

PLAYING SPORT IN THE STORMY SEA OF STREET LIFE

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Abstract

Currently, there are many street children in South Africa (SA). They have been robbed from the safe harbour of family life and on a daily basis experience the stormy sea of street life. Society has an obligation to intervene in the lives of these street children through, for example, quality education, basic health services and sport programmes. This article focuses on six street children in Tshwane, SA, who participated in a 'Learning Life Skills through Sport' programme that ran over a period of six months in 2006. After the programme had been completed the six street children were asked to narrate their experiences of the programme. These narratives were analyzed by means of narrative analysis. From the findings it seems that these six street children acquired 'personal-related skills' (e.g. respect, enjoyment) as well 'sport-related skills' in various sports (e.g. soccer, cricket), and that the 'Learning Life Skills through Sport' programme allowed them to experience a safe harbour amidst the stormy sea of street life.

Key words: Street children, life skills, sport, narrative metaphor, narrative analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Article 28 in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa (SA) a child's 'best interest' is always of paramount importance.

Metaphorically, the nine sections that constitute Article 28 of the Constitution of SA proclaim that children should live within a safe harbour. This entails, for example, the right to a name, to parental care, to family life, to healthy nutrition, to a good education and to quality health care (Constitution of South Africa, 1996).

However, many children in SA do not live in a safe harbour, but find themselves in the stormy sea of street life with its strong currents, wild winds and enormous waves. Metaphorically, the stormy sea often entails experiences, for example, of abandonment, poor health, physical neglect and sexual abuse. Street children are particularly at risk due to their vulnerable age and socio-economic status, often stigmatized and deprived of their human rights (Le Roux & Smith, 1998; Lockhat & Van Niekerk, 2000).

Street children can be seen as a commentary on society's inability to care for many of its most vulnerable members, namely its children. The stormy sea of street life that street children have to face everyday is harsh. Street children need to be brought back from the stormy sea of street life to the safe waters of a harbour,

which should be characterized by parental care, family life, healthy nutrition, good education and quality health care.

In 2006, four MA (Counselling Psychology) students of the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria (UP), in conjunction with TuksSport (Pty) Ltd and the Tshwane Alliance for Street Children (TASC), implemented a 'Learning Life Skills through Sport' programme¹ with the street children residing in 'Crossroads Shelter for Street Children'² in Tshwane, SA. The aim of this programme was to allow the street children from this shelter to experientially learn life skills through the medium of sport. In other words, the programme attempted to calm the stormy sea of street life by allowing the street children from this shelter to experience something of a safe harbour through sport. The programme was run over a period of six months, after which the street children were asked how they experienced the programme. Therefore, the goal of this research was to understand how the street children experienced the programme and what life skills they had learnt through the programme.

¹ Hereafter referred to as programme.

² A shelter provides institutional care for more than six homeless children who reside in these facilities on a voluntary basis (Gauteng Street Children Shelters Act, Act 16 of 1998).

LITERATURE

A 'child' in SA is any person under the age of 18 years (Child Care Act, Act 74 of 1983; Constitution of South Africa, 1996). A 'street child' is a child who spends most of his/her time on the street, detached from his/her family, and in institutional care as a result of homelessness (Gauteng Street Children Shelters Act, Act 16 of 1998). In SA one third of street children return home after a brief period on the street, another third remain on the streets for a period of six to 18 months, whilst the remaining third live on the streets for over two years. This exceeds the one month period of First World countries (Le Roux, 1993).

There are approximately 10 000 street children in SA with the ratio of boys to girls being 3:1 (Tshwane Alliance for Street Children [TASC], 2005). The preponderance of male SA street children is due to the reduced rate of girls being abandoned, as well as girls finding alternate accommodation and falling into prostitution (Swart, 1988). The majority of street children in SA lies between the ages of 13 and 16 (Le Roux, 1996), and is primarily from previously disadvantaged communities and considered to be victims of the apartheid policy (Ross, 1991; Swart, 1988).

There are various factors that cause children to leave the family life of the harbour and become part of the stormy sea of street life. In a study done in North America it was found that precipitating factors for children leaving home include age, gender, family and region (Sanchez, Waller & Greene, 2006). Street children tend to be victims of family breakdown, which often includes physical and sexual abuse and leads to children leaving home (Salem & Abd el-Latif, 2002). A study on street children versus non-street children done in Nigeria indicated that street children are predominately male, from large families with low-levels of education. Their parents tend to be unskilled workers, with deprived education levels, experiencing marital disruption. The boys leave their familial environments due to poverty and parental/familial reasons, seeking income-yielding activities on the street as a substitute living arrangement (Aderinto, 2000). According to SA street children family violence, abuse, parental alcoholism, poverty, and personal reasons are motivating factors for leaving home. There are pulling and pushing factors within the SA context which result in a child leaving home. Pulling factors include the desire for independence and improved living conditions, whilst pushing factors include urbanisation, population pressure,

need for increased income, family size, and child abandonment (Le Roux, 1996).

Living in the stormy sea of street life as children has a profound effect on the lives of street children. A study done in South America with 69 street children, revealed that the street life shapes and restricts how these children perceive their future, as pessimistic responses were provided in the sentence completion where the sentence began with: "For me, the future..." (Raffaelli & Koller, 2005). In Ukrainian shelters for street children 70% of the street children exhibited behavioural and emotional difficulties, with 74% of 97 children scoring high on depression on the Mood and Feelings Questionnaire (Kerfoot, Koshyl, Roganov, Mikhailichenko, Gorbova & Pottage, 2007). A study conducted in Kenya amongst 216 adolescents indicated that despite the youth being involved in education and religion, social change often brings about uncertainty experienced by the youth, which then can lead to the youth developing dysfunctional coping skills such as drug abuse and prostitution (Balmer, Gikundi, Billingsley, Kihuh, Kimani, Wang'ondy & Njoroge, 1997).

Furthermore, it seems that street children often have a low self esteem, experience apathy, and have a fatalistic view of life. However, it seems that an internal locus of control tends to lessen pathological symptoms in street children (Le Roux & Smith, 1998).

Studies in sport reveal a positive relationship between intellectual functioning and regular physical activity in children (Bailey, 2006). In studies where the academic curriculum time was reduced to incorporate physical education, students' academic results were maintained or improved, with less behavioural problems and less absenteeism (Sallis, McKenzie, Kolody, Lewis, Marshall & Rosengard, 1999; Shephard, 1997). The physical outcomes of sport include improved quality of life and reduced risk of diseases such as diabetes, blood pressure, and obesity in children (Bailey, 2006). With the decline in physical activity amongst youth in the United States of America (USA), there has been an increase in obesity and other weight related chronic diseases (Hedley, Ogden, Johnson, Carroll, Curtin & Flegal, 2004). Studies indicate that inactivity in childhood follows into adulthood (Raitakari, Porkka, Taimela, Rasanen & Viikari, 1994). This then culminates in a lifestyle associated with ill-health (Bailey, 2006).

It was established in the early 1990's that sport provided the platform for nation building through equality in SA (Paterson, 1991), and also has the potential to create a sense of national unity (South African Rugby and Football Union [SARFU], 2004). This was evident in events such the Rugby World Cup of 1995 and 2007, as well as SA winning the Soccer World Cup bid for 2010. Sport is an important aspect of society and can assist children in life skills development and youth identity (South African Sports Commission [SASC], 2004; Carrington, 1998). In this study the focus was on allowing street children to learn life skills through sport. Metaphorically stated, to create the stability of the harbour amidst the stormy sea of street life through sport.

METHOD

Context

The Department of Psychology at the UP presents three professional psychology training programmes, being MA (Clinical Psychology), MA (Counselling Psychology) and MA (Research Psychology). Besides three core modules, namely Fundamentals of Psychology, Psychological Assessment and Counselling Psychology, the MA (Counselling Psychology) has two elective modules, namely Community Psychology and Sport Psychology.

The research reported in this article was done from within the MA (Counselling Psychology/ Sport Psychology)¹ programme.

Programme

The programme was facilitated from April 2006 to September 2006 by four MA (Counselling Psychology/Sport Psychology) students from the Department of Psychology at the UP, in conjunction with TuksSport (Pty) Ltd and the TASC. TuksSport (Pty) Ltd was primarily responsible for the four students transport from the High Performance Centre (HPC) at the UP to Jopie Fourie Primary School in Salvokop and back, and also provided the sporting equipment used during this programme. The TASC was the link between the Department of Psychology at the UP and the street children of 'Crossroads Shelter for Street Children' in Tshwane who participated in this programme.

The programme was facilitated for one and a half hours per week according to a briefing - activity (sport) - debriefing model (Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988). After a warm-up session, the briefing phase was used to brief the street children about that particular sessions programme.

After this the street children participated in an activity (sport) of their choice (e.g. soccer, cricket, rugby), which was followed by a debriefing phase, in which the students and street children discussed what they had learnt about themselves during that particular day, and how this could be translated back to life at the shelter.

Participants

This research drew on a purposive sampling technique; therefore, the participants were selected according to certain criteria which served the purposes of the research (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). These criteria were:

Age: The participants in the research had to be children and therefore under the age of 18 years².

Shelter: The participants in the research had to be residents of a shelter for street children that fell under the auspices of the TASK.

Participation: The participants in the research must have participated in the six month programme and attended 80% of the programme so as to ensure extensive exposure to the programme.

Six of approximately 20 street children, who were residents of 'Crossroad Shelter for Street Children' in 2006 adhered to these criteria, and were invited to participate in the research.

³ The MA (Counselling Psychology/Sport Psychology) programme refers to the MA (Counselling Psychology) programme, with specialization in Sport Psychology.

Position

The narrative metaphor was adopted as the theoretical stance for the research. Narrative can be seen as the primary metaphor available to people to make sense of experiences (Edwards, 1997; Monk, Winslade, Crocket & Epston, 1997). Johnson (1993, p.11) states “narrative is a fundamental mode of understanding, by means of which we make sense of all forms of human action”.

The narratives people construct are primarily shaped by history and culture, as narrative is the meeting place of experience, history and culture (Crossley, 2000; Lock, Epston & Maisel, 2004; Sclater, 2003; White & Epston, 1990). History implies that when people narrate their experiences they do it by taking past-lived experiences and possible future experiences into account, as past and future fuse into the present narrative (Larner, 1998).

Furthermore, people also draw on culture when narrating their experiences. According to Cushman (1995, p.17-18):

Culture is not indigenous ‘clothing’ that covers the universal human; rather it is an integral part of each individual’s psychological

flesh and bones ... the material objects we create, the ideas we hold and the actions we take are shaped in a fundamental way by the social framework we have been raised in.

However, narratives are not just constructed by people, but they themselves have a constitutive ability (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). Andrews (2000, p.77-78) writes:

Stories are not only the way in which we come to ascribe significance to experiences ... they are one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves ... We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell.

It would therefore seem that there is a circular interaction between how people construct narratives to help them make sense of experiences, while the narratives themselves have a constitutive character in shaping the lives of people who construct the narratives. Adopting the narrative metaphor as theoretical stance for this research, the street children who participated in the research could on the one hand narrate their experiences of the programme, while on the other hand the narratives they constructed could have a constitutive effect on their lives.

⁴ See the years Constitution of SA (1996) and Child Care Act (Act 74 of 1983) for the definition of ‘child’.

MATERIAL

In this research interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), that were audio-taped via a dictaphone, were conducted by researchers at Jopie Fourie Primary School at the end of the programme. The goal of the interviews was to allow the street children to narrate their experience(s) of the programme. Once the interviews had been conducted they were transcribed verbatim by the researchers.

The transcribed narratives were analyzed by means of a narrative analysis (Human, in press), which entailed the following process:

Phase 1: Context: The researchers established the context against which the street children's narratives were to be analyzed, being urban street life.

Phase 2: Message: The researcher read each street child's narrative to form an initial impression of the message of each child's narrative.

Phase 3: History: The street children's narratives were analyzed with the aim of understanding how history formed the backdrop to the message of the street children's narratives. History refers to the period the street children had been living in the stormy sea of street life, as within the narrative metaphor this could influence the construction of their narratives about the programme.

Phase 4: Culture: The street children's narratives were analyzed to explore which culture meanings were employed to construct the

message of each child's narrative. Within the narrative metaphor, it is not just the history that shapes the construction of a narrative, but also the cultural meaning that is attributed to an event, for example, the programme.

Phase 5: Message: Through the analysis of the street children's narratives, the initial message was conformed or adapted, based in the work done in Phase 3 and Phase 4.

The quality of the narrative analysis was enhanced by means of coding-recoding and peer review (Krefting, 1991). Firstly, the process of coding-recoding of the street children's narratives entailed that the researchers independently analysed the street children's narratives at a certain point in time, left the narrative analysis for a period, and then analysed the street children's narratives again. The two sets of narrative analysis were then compared with one another. Secondly, the narrative analysis was presented to four fellow MA (Counselling Psychology) students in the Department of Psychology at the UP, as well as to one psychologist at the University of South Africa (UNISA) as a form of peer review.

Ethics

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the UP, as well as from the TASK.

The street children were informed of the purpose and method of the research, as well as the voluntary nature thereof. All six street children who were invited to participate in the research accepted the invitation.

RESULTS

In this section the results of each street child's narrative are portrayed, with specific focus on playing sport in the stormy sea of street life.

Participant A

This street child was a 16 year old male person who had been living in 'Crossroads Shelter for Street Children' for one year prior to the programme (history). He narrated his experience of the programme as one of 'enjoyment' (meaning).

Although he was not fluent in English, he was still able to convey his experience of the programme by stating 'I like to play this' and 'I like to play rugby...I like to play ball'. It seems that he primarily attributed the meaning of enjoyment to the programme. The stormy sea of street life, where for example abuse and/or neglect run rampage, is predominantly characterized by survival experiences (Cockburn, 1991; Ensign, 2006). It seems from his narrative that the programme

allowed for an alternative experience, not of survival, but of enjoyment.

This street child's narrative of enjoyment is echoed in other research where by children who have participated in the development of life skills through sport-based programmes, have experienced enjoyment (Bailey 2004, 2006; Larson, 2000; Petitpas, Van Raalte, Cornelius & Presbrey, 2004).

Participant B

This street child was a 17 year old male person who had been living in 'Crossroads Shelter for Street Children' for three months prior to the programme. He narrated his experience of the programme as 'moving from boring to helping'.

It seems from his narrative that when he first arrived at the programme he expected the programme to be boring, as he states that 'the first time I came here I thought it was going to be boring'. However, his experience of the programme changed and he started looking forward to participating in the programme. He says 'even the following week I was like when is it going to be? I wish it was Friday so that we can play soccer again'. He then indicates in his narrative that he experienced the programme to be helpful.

On the one hand the programme was helpful in that he had ‘something to do on Fridays so I don’t go out and do such things like stealing or drinking, or do things that are not right to do’, while on the other hand the programme was also helpful in that he learnt ‘how to play soccer’, ‘how to respect other players’, and ‘how to talk to people’. He continues firstly by giving an example of what it means to him to ‘respect other players’ in the phrase ‘last time we chose, we chose soccer and the others wanted to play cricket. I thought maybe today we can choose cricket. We always choose soccer and the others do not want to play soccer...they are not good at it’ and secondly by giving an example of what it means to him ‘to talk to people’ in the words ‘if someone is angry, I just talk to him nicely and if he’s really angry, I’ll leave him, then I’ll talk to him later’. It seems that the programme was not just about sport to him, but it was also about learning how to ‘respect other players’ and ‘how to talk to people’. It provided something different to the ‘norm’ of the stormy street life where ‘stealing’ and/or ‘drinking’ typically occur (Le Roux & Smith, 1998; Lockhat & Van Niekerk, 2000). He concludes his experience of the programme by stating ‘I want you guys to help us more...like twice a week next year’.

This street child’s narrative is consistent with other research on learning life skills through sport amongst urban youth. This research also indicates that pro-social behaviour is increased, and anti-social behaviour decreased when street children participate in sport (Brunelle, Danish & Forneris, 2007; Olley, 2006; Petitpas et al., 2004).

Participant C

This street child was a 17 year old male person who had been living in ‘Crossroads Shelter for Street Children’ for four months prior to the programme. He narrated his experience of the programme as being ‘more than just about sport’.

Originally he thought the programme was all about sport, as he states ‘I thought that it was like soccer and athletics. The things that I thought of, but when I arrived here I saw...ok, it’s a big project. Soccer, sometimes cricket, what you call... rugby’. However, as time passed by he started to realize that the programme was more than just about sport, as he says ‘as time goes by I saw it’s not a soccer practice, its all about your ability. To improve...maybe the way you treat people’.

He then continues to elaborate on the programme being more than just about sport by referring to the aspects of respect, morality and dignity in 'when we play here we get to know respect, to know each other, respect each other...we show each other a right thing, not the wrong thing...understand each other, that's the thing that we do experience...and dignity and respect'. It seems from his narrative that the programme allowed him to experience respect, morality and dignity, phenomena that are often foreign to the stormy street life (Balmer et al., 1997; Le Roux & Smith, 1998). He concludes his narrative by referring to the pay-offs of participating in the programme in that the programme counters boredom and evokes happiness, in the words 'when I'm sitting at home like on Friday, it's so boring cause you sit the whole day, but when I come here I learn new things that I don't know' and 'usually when I come here when I go home after this project, I go home being happy'.

This street child's narrative is congruent with other research findings which indicate that the presence of life skills, for example respect, dignity and morality, amongst street children are enhanced through sport-based interventions (Bailey, 2004; 2006; Balmer et al., 1997; Larson, 2000).

Participant D

This street child was a 16 year old male person who had spent nine months in 'Crossroads Shelter for Street Children' prior to the programme. He narrated his experience of the programme as 'learning about sport and respect'.

His narrative is predominantly one of learning and he articulates his experience of the programme through two secondary narratives, namely, that of learning about sport and that of learning about respect. The first secondary narrative of learning about sport through the programme contained two elements as can be seen in the words 'it's nice to learn about sport' and 'we can have a future of sport'. It seems that on the one hand he was afforded the opportunity through the programme to learn more about the sport activities that formed part of the programme (i.e. soccer, cricket, rugby), while on the other hand it appears that his participation in the programme evoked the possibility with him of having a future in sport.

It could indicate that the future might be one characterized by sporting experiences and not just the survival experiences of the stormy sea of street life.

The second secondary narrative of learning about respect through the programme can be seen in the words ‘I learnt respecting other guys in sport’. His narrative then continues by him applying learning about sport and learning about respect to the ‘Crossroads Shelter for Street Children’ context as is evident in ‘like we learn sport at home too...and we learn how to respect each other’.

This street child’s narrative of learning how to play sport (e.g. soccer) and acquiring life skills (e.g. respect) is consistent with other research findings (Bailey, 2004; Kraft & Sakof, 1988; Petitpas et al., 2004). His secondary narrative of ‘we can have a future of sport’ is somewhat optimistic and inconsistent with, for example, research findings in the USA where street children tend to have a pessimistic outlook on life (Raffaelli & Koller, 2005). However, his statement of ‘we can have a future of sport’ could on the one hand be interpreted in the context of having a career in sport in the future, or on the other hand it could be interpreted as street children approaching the future, not just with the survival experiences of the stormy sea of street life, but also with sport that allows for the creation of playing experiences amidst the stormy sea of street life.

Participant E

This street child was a 14 year old male person who had spent two years in ‘Crossroads Shelter for Street Children’ prior to the programme. He narrated his experience of the programme as ‘learning about respect and craving for competition’.

His narrative primarily seems to be one of learning about respect, as he states ‘the purpose here is to respect others and respect our friends’, and he also indicates that he is using what he learnt through the programme at the shelter by stating ‘at the shelter where I’m staying. I’m using it there’. Furthermore, he gives a suggestion on how the programme can be improved in the future by introducing the aspect of competition in ‘I think if you can get people, like Tshwane Alliance for Street Children people to come and challenge us to play soccer. That would be nice for us’, and through competition he is of the opinion that they ‘would learn us how to play soccer’. He then continues by giving a value judgement of the programme through the words ‘we did play stuff and it did teach us a lot of stuff, it was nice, it was cool’.

This street child’s narrative echoes results where learning respect occurred through playing (Bailey, 2004; 2006).

His request to learn more about soccer and to be exposed to competition is also supported by other research (Henry, 1999). Furthermore, his value judgment of the programme as 'it was nice, it was cool' seems to be consistent with other similar research where enjoyment has been an experience of children who have participated in sport-based programmes (Bailey 2004, 2006; Larson, 2000; Petitpas et al., 2004).

Participant F

This street child was a 17 year old male person who had spent one year in 'Crossroads Shelter for Street Children' prior to the programme. He narrated his experience of the programme as 'learning only about sport'.

He was dropped off at 'Crossroads Shelter for Street Children' by his parents as they 'could not pay for him'. On the one hand it seems that his narrative regarding the programme generally focused on his experience of learning sport as he states 'you remember that time you were teaching me rugby...I like that thing...they teaching me cricket, that's what I like...that's what I like in this project'. Furthermore, it seems that he did not just learn about different types of sport, but more specifically about sport skills as he says 'I learn spacing, you know when you

put a cones like this...I learn positions, and I learn a exercises...even if you're not here maybe Tuesday or Monday I starting to do the exercises'. Even his dreams only relate to playing soccer in 'my dream né, is to play soccer'.

This street child's narrative only emphasises learning about sport skills with no reference to learning about life skills (e.g. respect) and is therefore different from the narratives of the other street children in the research, whose experiences of the programme seemed to incorporate learning sport skills and life skills. The literature fails to confirm this finding as the research studies have shown that youth derive psycho-social benefits through sport (Fejgin, 1994; Larson, 2000; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003).

CONCLUSION

Society at large has a social obligation to get involved in the lives of street children. When the most vulnerable members of society, being children, are left to fend for themselves in the stormy sea of street life, the phenomenon of street children becomes a constant reminder that something is inherently wrong in society. There are many interventions that can be employed to facilitate a process where by street children can either be placed back in the harbour of family life or, although

living in shelters, experience the stability of a harbour. One such an intervention for creating the stability of a harbour for street children is sport. From this study it seems that all six street children who participated in this research acquired an 'emotional related skill' (e.g. respect, enjoyment) and/or a 'sport related skill' (e.g. soccer, cricket), which could contribute to these street children experiencing something of the stability of a harbour, amidst the survival experiences of the stormy sea of street life.

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