

Soul Buddyz Clubs: A social development innovation

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Abstract

Soul Buddyz Clubs, centered on social mobilization and children's rights, offer a model for developmental child welfare both in South Africa and further afield. Features of successful clubs and the way in which these enhance the lives of children, particularly in under-resourced areas, are highlighted.

Keywords

child participation, child welfare, childhood, children's clubs, developmental social welfare

With the publication of the new policy in the *White Paper for Social Welfare* (Department of Welfare, 1997) in South Africa, social development became the officially preferred approach to welfare service delivery. However, translating this theory into practice has presented challenges in child welfare also (Schmid, 2008), making it critical to document positive examples that identify best practice, offer a potential template for

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replication and provide an alternative, practical lens for social workers schooled in an individualistic, pathology-oriented framework. This review of the Soul Buddyz program adds to the limited research into South African social development projects. Patel (2005) highlights various innovative projects; Sewpaul (2001) identifies early initiatives in child welfare; and such programs as Isibindi (Wilson, 2008), Isolabantwana, Asibavikele or LoveLife Groundbreakers have been evaluated (Graham, 2009). The Soul Buddyz initiative is of particular interest as it falls outside formal child welfare structures, targeting social mobilization and community development through children's participation. It offers a transferable framework for children's engagement and development locally and internationally, expanding the repertoire of social welfare practitioners in both less and more resourced situations.

This article describes the Soul Buddyz Club model with reference to the Soul City Institute's view of social mobilization, outlines research carried out on the impact of these clubs, discusses the findings and identifies how the research outcomes contribute to social development best practice.

The Soul Buddyz Club model

The Soul City Institute, established in 1992, is a South African non-governmental organization (NGO) that uses mass media interventions ('edutainment') to develop safe and healthy communities in a context of high levels of poverty and unemployment, lack of services and infrastructure, much violence, crime and substance abuse, and a sizeable prevalence of HIV/AIDS (Soul City Institute, 2009). Social mobilization is a participative, collaborative, empowering and evidence-based process, which involves engaging community members at many levels of society to address wider concerns towards societal change (Chabwela, 2009). In 2008, Soul City articulated its particular social mobilization practice model: an assets-based approach (Jackson et al., 2003), in which communities are constructed as active agents in achieving individual, familial and communal behavioral and social change at local, national and even international levels. Because micro-level needs are understood as linked to broader societal concerns, grassroots activism and advocacy are viewed as contributing directly to macro shifts. In this sense, social mobilization is also a strategy for the development of social capital, that is, the family and community networks and institutions that individuals may draw on in times of difficulty (Misselholm, 2009). The Soul City Institute social mobilization practice model is used particularly to address health issues. It employs community events to mobilize policymakers, members of the media and the public to address critical problems, and

utilizes partnerships with other NGOs and the government to initiate national action. Strategies include health promotion and social capital development.

The institute reaches adults through its Soul City program, while 8–12-year-olds and the adults in their lives are targeted through television, radio and print in the innovative Soul Buddyz program, launched in 2000. Through drama, real life stories, messages on topics such as children's rights, HIV and AIDS, youth sexuality and safety are communicated to children (Maker, 2008).

In 2003, in response to children's requests, the Soul Buddyz program was extended to Soul Buddyz Clubs (SBCs), set up through a partnership of the Soul City Institute, the South African Broadcasting Channel (SABC) Education (a national broadcaster channel) and the Department of Education. These clubs, primarily school-based and facilitated by trained volunteer educators, target the same population as the broader program. Based on the principles of ongoing learning, child participation, children's rights and children as active and proactive citizens and agents of change, and using fun and creativity, the clubs intend to create and sustain a platform that gives voice to and promotes action for children's health and well-being. Children experience the value of service and volunteering. In 2003 1800 clubs were established, growing to 5255 in 2009 and representing a quarter of South African primary schools. Most clubs are based in poor, rural and under-resourced communities, the highest number being in Kwa-Zulu Natal, one of the poorest South African provinces. Girls represent 60 percent of those reached. The strength of the clubs varies, some struggling to get off the ground, others being engaged in significant community action. The Soul City Institute wanted to know what factors contributed to the successful clubs, so that such achievement might be replicated and less successful clubs supported.

Research methodology

The Soul City Institute contracted the Centre for Social Development in Africa to identify best practices by studying consistently successful clubs so as to share lessons learnt with others in the SBC fold. Because the research was commissioned by the institute, the researchers had to be cautious both in developing the research strategy and in analyzing the material, so as not to automatically adopt SBC perspectives and to ensure objective results were provided.

The study aimed to identify the building blocks of success in clubs labeled successful by the institute. It also intended to establish what various stakeholders viewed as benefits (Wilson and Taback, 2009). By understanding the building blocks of success, children in other schools might be

encouraged to launch clubs. The research could potentially speak to the value of the institute's social mobilization model for children's needs and participation. As such, the findings would have relevance for those wishing to adapt the approach in other contexts.

As the research budget was small, only a limited number of sites could be chosen. A purposeful sampling approach was adopted (Rubin and Babbie, 2005): the institute itself selected the six 'Platinum' status clubs, ensuring a mixture of urban, peri-urban and rural clubs – and thus different socio-economic contexts – for the study. The researchers required that club members, facilitators and teachers as well as school principals be interviewed at every site. Who was interviewed depended on availability.

The research has aspects of an exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2003) as multiple sources of information were accessed and analyzed. The researchers visited each club for an average of five hours. For a textured, multi-dimensional perspective the views of stakeholders were elicited through individual and group interviews. At four of the six sites, former club members were interviewed, while parents were interviewed at five sites and community members in one site. The current club members were interviewed in groups, while the adults – barring one group of parents – were interviewed individually. In total, 120 club members, eight facilitators, 15 parents/caregivers, six principals, 10 teachers, 11 former club members and four community members (chosen by the particular facilitator) were interviewed using guides to ensure some consistency in the questions asked. In addition, project documentation, such as quarterly project reports, a program proposal, the Soul City learning material, two past program evaluations and various media reports were examined. Researchers used verbatim notes of the interviews to write a case study for every club. A verbatim record allowed the researchers to reflect the interviewees' own language and wording. However, the researchers inevitably at this stage of the research selected which information to note, as a total verbatim record would not have been possible. The written information was analyzed thematically, guided by the original research questions.

The impact of both researchers being white women in their 40s on the data collection and analytical process is not immediately evident. Communication was in English and, at one site, Afrikaans. With one group of parents where language was an issue, the facilitator interpreted to avoid the cost of employing someone. While recognizing that having the facilitator translating could affect the information gathered, the researchers felt the questions being asked were sufficiently neutral.

The Soul Buddyz Institute specifically selected an informal research procedure with the intention of lifting out stories rather than rigorous research

data. Despite certain limitations in the research methodology, the information gathered nevertheless allows for features of successful clubs to be identified. The lack of comparison with less successful clubs does not, however, allow the inference that these features in fact were factors or causes of success.

Research outcomes

The research outcomes focused on common features of successful clubs, but also took note of how children, parents and facilitators benefited directly from their involvement in Soul Buddyz Clubs.

Features of successful clubs

The Soul City Institute identifies successful clubs as those actively realizing the vision and objectives of Soul Buddyz, by mobilizing children as agents of change in their own lives and that of the community; creating an environment for ongoing learning; hearing children's voices; and providing a positive alternative for young people (Centre for Social Development in Africa, 2008). The research pointed to a number of areas that contributed to a club being successful.

One area has to do with creating structure and systems. All successful clubs researched took advantage of the materials provided by the Soul City Institute as these were clear and easy to implement, while being careful to adapt these resources to the local setting. The facilitators' guide on annual themes and learning areas, bi-monthly newsletters (information about general club activities, national and international health campaigns and competitions) and posters encouraging community action on particular themes were all well used.

The Soul Buddyz facilitator guides are so clear, it's not necessary for me to have any training. (facilitator)

Guided by such resources, clubs adopt a uniform approach to many areas of club life. For example, recruitment is structured, ensuring that new members are enrolled at the beginning of each school year, though recruitment methods vary. In three instances, the children identify new members, whereas in other clubs the facilitator drives the selection process. In two clubs, children write letters explaining why they want to be a Buddy. If clubs are popular, the club is expanded or, as in the case of two schools, new clubs are established. The different recruitment methods do not seem to affect the success of the clubs.

Structure was also reflected in the designated meeting area, regular meeting times and expected attendance (failure to attend could lead to expulsion from the club). In addition, every club investigated had a clear management structure with an elected chairperson, vice-chairperson, treasurer, secretary and 'meeting mover' (who reminded members about the next meeting and ensured it took place). Further, effective management of meetings was emphasized, for example, through small group activities. As proof of club activity for Soul City Institute competitions, all the clubs maintained documents such as reports, photographs, letters from partners and beneficiaries, and newspaper articles.

A second feature of success is the institute's use of monitoring and reward systems to acknowledge exceptional performance and promote participation. The ranking systems used twice a year, in which new clubs are designated as 'Bronze', and older, active clubs 'Silver', 'Gold' or 'Platinum' grades (depending on the points earned through projects, competition entries, monthly reports and letters from Buddyz), seemed to serve as a motivation to clubs to perform. One of the most coveted rewards for clubs was to be selected for the 'Buddyz on the Move' televised actuality program, which showcases innovation, teamwork and community action. Club members are involved in the production of the program. Receiving grants from a foundation connected with Soul City is also a motivator, as clubs have to raise their own funds. Further, the networking opportunities for children and facilitators offered by the Soul City Institute were experienced as rewards and participation seemed to signify successful clubs. The Soul Buddyz Annual Congress, in which members participate, was a highlight. The institute hopes that the new provincial and district forums will serve as motivators too.

A number of other features were present in the clubs studied. Committed, consistent and active facilitators seemed to be critical to success:

Without our facilitator we would not have achieved our goals and helped our community.

The eight facilitators were all experienced educators, who shared a strong ethos of volunteerism and service and saw their role as teachers as an opportunity to make a difference to the lives of the children. They felt the club's success lay partly in their willingness to ensure the children's participation, though two facilitators admitted to initially feeling more comfortable with directing rather than guiding.

Successful clubs could also be identified by committed and enthusiastic club members. Further, all facilitators were of the opinion that where

parents and caregivers supported the children's involvement, they were more likely to participate actively. Respondents also consistently cited as a significant element of success a supportive school environment, which included motivated principals, teaching corps and school governing bodies that viewed Buddyz activities as important to school life. The researchers felt that clubs succeeded in well-managed schools, rather than the resource base being an indicator of success. Clubs that formed relationships with other community stakeholders instead of acting independently were also more likely to be successful.

Finally, the access to certain resources, such as transportation and financial support, seemed to be critical to the success of clubs. Access to computers or printers, photocopiers or digital cameras as well as to print media seemed to be important, not for the success of the clubs per se, but to be able to record and demonstrate their success to the Soul City Institute. The research thus illuminated particular features of successful clubs, but additionally emphasized that participation in a successful club resulted in important benefits for the children and other stakeholders.

Personal change through involvement in Clubs

The children's reports suggest that their participation in the clubs has given them an appreciation of community service and increased their confidence, sense of self-worth, and respect for self and others. Club members get to participate in television and radio programs and travel to other areas for national conferences, privileges not normally available to their peers. The clubs also offer recreational facilities, occupying children after school. Children further acquire particular skills. As reported by a Buddy:

Soul Buddyz broke my nervousness, I was always shy, never speaking, but now I am speaking out and giving speeches.

One former club member, who is now studying mining engineering, reports:

My involvement in Soul Buddyz gave me focus in life. It taught me a lot. For example, I was able to stay away from alcohol. This was really difficult at times because of peer pressure. I was made the chairperson of the first club so I had to lead by example. In Soul Buddyz we take care of ourselves, we learn to socialize.

Educators also noticed positive behavioral and attitudinal changes after the children joined Soul Buddyz. A teacher commented:

They learn to follow rules, to respect each other, and they know that everyone has the same value . . . [and they] are independent.

One of the principals stated:

It is a natural process for the Soul Buddyz to take up leadership positions in the school.

The parents interviewed all agreed that their children's club involvement was beneficial as they became more responsible about school work, household chores and towards others, and were more able to engage with their parents in discussions of difficult social issues.

Another benefit was that the parents felt the Soul Buddyz programs facilitated a closer connection with the school:

Soul Buddyz has made me feel I have a part to play at school. The club offers so many extra-mural activities for our children and this makes us feel committed.

Participation in the clubs was not only meaningful for children but also for the facilitators, who each reflected that they had grown personally and professionally from their involvement, particularly from developing a greater appreciation of children's contributions. Facilitators also became catalysts at other schools in launching Soul Buddyz Clubs.

School principals and educators were proud of the tangible contributions the clubs made to the school and community infrastructure. The schools' reputations also improved. One teacher spoke with pride of her school, saying that because of having a club 'We are like Bethlehem, there is a light here'. The clubs initiated many activities, including advocating on behalf of orphaned and vulnerable children; organizing a Women's Day celebration; providing a nutritious meal to fellow learners three times a week by using vegetables from the club garden, and donations from students, teachers and the local church; beautifying the school; organizing an annual visit to the local seniors' home and advocating for community members to receive grants and pensions; working on a clean-up campaign at the local taxi rank; establishing a trauma center; distributing blankets and teddy bears and raising money for school uniforms for children infected or affected by HIV; refurbishing the school kitchen; building a borehole for the school; and arranging diverse awareness-raising events including the dangers of social chat networks, unacceptable money-lending practices, HIV/AIDS and discrimination, xenophobia, bullying and breast cancer. While club activities are not intended to result in ongoing services, the one-off events have resulted

in partnerships with community stakeholders such as the police, government departments, community newspapers, and local welfare organizations, schools and church groups.

The research thus highlighted that successful clubs shared common features. In addition, the children, parents, facilitators, teachers, principals and community members interviewed believed the clubs to have made a positive difference in their communities and in their individual lives.

Lessons from successful clubs

The data revealed that children could advocate on behalf of themselves and could mobilize community members and institutions to ensure that school and community needs were being addressed, and through this process accrued many personal benefits. Allowing children to lead the process was, according to some facilitators, initially difficult, but was named by all as central to the club's success. What unfortunately remains unclear is the interrelationship between elements of successful clubs and child participation: did these various features of successful clubs facilitate child participation, and would these clubs have been successful even if the agenda was not driven by the members, but by the facilitators? To what extent was the agenda in fact shaped by the facilitators? A further question is the degree to which clubs can be child-led within a context highly structured and monitored by the institute. Are the guidelines offered by the institute truly only guidelines which local groups can adapt? How free do the members feel to modify or indeed depart from the national template? While it is apparent that clubs felt they could choose their own direction, as evidenced in rural clubs tending to focus on projects related to secure livelihoods, while urban clubs perhaps worked on social networking issues, further investigation in this area is required.

It is striking that appropriate materials from a centralized office are able to provide an extremely valuable framework and foundation for both the launching and sustainment of clubs, although they are only guides and allow a necessary flexibility. Similarly, the interaction with other clubs, both for facilitators and child members, seems to be important in encouraging club activity. Experienced educators, who value volunteerism, and strong school environments are other ingredients for success.

While these factors seemed to be central to ensuring well-functioning and dynamic clubs, not having examined less successful clubs makes it difficult to assume these were the key issues or the only issues that ensured effectiveness. For example, an issue requiring further examination is whether the schools, educators and children who choose to become involved in clubs

are those who themselves are already comparatively well resourced, bearing in mind that most are from disadvantaged circumstances. One can infer that the children who became involved had parents or caregivers who were inclined to support their involvement, the facilitators were teachers who had a calling to work with children, and the school principals were able to harness minimal resources to create well-managed schools. Does this mean that a head-start is required for a successful club to emerge? What happens to the less committed children who drop out or are expelled from clubs, and who are they? Furthermore, what happens with those who apply to be a club member but are not selected when clubs cannot be multiplied? Although members and facilitators may come into the clubs with particular strengths, this does not preclude their further development through involvement in Soul Buddyz.

Another issue for consideration is how Soul City expectations affect the success of clubs. Clubs are required to provide a range of documentation to demonstrate success, but limited resources can make this difficult even though the institute provides prepaid envelopes, for example. In addition, it would be important to examine how the clubs who previously received financial support cope now that they are expected to increase their fundraising efforts, as only raised funds will be matched. Will only the clubs that have access to alternative financial sources be able to survive and thrive?

Thus, while common elements could be identified in the successful clubs, further research is required to establish whether these are in fact ingredients for success. Will the non-Platinum clubs that begin to use the materials and supports and more actively introduce clear structures and utilize the networking opportunities become more successful, and will child participation be a guaranteed facet of such success?

Even so, the Soul Buddyz Club experience does offer pointers for social development in the child welfare arena, as discussed below.

Pointers for social development in child welfare

The successful Soul Buddyz Clubs are exemplars of local innovation, which demonstrate that programs designed to be, as stated by a facilitator, ‘for children, about children and by children’, can have an impact on the lives of the participating children, the facilitators, the immediate school context and the broader community. To identify what this experience implies for best practice in implementing the social development approach to child welfare practice, it is necessary first to describe what a social development approach in child welfare implies.

The three child welfare orientations identified in the Western world are the child protection, family services and community care models (Freymond and Cameron, 2006; Hetherington, 2006). In essence, the child protection approach adopts a narrow view of child welfare, focusing on child abuse. The approach locates child abuse primarily within family dysfunction, intervening at the point where the child is at significant risk of being harmed or has been harmed. The response tends to be punitive and stigmatizing, as well as discriminatory in that poor families and families of color are typically overrepresented. Furthermore, while preventive efforts are made, interventions focus on remedying the behavior of errant parents and are frequently statutory in nature. A characterization of the family services model operative in many European countries is an approach that tends to be more collaborative and strengths-based, seeking solutions with families (Waldegrave, 2006). Child-rearing is viewed as the responsibility of both the state and family, and resources are made available on a universal basis to prevent child abuse from occurring. In the community care model, indigenous communities in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the USA have articulated an approach to vulnerable children that emphasizes the connections and interdependence between children and their broader family network (Burford and Hudson, 2000). This holistic approach understands child abuse not simply as inadequate parenting, but sees its roots in oppressive systemic practices. The relationship between service providers and family members is reframed: professional expertise is seen as only part of the knowledge (albeit a critical part) required to arrive at an appropriate plan for a neglected or abused child, family group knowledge being seen as equally important. Child welfare practice in South Africa has to date been characterized by an Anglo-American child protection discourse (Schmid, 2008), despite the prevailing official policy direction for child welfare being developmental. It appears to have been difficult for child welfare practitioners to step outside the dominant approach and to adopt methods which conform more to a developmental perspective.

A social developmental approach offers a potential fourth model for child welfare. The social development model of welfare has an anti-oppressive bias, aiming to correct the discriminatory and individualized welfare approaches dominant during apartheid. Patel (2005) describes the developmental process as one that is rights-oriented, family-centered and community-based. Participants drive the process, are involved in decision-making and mobilize their resources to bring about constructive change. Intersectoral action is seen as critical. Efforts of institutions on the micro-, meso- and macro-levels must be collaborative and reinforcing of each other. The intention is to constructively address mass poverty through social mobilization. The Soul Buddyz Clubs

model is worth examining, as it does seem to share many features of a developmental approach to child welfare, despite being conceptualized primarily as a health promotion program.

A number of features of the social developmental model are found in the Soul Buddyz initiative, as reflected in the successful clubs. Primarily, the program emphasizes promotion and prevention. The rights of children, particularly the right of children to participate in issues that affect them, are core to the Soul Buddyz philosophy. Facilitators are constructed as adults who guide the process and are a resource to the children, rather than as experts who decide on behalf of the youngsters. In addition, the Soul Buddyz activities are community-based, operating out of neighborhood schools. All the participating children come from families and communities that were seriously compromised by apartheid, and where issues of crime, poverty and AIDS remain prevalent. The model does not adopt a deficit-based view, but rather assumes that despite these difficulties learners, educators and communities have assets which can be mobilized. These clubs are not expected to have all the resources they need, and the Soul City infrastructure closes many of the resource gaps. The overarching model further recognizes that the challenges children, families and their networks face are not self-induced, but reflect systemic inadequacies and oppressions. Another feature of the successful projects is intersectoral mobilization and collaboration, an ability to look beyond the microcosm of the school. Where appropriate, advocacy efforts have extended beyond the local level to provincial and national authorities. Yet another important aspect is that children are seen in their context, and thus it is recognized that parents or caregivers also need to be drawn into club projects.

The primary outcome is children who identify a growth not only in self-confidence, but also in tangible skills. Children also have been able to contribute to their communities, bringing together resources to address particular needs.

This study does not demonstrate if these children are less vulnerable to abuse, but Cameron and Vanderwoerd (1997) suggest that children's resilience in the face of difficulties is related to self-confidence, strong networks and positive role models, all of which appear to have emerged in successful clubs.

The Soul Buddyz Clubs initiative does therefore conform to social development principles. It is necessary, however, to maintain a critical eye, as programs that have been identified as being developmental in nature (Sewpaul, 2001; September, 2005) have retained many essential components of the Anglo-American child protection approach, such as being intrusive, individualistic and expert-driven. Presenting these as valid examples

of social development in the child welfare arena obscures what is essential to a developmental approach.

Despite the Soul Buddyz model seeming to provide an excellent example of a social developmental approach to child vulnerability, there are some areas of concern. The findings demonstrate that in certain clubs, children (who may be seen by middle-class society as needy) view themselves as assisting those who are 'less fortunate' and 'in desperate need', and are viewed as the 'social workers' of the school, helping children who 'looked poor' because they did not want others to look like 'charity cases'. It seems important to avoid a patronizing approach that aims at rescuing others from misfortune, as this invalidates the goal of social mobilization and empowerment (Margolin, 1997).

Another concern has to do with the entrance criteria used by individual clubs, which likely ensure that children with certain skills and resources are recruited. While these children certainly can develop their potential further, those with fewer social and academic competencies continue to be marginalized, and are thus more likely to be vulnerable and at risk of abuse. A social developmental approach needs to promote inclusion, rather than exclusion (Patel, 2005). Another gap raised by the facilitators, parents, previous members and children at three sites was the lack of similar clubs at the high-school level, as this is where they will face serious challenges of drugs, sex and crime. Sustainability must be taken into consideration in a developmental program.

Another issue is the family-based aspect of a social developmental approach. It would be useful for clubs to more intentionally engage children's parenting figure/s, though a parenting magazine is produced.

Overall, however, the Soul Buddyz Clubs initiative can be seen as consistent with a social developmental model, and thus offers social work practitioners a concrete example of how to translate developmental principles into practice in the child welfare context. These clubs are distinct from the Girl Guides/Scouts programs or Big Brother/Big Sister mentorship programs, precisely because of their emphasis on social mobilization and child participation.

Internationally, child participation is being promoted as a core element in work with children (Ansell, 2005; Covell and Howe, 2001), the United Nations Charter on the Rights of Children being a central document. Facilitating child participation has been identified as critical in South African social work (September, 2008). The Soul Buddyz Clubs experiences provide those working with children with a model of how to involve children in issues that affect them, their families and their communities.

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