

An infinite search for the talisman

Chapter Seven

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

...educate these sons and daughters...so that they may develop... and combine human perfection, that they may advance in all aspects of human endeavour, whether outward or inward, hidden or visible, material or spiritual... (Selections from the writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, 1978:128)

7.1 The journey towards the *talisman*

This research study started with a question about the possibility of loss of *talisman* in South African youth. Being involved in a variety of serious types of youth problematique, South African youth seem to have lost interest in their *talisman* or the sense of excellence. In response to their predicament, a programme called the Youth Enrichment Programme (YEP) was created and an NGO was formed to implement it. The purpose of the programme was to improve the cognitive, social and moral behaviour of the youth in an attempt to defeat the youth problematique and awaken the sense of *talisman* in them.

The programme was implemented in a limited number of schools in 1999. A journey started that became the centre of this research study, a journey of search for the *talisman*. The question asked by this research was:

Is YEP an effective life skills intervention programme that can bring South African youth closer to their state of talisman?

In pursuit of an answer to this overarching research question, it became necessary to raise other questions. Five questions were formulated, each of which became a stage in the journey of search for the *talisman*:

- What is the relevance of YEP to the needs of South African youth?
- What philosophical and theoretical principles underpin YEP?
- What methodological approaches are adopted in YEP?
- How do the design structure and features of YEP relate to the theoretical and methodological principles?
- Does YEP influence the cognitive, social, and moral behaviour of South African secondary school learners?

At the first stage in the journey in search of “*What happened to the talisman?*” a needs analysis of the South African youth was conducted. The research showed that South African youth are greatly at risk, as they are influenced by factors from their historical background (the apartheid era) as well as global factors that increase the extent of the youth problematique. The South African youth problematique was put into social, political, economic and moral perspective. The analysis of YEP showed that several themes in the programme – such as AIDS, Alcohol Abuse, Drug Abuse and Peer Pressure – directly address the youth problematique. Moreover, the content of case studies, questions and dilemmas used in the programme to some extent also reflect the social, emotional and political background of South African youth.

The needs analysis further alluded to the fact that the educational needs of youth are diverse and therefore should be addressed multi-dimensionally. Three domains of need – cognitive, social and moral – were identified; these domains relate to the three domains of learning addressed in YEP. Investigations into the developmental characteristics of youth indicated that the cognitive, social, emotional and moral capabilities and limitations of adolescence have been taken into consideration. This

has been achieved by way of adopting strategies such as questioning to encourage abstract thinking, group work for peer involvement, and life-oriented topics that suit the interest and developmental characteristics of this age group. Moreover, it was discovered that the intended skills and outcomes of YEP correspond with most of the Critical Outcomes and Specific Outcomes in the Life Orientation Learning Area of the OBE general education and training curriculum.

The next stage in the journey in search of the *talisman* was to determine the philosophical grounds and theoretical underpinning of YEP. A programme that aimed to rejuvenate the sense of *talisman* in the youth needed to be grounded on a different paradigm far from the paradigm that contributed to its downfall. The discussion in Chapter Three – *In search of talisman: the theory?* – demonstrated that YEP is based on the new world order paradigm which emphasises the spiritual aspect of the man, the oneness of human-kind, and the oneness of the world. These principles in turn necessitated accepting the principle of unity in diversity and equality for all regardless of their differences. Considering these principles and in view of the needs of the South African youth, two main functions were identified in the life skills programme of YEP – healing and building. The healing function was aimed at freeing youth from the psychological scars of the past, while the building function meant to give them the skills needed to live in a global society. Educational principles such as spiritual awakening, justice, caring, honouring the self, and holistic education were singled out as the basic principles for healing of the psychological and spiritual wounds of South African youth.

Chapter Four dealt with the next stage of the journey – *In search of talisman: the methodology*. The analysis of the methodological approaches and teaching strategies of YEP demonstrated that authentic, transformational and multi-domain approaches were adopted to build and capacitate youth with cognitive and affective skills. A rigorous search of the nature and principles of change and multi-domain teaching showed that teaching affective outcomes could not be done in the same way as

teaching cognitive outcomes. It became clear that the choice of teaching strategies needed to be made carefully, considering the process of change as well as the nature of the intended learning outcomes.

The discussion in Chapter Five – *Search for the talisman: the design* – concentrated on design features and transformational patterns used in YEP. It became apparent that YEP uses multiple strategies and transformational design patterns to translate its theoretical and methodological principles into practice, thus illustrating a distinguished feature of the practice theory approach.

To sum up, Celeste Brody's (1998:29-32) definition of the transformational approach describes the multi-faceted nature of YEP very well:

The transformational approach is multi-dimensional, multi-purpose and multi-technique. It uses authentic and life-oriented situations and participatory learning techniques that require of the learners to be active players and co-learners. In transformational approach physical, cognitive, affective, spiritual and moral are integrated and linked. Learners are expected to become self-directed problem solvers who find their own meaning and develop their own value systems. Multiple perspectives are promoted and examined as the learners use dialogue and cooperative methods to find answers to their problems.

Having established the conceptual foundations and design characteristics of YEP in the first five chapters of the study, the programme was put to the test in real classrooms. It was time to see if YEP could improve the behaviour of the youth and bring them closer to their *talisman*.

Through the empirical research presented in Chapter Six – *Has talisman been regained?* – an attempt was made to answer the question, “Does YEP influence the cognitive, social and moral behaviour of South African secondary school learners?” Four hundred and fifty secondary learners in two provinces in five different grades were exposed to YEP for a minimum period of two and half months. The influence of

YEP on the learners was studied both quantitatively and qualitatively. The analysis of data within and across the five case studies demonstrated that YEP had a positive effect on the cognitive, social and moral behaviour of the learners. It was noted that the most significant influence of the programme was on the moral behaviour of learners.

It is granted that the results of the study cannot be generalised, due to the fact that the sample studied was not representative of the population of South African secondary school learners, and also because the nature of case study research does not allow for generalisation. Nevertheless, the findings remain valid as on the one hand they provide a thorough understanding of the effect of YEP on the learners, and on the other bring to light new and unexpected findings.

7.2 Unexpected findings

The results of the case studies, especially the qualitative data, brought to light some interesting information that was not anticipated at the initial stage of the intervention. The following are among them:

7.2.1 Setting the learning climate for YEP

During the course of piloting the YEP intervention programme in schools, observations indicated that learners needed an orientation course to prepare them for learning in the YEP classes. Learners were used to a “rational” approach to academic subjects and tended to use the same approach to learning in YEP, whereas many of its topics actually needed contemplation and affective responses. For this reason a short pre-YEP training course was designed to introduce the learners to a different process of thinking and learning.

7.2.2 Peer learning facilitation

One of the most valuable and interesting results that emerged from this study was the discovery of the effectiveness of peer learning facilitation. Three of the facilitators in the five case studies were young matriculants who had no teaching experience. Comments by the learners as well as the teachers about the functioning of these facilitators showed that these young facilitators were very effective, as the following points indicate:

- Not even one school found it necessary to send away the youth facilitators due to their age or more importantly due to their lack of competence or mismatching with the school's environment.
- The young facilitators proved to be effective to the degree that the principals and the school authorities asked for an extension of their stay. The comments from the teachers quoted in Chapter Six clearly indicate that these youth proved to be of value to the schools. In Case Study 2, we read in the comments of one of the teachers that the youth facilitator set a good example for the students in the schools. In Case Study 3, it was stated that the young facilitator should be permanently employed in the school. In Case Studies 4 and 5, remarks by teachers and learners reflected their satisfaction with the quality of the work the young facilitators rendered.

The discovery of the ability of youth to facilitate learning in their own age group – peer facilitation – could have significant implications for the Department of Education that may want to consider utilising unemployed youth in educating their peers. This could address the problem of unemployment among the youth and at the same time render effective facilitation. Obviously this suggestion needs further research and thorough investigation and planning.

7.2.3 School environment

Another unexpected outcome of the intervention was that the teachers in Case Studies 2 to 5 commented on the positive influence of the programme on the attitude of the learners towards learning as well as their educators. In their qualitative remarks, the teachers asked for the continuation of YEP saying that the programme had improved discipline, attendance in classes, open communication with educators, and respect for school authorities. Interestingly, even their “negative comments” were about YEP *not being* introduced to more classes and learners in their schools. These comments show that the effect of the programme moved beyond the boundaries of the YEP classes, extending to the wider community in the school.

7.2.4 The young facilitators

The three facilitators in the five case studies were between the ages of 19 and 26. They were sent to the schools in spite of the fact that they were not trained teachers, and were young and inexperienced; there was some scepticism about the outcomes of their performance. The only criterion that was used in selecting these youth was reliance on their relatively high moral character. Since these facilitators were youth themselves, it was interesting to determine if the process of facilitating YEP had influenced them. For this reason the facilitators were asked to write a short report about their personal experiences with facilitating YEP. What they wrote was very revealing and beyond anticipation. Their comments showed that they had been affected by the process of facilitating the programme, and in some ways had been personally transformed.

According to the young facilitator in Case Study 2, the process of facilitation of YEP had helped him to improve his self-confidence and communication skills – “*YEP changed a lot of aspects of my life*”.

The young facilitator in Case Study 3 referred to “*some kind of expansion and transformation in my entire life*”. He also felt that his communication skills had improved and that he had gained enough confidence to work with other teachers. He even declared, “*I feel more educated than ever before, although I’m in no possession of a university or technikon qualification*”.

The facilitator in Case Study 5 felt the pressure of being in the school and of being challenged by the learners, who in most cases were about his age: “*I thought I should go back home...*”. However, he also developed self-confidence and overcame the challenge of teaching his peers: “*...but at the end of the day, I managed to pull myself up and acted like a teacher*”.

The comments of the facilitators demonstrate that the process of facilitation of YEP developed them to the degree that they felt comfortable working with educators who possessed professional degrees and who were often older than them. This finding shows that, when given the responsibility and opportunity, the youth can rise to the occasion and deliver beyond adults' expectations. Certainly there is need for further research and investigation on this finding.

7.3 Weaknesses of YEP

There is no programme that does not need improvement and revision. The case studies showed that at times the programme becomes monotonous. Five learners in Case Study 2 found the programme “*sometimes boring*” and three learners in other case studies responded to YEP negatively. In spite of the fact that only a few learners were unsatisfied with YEP, it does indicate that the programme needs elements in it to keep it exciting.

To address this shortcoming, alternatives and more sophisticated strategies such as drama, group and individual projects, stories and extracts from newspapers can be considered.

In addition to the weaknesses identified through the case studies, a number of subject specialists in Life Skills, Guidance teachers, heads of departments, and counsellors were asked to give their opinions about the programme. It must be noted that these individuals did not attend the YEP Facilitators training course, nor did they use the programme themselves; therefore, their input is based purely on reading the YEP manual and their personal points of view. The major criticisms they made of the programme and the possible solutions are presented below:

- *Some factual information about various topics in the manual is missing.* This is true as the programme does not make much room for knowledge and factual information on the topics discussed. This is because the programme was designed with the assumption that the life skills curriculum in schools provides learners with the relevant information, and YEP was developed to complement that curriculum. However, in order to overcome this shortcoming fact sheets on some of the topics can be added at the end of the relevant themes.
- *More African names and concepts should be included.* More African names will be included in the next version of YEP. However, to include more African concepts will require further research on African traditions and rituals.
- *The programme should include some practical activities to be used as a follow up after completion of the programme.* To address this recommendation small community projects such as school clean-up projects and visits to hospitals are suggested. In fact, as it happened in the school in Case Study 3, the creation of vegetable gardens and dance and drama groups are recommended.
- *Some kind of formal assessment of the learners should be included in the curriculum.* Formal tests and evaluations customary in other subjects were intentionally avoided in YEP due to the non-competitive and non-measurable

nature of some of the outcomes. A new way of assessment, that matches the nature of the outcomes of the programme, will have to be researched before it can be included.

- *The language of the quotations is often difficult for the learners.* The kind of quotations used and the messages they carry require a higher level of language competency which challenges the learners. Therefore, the solution is not to change the quotations but to acquaint the learners with this kind of literature. For the sake of convenience, the glossary, which is presently situated at the end of the manual, should be integrated into the structure of the themes.
- *The types of quotations used in the themes should be more diverse.* This is a relevant concern. The quotations should be more balanced as far as different religions are concerned. Moreover, other inspiring quotations from literature – such as words of wisdom, proverbs, and quotations from great thinkers – may be included. However, the key is the use of those literary materials that promote universal values and are inspirational.

7.4 Principles emerging from this study

Several important principles that emerged from this study need to be highlighted. In the life skills programme, transformative learning depends on the following principles:

- A programme envisaging transformative learning should focus on the process of quality learning.
- The programme should be based on sound theoretical and educational principles that satisfy the requirements of our times, the age of globalisation.
- Values such as oneness and care for individuals as bearers of *talisman* in creating a peaceful and united world should be the foundation upon which a life skills programme operates.

- The curriculum should be relevant to the social, emotional, economical, political, and cultural background of its target group.
- The curriculum should be relevant to the requirements of the developmental age of the learners.
- The programme should promote holistic development.
- Holistic learning requires an integrated approach to facilitating learning.
- The spiritual aspect, or the *talisman* of the learners, should be given special attention.
- Sufficient provision should be made to deal with the affective domain as it takes on a prominent position in transformative learning in a life skills programme.
- The methodological and facilitating learning strategies adopted should be relevant to the characteristics of the learning domains and the set outcomes.
- In a life skills programme where the outcomes focus on transformative learning, affective and cognitive learning both support the process even though they differ.
- The characteristics and the process of change should be taken into consideration when designing a life skills programme.
- The design of a programme should be able to offer practical steps for implementing the theoretical principles.
- Reflection becomes a main ingredient in the design of the programme.
- Establishing a climate conducive to learning should be incorporated in the design.
- The curriculum should make use of authentic and pertinent real life examples.
- The role of peers in learning should not be ignored but needs to become more prominent.

7.5 Contributions of the study

This study is significant in the following ways:

- The study drew on theory and practice to field test an educational programme. From the empirical research a comprehensive picture of the effect of the programme could be established. The qualitative research provided an in-depth report on the way in which the programme influenced learners, and the quantitative research provided the extent of the effect of the programme.
- The study focused on a programme that was created in response to a social need in South African society. It accommodated the concern of the government regarding the relevance of research programmes to the needs of society. : “*There is insufficient articulation between the different elements of the research system, and between the research system and national needs for social, economic, cultural and intellectual reconstruction* (DoE, 1997:24-25).
- The study proved the soundness of the theoretical principles behind YEP – that is, a belief in the *talisman*, the oneness of humankind, and unity in diversity as fundamental principles for maintaining individual dignity and advancement, as well as preparing for a peaceful world.
- The study included and exposed a variety of factors and complex ingredients that govern a curriculum for the holistic behaviour improvement of youth.
- The study shed light on the different learning domains and their distinguishing characteristics, showing a notable difference between cognitive and affective domains.
- The study provided a fresh look at teaching strategies and their relationship to the learning domains.
- The study gave an in-depth analysis of the relationships between the principles, teaching strategies, and design characteristics of the programme, thus indicating the importance and interrelationship of the three factors.
- The study offered practical and workable suggestions for transformational learning.
- The study concentrated on a programme which is relevant to the newly-introduced Life Orientation Learning Area in Grades 10, 11 and 12. Therefore, experiences gained from this study can be of benefit to the educators of this

subject.

- In light of the new developments in South Africa in respect of the Moral Regeneration Movement, research studies on programmes like YEP that address moral development are enlightening.
- The study discovered the value of peer facilitation.
- The study focused on the development of *talisman*, an important aspect in the life of the learners, which has long been neglected in education.

7.6 Suggestions for further research

The following topics were identified during the course of this study as worthy of further research:

- A comparative study of the influence of YEP on the learning domains of the youth within the school system and outside the school system, for example, in a prison.
- To compare the difference in the influence of YEP on the learners when conducted by trained peer facilitators and by trained teachers.
- To conduct intensive research on peer learning facilitation in respect of its effect on both learners and peer facilitators.
- To investigate the influence of the moral and spiritual beliefs of the YEP facilitators on the facilitation process and the learning outcomes.
- To conduct quasi-experimental research to compare and measure the influence of YEP in preventing the youth problematique in schools.

7.7 Conclusion

The dream of YEP was partly to awaken a sense of *talisman* in South African youth. Its establishment was a rewarding endeavour for all involved as it improved the cognitive and affective behaviour of the learners and in the process brought them closer to the state of *supreme talisman*. Moreover, the programme affected the young facilitators so that they felt transformed.

Many positive results were experienced with YEP. However, in the same way as the search for perfecting the *talisman* is never ending, the effort to improve the programme will continue, as it is also a never-ending and infinite endeavour.

It is my heart-felt wish that this research study and the Youth Enrichment Programme will help many educators and youth in South Africa to find fulfilment in their search for the *supreme talisman*. Together may we fulfil our destiny as members of the human community, inspired by the words of Thomas Berry:

Here we meet as absolute equals to face our ultimate tasks as human beings within the life systems of the planet Earth. We have before us the question not simply of physical survival, but of survival in a human mode of being, survival and development into intelligent, affectionate, imaginative persons thoroughly enjoying the universe about us (cited by Barney, 1999:86).