The result was a thick description of how learner carers and some children in their care perceive the distance education programme which they were undertaking.

Results

Biographical data of participants

Table 1 above shows that for the questionnaire respondents, the majority 34 (79%) were female while only 5 (12%) were male. This is a reflection of the overall composition of learners in both Year 1 and Year 2 of the Certificate programme. 12 (28%) of these learners were involved in the focus group discussion. In addition, 2(5%) learner carers participated in semi-structured interviews held in their organisation. 4 (9%) children, 2 (4.6%) males and 2 (4.6%) females participated in a focus group discussion held in their organisation.

The organisations in which the learner carers worked ranged from government, schools, preschools, community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations. These organisations offered services mostly at three levels of the intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2009);

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• the basic services and security level such as feeding schemes, soup kitchens, provision of clothes, food and shelter
• at the community and family supports level, organisations offered education at preschool and other levels, knitting and dancing schools, life skills, income generating projects
• few organisations offered such specialised services as counselling, support for children living with HIV/AIDS and Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT).

Findings show that the learners understood what psychosocial support is. Most of them defined psychosocial support as support and care given to children and youth in diversity in a holistic manner to help them develop their potential and deal with the challenges they faced in their daily lives, as shown below: -

• assisting the young and vulnerable children develop a clear mindset in discovering themselves and their potentiality in a holistic manner (one female learner);

The learner carers indicated that they had benefited from the distance education programme at a personal level and at a children and youth level, as the excerpt below shows: -

• Programme is good; it is an eye opener in handling children in diversity(Female learner)

Benefits at personal level

At a personal level the learner carers raised the following as the benefits they derived from the programme: -

• Better understanding of themselves as individuals- their attitudes, values, morals;
• Knowledge - ways of dealing with children; children’s rights and responsibilities; rights based approaches;
• Skills such as listening, communication, English language, conflict resolution, good facilitation, counselling
• Attitudinal changes- being non-judgmental, preparedness to listen to children; putting interest of the child always, as the excerpt below shows: -

Children behave in a particular way because of what happened to them. For example, a little girl came early to class one day. The teacher was surprised and asked her why she was on time for school that day. The little girl responded that before that day, she had to ensure that her sick mother had all she needed first; now that her mother had died, there was no reason to come to school late (Female learner);

Benefits at child level

For the learner carers, the programme also benefitted the children and youth in their care. They however pointed out that the benefits to child resulted from the changes that had taken place in them. These benefits were as follows: -

a) Identification of children with needs and how to refer when necessary;
• Now I can identify problems faced by children. I met a child in my community one day and noticed that she was going through some problem. I stopped him and talked to him. He had problems at home. I later made a home visitor to help resolve the problem with the family (Male learner)

b) Knowledge of children’s needs, rights and responsibilities
• Need to involve children in decision making and see their issues from their perspective (Female learner)

c) Tackling issues positively

• Need to involve children in decision making and see their issues from their perspective (Female learner)

d) Empowering children (offering a ladder rather than hand-outs)

• Need to involve children in decision making and see their issues from their perspective (Female learner)

e) Learners recognised children’s need for love, care and support.
• I try to understand the child in order to find solutions to their problems (Female learner)
• Need to involve children in decision making and see their issues from their perspective (Female learner)
The learner carers in the study also indicated that the programme had opened opportunities for them to aspire to higher university programmes. They hoped that IDE would soon introduce a diploma relevant to the Certificate programme which they could undertake.

Children’s perspectives

Four children were involved in a focus group discussion. They had this to say about the learner who took care of them:

- *She has a good attitude towards us; we are happy with her attitude towards us;*
- *Teaches us life skills*
- *Gives clear instructions even on house chores*
- *Talks to us with respect*
- *Motherly*
- *She is able to identify those upset or hurt and talks to them in privacy;*
- *She calls all us to talk to us if someone is missing or when we have misbehaved;*
- *In our meeting with her, we are given a chance to voice out our opinions;*
- *She listens to us – a good listener*

The children’s comments confirmed what learner carers in the study had said about how the programme had affected their relationships with children. Before the programme, most did not involve children in decision making or listen to them; they did not understand that children had rights like other people; they also did not understand child development and how children grow and were consequently impatient with children and treated them roughly.

From the children’s perspectives, there was evidence that attitudes of the learner carers in the study had changed to love, care and protection for the children in their care. The children expressed happiness with the changes they had observed in their carer.

Discussion

The study sought to establish how distance education could be used as a tool for the professional development of carers who are normally excluded from conventional programmes. The Certificate programme at the University of Swaziland was used for this purpose. From the results of the study, learner carers perceived the distance education programme in a positive light. They benefited from being able to study while they worked; they established new relationships among themselves as communities of learners (UNESCO, 2002; Vioreanu, 2016). The programme raised aspirations for further studies and opened new opportunities among people who would otherwise have had no chance to study at university level. From this we see that distance education opens access to higher education to all people willing to commit themselves to learning (UNESCO, 2002). In addition, through the programme the participants understood what psychosocial support entails and its purpose of building resilience in children and youth by addressing the psychological, social, emotional and physical needs of children (FOST, 2005).

Conclusion

The learner carers in the study perceived the distance education programme as beneficial to them and providing the professional development they desperately needed. The programme seemed to be making a difference in learner carers and their understanding of themselves and their caring responsibilities. It imparted knowledge and skills which participants used in their work with children and youth, leading to a more positive manner of dealing with orphaned and vulnerable children in their care.
Recommendations

• IDE should design a lower programme for grassroots caregivers with little or no education who are the first line in dealing with children. The current programme excludes them because of the requirement for at least a Junior Certificate qualification.
• IDE should introduce a Diploma or degree so that the programme graduates can advance professionally and academically;
• Further studies need to be conducted in as many organisations and communities as possible to establish the full impact of the Certificate programme on children and youth in Swaziland.

References

Holmberg, B (2008). The Evolution, principles, practices of Distance Education. Oldenburg: Bisverlag