

Every dance has its own story - how participation in dance empowered youth living in a rural community to buffer an intergenerational cycle of poverty

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ABSTRACT

Background: Rural environments characterised by inter-generational cycles of poverty and historical disadvantage, contain numerous barriers to the development of human potential. This study explored how participation in dancing classes offered by a rural outreach program in a rural community in the Western Cape buffered these barriers and empowered youth to create new lifestyles.

Method: An ethnographic research design was used to explore the experiences of youth participating in formal dance classes. Participants were student dancers and community members selected with the use of saturation sampling. Rich data was collected through interviews, a focus group and by walking though and observing the daily life of the rural community.

Results: Three themes arose from the thematic analysis: trapped within a predestined future, empowerment through dance and building a new community. Participation in a new form of dance occupation was found to stimulate the unlocking of youths' potential and empowered them to develop a new lifestyle that differed from the one inherited from their predecessors.

Key words: Dance, youth, rurality, inherited lifestyle, occupational development

Introduction

A group of undergraduate occupational therapy students was curious to find out why a rural outreach dance programme being offered to youth living in a rural community approximately 300km outside Cape Town was being hailed as a great success. They questioned what aspects of the youth's development and context were being addressed by participating in dancing classes. The classes had been introduced in 1991 by a non-profit dance organisation teaching dance to historically disadvantaged^a children and youth in Cape Town. The dance programme in this study began in February 2007 as an extension of its existing Outreach Programme¹. Its mission was to afford children in historically disadvantaged communities the opportunity for enjoyment, empowerment and the promotion of self esteem through the medium of dance, as well as training aspiring professional dancers and developing a unique, indigenous dance company.

The dance programme was introduced to a rural community that was characterised by under-development, scarce resources, restricted opportunities for development and included individuals who participated in high-risk occupations, which made the environment, a potentially unsafe and dangerous place to live². The culture of poverty, inherited by this Xhosa-speaking community, was continued along generational lines³. Given these complex barriers to human development, the study aimed to explore whether the introduction of a new occupation i.e. dancing classes, by an external organisation, would promote healthy development of youth living in this impoverished community.

Literature review

Rurality and the challenges for human development

Rural areas are defined by the South African Government as "areas that have the lowest level of services, and the greatest average distance to the nearest service points – it includes large scale farming areas, with small municipalities which have little potential to raise taxes sufficient to meet the costs of services"⁴. In South Africa 57% of the people live below the poverty income line and of these, 43% live in rural areas, such as the rural township in this study⁵. To address the problem of under-resourcing in rural areas, a Rural Development Strategy was included in the Government's Restructuring and Development Plan, which provided for the development of human capital by building strategic partnerships⁶.

People who live in poverty are commonly viewed as experiencing disempowerment. Luttrell et al^{7,6} stated that "achieving empowerment is intimately linked to addressing the causes of disempowerment and tackling disadvantage caused by the way in which power relations shape choices, opportunities and wellbeing". Rural outreach programmes, by undertaking development activities and providing services aimed at improving the lives of the rural poor, offer opportunities for the growth of individuals and communities by, amongst others, facilitating changes in the way that people relate to each other and participate in their daily occupations. To achieve these outcomes, Swanepoel and De Beer⁸ hypothesised that the static condition of living in rural communities initially required that interventions be introduced by external organisations.

Adolescence is characterised by developmental tasks such as adapting to physical growth, developing formal operational thinking, becoming a member of a peer group and forming sexually-related^b relationships⁹. Group participation in specific occupations, such as social dancing, may become an important method for acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitude for mastering age-relevant challenges and encouraging the development of relationships with peers. By mastering these challenges the youth might be readier to face the psychosocial challenges of their next developmental stages.

^a "Historically Disadvantaged Individual" (HDI) is defined as a South African citizen:

1) who, due to the apartheid policy that was in place, had no voting rights in the national elections prior to the introduction of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1983 (Act No. 100 of 1983) or the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993 (Act No. 200 of 1993) ("the interim Constitution"), and/or

2) who is a woman, and/or

3) who has a disability. [Online] Access 26 August 2010.

http://www.westcoastdm.co.za/Tenders/procurement_policy_schedule_90_10_eng.pdf

^b Heterosexual or same sex relationships

The dance programme offered to the youth in this study aimed to create opportunities for fun, empowerment and the development of self-esteem¹. It is assumed that without human and resource development programmes, these communities would remain stagnant, under-resourced and extremely vulnerable to participation in high risk occupations as the range of occupations remains restricted. This limits the repertoire of skills that can be developed to meet developmental challenges. Such contexts of occupational deprivation¹⁰ limit the choices that can be made and skills, being underutilised, are not developed. This leads to engaging in high risk occupations that are detrimental to healthy development. McKenzie and O'Toole define occupational deprivation as a situation where community members are "...kept from acquiring, using or enjoying personally satisfying activities due to the influence of poverty, illiteracy, prejudice and environmental resistions"^{11:89}.

Properties of dance impacting on adolescent development

Dance is a universal occupation described as moving rhythmically, usually to music, using prescribed or improvised steps and gestures¹². Many different types of dances exist worldwide and the choice of dance is strongly associated with a particular culture, age, generation, rituals and religion. Indigenous African musical and dance expressions are maintained by oral tradition, such as those in the Xhosa culture. The dance form of ballet continues the story-telling tradition, through gestures, facial and movement expressions that are accompanied by music. The dance program offered to youth by the Dance Organisation, included ballet classes twice a week and Hip-Hop and African dance classes three days per week. Classes were attended at two different venues by black Xhosa-speaking and white Afrikaans-speaking youth; the former in the adjacent town, and the latter in the rural community. Once a week, the two groups of student dancers danced together at one venue. Thus, an opportunity for youth from different cultures to interact with other youth and to learn different cultural dances was created. Prior to the introduction of the formal dancing classes, the youth engaged only in social, informal dancing with their peers in the streets. Afrikaans speaking and Xhosa children rarely socialised because the living areas were separated geographically. In rural areas, streets are seen as public areas, and as such frequently occupy the space where youth 'hang out' with their peers¹³. Casual dancing organised by the youth themselves typically occurs in such a public area. Residents however, consider such areas to be unsafe because it has a limited surveillance system.

Occupational development cycle

Duncan^{14:206} described occupational development as "an emerging health promotion strategy in occupational therapy". She outlined the occupational development cycle as comprising (adapted from Wilcock^{10, 14}) the invitation to do, education and coaching about occupation and health, an occupational analysis about opportunities, interests, skills, needs and barriers, the actual 'doing' of valued occupations and evaluating and reflecting on the health and social gains of 'doing'. This knowledge can assist the occupational therapist to understand the conditions for participation in occupations that facilitate changes in a community's lifestyle.

Therapeutic use of dance in occupational therapy practice

Dance movement therapy is a movement-based therapy in which the client-therapist relationship plays a central role¹². It is founded on the principle that movement reflects an individual's patterns of thinking, feeling and communicating. Through acknowledging and supporting the client's movements, the practitioner encourages development and integration of new adaptive movement patterns together with the emotional and relational experiences that accompany such changes. This article is, however, not about dance therapy, but rather about using the occupation of dance therapeutically. (An occupational therapist would apply the principles of dance therapy and the principles of occupational therapy during his/her interventions). It is not known whether therapeutic dance has the power to influence rural youth's development, positively.

Research methods

Research question

What is the experience of participating in formal dance classes for youth living in a rural community?

Research aim

The aim of the study was to explore and describe the experience of youth living in a rural community and their participation in formal dancing classes presented by an outreach dance programme affiliated to a non-profit organisation.

Methodology

An ethnographic research tradition was applied to obtain a descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do¹⁵. The ethnographer participates in people's lives "for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and asking questions"^{15: 59}. In this study, the ethnographic design was used to describe the group's experience of their dancing classes as it occurred within their specific culture.

Saturation sampling

Inclusion criteria for study participants were that they should have attended classes at least 75% of the time over a 6-month period, be between the ages of 12-18 years and be able to verbally communicate their experiences in either English, Afrikaans or Xhosa¹³.

Data collection methods

The researchers observed the participants in the rural community over a period of two days and data were generated by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with the dancing teacher (as key informant); conducting a focus group with learner-dancers using an interview guide; observing participants during dance classes; conducting an interview with a parent of a participant and with a participant who was a trainee dancer. The researchers spent time with the participants, made observations of the community and their activities while walking and travelling through the area (and viewing the people and their activities in their community) over a period of two days. Such immersion in the research context provided the thick description necessary for a qualitative research design¹⁵.

Data management and analysis

All data collected were audio taped with the informed consent of participants, their legal guardians and the dance organisation. The researchers were responsible for transcribing the data. Data were analysed thematically by grouping meaningful constructs into codes, categories and themes. The codes emerged from the data inductively through content analysis.

Ensuring Ethical practice

The four principles of the Declaration of Helsinki¹⁶ were adhered to in the following manner:- To enable autonomous decision-making and minimise personal risk, formal approval for the study was obtained from the University of Stellenbosch, Health Research Ethics Committee. Letters of informed consent were translated into English, Afrikaans and Xhosa to accommodate the language preferences of participants and their guardians.

Beneficence and confidentiality were ensured by respecting the participants' rights to participation, privacy and withdrawal from the study by the participants. Veracity was maintained by communicating the aim and purpose of the study clearly and ensuring that participants understood their roles and those of the researchers clearly. The principle of justice was upheld by arranging that the results of the study be shared with stakeholders and participants.

Ensuring trustworthiness and rigour

To ensure that the findings of the study were truthful to the subjects and their context, peer review critics and triangulation tech-

niques were applied for credibility¹⁵. Triangulation was achieved by comparing findings from data obtained from interviews, a focus group and observations made during the dance classes, as well as within the community. The data analysis and conclusions were presented to peers and the author for evaluation. The technique of member checking could not be used due to time constraints. However, by doing an audit trail, steps taken in the research can be traced.

Reflexivity is a process whereby the subjectivity of the researchers is positioned, so that their influences on the interpretations of the study are controlled; researchers' assumptions were documented in the research protocol and discussed during peer review sessions.

Findings

The findings in *Table 1* describe the story of a particular dancing experience as narrated by youth and community members, living in a rural community in the Western Cape Province. Their collective experience bore evidence to personal transformations that moved them from a destiny that perpetuated a culture of poverty, to a life that carried hope and promise, because it exposed them to different adolescent occupations. The researchers described this transformational experience as 'moving from being trapped within a predestined future, to being empowered through dance and building a new community'¹³.

Table 1: Findings: Themes, categories and codes

THEME 1: Trapped within a predestined future: "... trouble finds them, you know, they don't look for trouble, it's just there..."			
Category 1: <i>Underexposure to opportunities for moral development</i>	Codes: Different moral values Alternative frame of reference Alternative interpersonal communication styles	Category 2: <i>Overexposure to unstructured lifestyle</i>	Codes: High risk activities Unsafe environment Too much time doing nothing
THEME 2: Empowerment through dance: "...So after six months he has just completely grown as a human being. He has self-esteem now, he knows he can do something..."			
Category 1: <i>Exposure to new knowledge and challenges for mastering new skills</i>	Codes: New skills are developed and mastered Physical, cognitive and emotional development	Category 2: <i>A new feeling of belonging</i>	Codes: Constructive substitute for high risk activities Safety from high risk environment Positive channelling of energy Team work Assertive behaviour amongst peers Positive self-image Financial security
THEME 3: Building a new community: "...Like now everyone knows me in this location..."			
Category 1: <i>Taking a stand against destiny</i>			New authority figures questioning existing morals Experimenting with new moral values through dancing More respect for self, others and authority figures More socially appropriate behaviour Exposure to experiences in a outside an old frame of reference New knowledge and skills transferred back into the community

Discussion of findings

The study participants described their experience of occupational empowerment derived from participating in new dancing classes, as an unlocking process: "from being trapped within a predestined future, to becoming empowered through dance and building a new community"¹³. Weskamp and Ramugondo similarly described this

phenomenon of change when they said: "Hope requires a vision of how things might be and an anticipation of the achievement of that vision"^{17:160}.

Theme 1: Trapped within a predestined future: "... trouble finds them, you know, they don't look for trouble, it's just there..."

The phrase of 'trouble' finding them and of just being there was used to express the youth's experience of passivity and entrapment, while living in their rural environment. It was accompanied by a sense of frustration and despair at being unable to influence events that are repeated over generations, and to change them for the better. Inheriting a life of poverty predisposed the youth to continue the inherited lifestyle of occupational deprivation. Christiansen and Baum defined lifestyles as "distinctive modes of living that are both observable and recognisable, and over which an individual has choice"^{18:12}. Youths living in this rural community were found to be exposed to a restricted range of choices, from being idle to being destructive by engaging in high-risk occupations.

The lifestyles of the adolescents were characterised by a lack of respect for authority. A community participant explained: "...and the biggest problem is total lack of authority... ...there is no authority figure for them to respect. No, ...role models". This problem was manifest within families where: "... there is no respect in your home and if you have not been brought up to respect each other..." respect for other human beings was absent and the consequence was "...If you don't respect yourself, no-one will respect you...".

atmosphere of aggressive attitudes and actions: "...They really, really get excited, they are really rough with one another, you can't believe how rough and you can't believe how they fight, over the slightest thing...". It was part of the community's culture to resolve matters in an aggressive manner as one participant explained: "...I'll go and kill them". Aggression was observed to be present everywhere you went - in their music, in the frequent vandalism and fighting, and in their styles of communicating with each other. Alternative methods of resolving conflict appeared to be unknown. As a result, youth did not learn alternative styles of socialisation.

The youth experienced repetitive exposure to high risk and unsafe activities. A participant explained: "...where we stay, our location... a lot of alcohol abuse, drugs, sexual harassment, everything, rape...there is a lot that is happening in our location...". Youth were exposed to these influences involuntarily and continuously: "...So that's what I mean when I say that trouble finds them, you know, they don't look for trouble, it's just there...". The only alternative to non-participation in the above-mentioned high risk activities was seen to be "...doing nothing". A participant explained: "...In our location, there is not a lot of activities which are going after school. So children have nowhere to go after school, they don't know what to do after they have finished their homework".

Environments defined by occupational deprivation have been found to disable individuals because they permeate "...prolonged preclusion from engagement in occupations of necessity or meaning due to factors outside the control of the individual"^{18:100}. However, the unavailability of such occupations, through cultural or political constraints, can create disabilities of lifestyle¹⁸. The poverty culture therefore, was observed to sustain a community's under-exposure to new occupations and new opportunities for human development over numbers of generations that predestined youth towards an unchanged lifestyle and a disempowered future.

Theme 2: Empowered through dance: "...So after six months he has just completely grown as a human being. He has self-esteem now, he knows he can do something...".

This theme demonstrates how, through choosing to participate in newly introduced dancing classes, youth living in this rural community were enabled to deal with 'trouble' in their community, and develop a new sense of self. There was simply: "No time for trouble". How did this happen?

Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi^{19:89} explained that: "...at a certain point in ontogenesis, each individual begins to realise his or her own powers to direct attention, to think, to feel, to will and to remember. At that point, a new agency develops within awareness. This is the self". Dancing lessons seemed to function as a medium for gaining age- appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes for meeting their personal and social developmental challenges. Some examples are provided.

By: "...improving their posture....strengthening their stomach muscles...general healthy workout.." which allowed amongst other things, student dancers to maintain functional sitting postures during school hours, by improving their physical endurance. They developed their cognitive skills: "...those kids really do concentrate...". Learning new dances required attending, concentrating, memorising, sequencing, motor planning and the ability to follow verbal instructions. Development of these skills thus prepared the pre-vocational skills of the learner for formal employment.

Formal operational thinking was developed through the awareness raised by participating in dance classes, which enabled them to think about the influence of this participation, its consequences and how this differed from daily life without the dancing classes:

^c "Location": The state effectively reserved 87% of the land which whites exclusively could purchase; the Natives in Urban Areas Bill (1918) designed to move blacks living in "white" South Africa into specific 'locations' as a precautionary security measure. The Urban Areas Act (1923) introduced residential segregation in South Africa. [Online] [access 2010: July 21] available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_South_Africa.

"...The time I was not [at dance classes] I do not know what I was doing, maybe smoking, using drugs or drinking...you know?"

"....we can do wrong when we play outside, like fighting, drinking and some of them smoking. But if you are tired, you must go home and do homework and go to bed. No time for trouble." Because dancing classes were offered each day from Monday to Friday, this temporal space replaced their usual idleness or engagement in high-risk activities.

Occupational form refers to the context of the doing which provides occupations with purpose and meaning²⁰. When you do something in a particular place and at a particular time, the occupation becomes imbued with meaning. The shared or collective meaning created by participating in the dancing classes was experienced by the rural youth as transformational. Occupations, such as ballet, became a meaningful part of their cultural system despite not initially being shared by the rural community. A participant explained: "Actually ballet was not my thing, you know because here is our location, no-one knows it". Dance participants initially expressed their disapproval and anxiety by not attending dance performances they were invited to and vandalising the dancing teacher's motor car. However, continued participation in, and regular attendance at, these dancing classes enabled parents and youth alike to acknowledge positive aspects of their engagement in dancing classes: "...so when they come to dance classes it is, we teach them that it is not only about dance, we teach them different things... this is HIV/AIDS, how to prevent getting HIV/AIDS... but you teach them in a dance way, you see".

Mastery of age- appropriate challenges resulted in occupational competence i.e. being competent to perform. A safe group experience developed the youth's team-building skills: "So one of the big things with dance is that it really incorporates this whole team spirit, like let's really care about each other a bit...". Not only was this an important skill for learning to relate to the opposite sex, but it enabled them to relate positively within a group, instead of relating with aggression and violence. Dancing classes were offered in groups and the style of dancing, namely ballet, involved story-telling of current social themes, for example, negotiating safe sex, preventing HIV/AIDS infection and expressing feelings, were introduced and played out. At the dancing classes they were taught not to focus on their own needs, but also to take the other person into account when making decisions, and to identify with peers in a positive manner saying:

"Before you do a dance, you have to explain what the dance is all about...doing a dance about children who have no family, who have no-one to look after them...you have to pretend that you are that one, you see, so by doing that you are learning..."

Ego-centrism gave way to a new morality, one that required consideration of other perspectives. Such a skill prepared the youth for forming mature relationships later in adulthood and for contributing to the building of a new community.

Theme 3: Building a new community: "...Like now everyone knows me in this location..."

Being known is a critical pre-condition for experiencing sound mental health. It validates one's existence providing evidence and substantiates human existence²¹. This is true of communities too. Rural communities and impoverished communities are however, vulnerable to social invisibility because they are isolated geographically, socio-culturally, psychologically and temporally²². A rural community, suspended in time, in a physical and cultural zone, is exposed minimally to influences that will change it, and there are little opportunities for interaction with other communities²². Rural outreach programmes can buffer the impact of social invisibility. They are introduced by outside organisations that have the resources for implementing these programmes. Their aim is to develop individuals in communities in a sustainable manner. The dancing classes offered in the rural community in this study were started in 2008 and were scheduled to continue because of the positive evidence of youth's development through dance classes.

Dancing classes presented in other rural communities similarly showed very positive outcomes¹³.

Validation for the youth's existence and developmental needs was shown in the opportunity created for them to participate in dancing classes that catered for their specific age- appropriate needs. This prolonged participation seemed to boost their internal self-validation and made them feel confident and positive about themselves: "...We want to be good dancer[s] and have good opportunities" and : "...so I started to know and feeling it...I can even teach someone ballet now..." .

The dancing teacher served as a role model and life coach throughout the dancing classes: "She [dance teacher] was like my support group you see, she would tell me when I was doing something wrong". The statement is confirmed by the dancing teacher: "...They are a lot more disciplined now. So like, they are listening in the dance classes and even listening to what we don't want them to do".

Dance participants described how they started being validated by their community; "Like now everyone knows me in this location". Validation and recognition within the community was prised very highly by the youth. They were also becoming role models for their community. Wilcock^{23:210} said: "Becoming adds to the idea of being a sense of future and holds the notions of transformation and self actualisation. It is a concept that sits well with enabling occupation and with ideas about human development, growth and potential".

The transformation infiltrated their whole lives in the community and the evidence was visible in their body movements: "...they can't even walk down the street without a quick ballet movement". Dance participants were proud to be known and of been perceived as visible and accountable: "...But I now have someone who knows where I am, someone who can say, no, he was at the dance school".

The dancing classes offered opportunities to youth for exploring future vocational interests. They attended dancing shows at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town. This gave them an example of what their lives could be like one day, if they worked hard enough. "So they started to form goals for themselves of where they want to be one day and what they must do to get there". This new attitude towards their future is confirmed by the dancing teacher: "...they have a goal now, they have something they want to work towards...".

Student dancers who were interested in teaching dance as a career were given opportunities to attend weekly classes in Cape Town and to become trainee dancers. Trainee dancers were regarded as staff members and received remuneration for their assisted teaching: "... put him (trainee teacher) on board as part of staff...he's getting an income...". The experience of community i.e. connection to a broader society through dancing classes extended cross- culturally too: "...the kids from Montagu get to meet the kids from Zolani and we have this cross- community, cross- culture bridge...".

Attending dancing classes symbolised youth's transformation through "doing, being, becoming and belonging"^{23:210} as they carved a place for themselves in their broader society. A study participant explained: "...so dance is not just about listening to music and dance, you see....like every dance has its own story".

The dancing story became the youth's metaphor for describing their transformational experience of occupational empowerment. It is considered that by changing what they do, people can move societies in new directions and in this process, they themselves change. "Power from within", a dimension of power (within a culture of empowerment) was developed through dancing classes^{8:6}. This experience refers to instances when individual consciousness is raised by increasing awareness and desire for change through the medium of occupation. Participation in dancing classes introduced by an external organisation, for rural youth living in a specific rural community, created an opportunity for the youth to buffer inter-generational and poverty-induced barriers to their healthy development. In their poverty briefings, authors argued that individual and community development are inseparable components of human development endeavours and that without the introduction of an outside source, this process cannot be activated by itself⁵. The occupational perspective of dancing in this study, demonstrated the complex way in which

engagement in an important and meaningful occupation promoted a healthy lifestyle for youth living in a rural community. Occupational therapists, in the business of helping people to transform their lives through enabling them to do and to be through the process of becoming²³ could emulate the dance programme.

Limitations of the study

The rural area in which the research study took place, required the researchers to travel for two and a half hours to reach the community. Only two days were available for data collection. As a consequence, member checking with participants from the focus group was not done. Instead, trustworthiness of the study was ensured by providing a detailed audit trail.

Conclusion

The findings of the research study suggest that participation in dancing classes enabled youth living in a rural community to change their destinies, to develop their occupational potential and to alter their lifestyles. The barriers to human development contained in rural communities characterised by cycles of inter-generational poverty and historical disadvantage could be buffered by rural youth's participation in the occupation of dance, introduced by a Rural Outreach Dance Programme. The success of developmental interventions such as the one introduced by the dancing company can be understood comprehensively from an occupational perspective offered by the occupational therapy profession. The research study also suggests that there is hidden potential for inter-sectoral /organisational collaboration as a tool for developing rural communities. While the South African Government includes capacity building and integration as goals in the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (to have been achieved by 2010) they have not specified which resources must be developed or integrated⁶. This study begins to address that question.

Recommendations

It is recommended that strategies to foster understanding about the potential for occupational development, as a rural development strategy in Occupational therapy education and practice in the South African context, be considered.

Furthermore, that an inter-sectoral meeting between South African Government representatives responsible for the Rural Development Programme, representatives from Dance-For-All, a non-governmental organisation, researchers and Occupational Therapists, be arranged to disseminate the research findings. Strategic partnerships amongst these role-players could also be initiated.

The success of the dancing programme described in this study, was not limited only to the dance activity but included numerous activities nested within the occupation of dance. Such nesting in an occupation should be explored in further research.

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