
Conditions Necessary for Peer Counselling Strategy Formulation and Implementation in Zimbabwe Rural Learning Ecologies

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ABSTRACT

There are conditions that necessitate the success or failure of peer counselling strategy to mitigate drug abuse in Zimbabwe rural learning ecologies. This study was qualitative in nature and I used focus group to generate data from rural community members in Chivi, Zimbabwe. The generated data was transcribed, verified, analysed using critical discourse analysis and interpreted. Some of the findings and recommendations were: there many methods that are used in selecting peer counsellors these including that learners voluntary offer their services, teachers may select and also learners are given opportunity to select peer counsellors. I recommended that teachers, parents, learners and the stakeholders collectively select peer counsellors. This makes peer counsellors work appreciated, recognised and respect by all community members. Furthermore, the research found that the availability of counsellor supervisors is crucial in the success of peer counselling strategy. Peer counsellors need to be supervised to assess if they are executing their mandate accordingly if they are challenges they can be solved immediately. I recommend that peer counsellors should be supervised periodically and counsellor supervisors should be trained on how to supervise.

Key Words: *counsellor supervisor, drug abuse, peer counsellor, critical discourse analyses, rural learning ecologies, stakeholders*

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe rural learning ecologies learners are abusing drugs such as alcohol and beer, as stated in Chidarikire (2017). The effectiveness of a peer counselling strategy is shown by in the research studies done in countries such as Botswana, Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria. A research done in Nigeria by Oliha (2014:6) affirmed that “drug abusers exhibit some errant behaviour due to their reliance on drugs, they can be helped by counsellors to overcome their problem and counsellors are also required to provide drug abuse education to the adolescents in our secondary schools and tertiary institutions”. This is one of the testimonies of the effectiveness of a peer counselling strategy in mitigating drug abuse among adolescent learners. In addition, the research study done in Kenya by Bett (2013:482) revealed that “the rationale of peer counselling is based on the assumption that people who share similar characteristics and age tend to influence another’s behaviours significantly and it is recommended by the Kenyan Government that peer counselling service be established in all educational Institutions to motivate the youth to express their desire to protect themselves against HIV and AIDS and other social and psychological problems”.The success of the formulation and implementation of peer counselling strategy for alleviating drug abuse in rural learning ecologies is premised on the active participation of rural community members,

as Lykes (2016:43) alluded that: “for over a century, community psychologists collaborated with women, men and children in schools, workplaces, churches, non-governmental organizations, and local communities, seeking to enhance well-being and redress social inequities and/or to transform oppressive underlying socio-political structures that gave rise to those injustices. In this research study, I used the Participatory Action Research approach, which promotes active participation of Zimbabwean rural communities. I applied the idea of Abbott, Duane and Chase (2008:10), who came to the following conclusion: “[T]he problems that drugs and alcohol bring to communities are multidimensional and treatment interventions should be designed with input from the community. Tribal groups, families, traditional healers, religious entities, legal authorities, and local health care providers should all be involved in the healing and recovery process.” However, in Zimbabwe peer counselling strategy in relation to drug abuse and conditions necessary for formulation and implementation has not been explored in Chivi rural areas. Hence this study explores the conditions necessary for the formulation and implementation of peer counselling strategy for alleviating drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Success stories of peer counselling strategies

The strengths of peer counselling strategies are portrayed in different countries where it was formulated and successfully implemented. I maintain that a peer counselling strategy formulated through participation and empowerment of the marginalised rural participants is useful in mitigating drug abuse. In applying CER, Makina (2012:101) commented that the empowerment of youth in the South African context is “supported through interaction and engagement whereby students with creative thinking skills [act] as active participants and co-creators of knowledge”. From the social process point of view, according to Miller and Maguire (2008), the PAR perspective “openly challenges existing structures of power and creates opportunities for development of innovates and effective solutions to the problems facing our schools and communities”. A peer counselling strategy, found to be effective in the United States of America, namely Peer Provider Reproductive Health Services, was evaluated by Brindiset *al.* (2005), according to them, “the results show the decline of incidences of pregnancies, increased use of health care and increased use of contraception” (Brindiset *al.*, 2005). Furthermore, studies by Okonofua *et al.* (2003) confirmed that the findings on a peer counselling strategy with regards to STI Counselling and Treatment in Nigeria, provided “strong, substantive evidence that [the] informal peer educational program that offers education and counselling on STIs to in-school adolescents can substantively improve the careseeking behaviour with regards to STIs among youth”. In addition, a success story of peer counselling is recorded in Armstrong *et al.* (1990:98), who asserted that, “in Australia, the peer led program called Smoke Prevention was successful in that it increased the knowledge of the effects of smoking and provided the resistance to encounter peer pressure to smoke among seventh grades”. One research done in Zimbabwe by Chireshe (2013:352), found that “few respondents whose schools had peer counsellors mentioned that the peer counsellors assisted other students with HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, sexual abuse issues and they also helped in socialising isolated students.” The effectiveness of a peer counselling strategy found in Kenya in the above research study is supported by research studies done by Kaaria *et al.* (2014:213), who remarked that “the social issues handled by peer counsellors included disturbances from the opposite sex, stealing, and drug abuse and

bullying.” Furthermore, Blad (2014:2) recorded a research study at Rutgers University, which found that “Peer Group Connection had notable success in raising graduation rates for Latino males. There was 19% increase in Latino men pass rate from 63% to 81%”. The above literature proves the effectiveness of peer counselling in solving problems and this has motivated me to collectively engage Zimbabwean rural participants in this study to formulate a peer counselling strategy that will address the drug abuse problem in rural learning ecologies in Zimbabwe. This argument is validated by the following submission of Mertens and Wilson (2012:172):

[D]ecisions are aimed at determining the approach that will best facilitate use of the process and findings to enhance social justice; identify the systemic forces that support the status quo and those that will allow change to happen; and acknowledge the need for a critical and reflexive relationship between the evaluator and the stakeholders.

Furthermore, researchers are encouraged to consider the perspectives of participants, as

Franco (2005:3) explained that the “critical action researcher considers the voice of the participants, their perspective and meaning, not for record purposes and later interpretation but as part of the fabric of the research methodology”. In addition, the PAR research methodology used to engage rural participants in this study, according to Glassman and Erdem (2014:212), “facilitates action and development of knowledge. It has the potential to address research and wider issues of social justice, inclusion and empowerment of minority and often marginalised communities”.

Lack of support from school authorities

In Zimbabwe, there are some school authorities who do not support peer counselling supervision and other peer counselling roles. According to Mapfumo and Nkoma (2013:101-102), “one study in Zimbabwe has found that heads of schools are not overly supportive of guidance and counselling in their schools”. This is one injustice against the Guidance and Counselling subject, because other subjects, such as English, are recognised and supported by school authorities. One research study done in a Zimbabwean rural area by Dube (2016:145) found that “[g]enerally, many subjects in the

Zimbabwe curriculum have qualified teachers”. This shows that Guidance and Counselling is not supported. The finding of this subject not being supported adequately is of great concern to me as the researcher. Therefore, the importance of this research study, anchored in CER, is for the rural community to understand that they are being marginalised. I concur with Mthiyane (2014:13) that “indications in some studies are that in some communities there are still inequalities and poverty”. To solve this, I used PAR as a methodology, through its transformative context. According to Mertens (2007:212), “the researcher using PAR is one who recognised inequalities in society and strives to challenge the status quo, who is a bit provocateur with overtones of humility, and who possesses a shared sense of responsibility”. In advocating for the support of peer counselling by school authorities through CER, I suggest solutions as recommended by Williams and Brydon-Miller (2004:245), who wrote that “CER addresses the cause of inequalities while at the same time focusing on finding solutions to specific community concerns”. To mitigate this, Chireshe (2013:156) argued that the “Zimbabwe school administration should support counselling teams by providing space for confidentiality, uninterrupted counselling and removing co-curricular activity loads that

may compete with this service”. Greenberg (2013:33) stated that peer counselling needed broad support from the school community, and that this support “should include administrators, faculty, parents and students”. This research study, using PAR, allowed school leaders, such as School Development Committee members, teacher counsellors and Members of Parliament to play different roles to support the peer counselling strategy. The active participation of these school leaders is viewed through PAR, according to Kindon, Pain and Kesby (2007:2), as power relations that emphasise “dialogic engagement with participants, and the development and execution of context suitable stratagems oriented towards empowerment and transformation”. The heads of schools must provide leadership to peer counsellors so that they can execute their mandate. The lack of support from the school heads, who are the responsible authorities, may jeopardise the implementation of peer counselling strategies in rural learning ecologies.

Peer counsellors are underrated by other students

The study in Zimbabwe by Chireshe (2013:352) noted that “respondents revealed that peer counsellors experienced some challenges which include: being underrated by peers, being resisted by other students, other students discouraging them from being peer counsellors, not being trusted by fellow students and little time for peer counselling”. Learners or peers have the tendency to underestimate one another. Some learners do not embrace assistance from other learners and some learners do not trust sharing drug-related problems with their peers. The reason is that they think other learners may report them to school authorities or to their parents. However, rural parents support peer counsellors. The research in one of the rural areas in Zimbabwe by Harris (2013:1) found that “villagers in Matobo South are appealing to the government to introduce peer educators in rural areas, who can guide young people in developing positive norms and especially in making healthy decisions about sex”. In Zimbabwe, drug abuse is an offence that warrants the dismissal of a learner from the school. Some of the ways to curb these challenges are discussed below.

The school authorities should embark on peer counselling awareness programmes that will assist learners in rural learning ecologies to understand the importance of peer counselling and peer counsellors. This finds its support in the PAR methodology I used in this study, as Kemmis and McTaggart (2007:277) stated that PAR is “utilised by groups of people who come and interact together to change the existing social structure for betterment of society”. Moreover, CER, according to Gruenewald (2003:12), enables empowerment and “the emphasis is on creation of an encouraging space that embraces multiplicity of voices in solving social problems of the day”. It was our intention to use PAR to encourage people to participate in peer counselling, thereby bringing everyone to an understanding of peer counselling. Crane and O’Regan (2010:15) explained that PAR’s latent contributions are to “participate in communication, explain, reframe, seek common ground and language, which facilitates and encourages collaborative dialogue in research”. The use of CER’s transformative aspect and PAR’s participatory thrust will make this peer counselling strategy effective, as supported by Carlson, Engebretson and Chamberlain (2006:837), who concluded that “lack of articulated theories of change and participatory methodologies hinder empowerment of individuals to the margins of the society and make programs ineffective”. Some of the challenges encountered by peer counsellors may be due to lack of knowledge on the student body about the fundamental role played by peer counsellors in the mitigation of drug abuse and other related problems. Peer counsellors and rural community members

should be trained in trust and acceptance issues to deal with counselling ethics, such as confidentiality. The Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe (2007:12) recommended that “Zimbabweans need to rekindle customs, values and those of our norms that are capable of laying a social foundation for resuscitation of the spirit of respect, integrity, tolerance, compassionate ‘unhu / Ubuntu’”.

Research Method and design

The study was informed by the following two questions:

What are the challenges that affect the conditions necessary for peer counselling strategy formulation and implementation of peer counselling strategy?

How can these challenges be mitigated in order to successfully formulate and implement peer counselling strategy?

The study adopted qualitative case study design. Fifteen rural community members were purposively selected from Chivi community. They were divided into three groups where data was generated and analysed through critical discourse analyses. Interpretation and findings were made.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data generated from the participants found some circumstances that permit the successful formulation and implementation of peer counselling strategy, which are as follows:

Choosing peer counsellors

The selection of appropriate peer counsellors who have the right characteristics is crucial in formulating and implementing peer counselling strategies. Kamore and Tiego (2015:254) wrote that “the question on who to select as student peer counsellor is important in developing an effective peer counselling program in high schools”. There are ill-defined peer counsellor selection templates that spell out the qualities of peer counsellors and the process of identifying these counsellors. These templates differ from one school to the other. Peer counsellors are chosen to assist other learners to deal with drug abuse, as alluded to by Ncube (2014:32), who argued that peer educators “are specially selected and trained students who serve their fellow students and teacher counsellors in a positive way”.

In some schools, peer counsellors are selected by learners and / or teachers and administrators. The research evidence submitted by Garikai (2014:45), explained that peer counsellors are “students appointed by their colleagues or the school administration in an effort to open a great link between individual students and are seen to be useful where professional services may be inadequate or not readily available”. I observed, in Zimbabwe learning institutions, that peer counsellors in some schools are selected by teachers and in others by students. In other institutions, learners voluntarily appoint themselves as peer counsellors. Some schools use both methods. I prefer the selection criteria of school peer counsellors to be open to the student body. This resonates with the agenda of PAR and CER to empower and emancipate the disadvantaged in decision making.

Given (2007:2) stated that “PAR observes participants as participants, the joint contributors and investigators”. Moreover, selection of peer counsellors should be democratic, as PAR methodology, according to Whiteman *et al.* (2015:625), is a “democratic model... [that is]

able to produce, own and use knowledge [and] is driven by participants rather than an outsider sponsor, funder and academic”. School learners and staff in rural learning ecologies should be involved in the entire process of selecting or electing peer counsellors. Inclusion of all stakeholders in the selection of peer counsellors is emancipatory and allows the active participation of the marginalised in the decisionmaking process. Mugo (2005:13) averred that “the goal is to ensure that students will be valued and respected by their peers when need arises”. Students have a tendency to respect and value the peer counsellors they have chosen. They will, however, resist peer counsellors they feel have been imposed on them by the school authorities. Muranga *et al.* (2012:95), through their research findings, proved that “inclusion of learners in selecting peer counsellors is fundamental to the success of the peer counselling process”. Failure to select the right peer counsellors negatively affects the peer counselling process and inhibits the aim of formulating a peer counselling strategy to alleviate drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies.

The availability of counsellor supervisors

Another circumstance conducive to effective formulation of peer counselling is the presence of counsellor supervisors. Most teachers in Zimbabwean rural areas have not been trained in peer counselling matters. The research study by Ncube (2014:65) defined counselling supervision as referring to “overseeing the peer counsellors”. It is my view that peer counsellors need to be supervised when they are executing their mandate. Supervision brings about accountability and enhances the performance of peer counsellors. This means that teacher counsellors provide peer counsellors with leadership, guidance and protection. Greenberg (2013:23) found that “the supervisor provides consistency, leadership and guidance necessary to the success of peer program”. The purpose of supervision in counselling is further elaborated by Garikai (2014:46), who alluded that “peer counselling supervision must be developmental, assisting them to evaluate their relationship with other learners and the counselling process”. A relationship based on trust between the counsellor and the supervisor is essential. The supervisor should not be dominating, but rather be able to provide guidance and leadership without undue influence. In addition, Ncube (2014:67) stated that “school counsellors supervise the school counselling programs and bear the responsibilities of the performance, proficiency and effectiveness”. Peer counsellors should execute their counselling responsibilities under the approval of their superiors. Most learners seek approval before doing anything, for they fear to do anything that has not been sanctioned. Garringer and MacRae (2008:6) posited that “buy-in from the top is critical to any aspect of school programming. Getting support from and the active participation of principals, teachers, counsellors and other school staff is much easier if school leaders promote the program”. If the school authorities buy in, they will surely provide resources such as money, venues, personnel and equipment to be used by peer counsellors in dealing with drug-related problems among learners.

A peer counselling strategy should have a clear purpose

This peer counselling strategy has specific objectives and goals that are used to measure its success. Greenberg (2013:21) wrote that “at the earliest phase, program goals should be established that reflect the long-term benefits that can be derived from peer counselling”. The goals and objectives of our peer counselling are made in light of the goal of CER, which was explained by Murphy and Fleming (2009:39) as “a goal to human emancipation”. On the other hand, the use of the PAR methodology calls for collaboration, as explained by Miller

and Maguire (2008:88), who commented that “PAR is not a mere methodology, but rather a pledge to collaboration and partnership throughout the problem posing, knowledge creation, and action-taking cycles of the project”. The marginalised perspectives are heard in research through CER. Alvesson and Karreman (2008:26) found that “marginal voices are to be integrated into social power distribution... and through raising critical consciousness, real discrimination and oppression that people experience in everyday life is exposed”. In addition, PAR promotes the agreement between the researcher and participants, as supported by Cornwall and Jewkes (1995:1669), who wrote that the researcher and participants should agree on the agendas and take “responsibilities for analysis and presentation of outcomes”. Moreover, goals and objectives of this peer counselling are negotiated as PAR methodology permits. Baden and Major (2010:53) advised that the “dynamic relationship between the researcher and participants [should be] consistently negotiated to deconstruct power, achieve and maintain trust, promote equality and ensure reciprocity”. Haughey (2016:1) stated, “Once you have planned your project, turn your attention to developing several objectives that will enable you to be successful. Goals should be SMART – specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic and time-based.” This peer counselling strategy had an aim to prevent drug abuse in Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies. The goals derived from this aim and objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and accomplished within a reasonable time frame. Some of the goals are to have a peer counselling strategy content that was collectively made by all stakeholders in the Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies. Peer counselling strategy was formulated through the involvement and the active, equal participation of the marginalised for alleviating drug abuse in rural, learning ecologies. This was made possible by using PAR to generate data from participants. The peer counselling had a goal of preventing drug abuse by using peer counselling. Our peer counselling strategy is preventive in nature. This is supported by Van Zyl (2013:22), who stated that, “essentially, prevention addresses the following main components: creating awareness, educating people about drugs and their effects, providing supportive environments”. The peer counselling strategy being formulated in this study will create awareness and educate people on the lack of peer counselling strategies that addresses the drug abuse problems that have negative effects on the learners and other people within the rural learning ecologies in Zimbabwe. The stakeholders in the rural learning ecologies in Zimbabwe are included in this research study in order to create awareness of drug abuse, lack of a peer counselling strategy and the importance of creating a strategy that is all inclusive in terms of people’s views. This is in line with PAR and CER that I used in this study, which advocate for non-exclusion of learners and other stakeholders in the peer counselling strategy for the alleviation of drug abuse in rural learning ecologies.

Implementation of a peer counselling strategy

There is a tendency of not implementing formulated peer counselling strategies. In Zimbabwe, Chimonyo, Mapuranga and Runganye (2015:149), in their research, arrived at the following conclusion:

[R]evelations in this study are that in all schools the guidance and counselling programme was generally time tabled. This maybe so because it is a requirement by the Ministry of Education to have a subject taught in all schools yet, on the ground the actual implementation, is not taking place.

This proves that, in Zimbabwe, Guidance and Counselling as a subject is on the school timetable, but it is not being implemented because it is not examinable. This defeats the noble purpose of the peer counselling strategy because it will not be implemented. I have noted that many strategies that have been formulated, have not been implemented. Many research studies have been done with well-meaning intentions, but they are gathering dust because no one has implemented the formulated strategies. This research study is not only for academic and professional purposes, but its findings will also be implemented. This is possible through using PAR, as Sharma *et al.* (2016:4) confirmed that “virtually all participants acknowledged the importance of community participation and endorsed community development through an active and engaged citizenry” with this methodology. The collaborative nature of this study in formulating a peer counselling strategy may contribute to the implementation of the strategy for the alleviation of drug abuse in the Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies.

Evaluation of the peer counselling strategy

Peer counselling strategy should be evaluated periodically to ascertain its effectiveness. The importance of evaluation of the strategy is explained by Mugenda and Mugenda (1999:31), who stated that “evaluation is essential in determining whether the intended results of a program are realized”. This peer counselling strategy will be evaluated through the active participation of the marginalised participants in order to ascertain its success in alleviating drug abuse within their Zimbabwean rural learning ecologies. In this study, I engaged the marginalised rural participants in evaluating the peer counselling strategy because in CER, participants should create knowledge, Nkoane (2012:68) stated that the goal of CER is “to help participants construct their own ‘knowing’ in order to create action of their plan for better future”. To empower the marginalised and involve them in peer counselling strategy evaluation, I used PAR’s participatory evaluation, which is explained by Jackson and Kossam (2010:21) as the “means to document our individual and collective perceptions of the site, and reaching consensus on the priorities emerging from the evaluation”.

Evaluation is done in order to monitor if the peer counselling strategy is successfully addressing its intended purpose and objectives. The evaluation allows us to make adjustments and corrections wherever the demand arises. Greenberg (2013:23) recorded that “there should be a regular process where peer counsellors, community members, staff and coordinators can share both positive and constructive feedback. Written evaluations should be developed in conjunction with program goals for purpose of gathering data about the success in accomplishing those goals”. I regard evaluation as an ongoing process that is essential in making sure the formulated strategy accomplishes its purpose. I concur with the observations of McGannon, Cary and Dimmit (2005:78) who stated that the “issue of evaluation is receiving increased attention, as peer counsellors are asked to demonstrate that their efforts contribute meaningfully to student development and success”. I will evaluate the goals and objectives of the peer counselling strategy, training of peer counsellors and teacher counsellors, resources assigned, people’s perceptions about peer counselling and its impact in relation to drug abuse.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research found that, selection of peer counselling is one of the conditions that necessitates the success or failure of peer counselling strategy to mitigate drug abuse in

Zimbabwe rural learning ecologies. There are many methods that are used in selecting peer counsellors these including that learners voluntarily offer their services, teachers may select and also learners are given opportunity to select peer counsellors. I recommend that teachers, parents, learners and the stakeholders collectively select peer counsellors. This makes peer counsellors work appreciated, recognised and respect by all community members. Furthermore, the research found that the availability of counsellor supervisors is crucial in the success of peer counselling strategy. Peer counsellors need to be supervised to assess if they are executing their mandate accordingly if they are challenges they can be solved immediately. I recommend that peer counsellors should be supervised periodically and counsellor supervisors should be trained on how to supervise. A peer counselling strategy should clear purpose, and all peer counsellors should be able to clearly articulate and understand their roles and mandate. I recommend that, peer counsellors should be adequately trained and be knowledgeable in peer counselling. Implementation and evaluation of peer counselling strategy are also conditions of effectiveness of peer counselling strategy in alleviating drug abuse in rural learning ecologies. Peer counselling strategy should be evaluated after every term (quarterly) to see if it is relevant and addressing its purpose. Evaluators should have rich knowledge in peer counselling strategy in order to give objective assessment.

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