

François Steyn

Lifeskills training for children with problem and deviant behaviour: the Noupoot Youth and Community Development Project

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This article describes the development, implementation and outcomes of two community-based lifeskills programmes in Noupoot for children with troubled behaviour. Results show that approximately one out of every five children re-engaged in misconduct or criminal behaviour following participation in the programmes. Continued offending occurred predominantly in property-linked crimes. This indicates a need for improved assessments and alternative or additional support for some of the participants. Although most parents/guardians of referred children valued the programmes, practice indicates that it is difficult to secure their involvement. The study includes descriptions of comparative situations from South Africa and international evidence in respect of intervention with troubled behaviour of children.

Opleiding in lewensvaardighede vir kinders met afwykende gedrag: die Noupoot Jeug- en Gemeenskapsontwikkelingsprojek

Hierdie artikel beskryf die ontwikkeling, implementering en uitkomst van twee gemeenskapsgebaseerde lewensvaardighedsprogramme in Noupoot vir kinders met sorgwekkende gedrag. Bevindinge wys daarop dat ongeveer een uit elke vyf van die betrokke kinders weer in wan- en kriminele gedrag betrokke was na deelname aan die programme. Herhaalde oortreding behels meestal eiendoms misdade — 'n aanduiding dat verbeterde assessering en alternatiewe of bykomende ondersteuning vir sommige deelnemers benodig word. Alhoewel meeste ouers/voogde van verwysde kinders die programme van waarde ag dui die praktyk daarop dat hul deelname moeilik is om te verkry. Vergelykende situasies van Suid-Afrika en internasionale bevindinge rakende ingrepe met die sorgwekkende gedrag van kinders word ook aangebied.

Mr F Steyn, Centre for Health Systems Research & Development, University of the Free State, P O Box 339, Bloemfontein 9300; E-mail: steynf.bum@ufs.ac.za

Disruptive behaviour in children, continued misbehaviour, conduct problems and offending antagonise relationships and cause trauma to others (Loeber *et al* 1993: 295). Parents, in particular, often struggle to cope with children who present uncontrollable and deviant behaviour (Farrell 1995: 1, Morata 2002: 4).

The anxiety of not knowing the whereabouts of a child, concerns about the peers with whom it associates, and the shame caused by a child who engages in crime could cause severe domestic stress (Bezuidenhout & Tshiwula 2004: 98-9). In addition, inadequate parenting skills, which could result in resistance to authority on the part of the child, have the potential of strengthening anti-social and antagonising offending behaviour at home, at school and in the community. Similarly, educators as agents of socialisation often experience feelings of frustration and inadequacy at their inability to address the behavioural problems of learners (Rushton 1995: 87). Evidence from abroad shows that community-based programmes and those that focus on cognitive and skills-building strategies are effective in intervening with problem behaviour (Gendreau & Andrews 1990: 182, Izzo & Ross 1990: 139).

1. Aims and research strategy

This investigation endeavours to build on previous work undertaken in the field of intervention in respect of child problem and deviant behaviour (*cf* Steyn 2005). It serves two purposes. First, it describes, in a predominantly case study format, the development, focus and implementation of two community-based programmes in Noupoot, Northern Cape, for children manifesting with troubled behaviour. One programme focuses on children who present problem behaviour at home, at school and in the community, while the other is concerned with children who are in conflict with the law. Both programmes entail lifeskills training and are implemented by the Noupoot Youth and Community Development Project (NYCDP).

In addition to secondary information about lifeskills training in general, and the two interventions, especially in terms of their objectives, programme theory, content and implementation, personal

interviews were conducted with programme managers, implementers, referral officers and stakeholders. In adhering to the flexible nature and multiple configurations of case study methodology (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 281, Neuman 2000: 32), the experiences, views and observations of these respondents are intertwined with secondary data. The aim is to articulate the purpose, implementation and challenges relating to lifeskills training with reference to child troubled behaviour. The description of the programmes is preceded by an overview of the factors associated with child problem and deviant behaviour in order to contextualise, within an ecological framework, the need for family-involved and community-based intervention. International evidence for best intervention practices and results from other South African studies are also provided.

Secondly, the study engages the “what works” debate for intervention in child troubled behaviour by providing empirical evidence of the outcomes of lifeskills training as a method of addressing the problem and deviant behaviour of children. Little is known about the impact of lifeskills training as uni-modal intervention as opposed to programmes with more than one method. An explorative and descriptive design was pursued in order to determine on a quantitative basis continued problem and deviant behaviour following participation in the abovementioned two programmes (Babbie & Mouton 2001: 79-80).

In terms of the programme directed at child problem behaviour either at school, in the community or in the home environment (henceforth referred to as the “at-risk” programme), continued or relapse problem behaviour was regarded as any form of antisocial or criminal activity on the part of ex-participants as perceived by themselves and/or their parents/guardians following participation in the intervention. For the purposes of the child offender programme (later explained in the context of diversion), recidivism was viewed as the commission of a criminal activity by ex-participants, regardless of the seriousness of the offence, the time lapse between participation and re-offending, or to whether or not the child has been re-arrested or not.

For the sampling framework, the NYCDP provided a list of children who participated in the two programmes — ex-participants who were in possession of contact particulars formed the study populations. In the light of the relatively small study populations (84 in the “at-risk” programme and 56 in the child offender programme) — and in addition to the fact that some ex-participants had relocated elsewhere due to study, work or family matters — the investigation had to target all potential respondents. For the “at-risk” programme, 49 ex-participants and 49 parents/guardians were traced. In only 39 cases both the ex-participant and his/her parent/guardian were interviewed. Data was obtained for 59 children (70.2% sample coverage). With the child offender programme, 31 ex-participants and 37 parents/guardians were successfully traced, which allowed for data to be gathered about 42 children (75.0% sample coverage). Data collection took place in April 2004. Face-to-face interviews involving the use of structured questionnaires were undertaken. Data was encoded and captured in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

Since it is common knowledge that too small sample sizes yield insufficient statistical power to determine significance (Lipsev 1992: 126, Mihalic *et al* 2001: 2), no inferential manipulations were undertaken and only descriptive data is presented.¹ Appropriate and supporting views of programme implementers are provided where deemed appropriate.

2. Understanding child problem and deviant behaviour

Research into the problem and deviant behaviour of children necessitates an exploration of the possible origins of the phenomenon, evidence about the success of different types of intervention, and the value of implementing responses in a community setting, as described below.

1 Although the moderately low number of respondents could be perceived as a limitation of the study, the credibility of the findings and conclusions is strengthened by the relatively isolated nature of the programme site (non-contamination of outcomes by similar interventions), the sample coverage in relation to the study populations, additional sources of information (parents/guardians) and triangulation of data with other primary and secondary information.

2.1 Definition, causes and prediction

Any definition of problem behaviour in children is challenged by perceptions of what exactly constitutes normative versus deviant behaviour, as not all forms of problem behaviour amount to criminality, for instance truancy, disobedience and the testing of boundaries (Bezuidenhout & Tshiwula 2004: 87, Farrell 1995: 6).² Some manifestations of child problem behaviour should rather be seen as normative, since minors often grapple with the developmental stages and demands of childhood and adolescence. The latter, in particular, is frequently perceived as a time of *Sturm und Drang* (Algozzine *et al* 2001: 145-6), and misbehaviour should be viewed against the natural process of maturation, in terms of age-appropriate behaviour (IMC 1996: 26-7). As such, a key feature of adolescence is that misconduct is most often a transient phenomenon not necessarily continued into adulthood (Lipsey 1992: 83-4, Muncie 2004: 25-6, Wolmarans & Jacobsz 1994: 14).

In this regard, the theory of adolescence-limited and life course-persistent antisocial behaviour provides an understanding of child deviant behaviour. While the latter stems from neuropsychological challenges in relation to criminogenic environments, the former features among children with limited risk from personal or environmental factors. Adolescence-limited problem behaviour results from peer influence, expectations, and the need for immediate gratification in relation to the perceived benefits of adulthood. However, “aging into adulthood brings a subjective shift in the valence of the consequences of crime. Then such offenders readily desist from crime” (Moffitt 1993a: 694-5).

- 2 Although a criminal act by a child is clearly defined as the trespassing of a law by a person between the ages of seven and 18 (Juvenile Justice Drafting Consultancy 1994: 38), criminologists also use the terms “antisocial behaviour” and “delinquency” to include problem behaviour outside the legal definition of child offending (Muncie 2004: 39). In this article, the terms “child offender” and “child deviant behaviour” relate to minors who have transgressed a legal sanction, while “child problem behaviour” or similar wordings denote troubled, disruptive and misbehaviour without an officially recorded offence.

Adolescence-limited offending takes the form of acts that symbolise adult life or that accentuate autonomy from parental influence, such as drinking, substance abuse, vandalism and truancy. Life course-persistent offences, on the other hand, are associated with a broader range of offences, including victim-oriented crimes such as violence, theft and fraud. In essence, therefore, life course-persistent offenders have a greater underlying propensity towards antisocial behaviour and crime as opposed to adolescence-limited troubled children (Mercy *et al* 2002: 31).

Despite their transitory features, behavioural problems and offending during formative years can precede an adult life of antisocial and criminal behaviour (Bezuidenhout & Tshiwula 2004: 97, Sonnekus 1991: 75, Welsh *et al* 1996: 77). It is generally accepted that early identification and appropriate intervention have the potential to alter problem behaviour, particularly in the case of children (Senekal 2002: 10, Riley 1999: 17, Dept of Correctional Services *et al* 1996: 61). Lipsey (1992: 83-4) notes that

... since youth have a potentially long adulthood before them, the payoff in reduced criminality over a lifetime resulting from effective preventive intervention at an early age can be substantial.

However, the success of intervention measures rests with a firm understanding of the risk factors involved in problem and deviant behaviour, in order to ensure that programmes will meet the behaviour modification needs of target groups (Sonnekus 1991: 74, Steyn 2005: 282, Welsh *et al* 1996: 79).

Child problem and deviant behaviour is complex and is the result of numerous causes and influences (Kurtz 2002: 686, Schurink W 1994: 30). Some with combinations of risk factors are believed to be more powerful than others (Hawkins *et al* 2000: 7, Loeber *et al* 1993: 129). An ecological framework — in terms of personal, relationship, and community and societal attributes — facilitates an understanding of the multiple and interactive nature of factors that put children at risk of problem, and more particularly, offending behaviour (Dahlberg & Krug 2002: 12-3).

2.1.1 Individual factors

The first sphere of an ecological approach to child problem and deviant behaviour focuses on the individual biological and personal attributes of behaviour (Dahlberg & Krug 2002: 12). Hyperactivity, impulsivity, concentration problems, risk-taking behaviour, restlessness, poor academic performance and behavioural problems during childhood (including at school) have been correlated with violent youth behaviour, aggression and offending (Hawkins *et al* 2002: 2, 7, Loeber & Dishion 1983: 87, 94, Moffitt 1993b: 147). Antisocial behaviour at an early age, even at pre-school stage, has been linked to later antisocial behaviour (White *et al* 1990: 521). Similarly, aggression during childhood is considered a strong predictor of violent behaviour in adolescence and early adulthood (Mercy *et al* 2002: 30, Tolan *et al* 1995: 580). Furthermore, violent victimisation during adolescence has been correlated with adult assault, domestic violence, drug abuse and property offences, and hampers the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood (Menard 2002: 14).

Neuropsychological problems at an early age have also been linked to general risk during later childhood and adolescent psychopathology (White *et al* 1990: 522), including the onset of conduct disorders (as well as its stability over time), hyperactivity and aggressiveness (Moffitt 1993b: 147).³ Behavioural problems stemming from individual risk factors include externalised activities such as aggressiveness, deviance, disobedience, destructiveness, lying, stealing and a lack of self-control (Algozzine *et al* 2001: 69). However, individual risk factors do not function in isolation, but are influenced by relationship and broader community attributes (Mercy *et al* 2002: 33).

2.1.2 Relationship factors

The second level of an ecological understanding of child problem and deviant behaviour seeks to explain how proximal relationships in-

3 A study among a cohort of 1 037 children in Dunedin, New Zealand, showed that the 12% of boys who had high child offending and poor neuro-psychological status at age 13 were responsible for more than half of the offences officially recorded for the sample. The finding thus supports the theory of life-course-persistent antisocial behaviour by children (Moffitt *et al* 2004: 296).

crease the likelihood of the phenomena (Dahlberg & Krug 2002: 13). Parental behaviour and family contexts play a pivotal role in the development of antisocial behaviour in children and young people (Mercy *et al* 2002: 33). In fact, family adversity and poor ties between parents and their children have been associated with child offending (Moffitt 1993b: 147, Schurink E 1994: 47-8). Moreover, hostile family environments, exposure to violence at an early age — specifically at the domestic level — as well as child abuse and neglect have been linked to violent teenage and adult offenders (Kurtz 2002: 687, Wolmarans & Jacobsz 1994: 12). In addition, inadequate family management mechanisms (including a lack of supervision and harsh and erratic discipline), parental attitudes that favour violence, and criminality or antisocial behaviour by family members serve as predictors for delinquency (Hawkins *et al* 2000: 6, Kurtz 2002: 687, Loeber & Dishion 1983: 87, 94).

In this regard, Farrington *et al* (1996: 61) found the presence of a convicted parent by the time a child is ten years as the strongest indicator of criminal and antisocial lifestyles on the part of the children. A study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) among young offenders found that perpetrators cited family dysfunction (for instance broken homes, poor parent-child relationships, absent parents, and drug and alcohol abuse by parents) as one of the main causes of their transgressing (Schurink W 2004: 29-30). Furthermore, association with peers during adolescence is considered important for the development of interpersonal relationships and self-evaluation (Bezuidenhout & Tshiwula 2004: 94, Mercy *et al* 2002: 34). However, having delinquent friends, association with antisocial peer groups and gang membership have all been linked to later violent behaviour, and is considered a strong predictor of future antisocial behaviour (Hawkins *et al* 2000: 7, Tolan *et al* 1995: 581). The HSRC study also found that young offenders stated that peer influences had been a contributing factor to their having engaged in crime (Schurink W 2004: 29-30).

2.1.3 Community and societal factors

The third sphere of an ecological stance on child problem and deviant behaviour entails the community and the larger social environment

that affects behaviour (Dahlberg & Krug 2002: 13). Mercy *et al* (2002: 34) note that the

communities in which young people live are an important influence on their families, the nature of their peer groups, and the way they may be exposed to situations that lead to violence.

Literature indicates that children with emotional and behavioural problems to a large extent tend to come from socio-economically deprived families and communities (Farrell 1995: 13, Moffitt 1993b: 147). More crime, including offences by youth, occur in communities characterised by poor friendship networks, unsupervised teenage peer groups and low organisational participation.

Social disorganisation theory, particularly in terms of community structural features such as low socio-economic status, residential mobility and family disruption, has been found useful in showing variations in the prevalence of crime (Sampson & Groves 1989: 799). In this regard, high levels of residential mobility, highly diverse societies with poor cohesion and high population density have been associated with higher levels of crime and violence. In addition, communities which are characterised by the social challenges of drug trafficking, high levels of unemployment, social isolation, poverty, poor infrastructure and little institutional support systems experience higher levels of violence than others, including those found among youths (Dahlberg & Krug 2002: 13, Hawkins *et al* 2000: 7).

2.2 International evidence in terms of the success of intervention types

In South Africa, the introduction of programmes to address child problem and deviant behaviour is fairly new with quality empirical results about the effectiveness of different types of interventions trickling in slowly. Nevertheless, broad lessons can be drawn from international evidence. First, programmes that endeavour merely to create awareness, for instance disseminate knowledge, have been found to be ineffective (Mercy *et al* 2002: 41). Research indicates counselling to have limited impact on re-offending (Kobrin *et al* 1983: 183, Lipsey 1992: 123, Mercy *et al* 2002: 43, Teilmann van Dusen & Peterson 1983: 267).

In contrast, meta-analyses have found interventions that are educational, structured, focused and behaviour-oriented (with an emphasis on cognitive and skill building strategies) to have greater effect in intervention with offenders (Gendreau & Andrews 1990: 182, Lipsey 1992: 123, Lipsey & Wilson 1993: 1199, Tate *et al* 1995: 779). In fact, programmes that included a cognitive aspect were found to be more than twice as effective as interventions without such a component (Izzo & Ross 1990: 141). In addition, programmes that are focused on the causes of child problem and deviant behaviour, and address a variety of potential causal factors, have been found more successful than those that do not (Kurtz 2002: 678).

Programmes that focus on the manner in which antisocial behaviour is addressed in the home environment are considered more successful (Kurtz 2002: 687). In this regard, the involvement and commitment of parents during intervention with “at-risk” children and youth have been found more beneficial in terms of programme outcomes than those that exclude their participation (Léonard *et al* 2005: 240; Mercy 2002: 43). Multi-faceted and longer-term programming has been found more effective than once-off, uni-modal interventions (Borduin *et al* 1995: 576, Lipsey 1992: 123, Teilmann Van Dusen & Peterson 1983: 267).

A critical aspect of effectiveness relates to the extent to which the programme was appropriate in terms of the principles of risk, need and responsivity (Andrews *et al* 1990: 384). In other words, the programme content and mode of implementation have to respond to the documented behavioural change needs of participants (Matshego & Joubert 2002: 126, Mihalic *et al* 2001: 2). Comprehensive assessments are essential, therefore, in determining whether a child will benefit from a particular intervention. Meta-analyses have shown community-based intervention to yield more positive results than those in institutional settings (Andrews *et al* 1990: 386, Izzo & Ross 1990: 139, Gendreau & Andrews 1990: 182).

2.3 Local evidence of lifeskills-based intervention in respect of children

Evidence concerning the impact of uni-modal programmes in South Africa is scarce, given the predominant multi-modal nature of initiatives which, in effect, hampers the investigation of specific intervention components (Steyn 2005: 289). Lifeskills training, particularly as a means of addressing child offending, is often undertaken in combination with other intervention methods, for instance community service or restorative justice initiatives.

Two evaluations undertaken by the National Institute for Crime Prevention and Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO) in respect of the effectiveness of its interventions with child offenders provide evidence in this regard. The studies traced ex-participants, the majority of whom completed a lifeskills-based programme in combination with other interventions. A 6.7% recidivism rate was found within the first year following participation in the programme(s), while a re-offending rate of 9.8% was recorded during the second evaluation. The recidivism rate for lifeskills participants alone was estimated at 15.4%. Nearly two-thirds of re-offences (64.5%) were property-related (Muntingh 2001: 41, 50).

From Scars to Stars, on the other hand, provides evidence of the effectiveness of lifeskills training as single method of intervention. The programme is community-based and run by the Mangaung One-stop Child Justice Centre in Bloemfontein. It endeavours to intervene in respect of children who display uncontrollable behaviour, such as truancy, staying out late, alcohol- and substance abuse, theft and general disobedience. Referrals are made by social workers, schools and parents.

The programme is used for both offending and “at-risk of offending” children, and consists of group work sessions and role-play. It includes the themes of problem solving, drug abuse, sexuality, responsible decision-making, self-esteem, setting of goals and conflict resolution. During the course of 2002, 280 children between the ages of fourteen and seventeen participated in the programme. From among these participants, seventy (25%) ended up in conflict with

the law. Programme officers noted that greater involvement by the parents of participants is needed to improve the behaviour of children (Morata 2002:4).

2.4 Directives for and value of community-based intervention

Community-based initiatives are necessary to effectively manage the behavioural problems of children, even more so in neglected communities and those experiencing high levels of crime (Léonard *et al* 2005: 246, Schurink E 1994: 52, Welsh *et al* 1996: 95, Wolmarans & Jacobsz 1994: 15). It is acknowledged that few such responses exist, particularly in South Africa's rural and small-town areas. This is possibly due to a lack of resources and skills to plan, implement and sustain interventions. Yet

... we know that comprehensive, individualised, community-based, family-oriented interventions appear to hold promise and have impressive initial findings of success (Tate *et al* 1995: 780).

Various rights-based, prevention and developmental policies call for early, sustained intervention with children who are at risk of committing offences and those engaging in transgressions. These policies *inter alia* comprise the UN's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990a) and the *Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency* (1990b), the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* (OAU 1999), South Africa's *Interim Policy Recommendations for the Transformation of the Child and Youth Care System* (IMC 1996), the *Minimum Standards for the Child and Youth Care System* (IMC 1998), the NCPS (Dept of Correctional Services *et al* 1996) and the *White Paper on Crime Prevention through Development and Restorative Justice* (1997).

It is noted in the directives that such initiatives, should, among other things, be undertaken at the community level and focus on the acquisition of skills. Furthermore, calls are made for parents of "at-risk" children to benefit from parenting and social skills training, while teachers are to be empowered to identify problem behaviour at an early age in order to act as intermediaries for referral to appropriate services.

Since the early 1990s, a shift has taken place towards greater community involvement in addressing social challenges (Welsh *et al* 1996: 78). In fact, early post-apartheid youth policy called for communities to participate in solving their own problems, including the rehabilitation of marginalised children and youth (Everatt 1995: 209, Truscott & Milner 1995: 66). Various community-based initiatives, such as community-policing forums and neighbourhood watches, attest to greater community involvement in addressing crime. Community action provides impetus to the principles of *ubuntu* and has been found to have various benefits.

- First, alternatives to traditional responses to offending behaviour, through rehabilitation and training, have been found to be cost-effective and to decrease recidivism (Kurtz 2002: 678). Evidence shows that early intervention negates potential future expenditure on justice processes, institutionalisation and rehabilitation (cf Mihalic *et al* 2001: 4).
- Secondly, self-determination by communities is promoted (Welsh *et al* 1996: 78), since community members often have a direct stake in the planning, implementation (often through volunteering) and management of community-based programmes.
- Thirdly, interventions could form part of district and local-level development plans, which could in turn facilitate access to existing infra-structure, knowledge and financial resources.
- Fourthly, they promote community interest, ownership, commitment and responsibility in matters that affect inhabitants (Léonard *et al* 2005: 243).
- Fifthly, community-based responses to child troubled behaviour give voice to the objectives of numerous child-centred directives, such as the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency* (UN 1990a & 1990b).

3. Lifeskills training — implementation and application at the NYCDP

The inception of the NYCDP took place towards the end of 1999. This initiative is aimed at decreasing the incidence of child offending in Noupoot⁴ by means of counselling and intervention activities;

4 The town of Noupoot is situated in the south-eastern corner of the Northern Cape. The municipal area has approximately 3 924 inhabitants. Poverty is rife

by assisting children to become responsible community members; by instilling positive norms and values; and by empowering children and youths by means of the development of life-enriching and leadership skills (NYCDP 2000: 1). An NYCDP stakeholder summarised the need for the initiative as follows:

We had a need for someone to help give the children guidance on how they should behave and to change negative behaviour, to keep them from crime and teach them values to become good citizens.

Although some start-up funding was received from the local business community, services were rendered by volunteers until donor assistance was mobilised nearly a year later. The NYCDP provides child and youth-focused developmental and crime prevention services at various levels.⁵ At the primary level, the organisation undertakes crime awareness through recreational and enjoyable activities, such as sport and culture events, with the aim of instilling a sense of respect, caring and belonging to broader societal contexts. At the secondary level, the NYCDP targets “at-risk” children and youth to participate in schools-based awareness workshops and extramural lifeskills training. At the tertiary level, the initiative is aimed at rendering lifeskills intervention to children who have been in conflict with the law. The following sections focus on the initiative’s secondary and tertiary level programmes.

with only 12% of the total population being formally employed. Approximately 40% of the population is below the age of eighteen (Statistics South Africa 2001). Recreational facilities in the town for youths are poor — sport stadiums are in a state of disrepair and the municipal swimming pool has been empty for the past few years. As one respondent noted: “It’s amazing, every street in Noupoot has a shebeen, but you won’t find any recreational facilities for children. Not even parks”. Alcohol abuse reportedly exposes numerous children to its aftermath, including domestic and interpersonal violence.

- 5 A public health approach to crime prevention distinguishes between primary, secondary and tertiary levels of prevention. Primary level prevention entails creating awareness and disseminating information, often in the form of campaigns, and is generally directed at society at large. Secondary level prevention is targeted at high-risk or at-risk-of-offending sections of the population or community. Tertiary level prevention focuses on persons who have committed crime, in other words rehabilitation and reintegration (Dahlberg & Krug 2002: 15, Wolmarans & Jacobsz 1994: 14).

3.1 Conceptualisation and aims

Community leaders of Noupoot identified the need for intervention in respect of child offenders when it was found that the justice system lacked the resources necessary to deal effectively with the crime prevention needs of many of the children who entered legal procedures after having been arrested. Diversion — which entails the channelling of *prima facie* child offending cases away from formal legal processes into crime prevention, reintegration and developmental endeavours (Child Justice Alliance 2004) — was chosen to deal more appropriately with children guilty of perpetrating less serious, and, most often, first time misdemeanours.

It is generally accepted that the criminal justice system promotes stigmatisation, is costly and does not necessarily address the root causes of offending behaviour. Prisons are often viewed as “schools” of crime where further offending could be learnt from fellow inmates. Furthermore, it is considered that early prevention, through appropriate corrective action and guidance, could prevent a life of continued crime (Dept of Correctional Services *et al* 1996: 61, Riley 1999: 17). As a manager at the NYCDP noted:

Young people are only worse off in prison. Mostly they only become worse. The diversion programme tries to give them a second chance to right mistakes. We don't want our children to have criminal records, and we want to see them finishing school and find work without a record.

According to article 43 of the Child Justice Bill (2002), diversion aims to encourage responsibility, address behaviour modification needs, promote reintegration with the family and community, encourage victim participation, reparation and restitution, and prevent the child from having a criminal record. The NYCDP's diversion programme follows the Youth Empowerment Scheme of NICRO. This lifeskills-based intervention aims to:

- equip young people with the tools to understand themselves, to be responsible and to relate to others;
- allow young people to express their ideas, views and feelings in a constructive way;

- provide young people with the skills to deal with the challenges of their surroundings;
- promote communication between young people and their parents or guardians;
- enhance self-respect and worth, as well as nurture respect for others, and
- promote and nurture parental responsibility (NICRO 2000: 6-7).

Following conceptualisation of the diversion programme, measures were also required in Noupoot to address the “at risk of offending” behaviour of children, as it was accepted that unrestrained problem behaviour could result in crime. As a stakeholder to the NYCDP noted:

Many children have been involved in criminal activities because of their home circumstances, and some because they have nothing to do [... Programmes are needed] to develop them, keep them busy and to stay away from the streets.

A lifeskills training programme was subsequently introduced to deal with children who display “acting out” and problem behaviour, either at school, home or in the community. The NYCDP considered that children with problem behaviour can, in a pro-active way, be guided and empowered to lead healthy, constructive and positive lifestyles. The overall goals of the “at-risk” lifeskills programme are to:

- assist children to learn more about themselves and to strengthen positive self-concepts, attitudes and characters;
- facilitate the acquisition of communication skills to enhance family and community relationships;
- transfer knowledge and skills about decision-making to enable young people to deal with peer and group pressure, and
- inform children about the consequences of decisions with a view to strengthening their sense of responsibility (NYCDP 2001: 2).

In essence, the programme endeavours to develop children to think and act in an autonomous and responsible way. In the development of the programme, various documents regarding the approaches to, and the contents of, lifeskills training were consulted and the most appropriate strategies adopted and adapted to address child problem behaviour in Noupoot. As one NYCDP official noted:

We took the core ideas of lifeskills training and made it home grown to meet our needs [...] We looked at what works elsewhere and took the best of these to suit local demands and resources.

Adaptations to the programme content had to be made as service delivery proceeded. NYCDP staff members, all residing in Noupoot, participated in the development of the programme, which was seen as crucial since they are relatively young and familiar with the needs and challenges that children in the area face. Knowledge about local dynamics and resources further proved helpful.

It is worthwhile to reflect on the key programme assumptions and theory of lifeskills training with troubled children before focusing on the entry to, and implementation of, the programmes.

3.2 Assumptions and theory of lifeskills training

The use of cognitive-behavioural interventions with child problem behaviour, in particular through self-management, self-monitoring and problem-solving skills training, has gained momentum in recent decades (Algozzine *et al* 2001: 228). It is accepted that children commonly require teaching of cognitive, affective and behaviour skills as primary competencies for effective adulthood (Apter 1982: 216-7, 230, Meletse 1994: 44, Tolan *et al* 1995: 581). Among other things, social skills education is required for successful independent living, the maintenance of friendships, success at school, and the prevention of prolonged interpersonal problems (Algozzine *et al* 2001: 231-2). The underlying philosophy of lifeskills training in the context of child problem and deviant behaviour revolves around responsibility and correcting mistakes, ultimately to prevent future misbehaviour by instilling an understanding of the consequences of actions (NICRO 2000: 5-6).

Seen broadly, lifeskills are considered as practical skills in the art of living (Lindhard & Dlamini 1990: 19). The World Health Organization (Muthukrishna 2002: 82) defines lifeskills training as programmes that are designed to facilitate the practice and strengthening of the psychosocial skills of participants in a culturally and developmentally appropriate way. In general, lifeskills training should contribute to personal and social development, the prevention of social problems, and the

realisation of human rights. Lifeskills training is seen as an integral part of education⁶ and should serve to integrate all components of child and youth development, ie at the social, economic, health and psychological levels. The argument behind lifeskills training as intervention revolves around the need for strategies that will enable participants to succeed in the many roles that they (will) have to fulfil in society, including the mastering of, and coping with, difficult and challenging circumstances (Algozzine *et al* 2001: 209, Muthukrishna 2002: 82, Schurink E 1994: 47). As such, lifeskills training acknowledges and takes into account the relationship between developmental age and the risk factors involved with child problem and deviant behaviour (Steyn 2005: 282). With this in mind, the foundation of lifeskills training consists of the following core assumptions:

- Adolescence entails a shift in the abilities required to function effectively and maintain direction and focus in life.
- Problem and deviant behaviour results from inadequate skills (including communication, decision-making and conflict resolution abilities) to react appropriately to particular situations.
- Proper management of internal impulses facilitates personal growth and pro-social interaction.
- An understanding and appreciation of the source, onset and consequences of behaviour is needed to effect change.
- The acquisition of appropriate skills strengthens responsibility and accountability.
- Collective interaction creates opportunity to learn from the experiences and views of others (Algozzine *et al* 2001: 137, Izzo & Ross 1990: 141, Mihalic 2001: 8, Steyn 2005: 283-4).

From the above it is evident that thinking plays a pivotal role in effecting behavioural change through lifeskills training. Children with troubled behaviour need to be taught to think logically, objectively and rationally without disfiguring the reality or externalising the blame. At the same time, they should be empowered to conceptualise appropriate steps to deal with their needs and interpersonal conflict (Izzo & Ross 1990: 141).

6 The IMC (1996: 28) notes that wherever such training cannot be provided at school or where adolescents are not attending school, lifeskills training is to be provided by community structures.

3.3 Referral, entry criteria and assessment

In this context, referral is defined as a request for assistance when someone believes a child is at risk of behavioural problems (Algozzine 2001: 42). Referral to the NYCDP's diversion programme implies that the stipulations of the Child Justice Bill (2002) are met, ie the child has to admit to the offence and the trespass should be of a minor and first-time nature. In addition, the child and his/her parent/guardian have to voluntarily agree to participate in the intervention. On the whole, only offenders below the age of eighteen are accommodated in the programme.

Assessments are required to generate insight into the risk factors involved in problem behaviour, on the one hand, and to facilitate responsive decision-making, on the other (IMC 1996: 31). Assessments should be focused on the developmental needs of children and are informed by, among others, reports and records of the child, direct observation of behaviour and interviews with family members and socialisation agents (Algozzine 2001: 43, Farrell 1995: 11-2, Gendreau & Andrews 1990: 181-2). In the case of the NYCDP, the local social worker undertakes an assessment of potential cases to determine the prospects for diversion. Programme implementers undertake a further assessment to focus the scope and content of particular sessions according to the needs of referred children.

The "at-risk" programme does not have strict entry criteria and accommodates any child who exhibits problem behaviour. Such behaviour can range from alcohol and drug use to interpersonal violence and disrespect for others. It is mostly educators who refer troubled children for intervention, although some parents/guardians contact the NYCDP directly to inquire about enrolling their children in the programme. When referral partners are involved, communication strategies are essential (Léonard *et al* 2005: 243). Each of the four local schools has at least one educator who liaises with the NYCDP. These referral officers often communicate with the parents/guardians of children prior to referral. NYCDP staff members, together with relevant educators, undertake assessments regarding the intervention requirements of at-risk children. Assessments focus on the need for referral, the child's behaviour at school, academic performance, school

attendance, extramural activities and interaction with friends and peers. Assessments often include the views and needs of the parents/guardians, particularly in cases where they or community members refer children for intervention.

3.4 Focus and implementation

Critical themes for lifeskills training in the South African context include drug and alcohol abuse, self-awareness and self-concept, HIV/AIDS and sex (Everatt 1994: 214). The NYCDP's lifeskills programmes contain an array of developmental topics that are directed at promoting responsible lifestyles. They are also focused on matters related to offending behaviour. The consequences of a criminal conviction receive particular attention in the diversion intervention. Both the "at-risk", and diversion programmes consist of the following central themes:

- Self-knowledge and the environment explore harmful relationships and the impact of negative comments and self-perceptions (labelling). Emphasis is placed on the self-concept and on respect for the law and others.
- Responsibility relates to choices and actions (including the impact of a criminal record), how rights balance with responsibilities, and asserting rights while respecting those of others (including victims of misbehaviour).
- Planning for direction in life focuses on the achievement of concrete, realistic personal and career aspirations, and provides guidelines for future pro-social behaviour.
- Communication focuses on the difficulties in expressing emotions and the skills to do so. Negotiation towards mutual satisfaction is also explored.
- Conflict resolution focuses on passive, aggressive and assertive behaviour styles, and on the fact that communication is an essential part of resolving conflict.
- Decision-making emphasises the way in which decisions are made and how certain factors or people can influence the decision-making process. Thought processes involved in, and the consequences of, decisions are explored, as well as their relationship with the achievement of personal goals.
- Risk taking focuses on creating insight into ways in which participants became involved in anti-social behaviour, and aims to assist participants to identify "at-risk" triggers and apply knowledge about "at-risk" circumstances.

- The involvement of parents serves to promote parent-child reconciliation and to rebuild trust. Forgiveness is asked and plans are made for future interaction [the following heading is devoted to the imperative of, and challenges experienced with, the involvement of parents] (NICRO 2000, NYCDP 2001).

The teaching of social skills normally involves a description and rationale for using the skill, and practising by means of role-play and rehearsals (Algozzine *et al* 2001: 219, 247). Children have to understand the purpose and value of lifeskills, as well as the accompanying behaviour. Creative and interesting ways are mostly followed to instil and emphasise lifeskills messages. At the NYCDP, ice-breakers and games are used to keep participants focused, while group interaction and dynamics provide the opportunity for self-expression, reflection, insight and mutual learning. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that community-based interventions in respect of child problem behaviour should be flexible and adjustable to address the relevant needs of participants and their families (IMC 1996: 28, NICRO 2000: 8).

NYCDP officials have indicated that, depending on the needs of an intake group and as informed by individual assessments, the content and focus of their lifeskills programmes can be adapted to address the needs of particular groups:

Sometimes the facilitator will identify a problem and then explore it in depth. One cannot strictly follow the programme guidelines. Although we prepare according to the protocol, we are flexible during implementation. Such flexibility is also required to deal with the particular problems and needs of participants.

In addition, special sessions may can be arranged on the themes of crime awareness, sexual health (HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy), alcohol abuse and sexual assault (NYCDP 2001: 1).

3.5 Involvement of parents

The significant role of parents in child troubled behaviour has been alluded to earlier, but requires further reflection since their participation in the NYCDP's programmes appears particularly problematic. It is generally accepted that poorly equipped parents may fail

to reinforce the good intentions of behavioural interventions at the domestic level where programme outcomes are dependent on understanding, support and meaningful interaction from their side (Algozzine *et al* 2001: 251, Fivaz 2002: 7). In this regard, parents themselves often require skills training on parenting and on ways in which they may relate and react to their children (Apter 1982: 217).⁷

The challenges associated with parents as agents of behavioural change are known and include single-parent households, parents who are absent due to work constraints, absent father figures, lack of discipline, and the breakdown of extended family structures (Meletse 1994: 43, Schurink E 1994: 48). Nevertheless, evidence supports a focus on parenting and family relation as risk factors in child antisocial behaviour (Apter 1982: 159, Tolan *et al* 1995: 581). Despite the abovementioned challenges, the empowerment of parents could — from an ecological stance — have a positive cascading effect on other parts of the family system:

... a very troubled system can be returned to balance and harmony as the result of the first intervention, involving the parents of a child who is identified as troubled (Apter 1982: 169).

Reportedly, the co-operation and active involvement of parents/guardians in the NYCDP's lifeskills programmes is difficult to secure. Service providers view this reality as detrimental to the anticipated outcomes of the interventions. It is worthwhile to present the following statements of programme implementers on the matter:

Working with the child alone does not help because most of the time the problem is at home [...] It is simply not worth it that children attend the programme without the support of their parents [...] The lifeskills disappear when the child gets home, because the parent is not building on what the child has learnt; [...] Parents do not participate. The misbehaviour of children will change more easily if parents were also part of the programmes [...] Some children say that their households do not make it possible for them to implement what they have learnt. They do not benefit from these programmes, as there are too many hampering factors at home.

7 Not surprisingly, during the previously mentioned HSRC study youths indicated the training of parents as a potentially significant means of preventing child offending (Schurink W 1994: 29-30).

Alcohol abuse and a general lack of interest in matters concerning their children were indicated as the main reasons for a lack of parental involvement. A stakeholder noted: "I can identify many children who live on the streets. Their parents live in Noupoot, but they simply don't care for their kids". Poor parental involvement is compounded whenever a child is referred to the initiative by the school, in which case parents perceive the problem to be the school's and not theirs. In addition, the parents of some children are employed outside Noupoot and the care-giver, usually a grandparent or other family member, shows little interest in the programme.

3.6 Intake, uptake and completion

NYCDP officials noted that more boys than girls enter the programmes with an estimated ratio of three to one. The maximum intake for the "at-risk" programme is fifteen participants, although mostly between eight and twelve children take part at a time. Given the low number of diversion referrals, child offenders are often accommodated in the "at-risk" programme, with additional crime-focused sessions arranged, or intervention is held back until a suitable size group can be formed. The programmes span a six-week period with one session per week over a one or two-day period.

It has been reported that the start of each year sees an increase in intake, potentially due to the long festive holidays, during the course of which children have much free time without any academic commitments. In its first year of operation, the NYCDP dealt with 95 "at-risk" and fifteen diverted children. The following year saw a decline to 44 "at-risk" children, although the number of diverted cases increased to 25. The first half of 2003 predicted increased intake, with 34 at-risk and nine diverted case recorded. Although data is not available, NYCDP officials estimated that more than 90% of children successfully complete the intervention. Following completion, an evaluation report with focus on insight and understanding during the programme is submitted to the court or respective school, while defaulters are reported to the relevant authorities.

4. Findings of the impact assessment

4.1 Background information

Both studies constituted slightly more boys than girls (“at-risk” programme: 59.3%; n=35; diversion programme: 73.8%; n=31). The majority of ex-participants (“at-risk” programme: 71.1%; n=42; diversion programme: 61.9%; n=26) were between the ages of fourteen and nineteen years. Most respondents for the “at-risk” programme were still attending school (79.7%; n=47), while nearly half of the diversion group were not attending school (47.6%; n=20). Programme implementers indicated the majority of participants to be from lower socio-economic spheres. Less than a third of the households of the “at risk” group (30.5%; n=18) and less than a quarter of the diversion group (23.6%; n=10) had at least one person working for an income. However, this does not rule out the child support, pension and disability grants that households may receive. As can be gleaned from the following table, most children lived in fairly large households, particularly those from the diversion group.⁸

Furthermore, programme implementers stated that participants generally live in environments that are characterised by, among others, poor family ties. In the “at risk” group, roughly four out of ten children (42.9%; n=21) indicated their mothers as being the main care-giver in their households. With the diversion group, six out of ten respondents (61.3%; n=19) indicated this to be the case. A limited number of respondents perceived their fathers to be the main care-giver (“at-risk” programme: 12.2%; n=6; diversion programme: 12.9%; n=4).

8 In 2001, the average household size in the Northern Cape was 3.8 persons (Day & Gray 2005: 267).

Table 1: Number of people living in the households of ex-participants

Number of people	“At-risk” programme		Diversion programme	
	n	%	N	%
2-3	8	13.6	3	7.1
4-5	13	22.0	9	21.4
6-7	22	37.3	14	33.3
8-9	6	10.2	11	26.2
10-11	8	13.6	3	7.1
12-14	2	3.4	2	4.8
Total	59	100.1	42	99.9

4.2 Reasons for referral to the programmes

In the case of the “at risk” group, misbehaviour (eg disobedience, not attending school and staying out late) and delinquent activities (eg drinking, drug abuse and theft), when combined (62.7%; n=37), formed the predominant reason for referral to the programme. Nearly half of referrals (44.9%; n=22) originated from teachers. The remainder consisted of voluntary participation⁹ and referral by family and community members. The main reasons for participation in the intervention are presented below.

On the whole, ex-participants of the “at risk” programme felt that they needed to change their ways or needed to learn more about life. Similarly, about half of the parent/guardian respondents (51.1%; n=23) stated that their children needed to change their behaviour, while others felt that their children had to engage in a more constructive manner (15.6%; n=7) and needed to be informed about life (13.3%; n=6).

9 The study was unable to determine whether respondents who indicated that they voluntarily enrolled in the programme did so out of their own free will, ie without referral from school or by a parent/guardian or community member, or whether they were simply dishonest in their responses. As such, data from these respondents were excluded in the calculation of continued misbehaviour (discussed below).

Table 2: Main reason to attend the “at-risk” programme according to ex-participants

Reason	N	%
I needed to change my ways	15	34.9
I needed to learn more about life	14	32.6
I needed to learn about substance abuse	4	9.3
I needed to learn how to communicate	4	9.3
I needed to ‘sort myself out’	2	4.7
I needed to improve my self-image	2	4.7
I was naughty/disobedient	2	4.7
Total	43	100.1

In the case of the diversion programme, half of the interviewees (50.0%; n=21) committed property offences exclusively: 35.7% (n=15) for theft and 14.3% (n=6) for burglaries. Nearly a third (31.0%; n=13) were referred for common assault and four (9.5%) for sexual misconduct. Two cases (4.8%) were referred for vandalism, and one each for vandalism and theft (2.4%), and for theft and assault (2.4%). The majority of respondents were arrested (85.7%; n=36) and all were referred to the programme by the court.

Reasons why respondents felt that they needed to participate in the diversion programme amounted to: not wanting to be sent to prison or reform school (41.4%; n=12); feeling that the programme would help in changing behaviour (37.9%; n=11); and perceptions that their behaviour was wrong (20.7%; n=6). Parents/guardians, on the other hand, felt that their children needed to participate in the programme as: the child had to change his/her behaviour (44.7%; n=17); a wrongful act was performed (21.1%; n=8), and to assist the child in staying out of trouble (15.8%; n=6).

4.3 Retention of themes and benefits

The interviewed ex-participants were asked what themes they could recall from the lifeskills programmes, and could provide more than one

answer. As can be surmised from the table below, the most frequently mentioned themes included drug and alcohol abuse, not to commit crime, respect for others, self-awareness and good behaviour.

Table 3: Themes retained by ex-participants (at-risk and diversion programmes)

Theme	“At-risk” programme		Diversion programme	
	n	%	n	%
Drug abuse	15	14.7	5	11.6
Not to commit crime	11	10.9	6	14.0
Alcohol abuse	11	10.9	4	9.3
Respect for others	11	10.9	4	9.3
HIV/AIDS	10	9.9	1	2.3
Peer groups and relationships	9	8.9	5	11.6
Communication	6	5.9	-	-
Self-awareness	5	5.0	5	11.6
Good behaviour	5	5.0	6	14.0
Child abuse/domestic violence	4	4.0	2	4.7
Setting and achieving goals	4	4.0	3	7.0
The importance of education	3	3.0	-	-
Sex and sexuality	3	3.0	-	-
Conflict management	2	2.0	-	-
Decision-making	-	-	2	4.7
Teenage pregnancy	2	2.0	-	-
Total	101	100.1	43	100.2

With regard to the benefits resulting from the interventions, the majority of respondents from the “at-risk” group (89.8%; n=44) felt that the programme responded to their needs. The main reasons cited included stopping alcohol/substance abuse (21.7%; n=10); having learnt much about life (17.4%; n=8); behaviour improved

(17.4%; n=8); and respecting others (13.0%; n=6). Reasons why the programme did not respond to the needs of four children related largely to the latter's perceptions of not having had any problems and of not belonging in the programme.

The majority of parents/guardians (79.6%; n=39) — although slightly fewer than the ex-participants — stated that the programme responded to the needs of their children as: their behaviour improved (42.5%; n=17); more about life was learnt (17.5%; n=7); school work/attendance improved (15.0%; n=6); and substance abuse ceased (10.0%; n=4). The nine parents/guardians who felt that the programme did not respond or only partially responded to the needs of their children cited no change in behaviour (n=4), continued alcohol/substance abuse (n=3) and truancy (n=2) as reasons.

With regard to the diversion group, the majority of respondents (83.9%; n=26) felt that the programme responded to their needs as it brought about a change in behaviour (80.8%; n=25) and more about life was learned (19.2%; n=5). Two respondents stated that “there was nothing wrong with me”, and that the programme did not respond to their needs. However, fewer of the interviewed parents/guardians (67.6%; n=25) stated that the intervention responded to their children's needs, largely since no improvement in their behaviour prevailed (32.4%; n=12). Furthermore, the majority of ex-participants (59.4%; n=19) stated that they would have ended up in prison had they not participated in the diversion programme, while 15.6% (n=5) noted that they probably would have continued misbehaving. Similarly, the interviewed parents/guardians felt that their children would have been re-arrested (40.5%; n=15) or would have continued misbehaving (37.8%; n=14) if they had not been referred to the programme.

4.4 Continued misbehaviour and recidivism

With regard to the “at-risk” group, three children (8.6%) — excluding those who reportedly enrolled voluntarily — acknowledged that they had again been referred to the NYCDP for intervention. In contrast, six parents/guardians (16.2%) stated that their children had re-engaged in misbehaviour since first participating in the programme.

The forms of misbehaviour were indicated as two cases of truancy, two of public drinking, one of burglary, and one of staying out late. Three of these children (the burglary and public drinking cases) were arrested and diverted to the diversion programme.

With regard to the diversion group, three of the interviewed ex-participants (9.7%) indicated that they had re-offended since participating in the programme. In contrast, eight parents/guardians (21.6%) stated that their children had re-offended.¹⁰ All re-offences were property-related and amounted to burglary (n=6), theft (n=1) and vandalism (n=1). One re-offence had not been reported, whereas the other seven children had been re-arrested.

5. Discussion

Literature notes the problem and deviant behaviour of children as causing stress at various levels, while the latter form of conduct harms the social fabric of communities and could lead to an adult life of crime (Bezuidenhout & Tshiwula 2004: 97). In this regard, the endeavours of the NYCDP are noteworthy contributions to a small community that faces numerous social challenges and developmental deficits, including children hovering on the brink of antisocial and offending behaviour, and those already in conflict with the law.

The case study reveals that the objectives of the NYCDP and the thrust of its secondary and tertiary intervention programmes fit in well within international, regional and local directives for responses to troubled children. Moreover, the establishment of the initiative shows that community-based interventions can be conceptualised and implemented by concerned and motivated community leaders in a small-town setting, even despite little resources and the use of vo-

10 Data from the abovementioned NICRO recidivism studies also suggest that alternative sources of information are more likely to report re-offending. With the 1998 survey, 13 client respondents indicated a re-offence compared to 19 alternative respondents. The latter group represented roughly a third (34.2%) of the total study population. With the 2000 survey, 15 client respondents stated first and second offences compared to 25 alternative respondents. Alternative sources of information constituted slightly less than half (44.7%) of the second survey (Muntingh 2001: 11, 44-5).

lunteers. On the whole, appreciation for the NYCDP is echoed in the positive responses from the parents/guardians of referred children. In addition, the themes retained by ex-participants indicate recollection of a variety of lifeskills messages, including the key themes of drug and alcohol abuse, self-awareness and HIV/AIDS (Everatt 1994: 214). Furthermore, it is accepted that the efforts of dedicated referral educators from all local schools, and the support of the local magistrate in referring child offenders for diversion, ensure utilisation of, and could contribute to, the longevity of the initiative.

It is noteworthy that service providers developed and adapted the “at-risk” programme to meet local demands, and that a nationally used diversion initiative — which is supported by evidence regarding its effectiveness — is being employed in tertiary crime prevention with children. Although the scaffolding of the focus and content of the programmes according to the intervention needs of intake groups is equally noteworthy, it has to be kept in mind that lifeskills training, in general, functions predominantly on collective rather than individual approaches to intervention. This scenario questions the ability of such programmes to address the particular needs of individual participants. When considering the content of the “at-risk” and diversion programmes, it is observed that they are congruent with the philosophy of lifeskills training and show the potential to realise the objective of instilling a sense of responsibility and understanding in the majority of ex-participants.

Approximately four out of five “at-risk” and diverted children did not re-engage in antisocial or offending behaviour following participation in the programmes. For the majority of diverted children, therefore, the programme proved successful in preventing them from getting a criminal record. Of concern, however, is the fear that the programme does not involve the victim of the offence, thereby failing to meet the objectives of reconciliation with, and restitution of, victims as proclaimed in article 43 of the Child Justice Bill (2002). In this regard, structured lifeskills training as uni-modal intervention could benefit from a victim-involved component, or should be implemented in conjunction with restorative-focused interventions such as victim-offender mediation.

Existing evidence notes that some parents play a role in both contributing to and inhibiting child problem and deviant behaviour (Léonard *et al* 2005: 240, Mercy 2002: 43). The case study highlights the difficulty of ensuring the involvement of parents/guardians in interventions, a situation that challenges the interventions' objective of reintegrating the child with his/her family, as well as the goal of enhancing family relationships. Outcome criteria of the programmes could place stronger emphasis on their involvement. For example, with regard to the diversion programme, referral could relate more closely to meaningful parental inclusion as an indicator of successful completion, while improved collaboration with parents — particularly during assessment — could feature in the “at-risk” programme. Expecting children to implement what they have learnt at the domestic level without the support, understanding and empowerment of parents could place too high a premium on the anticipated outcomes of interventions.

The research indicates that the diverted children share the characteristics of known risk factors, including challenges at school (nearly half of the diversion respondents did not attend school despite the fact that the majority were of school going ages), poor socio-economic status, and absent or uninvolved father figures. These critical themes should be addressed by the intervention.

Despite various interpersonal and property-related offences having been referred to the diversion programme, results from the research — and to a large extent supported by the NICRO surveys — show that continuity in criminal activities has realised predominantly in property-related offences. Such relapse offending behaviour may well be understood in the economic contexts of Noupoot, which points to a limitation of the programme. Anticipating children exposed to economic hardships to rise above their situations, based on lifeskills training alone, is perhaps unrealistic, particularly when set rationalisations for acquisition crimes are present. In these cases, a constant focus on the motivation for crime without addressing the function of crime relates to misdirected intervention and a misappropriation of resources. Moreover, wrongly focused programmes may even contribute to poor self-images, (self) labelling and subsequent persistence in crime.

The situation calls for broader social support and economic development in the case of some child offenders, possibly in the form of vocational skills training and employment. In this regard, assessment as diagnostic tool for referral could prove helpful and, in the case of the NYCDP, may require strengthening to identify broader risk factors to which individual cases are exposed.

Although the majority of respondents noted that the programmes had responded to their needs, the study reveals potential abuse of the diversion system. With a large number of ex-participants citing their reluctance to go to prison or reform school as the main reason for participation, it is evident that the consequences of formal prosecution are weighed against those of participation in the programme. In such circumstances, the true voluntary intent of the diversion philosophy is distorted. Legal and referral officers should guard against exploitation of diversion programmes merely to avoid institutionalisation and a criminal record. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the majority of respondents indicated that they would have re-offended had they not participated in the programme. Therefore, diversion serves two purposes: it provides offending children with a second chance, and it serves to filter out those who continue with crime. As a result, only cases that truly warrant formal prosecution and legal sanctions are taken up in the justice system.

A slightly lower proportion of parents/guardians of “at-risk” ex-participants indicated continued misbehaviour than those of diverted children, which tempts one to conclude that lifeskills training is more effective with “at-risk” than offending minors. However, larger longitudinal studies are needed to determine the susceptibility of different types of troubled children to lifeskills training, particularly as uni-modal intervention. At the methodological level, it is observed that alternative sources of information are more forthcoming and reliable regarding continued misbehaviour and recidivism than ex-participants. Therefore, self-report provides a distorted picture of relapse conduct.

6. Conclusion

Community-based programmes are viable and valuable in addressing the behaviour modification needs of children who present problem and deviant conduct. The majority of referred children and their parents/guardians benefit from such endeavours, although the meaningful participation of the latter proves to be difficult to secure. Lifeskills training as uni-modal intervention shows promise to alter child troubled behaviour effectively, although some limitations of the approach surface regarding its ability to address acquisition crimes.

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