

RESOURCE AND SUPPORT PROGRAMMES FOR POOR FAMILIES IN A RURAL RESIDENTIAL AREA

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INTRODUCTION

During the present social, economic and political changes in South Africa poor families experience many different problems which affect their daily functioning and it becomes more and more demanding for them to meet their basic caring responsibilities without the assistance of other systems in the community. They need the support of formal systems such as churches, schools, welfare agencies and community resources, as well as informal systems such as their family and friends. These are crucial for promoting and maintaining the quality of these families' daily lives (Sviridoff & Ryan, 1997; Unger & Powell, 1990).

In this paper some attempts to improve the quality of family life made by a welfare agency where final-year social work students are placed for their fieldwork are explained. At this welfare agency the students were working in projects specifically aimed at building the strengths of poor families. A theoretical overview of how these projects were planned and implemented will be presented. Where applicable, practical illustrations or examples will be given.

PROFILE OF KAYAMANDI

Some demographics* of the community in which the students were placed for fieldwork are presented in order to explain why the families are regarded as being poor. Kayamandi (meaning My Home) is mainly a Xhosa-speaking, semi-rural, residential area. It is situated in Stellenbosch, a rural town 50 km north east of Cape Town. The population of Kayamandi is nearly 16,000; at present that is roughly 20% of the entire population of Stellenbosch.

A little over half the community of Kayamandi is female and, as far as the age distribution is concerned, the population includes more young people than old. Because almost 70% of the residents are younger than 30 years of age and the mean age of residents is 23 years, the community can be regarded as a young community.

Although 75% of the residents in Kayamandi have some form of employment, the mean monthly income of employed people is between US\$50 and US\$100. The minimal subsistence level is roughly US\$2,00 per day or US\$48,00 per month. This indicates a high incidence of severe poverty, which is also reflected in the housing conditions in the community; only one half of the residents live in formal housing, meaning a house, apartment, or a room in a house or hostel. The other half of the residents live in informal housing, such as shacks in the backyards of houses, and in informal settlements.

In view of these demographics, the students felt that they should find out about the quality of the everyday lives of the families in Kayamandi as a matter of urgency. The students then compiled a profile of the community, which indicated that the families in this community were characterised by poverty, overcrowded living conditions, inadequate housing structures, unemployment,

* Socio-economic survey of Kayamandi, done by the Department of Sociology, University of Stellenbosch, May 2001.

domestic violence, child abuse, HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancies and community violence. There was also a lack of recreation facilities and an acute need to learn to speak English or Afrikaans as well as for literacy training in general. In collaboration with various other role players and an action committee it was decided to use the community profile as a point of departure for the development and implementation of community-based resource and support programmes for families.

THE PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY-BASED FAMILY RESOURCE AND SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

Community-based programmes for family support originated in the USA in the seventies (Farrow, 1991; Langley, 1991; Dunst, Trivett & Thompson, 1990; Weissbourd, 1990). The literature (Farrow, 1991; Dunst *et al.*, 1990; Lightburn & Kemp, 1994; Unger & Powell, 1990; Weissbourd, 1990) describes the purpose of these programmes extensively. From an analysis of this literature it appears that the aims of community-based family resource and support programmes are:

- to promote parents' skills and abilities in order to empower them for improved acceptance of their caring responsibilities;
- to empower families to make more effective use of community resources;
- to establish support systems for parents that enable families to support each other.

Dunst *et al.* (1990:22) describe the purpose of these community-based family programmes as follows: "... to enable and empower people by enhancing and promoting individual and family capabilities that support and strengthen family functioning".

The dual focus of these programmes, namely to promote parents' personal competence and to establish support systems in their environment, is in accordance with the points of departure of the ecological perspective that generally is presented as praxis model for family programmes (Cochran, 1990; Germain, 1981; Germain & Gitterman, 1980; Whittaker, Schinke & Gilchrist, 1986).

Support systems, such as family, friends and neighbours, usually provide support (Hartman, 1978); the literature (Cochran, 1990; Tracy & Whittaker, 1990) regards a support systems network, according to Whittaker *et al.* (1986:484), as a "...set of interconnected relationships among a group of people that provides enduring patterns of nurturance (in any or all forms) and provides contingent reinforcement for efforts to cope with life on a day-to-day basis".

The aim of networking is therefore to bring people together and to put people in touch with each other and with resources. Networks as support systems are needed by poor families because, without a support network, people are usually alone and lonely, and in the long run their social functioning will suffer. The students were encouraged to use the social network map developed by Tracy and Whittaker (1990) as an assessment tool. The principles and techniques of the social network map were used to assess the types of support which are available to families, the gaps that exist in support availability, and the resources available to fill these gaps. According to the literature (Tracy & Whittaker, 1990; Tracy, Whittaker, Boylan, Neitman & Overstreet, 1995), social networks can give the following three types of social support:

- emotional support: having someone listen to your feelings, comfort you, or offer encouragement;
- informational support: having someone teach you something, give you information or help you make a major decision;

- concrete support: having someone help out in tangible ways, lending you something or helping with a chore.

These types of social support can be provided by informal resources such as family, friends, neighbours, peers or in self-help groups that have been specially created for this purpose, and by formal resources such as social welfare practitioners, churches, schools and welfare agencies.

The programmes are further based upon a promotional or proactive approach that focuses upon the development, enhancement and promotion of a person's abilities and competence (Dunst *et al.*, 1990; Lightburn & Kemp, 1994; Unger & Powell, 1990). The promotion of parents' and children's life skills affects the achievement of these things. The explanation of Whittaker *et al.* (1986:485) of life skills as "competencies beyond intellectual knowledge that are needed to act effectively in social environments and social roles aptly describes the nature of the skills development that these community-based family programmes realise".

The underlying point of departure of these programmes is also that families themselves must have the power to determine what their real needs are and how best to meet them. This corresponds with the points of departure of empowerment (Williams & Wright, 1992). Therefore the purpose of these programmes corresponds with what Staples (1990:3) describes as empowerment directed towards the development of personal characteristics, such as "self-efficacy, participatory competencies, critical analysis, commitment to a position, rationally motivated action, skills, self-esteem, and a sense of control or actual control".

In view of this purpose, these types of community-based family programmes can be implemented to empower or build the strengths of poor families.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMES FOR FAMILIES

When community-based programmes are implemented, they aim to bring about the empowerment or strengthening of family life at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. The literature (Gutiérrez & Ortega, 1991; Parsons, 1991; Pinderhughes, 1983; Tracy & McDonnell, 1991) indicates how this can take place and the students followed these guidelines.

Micro-level

Empowerment or capacity building at micro- or personal level focuses on ways in which the family can develop the feeling that they have control over their own lives and that they can function with greater independence. For families to meet their basic needs and to enhance their coping capacities, they need knowledge about the resources in the community and on how to extend their support network. This was done by means of home visits during which the needs of the families were explored and the students informed them about relevant, available community resources which can promote the quality of their lives (Farrow, 1991; Kruger, 1998; Weissbourd, 1990). Examples of these resources were crèches, feeding points, sewing classes, a gardening project and literacy classes in which the students were involved.

Services at this level offer concrete and informational support; not only are basic needs identified and met, but social contact is also enhanced.

Meso-level

Empowerment or capacity building that takes place at this level strives towards the development of families' specific skills. Membership of a group can be a powerful tool in the empowerment of families. By using social group work within the developmental framework, the aim was to

empower the group members to realise their potential for social functioning through group work experiences in which they shared a common concern, interest or life situation (Tropp, 1977) and to offer them opportunity to develop connections with each other (Hurdle, 2001). Within the groups, such as the sewing classes, gardening projects and literacy classes, family members had the opportunity to talk informally about things like personal development, family relationships and health issues such as HIV/AIDS. The common purposes of the groups were:

- the release of feelings that tend to block effective parenting, feelings such as uncertainty, fear and guilt;
- support and tapping of latent strengths through belonging, receiving acceptance and achievement and recognition in the group with a resultant gain in self-esteem;
- reappraisal of self, which involves new options for giving guidance to children and a more responsible taking hold of one's own responsibility to protect one's children; and
- the promotion of interpersonal relations in the group.

This meant that the group offered its members an experience in free communication and an opportunity to help or empower each other to strengthen their families. The outcomes of these informal conversations were the promotion of parental and life skills, skills in problem-solving, conflict resolution and self-assertion. In turn the development of these skills facilitated the families' acceptance of their caring responsibilities. Similar groups for children were also presented to develop their life skills. In this way an entire family could obtain more information on how neighbouring families deal with family problems and this in turn led to empowerment in the various age groups.

Macro-level

At the macro-level the empowerment of families will depend on the empowerment that has taken place at the micro- and meso-levels. Community work models such as community development and social planning (Brueggeman, 1997; Cox, Erlich, Rothman & Tropman, 1987) were implemented by the students to bring about the family's empowerment at the macro-level (Green, 1998).

This then led to a network of support systems at the macro-level that were created and developed with the help, involvement and participation of the families themselves. Examples of these community-based support systems are the crèches, feeding points, sewing classes, a gardening project, literacy classes and a child-protection programme in which the students were involved.

Because community empowerment was one of the objectives of this programme, family members who were involved in the groups were encouraged to function as an action committee which aimed at the promotion of self-help and which took ownership of the projects and also became more active in the protection of the families in their community. It was also emphasised that the family members' capacity to engage in co-operative problem-solving on a self-help basis was of central importance and that the social work students were to act as enablers in encouraging community building and nurturing the good relationships which were started in the groups or support systems. The families were also viewed as active participants in continuous interactional processes with one another and with the students.

The network of support offered by all these community resources enhanced family functioning and parental competence by improving parents' access to information and counselling, providing reinforcement of appropriate parenting and integrating family members into wider community

networks. Involvement in these programmes also provided assistance with child-care monitoring of child safety, increased educational opportunities and advice to families (Jack, 1997).

The dual focus of the programmes which were implemented at the different levels (micro, meso, macro) was, on the one hand, to promote parents' personal competence and, on the other, to establish and maintain support systems in their environment. These programmes were furthermore based upon a promotional, proactive or strengths approach that focused upon the development, enhancement and promotion of individuals' and families' abilities, competence and strengths (Saleebey, 1992).

THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMES FOR POOR FAMILIES

In the literature (Farrow, 1991; Kagan & Lonow, 1990; Weissbourd, 1990) there is agreement that the nature of these family programmes will depend on the target group for whom they are planned; the framework or community within which they are implemented; and the variety of support services that are already offered. Beside the above factors which can influence the design of these programmes, the literature (Dunst *et al.*, 1990; Farrow, 1991; Weissbourd, 1990) confirms that family support and resource programmes have the following characteristics:

- The relationship between the social worker and family members is characterised by co-operation and shared decision-making and responsibility. This promotes community building;
- Family programmes are designed together with families at grassroots level to satisfy these families' expressed needs. Thus, the potential and level of community participation of individual family members and the family unit are enhanced;
- Family programmes are planned and presented so that they are in accordance with the values and culture of the families who are involved;
- Communication and co-operation between family members and community organisations and institutions are brought about. This promotes the independent functioning of families;
- Support system networks for families are created to satisfy the need for emotional and concrete support;
- The integrity of the family is protected. This prevents potential risk factors leading to problems which need intervention;
- Opportunities are created for family members to master developmental tasks. Thus the functioning of families is enhanced.

In evaluating the current community-based programmes it is felt that they:

- **Focus on the strengthening of families through promotion of their social networks**

This takes place when family members receive the opportunity to participate in activities during which they can learn and work together and also celebrate the progress of their development towards independence. In this way cohesion, the experience of mutual support and a sense of belonging to a family develop and are strengthened in family members. Family members' understanding of differences in role expectations, role perceptions and role interpretation are enhanced by their engagement in the family resource and support programmes.

- **Utilise education and the training of families as an intervention strategy**

Parents and children have the opportunity to learn in an instrumental and transforming manner. Parents are enabled to extend their knowledge and develop parental skills that contribute towards self-understanding with regard to their parental style. Family members also learn problem-solving skills that empower them to deal with daily problems in domestic functioning. Programmes for families and groups that offer the opportunity for a mutual exploration of values and experiences of life, as well as for discussion, feedback and support concerning domestic problems, allow parents and children to become involved in their own growth and development.

- **Promote mediation between families and community resources**

A network of resources that are mutually linked is slowly developing in this community to meet poor families' needs.

The aim is also to strive towards supporting family members to improve their own mediation strategies and skills.

- **Promote the development of support system networks**

Family resource and support programmes are directed towards developing informal support systems which will offer preventive and support services to poor families.

CONCLUSION

In the above discussion an attempt was made to explain how programmes offered by a welfare agency in Kayamandi are bringing families together and offer opportunities to build their strengths from within themselves. These programmes are of a preventive nature, are based on a social developmental approach, and are implemented in accordance with the policy guidelines for families which are spelled out in various policy documents in South Africa. We regard these programmes not as a complete answer, but merely as a beginning, as a foundation for families in this community to create a realistic vision for their own development within Kayamandi itself and for the integration of the Kayamandi community in the larger community of Stellenbosch.

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