

‘With a little help from my friends’

Exploring the impact of peer-led psychosocial support groups for children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS in South Africa

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Chapter 8

Summary of findings and recommendations for the future

This study has sought to explore the feasibility of training and supporting South African community-based programmes to reliably deliver a peer-led group intervention for children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. It did so in four important ways. First, it measured, through innovative and child-friendly measures how being part of such a peer-led group that follows a specific curriculum (Vhutshilo) impacts on the child-participants. Second, it ascertained both how being involved as a youth peer educator impacted on young people recruited from similar contexts who themselves are vulnerable, as well as the way in which they understood the strengths and weaknesses of the current Vhutshilo strategy. Third, it evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention components, from the curriculum materials, to the peer education strategy used (both theoretical as well as what happened in practice), and comments on the staff performance in implementing the programme. Finally, it assessed the benefits and burden of the programme to the implementing organisations so that a realistic assessment may be made regarding the value of the programme as an intervention able to be implemented at scale.

Summary of findings

The report therefore comprises eight chapters. In chapter one, the psychosocial needs of children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS are discussed in light of the South African AIDS pandemic, and the way in which peer education can be used to provide support and ultimately prevention to these children. The main points made in this chapter concern the need for children to be connected with each other and with older peers so that they may access informal help in view of the dearth of formal services available to them, especially in impoverished communities in South Africa. It also makes the case for engaging educational programmes that fall between formal professional services and recreational or feeding programmes frequently supplied by community based programmes.

In chapter two the research methodology is described, with a focus on the care taken to evaluate what it is possible to measure given the age of the children at whom this intervention is targeted, and in keeping with a child-friendly and child-rights approach to research. We decided to use measures that would allow periurban and rural children to tell their stories and exhibit their learnings in a way which did not make them feel as if they were being tested, judged or criticised. In using a control group we ensured that our sample matched as closely as possible, and that where possible, children had more than one attempt to provide data on what they learnt – so that conclusions were not based on myopic measures. In the event, we assessed their learnings, and invited them to assess their own learnings in a way that we observed kept them engaged and safe. Many of these measures were specifically designed for this study and are potentially useful for other research amongst vulnerable groups. They do however need to be further refined and offered for rigorous scrutiny from amongst the scientific community.

While only briefing alluding to the seven sites and seven organisations who implemented Vhutshilo in this chapter, we refer the reader to the detailed Appendix 9, in which sites and organisations are mapped in

more detail so that the effect of the evaluation may also be deduced. In many cases, good organisation made for an easy evaluation, and it was equally easy to interact with children and measure the impact of Vhutshilo. In other cases, long distances, poor communication technology, and complexities between the implementing organisations and a CBO which whom they had subcontracted added to the complexity of both the evaluation and the implementation of Vhutshilo. Each of these difficulties affected our evaluation and we try to reflect these fairly in this chapter 2, and in our final conclusions.

In chapter three, we turn to the Vhutshilo curriculum and assess how it is implemented by staff (both volunteer peer educators and those who supervise them) and received by children. We describe at length the results of observing lessons being implemented; a task that a member of the peer educator team also completed each week and that then informed their further lesson preparation and delivery. Our own observations provided an abundance of data. Not only was it possible to ascertain which topics children loved, hated or found difficult, but it also provided insight into how peer educators struggled with materials or whose preparation were insufficient on the day of delivery. Notably we found that peer educators require greater facilitation skills than they naturally possess or that their limited training proved them. In almost all of the lessons observed peer educators spoke too much and allowed too little time for children to dialogue with them or to discuss concepts amongst themselves. Of course, these ratios changed depending on which lesson was being facilitated, but the overall conclusion holds. We also noted the need for materials in local languages, partly to aid facilitation but also to act as reference points for child-participants and to meet their needs to communicate material with members of their households. Overall the materials were relevant to children, but depended on both organisational capacity and peer educator delivery for successful lessons. We identified that more attention might be paid to issues such as distinguishing abuse from sex, rape, ARVs, alcohol misuse in homes and communities, and an age-appropriate discussion around

condom use.

In chapter four and five we turn to the impact that Vhutshilo had on child participants. In chapter four we describe our assessment of what Vhutshilo participants had learnt when compared to other children in similar circumstances who did not attend Vhutshilo groups. Vhutshilo group members displayed a somewhat wider repertoire of emotional literacy and related skills (identifying support networks) than their non-Vhutshilo counterparts. They demonstrated large gains (at least a third higher in 'future orientation' and 'goal setting' indicators than their peers who had not been through Vhutshilo) and at least a 10% greater ability at demonstrating decision-making skills. They also seem to assess their current situation more realistically than their non-Vhutshilo peers. Vhutshilo group members had a wider repertoire of reasons for delaying sexual debut, ways to avoid unwanted sexual advances, advice for friends having sex, and characteristics of healthy relationships. Furthermore Vhutshilo group members displayed greater competence, confidence, understanding and self expression than their non- Vhutshilo counterparts. Finally, they exhibited a greater understanding of resilience evidenced by a more sophisticated understanding of their inner strengths; and the ability to articulate a wider variety of specific external supports and interpersonal problem-solving skills than comparison group children.

In chapter five, we noted that children were far more able to articulate what they had learnt during one to one interviews with an adult researcher than in the final session facilitated by peer educators. This phenomenon, as well as other observations regarding who children sought help from (adult supervisors initially, then peer educators as they grew to trust them, and also dependent on the domain of help needed), leads us to conclude that for this age group, peer educators and adult supervisors need to work together to provide maximum benefit for vulnerable children. In addition Vhutshilo participants spoke clearly about how participation in Vhutshilo groups had helped them to express their emotions and spoke animatedly of learning about respect and responsibility. Although the session concerning grief

and loss was both liked and disliked by children, it seems to have met a real need not otherwise addressed due to cultural taboos.

In chapter six attention is drawn to the impact that Vhutshilo had on peer educators, which not surprisingly is highly positive. Peer educators report that their participation as a peer educator helped them to deal with their own struggles, built their self esteem, confidence and communication ability. They said they felt more able to help their same aged peers and were more likely to get a job based on the skills they had gained from being a peer educator. In terms of the way in which Vhutshilo was implemented peer educator had much to contribute. They felt strongly about funds being available to provide for the needs of the programme (food for children, stationery, visual aids and transport) as well as incentives such as t-shirts and caps for themselves. They recognised their need for training, both at the inception of the programme and as they met new challenges during implementation. Finally, they strongly recommended that training and 'take home' materials be provided in local languages to assist them in their facilitation and to provide a bridge between children and caregivers, especially around messages that may appear to be controversial to elders (e.g. puberty changes and grief and loss).

In chapter seven we describe the burdens and benefits to implementing partners as identified by organisational leaders and programme supervisors. We conclude that existing staff capacity for many implementing organisations (especially with regard to monitoring and evaluation), reluctant buy-in from organisational leaders, and the lack of prior financial planning contribute to suboptimal implementation of Vhutshilo, and a greater organisational burden. On the other hand, the benefits of Vhutshilo are clear. Vhutshilo enables organisations to offer a formal programme for orphaned and vulnerable children, with benefits to both children and peer educators that make a real difference in their lives and circumstances. Finally, we note the complexity of Vhutshilo standards is exacerbated by the multiple levels of communication required between CSPE and sites, often poorly mediated by mid-level

organisational leaders, who in turn cause frustration on the ground with grass-level staff.

What characterises a good Vhutshilo programme?

At the outset we drew attention to the standards proposed by Rutanang that might characterise an effective peer education programme. Our final task is to evaluate these features against what we have found in the field.

1. Planning: Is there a detailed plan of action, based on actual needs with clear, measurable goals? Planning for continuity rather than programme disruption, adequate venues and ensuring that peer educators are trained (Initially and on the job) made for higher impact overall.
2. Mobilising: Is there commitment, understanding and support from the leadership of the school/higher education institution/community in which you are working? Are there shared vision, structure and resources? Although not true for every site, where organisational leaders were aware and informed about the aims and goals of Vhutshilo, work on the ground seemed to thrive.
3. Supervisor infrastructure: Have supervisors been carefully selected, trained and contracted? For the most part supervisors hold the key to the programme. Where they are resourced, enthusiastic, empowered and available to children and peer educators the programme is successful. Volunteer supervisors appear to lack the decision-making power to do things for the programme which make a difference, such as providing adequate venues, materials and refreshments to children and peer educators.
4. Linkages: Have you included the partners and support structures you need for your programme? This seems to be an area for improvement. Vhutshilo participant's ability to access help and

resources in their communities remained somewhat limited.

5. Learning programme: Is your learning programme an effective, tested, 'beyond awareness' programme, delivering adequate dosage in an appropriate sequence, making use of interactive methodologies? While the learning programme was effective, there were areas that might be excluded. In addition, despite interactive methodologies delivery is in the hands of peer educators, who frequently failed to exploit the programmes creativity and power.
6. Peer educator infrastructure: Have peer educators been carefully selected, trained and contracted, with clearly defined roles, performance standards and graduated responsibilities? It was abundantly apparent that peer educators are key to the success of Vhutshilo. However, despite inadequate performance, children did learn and perform better than their peers who did not attend Vhutshilo groups. Training of peer educators needs to emphasise facilitation skills and referral skills, especially in the early parts of the programme. In addition, it was found that both age and educational level were both equally important in predicting the effectiveness of peer educators. Peer educators should not just be older than the participants, but should be in a higher grade level. Two years older and two grades higher seem to be the minimum desirable difference between peer educators and group participants. Programmes generally got selection of peer educators right based on the diversity of the Vhutshilo group. This is highly commendable.
7. Management: Are peer educators and supervisors well managed and is the delivery of all four roles of peer education quantifiable and happening effectively? Supervisors and peer educators work together in partnership. Commitment and understanding are required from both, and effectiveness collapses in the absence of either. Where inadequate planning has occurred Vhutshilo sites were weak i.e. overworked supervisors, and

over-committed peer educators with large distances to travel to get to site venues. Peer educators were seldom seen to be involved in advocacy work, although the other three roles were generally performed.

8. Recognition and credentialing: Are there credentialing and reward mechanisms in place to ensure growth, development and advancement opportunities for peer educators and for supervisors? For both peer educators and supervisors this seemed to be the weakest aspect of the Vhutshilo strategy. Peer educators, especially were highly sensitive to a lack of (non financial) reward.
9. Monitoring and evaluation: Do you have a realistic monitoring and evaluation plan that includes documentation and information management? Despite CSPE experience to the contrary, the monitoring and evaluation plan appears to be burdensome to implementing partners. Greater realism may involve limiting observations and reports to certain lessons, rather than requiring repeated data collection. Where possible, M&E tools need to be simplified with input from the field.
10. Sustainability: Do you have a practical and operative sustainability plan dealing with compliance, public relations, staffing, funding and peer ownership?

Sustainability of Vhutshilo programmes appears to rest with organisational leadership rather than with supervisors or peer educators. Given the busy-ness of implementing partners and sites this seems unavoidable at present. Making adequate providing for funding however seems to be a sine qua non for effective programme implementation. It is the relatively small expenditures that seem to have the greatest effect on creating a space for Vhutshilo support groups (stationery, visual aids, refreshments and non financial rewards for peer educators). The question of whether groups are more effective as open or closed groups was not evaluated. What was clear

however, was the need for ongoing rounds of Vhutshilo programmes since there was frequently more interest than groups could accommodate.

In summary, we conclude that while these Rutanang standards are helpful, they could be better applied by considering how specific criteria need to be fulfilled at each level or layer of implementation.

At the level of organisational leadership

1. Organisational leaders who know what the programme is about and is supportive, materially and morally, of grass-level staff

At the level of technical assistance and training

2. Ongoing training, focussing on helping peer educators to develop good facilitation skills as the programme progresses
3. Curriculum materials that encourage facilitation, dialogue and discussion rather than monologue

At mid-management level

4. Mid-level managers who are empowered to help supervisors to solve problems on the ground

At the site level

5. Supervisors who are present and able to interact with children and assist peer educators on a week by week basis
6. Finances available for peer educators snacks, transport and incentives
7. Adequate time for peer educators to prepare, and a sense of team amongst peer educators, so that unforeseen peer educator absence can be dealt with

At the group level

8. A good venue, at which safe and relaxing space can be created for lessons to occur and for informal 'hanging out' to take place before and after lessons
9. Children are able to receive a snack to help them concentrate on the lesson
10. Peer educators who facilitate rather than teach lessons

Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to evaluate the feasibility of training and supporting South African community-based programmes to reliably deliver a peer-led group intervention for orphaned and vulnerable children in township and rural settings. Based on our investigation, we can confidently conclude that the Vhutshilo model is capable of contributing to the plight of children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. Table 8.1 summarises our assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the Vhutshilo peer education strategy.

Table 8.1 Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the Vhutshilo strategy

The staff from the Centre for the Support of Peer Education have a rigorous training and technical assistance programme in place and were able to provide detailed insight into the strengths and weaknesses of programme implementation and of implementing partners. Both through a paper written evaluating the pilot programme of Vhutshilo (Deutsch 2009) and personal interviews and consultations with CSPE staff it was apparent that they had drawn many of the same conclusions we had independently arrived at throughout this investigation. Our recommendations in the main are 'tweaks' towards streamlining the implementation and adding greater efficiency and impact to the programme.

In future studies, it is also recommended that a more ethnographic

approach to evaluation be included that embeds researchers as participant observers at sites in order to document more closely the dynamics in operation at ground-level, and to be able to make suggestions for better guiding peer educators and supervisors in their tasks.

Postscript

In a recent report entitled *Home Truths: Facing the Facts on Children, AIDS, and Poverty* published by the Joint Learning Initiative on Children and HIV/AIDS (JLICA) (Irwin, Adams, Winter et al, 2009), attention is drawn to three broad policies that will make an immediate and long-lasting difference to children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. These are to:

1. Support children through immediate or extended families and deliver integrated family-centred services;
2. Strengthen community action to support families;
3. Address family poverty through national social protection.

With these three recommendations in mind, it is pertinent to ask how or whether peer-led support groups for children find a place in these new directions for children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS (and extreme poverty). There are four main answers to this question that emerge from this study.

The first is that peer education can serve to strengthen families but seldom does so. There were numerous occurrences when children, peer educators and staff recommend that the link between support group and family (whether lone carer, grandparent or extended family) be made explicit. According to these research participants making this link will contribute to extending discussions about sex, grief and abuse into homes whether the appropriate knowledge, skills and cultural taboos militate against action for and on behalf of children.

Second, JLICA critiques HIV/AIDS prevention and education programmes that are limited to schools, since the use of schools as intervention platforms misses the opportunity to reach children early and to reach those who are not in education. Vhutshilo's focus on drop in centres, intentions to reach young children (8-10) while unlikely to reach critical masses of children has the potential to reach children outside of school. It also shows (surprisingly) the educational potential of peer-led support groups. Numerous children spoke of the purely educative gains they made through participation in Vhutshilo. On the other hand however, peer educators need to have a certain level of educational attainment in order to be effective as peer educators, since the tasks of being a peer educator require sustained concentration, verbal and written skills (especially for monitoring and evaluation functions).

Third, JLICA advocates that the best immediate support for families is given by community groups with prevention being focused on families, supported by communities when families break down or when children live in an abusive environment. Both community support and family involvement are lofty goals for peer education. The principle that seems JLICA seems to be implying (besides that of systemic change through cash transfer programmes who value is undisputed) is that change should be systemic. To the extent that peer education widens children's circle of care, it contribute to prevention in community rather than in isolation.

Finally, JLICA speaks convincingly of the need to scale up intervention and prevention and it is here that peer education strategies such as Vhutshilo seem to be the most difficult to achieve, and potentially limits its impact on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Unlike other programmes, Vhutshilo is not too expensive to scale up; rather it is labour intensive. Peer educators living in similar circumstances to those whom they reach, while ideal as educators and models of informal influence, require concentrated training, supervision and support to deliver prevention and psychosocial support to children made vulnerable through HIV/AIDS. Once these obstacles are overcome, their

contribution may make more of an impact on a greater scale as peer-led support groups provides vulnerable children with the connectivity they need to 'get by with a little help from my friends'.