

## The experiences of alumni adolescents on the contribution of a Youth Opportunities Programme

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This article focuses on the experiences of alumni adolescents on the contribution of a Youth Opportunities Programme, a non-profit after-school education programme presented in Namibia. A qualitative descriptive design was used to provide insight into the contribution of this programme. Five focus groups were conducted with 32 participants. The transcribed data were analysed by means of thematic analysis. The rich descriptions of the experiences of alumni adolescents indicated learning, personal and relational experiences as well as challenges. The learning experiences included the transfer of academic knowledge and skills that assisted them to deal with advanced opportunities, and the provision of resources. They were able to socialise with friends and form personal relationships with teachers, serving as emotional support. The challenges they encountered while attending the programme on a full-time basis included high expectations in terms of time management, attendance and behaviour. These challenges proved to be exhausting at times.

**Keywords:** academic improvement, adolescents, after-school programme, development, extracurricular activities, life skills

### Introduction and background to the study

School is potentially an area where adolescents can be presented with opportunities and experiences that will enhance their development and learning (Elmore, 2009). Schools in struggling townships often have limited access to educational opportunities, since learning resources such as books or learning opportunities and excursions or extracurricular activities cannot be afforded (Thabane, 2008). This is likely to increase academic difficulties, decrease the number of years of schooling, and increase school drop-out rates (Crosnoe, Mistry & Elder, 2002; Farmer, Price, O'Neal, Leung, Goforth, Cairns & Reese, 2004). However, there is also evidence that a positive attitude towards school, including a sense of belonging and awareness of ability, may predict higher educational achievement, despite the high poverty in which these children find themselves (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer & Hutchins, 2011). Studies of programmes after school hours have indicated the positive impact of extended after-school-hours programmes in alleviating some of the negative influences of poor communities (Mahoney, Lord & Carryl, 2005; Paviot, Heinsohn & Korkman, 2008; Posner & Vandell, 1994). The introduction of after-school programmes, such as this programme, offers educational as well as recreational opportunities in various communities (Posner & Vandell, 1994).

The programme referred to in this study, is a non-profit, after-school-hours education initiative presented in a struggling township in Namibia.<sup>i</sup> Namibia, an African country, attempted after its independence in 1990 (Garrouste, 2011) to completely change its education system (Angula & Lewis, 1997). Approximately 13 percent of the Namibian population aged 15 years and older do not have formal education, and 45.8 percent of this population are poor. The 6 percent of the population aged 15 years and older who have attained tertiary education have a poverty incidence of less than 1 percent (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2012). This suggests that education can be regarded as a buffer against poverty. Currently, general education in Namibia is experiencing inadequacies, including unqualified school teachers, a shortage of books and instructional material (Marope, 2005) with a ratio of one textbook per three learners in primary schools and one text book per two learners in secondary schools (Nakale, 2013), overcrowding in schools and underfunded schools (Hoadley, 2009; Molinuevo, Bonillo, Pardo, Doval & Torrubia, 2010). Financial resources in terms of salaries for teachers also have an impact on the quality of education. Some teachers lack commitment due to low salaries, which is suggested to be one of the reasons for the high failure rate in schools (Sichombe, Nambira, Tjipueja & Kapenda, 2011).

The Youth Opportunities Programme is focused on supporting learners in government schools (Hoadley, 2009; Molinuevo et al., 2010) with additional academic work and activities to advance their social and moral skills,<sup>ii</sup> free of charge. Classes are presented by appointed teachers or occasional volunteers from other countries. These classes include English, mathematics, reading, life skills, as well as sport, music and computer classes, which are often not introduced in government schools.<sup>1</sup> Through these activities and classes, the programme is dedicated to promoting a future generation of emotionally healthy, driven and forward-thinking leaders in Namibia<sup>ii</sup> by aiming to cultivate positive thinking and self-esteem in the learners. The programme aims to expand the learners' knowledge and experience base by exposing them to textbooks and resources other than those being used in government schools. Other resources include field trips introducing learners to Namibia's wildlife, tourist attractions and uranium mines, which are all major contributors to the country's economy. Academic performance is evaluated through tests so that learners who require more help can be identified and strategies can be formulated.<sup>i</sup> Involvement in the community is also encouraged through fundraising for nature conservation or animal rescue.<sup>i</sup>

Various schools in the Swakopmund area have been approached by this Youth Opportunities Programme, inviting Grade 3 learners who show ability and promise to undergo a selection process. These learners are tested on reading, mathematics and English, and a total of 24 learners are invited to join the programme from Grade 4 to Grade 7. They are collected from the various schools every afternoon, receive lunch and attend the lessons from 14:00 until 17:00. For these children, active participation in the programme requires time, effort and commitment, since they are expected to attend the programme every afternoon once they have been accepted. Once learners reach Grade 9 to Grade 12 they form the alumni group and do not attend the formal programme any longer. As the workload and responsibilities in government schools take up much more of their time from Grade 9 onwards, they are given the opportunity to use the facilities of the programme rather than following the formal programme.<sup>iii</sup> The hope is that the programme presented them with solid basic skills and a positive attitude towards education to keep them invested in their own academic success.

The purpose of this Master's Degree study was to gain descriptive data on the experiences of alumni adolescents on the contribution of the programme. The following broad research question guided this study: *What are the experiences of alumni adolescents of the Youth Opportunities Programme?*

### Research methodology and research design

A qualitative descriptive design, as described by Sandelowski (2000), was seen as most appropriate for this study as it describes the experiences of adolescents without attempting to explain them (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). An exploratory approach (Babbie & Mouton, 2001) furthermore provided in-depth data on how the programme is experienced by the adolescents.

#### Data collection

The sample of participants for the focus groups was taken from the population by purposive non-probability sampling (Strydom, 2011). Lists of learners who have previously attended the programme were obtained after which the researcher approached all these learners at their respective schools during school hours. These learners received letters addressed to their parents with the invitation to participate in the study as well as consent forms. A total of 32 participated in the study, of whom 25 were female and 7 were male adolescents. These participants attended the formal Opportunities Programme at some stage in the past but do not attend the formal programme any longer (referred to as alumni adolescents). They were in Grades 8 to 12, and their ages ranged from 14 to 19 years. Most of them spoke Oshiwambo but were able to communicate in English.

Focus groups were used to collect in-depth qualitative data (Greeff, 2011; Henning, 2004) on the participants' experiences. The focus groups provided the participants with an opportunity to share their personal experiences. The conversations among the participants elicited a wide range of responses (Greeff, 2011) and dynamic discussions (Liamputtong, 2011), while reminding each other of events and experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Five focus groups were conducted by the researcher during afternoons at the premises. The questions asked during these focus groups included: When starting with the programme, what did you expect from it? Tell me more about your experience of the programme. What did you like most about the programme? What did you learn at/from the programme? Now

that you are no longer part of the full programme, do you think the programme helped you in how you currently function at school? How did it help you to function at your school now? Looking back, is there anything you would change in the programme? After you have experienced the programme, what do you think you needed from the programme?

The focus group questions were aimed at prompting descriptions on how the adolescents experienced the programme. Hence, a few basic questions were set while further prompting was based on the responses given by the adolescents. The number of participants in the focus groups varied between two and 10. Field notes (Greeff, 2011) were also used as a supplementary form of data collection.

Ethical guidelines, as described by Strydom (2011), were taken into account. Permission for the study was obtained from the reviewing panel of the Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies, North-West University, the board members of the programme and the Research and Ethics Committee of North-West University. Prior to the study, informed consent was obtained from all the parents/guardians and written assent from the participants. The participants were informed about the aim of the study as well as the research process and their right to withdraw from the study at any time should they wish to do so. Confidentiality and anonymity was ensured. The participants were compensated financially for transportation and they received refreshments.

#### Data analysis

The goal of data analysis in this study was to identify, analyse and report the patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2009) found within the empirical data. This was attained by means of thematic analysis, which provided a rich thematic description of the entire data set, giving a sense of the predominant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six steps, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) for conducting thematic analysis, were utilised by the researcher in this study. The study supervisors critically commented on the initial analysis, which was used to refine subsequent interpretation, thereby enhancing trustworthiness (Creswell, 2009).

#### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness criteria can be operationalised by credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher made use of member checking to ensure credibility and dependability. Since it was logistically difficult to have the same group attend discussions more than once, the insights and information gained from one group was tested with another focus group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This gave the participants the opportunity to provide additional information and to corroborate, differ from or expand on the statements made by participants from other focus groups, thus ensuring credibility. It is the responsibility of the researcher to provide the reader with thick descriptions with the widest possible range of information to enable potential applicants to make judgments of transferability (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher achieved this with thick descriptions clearly placed within the context of the study. The raw data (tape-recorded focus group interviews and field notes), notes on theories and concepts, the themes that were developed, the findings and conclusions, personal notes and expectations (Babbie & Mouton, 2001) have been reviewed to establish confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

In this section, the themes and subthemes that emerged from the study will be presented. Verbatim quotes will be added where necessary to support the themes and subthemes.

### Learning experiences

#### *Enhancement of academic performance*

Academic work at the programme helped the adolescents to improve their marks at school by providing them with a better understanding of the work while they were in the programme. The following quote provides evidence of such academic improvement: "...what I have learned from (the programme) is that it will actually improve your level in English and maths." Through the knowledge and skills acquired from quality education, schooling is considered to foster positive development, being one of the strongest protective factors in the lives of young people (Cunningham, Cohan, Naudeau & McGinnis, 2008). Performance in their government schools improved due to their skills being transferred from the programme to their school contexts. This is evident from these quotes: "...everything we did in Maths (at the programme), we take back to what we did at school", and "We learn, and we are ahead with our work that we do at school".

Access to information and learning how to use the internet and library improved the quality of their projects: "And you can even come here to do like your projects and stuff, which also increase your marks at school." These resources may have been unavailable, like for this adolescent: "I don't know how I would have managed without (the programme), because we don't like have a computer at home." The field trips helped them to gain new knowledge, also useful for projects: "Or let's say you have maybe an essay to write about a place you have seen. At least you have something to write about." In this regard, the programme is providing them with a unique opportunity to overcome a barrier to their achievement at school, namely a lack of resources. A study by Mampane and Bouwer (2011) found that adolescents had expectations of schools to provide them with resources, and experienced this as having a direct influence on reaching their goals.

#### *Acquisition of skills*

The adolescents' thought processes and critical thinking also changed, as can be seen in how they reflected on learning: "...how to use your brain" and "think outside of the box". Improvements in critical thinking and learning to take responsibility can assist adolescents in engaging with their social and physical environment in an active, organised and goal-directed way, which Skinner and Edge (1998) consider to characterise a well-adjusted adolescent. Their reading skills have been improved with a unique rating system that encourages adolescents to read often. This system contributed to the improvement of their reading and language skills, as this adolescent stated: "They gave us extra help...just the fact that we actually got the opportunity to read books and improve our English." Most of these learners' mother tongue is Oshiwambo. They experienced the language policy of the programme, namely that only English may be spoken, as one of the ways in which the programme assisted in enhancing their improvement. This adolescent reflects on how the programme provided assistance in this regard: "...so every time we come to (the programme) we know we must speak English. So, by that time our English improved. I moved from a D candidate in English to a B..." English is the official language of Namibia (Ministry

of Education, 2010), highlighting the importance of its mastery.

The adolescents experienced the life skills classes as equipping them with information and competencies required on a daily basis, as seen in the following quote: "...her life skills...she taught us things that you need to know in life." Theron and Dalzell (2006) recognise adolescence as a period of heightened vulnerability, and argue that appropriate life skills could provide them with the necessary guidance and empowerment to meet the challenges they face.

### Personal experiences

#### *Intrapersonal attributes*

The adolescents acknowledged that their own input was needed to benefit from the programme, as shown by this quote: "It made us better, maybe, maybe not, it depends on individuals..." They learned to commit and persevere, which is described in the National Curriculum of Basic Education (Ministry of Education, 2010) as personal qualities needed to pursue goals and act autonomously. The following quote suggests the sense of responsibility they have learned to take on: "I can complete my own form without anybody's help." They further experienced the programme as being motivational, for example, through the reading system in the library, as described in the previous section. The implementation of this system contributed to their internal motivation. This adolescent explained that, "You always want to read more, so that you can go to the next level". Other intrapersonal attributes gained included confidence and belief in their own abilities, which may determine the attitude with which they approach tasks and problems. One adolescent girl explained how she learned that she was capable of much more than she had thought, and exclaimed, "I can become a president!" They also experienced an increase in self-confidence as this quote indicates: "For some times, somehow, it uplifted your self-confidence, you know how to talk..." Self-esteem is considered an important component of psychosocial development during adolescence (Sadock, Sadock & Kaplan, 2007) as it assists adolescents to manage the challenges, changes and transitions characteristic of adolescence (Birkeland, Melkevik, Holsen & Wold, 2012).

#### *Exposure to unfamiliar experiences*

The programme provided the adolescents with a range of experiences never possible before due to financial limitations, as this adolescent explained: "...because you don't get music elsewhere...I mean if you go for a drum lesson out of (the programme), you would pay like a lot." Adolescents felt that the programme provided an opportunity to discover their own talents and interests, as this quote suggests: "If I wasn't at (the programme) I don't think I will ever learn how to play the recorder. Now we also have guitar classes." The participants were also introduced to information technology, such as computers, internet and email, which they were ecstatic about as this adolescent girl exclaims: "I EVEN got an EMAIL here, ja, I didn't have an email." The adolescents had the opportunity to see places which could have been without their reach. This adolescent recognised this opportunity by saying: "Ja, my mom will never take me here ... . Ja, who will take me there? Who will take me to Etosha?" An increase in opportunities for adolescents to participate in diverse activities is desirable (Fredericks & Eccles, 2006) since this allows them to demonstrate a wider range of skills and interests that are not always available in schools. The programme reduced this lack of experience for them, which could have positive developmental outcomes for

them as has also been clearly noted in a review by Feldman and Matjasko (2005).

#### Relational experiences

##### *Personal relationship with teachers*

In all the focus groups, the adolescents became most excited and energised when talking about this relationship. The adolescents reminisced excitedly about the teachers at the programme, suggesting the positive relationships they had with some of the teachers: "...she was very nice with us, like every time you came to (the programme), it's like, run to her and then hug her or something." They considered this relationship like a close family relationship, as stated by this adolescent: "...the nice teachers that you even want to call, like if they are one of your family members." Previous studies have found that positive student-teacher relationships are important to predict social-emotional functioning (Decker, Dona & Christenson, 2007) and to improve academic attitudes and self-esteem (Chan, Rhodes, Howard, Lowe, Schwartz & Herrera, 2013), and that successfully relating to and interacting with learners may enhance their academic motivation (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami & Lun, 2011). The adolescents felt comfortable to use the teachers for emotional support, evident when one adolescent reflected: "Whenever you had a problem, and can't talk to your parents, or the teachers at school, I actually felt more comfortable talking to the teachers at (the programme), than at school 'cause, they listened more." According to Mampane and Bouwer (2011), the role of teachers in schools is about more than merely presenting the adolescents with knowledge and skills, as adolescents in adverse situations depend on their schools for assistance regarding their future lives.

##### *Social interactions with peers*

During the adolescent developmental phase, socialisation entails the process or ability to find acceptance in peer relationships, as well as the development of more mature social cognition (Sadock et al., 2007). Adolescents' attempt to achieve a sense of belonging in their peer group and to form a sense of well-being through their ability to conform to the activities of that group and measure up to their expectations (Sadock et al., 2007). Peer relationships become increasingly important during adolescence (Gowers, 2005), and the programme created a platform for meeting more peers and making friends. This is evident from the following quote: "...for me it was, the social life, since you come straight from school to (the programme) like, you never have time to make friends. The friends you have are here." The connections these adolescents made with their peers and their teachers led them to regard the programme as a second home: "(the programme) is like a family. Like, stick together and you must trust one another...we thought (the programme) was our second home." Studies (cited in Cunningham et al., 2008; Naudeau, Cunningham, Lundberg, McGinnis & Worldbank, 2008) have shown that a feeling of connectedness to a school setting may result in motivation and engagement in the classroom, academic performance, completion of education, and lower incidences of skipping school, fighting, engagement in bullying and vandalism.

##### *Change in how others perceive the learners attending the programme*

The adolescents felt that they had been granted beneficial status through their attendance of the programme, as the following quote suggests: "...writing (the programme) in your CV, it will

make you become an executive... ." Some adolescents also saw how the programme raised their popularity among friends, as this adolescent reflected: "It also makes you popular, because when you are here everybody is like, it's the smart kids that go to (the programme)."

##### Challenges associated with attending the programme

The programme posed a few challenges, which some of the adolescents recognised as requiring their commitment to reap the benefits, like this adolescent explained: "...it depends on certain people and how you are and how you use your time." However, for some adolescents it resulted in withdrawal from the programme as they felt that they could not balance their commitment to the programme with other responsibilities at home or at their government schools.

##### *High expectations of the programme*

Some challenges with regard to attending the programme influenced adolescents' attitudes toward the programme, like this adolescent reflected: "I think (the programme) became too demanding. Like, that is part of the reason why I left." They experienced this pressure as challenging, as the following quote indicates: "They were putting too much pressure on us, expecting too much..." They felt that the teachers and managers of the programme set very high standards, and that it was difficult at times to keep up: "There is like a certain level that they expect, and you can't go below it." They experienced the programme as too intense, interfering with other responsibilities, as this adolescent recalled:

"...imagine you have to go to school at 7:00, come from school at 13:00, at 14:00 you are here, uh, you go home at 17:00. You have to cook, you have to learn for tests, you have to study... Do your home chores. It's just too much."

They found it difficult to keep up, and became exhausted, as this adolescent reflected: "...then like we will go home and like you're tired from (the programme), after school you were tired, you come, you get more tired and then we go home." They felt that this had a negative impact on their school work: "...then we still like have to study for examination. Sometimes you are so tired, you just sleep. And then next day you fail."

##### *Time management*

The following two quotes comment on their difficulty to balance their time with other responsibilities and activities: "...one didn't get enough time to study and do stuff like, like some of us at home, we cook, to the household and stuff like that" and "...like we didn't have time for other stuff, like just...school (the programme), home, school (the programme), home". The adolescents were expected to obey the time boundaries set by the programme, evident from this reflection: "...when you actually don't pitch like for (the programme) at all, they kind of give you warnings and stuff." The adolescents expressed the need for a balance between the programme's activities and other activities: "And I think they should like compromise more, like, (the programme) life and other stuff. Like they should really balance that out, like maybe (the programme) on that day... ."

#### Discussion of findings

This study explored the experiences of alumni adolescents on the contribution of an after-school education programme presented in a township in Swakopmund. The adolescents spend numerous hours per week at school, and it is considered to have

an impact on every aspect of their development. In low-income and middle-income countries adolescents constitute a far greater proportion of the population than in high-income countries (Sawyer, Afifi, Bearinger, Blakemore, Dick, Ezeh & Patton, 2012), and it is in these countries that adolescents may be presented with fewer opportunities, resources and services that are essential for them to thrive and grow into healthy, productive adults (Murry, Berkel, Gaylord-Harden, Copeland-Linder & Nation, 2011). Operating in a lower to middle income country (Garrouste, 2011; Smith & Barret, 2011), Namibian schools are faced with challenges such as overcrowded classes (Hoadley, 2009), a lack of learning materials (Marope, 2005) and unqualified teachers (Marope, 2005) rather than being opportune developmental contexts. After-school education programmes attempt to overcome some of these challenges.

The findings of this regional study revealed that the Youth Opportunities Programme contribute to these adolescents' development and education in various ways. The fundamental learning areas addressed at the programme, namely English, mathematics and reading skills, have resulted in improved academic knowledge and skills. The adolescents' improved skills have thus been transferred to their government school setting. Since most of the adolescents' mother tongue is Oshiwambo, the increased use of the English language while attending the programme as well as the opportunity to read English books have assisted these learners in mastering Namibia's official language (Ministry of Education, 2010).

It is also clear from the findings that the programme not only helped them to improve their academic achievements, but also provided them with support. The life skills classes and emotional support from the teachers at the programme equipped these adolescents with knowledge and skills necessary to overcome peer pressure to engage in risky behaviours. The close relationships they had with some of the teachers as well as the friends they made have resulted in a sense of connectedness. On an intrapersonal level, the adolescents gained confidence and discovered their talents and abilities that are essential for the development of their self-esteem. The means of implementing the programme created enthusiasm and internal motivation to attend this educational programme. Socialisation and self-esteem form part of the required social and emotional development during the adolescent developmental phase. The programme created an opportunity for the adolescents to be introduced to a range of activities, which is not always available at their government schools. The field trips and excursions organised by the programme allowed them to see the most prominent tourist attractions in Namibia, thus expanding their knowledge base and providing them with valuable information. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the adolescents learned to think critically, which is an important part in adolescent cognitive development. The findings also suggest that the adolescents learned to commit and persevere while they pursued their goals, and that they felt encouraged by the teachers at the programme.

However, they also reflected on challenges they faced while attending the programme on a full-time basis. The intensity of the programme and time required made it difficult for them to balance their attendance of the programme with other activities and responsibilities. Sanderson and Richards (2010) emphasise the importance of identifying the barriers affecting attendance of after-school programmes on a community level. Since the benefits of after-school programmes have been documented (Mahoney et al., 2005; Posner & Vandell, 1994), it is important to recognise the potential barriers to attendance

(Grolnick, Farkas, Sohmer, Michaels & Valsiner, 2007; Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001) and attempt to alleviate these so that adolescents have the opportunity to benefit from such programmes. Therefore, the challenges the adolescents experienced should be taken into account.

A comprehensive needs assessment may provide valued insight into how the programme could be developed in a way that would assist and support their learners in the best possible way, ensuring that their developmental needs are balanced with the distinct needs arising from their specific circumstances. This may point out how challenges may affect their participation in the programme. A detailed investigation into the field of after-school programmes by Halpern (2000) highlights the importance of such a balance.

A limitation in this study was controlling the size of the focus groups and the number of participating adolescents. Many arrived at groups other than those they were scheduled for, and had to be turned away to prevent the groups from having too many participants.

### Conclusion

Poor communities often have limited access to educational opportunities, since learning resources such as books or learning opportunities and excursions or extracurricular activities cannot be afforded (Thabane, 2008). Studies of after-school-hours programmes have indicated the positive impact of extended programmes or programmes presented after school in alleviating some of the negative influences of poor communities. This exploratory study therefore aimed to gain insight into the experiences of alumni adolescents on an after-school programme. The findings of this regional study also provide a clear indication of the various positive contributions the programme has made to the adolescents' overall development and their academic or school functioning. Similar positive contributions are also documented in research studies of other after-school intervention programmes (Mahoney et al., 2005; Paviot et al., 2008; Posner & Vandell, 1994). Although this programme is restricted to a specific context, the rich description of the experiences provided insight into the positive attributes as well as the challenges of such a programme. The programme also provides opportunities to a very small elected group of children. Hence, it would be fortunate if more children from poor communities could be part of such an opportunity. This study has provided a possible backdrop for more detailed research.

### Notes

- i Mondesa Youth Opportunities. Sept 2011 Newsletter. Available: <http://www.sportanddev.org/newsviews/news/23611/Modessa-Youth-Opportunities-newsletter-out>  
Date of access: 9 May 2012.
- ii Mondesa Youth Opportunities (website) <http://www.mondesayouth.org/>  
Date of access: 25 February 2012.
- iii Boulter K 2012. Introduction to Mondesa Youth Opportunities [personal interview]. 10 Feb., Swakopmund, Mondesa.

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