

Spiritivity as Methodology for Social Inclusion of Marginalized Populations – Pilot study in India

Project Dreams and Reality 2010 –The Mysore Chapter

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The Story of Project Dreams and Reality – The Mysore Chapter

Introduction

My PhD research on social exclusion had shown that children and youth at risk of exclusion are the most difficult to reach populations (in the UK and globally). This is often because the stakeholders involved in ensuring wellbeing of these populations are embedded within paradigms of Institutions and roles that they represent, resulting in very little actual communication achieved even during scheduled sessions of interaction.

Therapeutic interventions, therefore, need to be non-institutional and embedded within the empowerment paradigm where the process is driven by the marginalized groups rather than being passive recipients. Constructive communication processes that would traverse differences between symbolic and real worlds of all parties are essential to reaching marginalized populations. Power differences, status divide, institutional affiliations, and divergent subjective experiences of those trying to reach marginalized groups from the populations they are trying to reach create barriers to participatory processes to social inclusion

Spiritivity is a communication tool that was successfully applied in this project to create a dynamic, constructive platform for equal participation of all parties involved. The idea was to develop a methodology for non-institutional, therapeutic based intervention to lift barriers to social inclusion by creating experiences of empowered action. Spiritivity was used successfully to achieve this goal.

The Mysore Chapter in India

Mentortogether is a project that aims to assist in urban poverty reduction efforts in India through a youth mentoring program that matches urban poor youth one-to-one to committed volunteer mentors. Mentors impart crucial academic and career information, IT and English (spoken and written) skills, and life skills like self-esteem, self-expression, teamwork and time-management, to prepare youth to compete equally after their formal education. Mentortogether is a registered Charitable Trust (No. 372/09-10), with its office located in Bangalore, India.

I chose to collaborate with Mentortogether because there is ample research to support the argument that healthy role models and mentors have a positive impact on the development of children/youth categorized to be at “high risk” of exhibiting behavioral and adjustment problems. The context for applying Spritivity would be the mentoring program, with workshops conducted with both groups of mentors and their respective mentees.

Spritivity-Mentortogether Initiative

A sample of 21 girls (age group of 14 – 17 years), who live in a government run girls’ home in Mysore, was selected for the Spritiivity-Mentortogether initiative in Mysore. This age group was chosen because the girls have to leave State care at the age of 18 and therefore, are at the verge of a major transition into society. I modified the event design of Project Dreams and Reality (PDR, 2008) that was a Spritivity workshop conducted for MSc students at the LSE. The ‘Timeline’ part of the PDR 2008 was re-written to embed the mentorship programme as individual, personal project for each girl, similar to the MSc thesis timelines for the LSE students. The entire workshop was designed around the mentorship programme that Mentortogether was starting with the girls.

I developed a phase two that was not a part of PDR 2008. Since the idea is to provide non-institutional therapeutic intervention to socially excluded populations, I designed a Spritivity workshop for the Mentors as well. In this workshop, the narratives from the previous workshop done with the girls were shared with their mentors. This workshop was designed to incorporate the mentorship experience as the personal project for each of the mentors this time. The underpinning idea was that the narratives can be used as an effective medium for intervention by

the mentors, and during the Spritivity workshop, the mentors will also be able to reflect upon it and come up with better informed, mentee-centered strategies for intervention.

This second phase of the project is based on application of Problem Solving Process Model for personal decision support (PSPM-DS) that was developed to provide decision support to young adults in counseling, struggling with difficult life's decisions. The model draws upon decision theory, soft system methodologies and systems thinking to help with the three phases (problem awareness, problem structuring, and problem evaluation) of the decision making process. Three different ways of problem representation, Future Scenarios frame, Multi-Attribute-Utility (MAU) frame, and Rule-base frame, are used for representing the problem¹.

The key element and pre-requisite of the PSPM model is the creation of a responsive, flexible and adaptive environment. Such an environment enhances exploration, creativity and freedom in the expression of feelings and desires and increases the awareness of the problem. Spritivity workshops create such an environment and help in getting the narratives from the difficult to reach population. These narratives can then be shared with the adults who will play the role of counselor in the girls' lives. This creates the bridge of inclusion that is non-institutional in its approach and therapeutic in its practice.

Workshops for the Girls in Mysore, India

The aim of the Spritivity workshop with the girls was to make them comfortable expressing themselves, rather than striving constantly to gain someone else's approval or acceptance. They were being trained to realize their own potential and that what matters the most is what *they* think about themselves, not what others think about them.

The best moment in the project was the reaction of the girls when they saw the photos that they had clicked. None of them had held a camera before and were very shy at first. But once they got it, they ran around excitedly taking photos. Then they were unsure of the quality of photos they had clicked and shy about sharing them publicly. But once the photos had been shown to them,

¹ For details of the model and an example of its application to the counseling process, please see Chatjoulis, A. & Humphreys, P., (2007), 'A Problem Solving Process Model for Personal Decision Support (PSPM-DS)', *Journal of Decision Systems* 16(2): 213-239

they could not wait to have the photos printed and show everyone that *they* had clicked the photos alone with no help from anyone.

Then the girls created Sprites and stories using those sprites. Each story is embedded within the subjective reality of each girl and conveys her unique perspective on her situation. They went through each phase of the problem solving process, embedded within their cultural and contextual reality, till they themselves formulated an action plan.

Through this process, the girls were able to identify their key concerns about the mentorship programme, the main stakeholders and their roles in the girls' journey, their expectations from the programme and eventually, their strategy to gain maximum from the mentoring experience. They gained clarity about their own goals and devised a strategy that identified potential time-lines, mile-stones and action plan to achieve the final goal. The mentorship programme emerged as an opportunity to take the first steps towards their goals. Prior to the workshop, the girls had shown limited understanding of the programme and were operating from a *compliant, passive mindset* rather than a *critical, proactive approach* that they adopted after the workshop.

Workshops with the Mentors:

The aim for the Spritivity workshop with the mentors was that they come to understand the girls' situations through their eyes alone and not through biased assumptions (positive or negative) about the girls. The narratives of the girls were shared with the mentors at the beginning of their workshop. The idea was that they would realize the importance of facilitating the decision-making capabilities of the girls and construct their mentoring role around it, rather than the other way around. They were mere facilitators, while the girls become the leaders of change in their own lives, and challenged the implicit power inequalities as and when they arose in the process. Having been through a similar creative workshop where they were forced to reflect themselves on their own life's journeys, the mentors became more sensitive and aware of the important role that they can play in the girls' lives.

Additionally, mentors often went back to their own or their mentees labyrinths when faced with communication or interaction problem with the mentees. The stories narrated by the girls helped overcome problem of difficulty of disclosure faced by marginalized populations. The narratives became guidance and information source for the mentors to develop creative solutions for

establishing fruitful relationships with the girls. Their own labyrinths helped them re-gain focus and perspective when they felt lost or overwhelmed during the mentoring process.

This experience had to be as effective as possible for both, mentors and mentees, for it to be deemed a success. We often want to do something but don't have a plan how to do it. These workshops helped identify what they wanted to do and then together, construct a workable plan. In contrast to previous programmes run by Mentortogether, the girls in this project were proactive, expressive of their emotions and needs, and took complete ownership of the project. Similarly, better-prepared and critically conscious mentors made therapeutic interventions a reality for those populations that needed it the most. They were able to understand the needs of their mentees, without taking charge of the process themselves. Meaningful interactions became possible with even the most reticent of participants, where sprite and narratives created by that participant could be used instead of speech. Each interaction was thus tempered and driven by the participants' needs and preferred pace/method of communication rather than enforced upon them.

The Spritivity workshops were greatly appreciated by both the groups. Mentortogether has reported that the Mysore chapter was the most successful mentoring initiative so far, with real relationships formed and much greater, proactive participation from the mentees.

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