Title

African university students' struggle with the western approach to reflection: experiences from a multilevel mentoring project at Bindura University, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Use of non-African approaches in education and practice in Africa leaves a gap between theories, their application and practice. For example, reflection in professional training and practice has largely taken a western approach. Reflection is a natural, cultural or professional process of thinking deeply about occurrences, behaviours, situations and derive lessons to improve knowledge, interpretations and interventions. In social work, reflective practice is a process where students or practitioners assess how culture, experiences, policies and knowledges influence their learning or work and use results of the assessment for personal growth, to avoid biases and improve interventions. Reflection in professional training and practice has largely taken a western approach, an unpleasant legacy of colonisation and neo-colonialism. In this research, we examined a community work mentoring project of lecturers and students in the Department of Social Work at Bindura University in Zimbabwe. This mentorship program, named Step in Step, was provided to children at a disadvantaged public primary school in Bindura as part of the Department's community responsibility programme. It was meant to develop skills in needs assessment, communication, reflection and other areas. The first step involved lecturers mentoring social work students who in turn mentored primary school children. This made the mentoring program multilevel, a reflection of how mentoring happens in Africa society. By August 2016, 50 students and five lecturers had been involved in this project. Of these 10 students were purposively selected to participate in a social media-based focus group discussion about the program. Thematic analysis was applied to understand the situation of children while process analysis and methodological analysis were applied to the process of reflection and the low-cost WhatsApp method used in the research respectively. From the thematic analysis, the themes generated included the social, economic, psychological and educational circumstances of the children. Process and methodological analysis generated two themes respectively: students' struggle with understanding reflection and the usefulness of simple technologies in carrying out research in poorly resourced settings. This article will report on these themes.

Key words

Africa, Bindura University, multilevel mentoring, reflective practice, social work, western theories, Zimbabwe

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Introduction

There is usually a gap between theory and practice in applied sciences like social work, development work, community work and counselling in Africa. This is because of use of non-African approaches to training. In the research reported in this article we used the training and practice concept of reflection to understand its use and applicability with African social work students. Reflection is a natural, cultural or professional process of thinking deeply about occurrences, behaviours, situations and derive lessons to improve knowledge, interpretations and interventions. In social work, reflective practice is a process where students or practitioners assess how culture, experiences, policies and knowledges influence their learning or work and use results of the assessment for personal growth, to avoid biases and improve interventions. Reflection in professional training and practice has largely taken a western approach, an unpleasant legacy of colonisation and neo-colonialism. We examined a community work mentoring project of lecturers and students in the Department of Social Work at the Bindura University in Zimbabwe. This mentorship program, named Step in Step, was provided to children at a disadvantaged public primary school in Bindura as part of the Department's community responsibility programme. It was meant to develop skills in reflection, needs assessment, communication and other areas. The first step involved lecturers mentoring students, and the next step students mentored primary school children. This made the mentoring program multilevel, a reflection of how mentoring happens in Africa society. By August 2016, 50 students and five lecturers had been involved in this project. Of these 10 students were purposively selected to participate in a social media-based focus group discussion about the program. Thematic analysis was applied to the data to understand the situation of children while process analysis and methodological analysis were applied to the process of reflection and the low-cost WhatsApp method used in the research respectively. From the thematic analysis, the themes generated included the social, economic, psychological and educational circumstances of the children. Process and methodological analysis generated two themes respectively: students' struggle with understanding reflection and the usefulness of simple technologies in carrying out research in poorly resourced settings. This article will report on these themes.

Step in Step multilevel mentoring project

This project was started in 2013 to help student social workers with knowledge and skills to practise with orphans and vulnerable children (Bindura University, 2015). A two-step mentorship programme was designed, running from 2013 to 2016. In the first step, lecturers mentored students and in the second step, student social workers mentored primary school children. The children were attending a primary school in Bindura, a small town in Mashonaland Central province of Zimbabwe. By August 2016, participants of the project had included 60 children, 50 students, 3 primary school teachers and 5 lecturers. Activities for the project included drama, storytelling, interaction, writing, drawing, poetry, mini-competitions, donations and music.

The mentoring project was meant to develop social work students' skills in needs assessment, reflection, engaging children and communication. With reflection, the goal was to understand how the students applied it and their thoughts about it as an intervention to improve practice.

Western approach to reflection

In this section, we describe the western concept of reflection focusing on how to reflect and western models of reflection.

How to reflect – a western perspective

Practitioners reflect in many ways to improve their interventions (Hoffman-Miller, 2015), Without reflection, practitioners will be biased in their decision making (McCoyd & Kerson, 2013; Maclean, 2010). Maclean (2010) offers some strategies on developing reflective practice, including working pairs or teams, speaking with a supervisor or a critical friend, keeping a reflective journal, doing a critical incident analysis, mind mapping, and developing a model of reflection. A few of these will be discussed.

Working in pairs or teams provides checks and peer review (Probst, 2015). In pairs, two practitioners meet regularly to discuss selected moments of their practice. These could be critical friends or trusted listeners (Maclean, 2010). This can also be done in groups. One of the team members is usually experienced or a senior member of the team. This could be a manager or supervisor. This strategy can utilise questioning. For example, after a session with a carer of an orphan, questions you might ask

include: Was my view of extended family care right? Why do I think having so many children is wrong? While this form of reflection has benefits, it may also be negative if inappropriately used. Fook (2015) argues that not all workers and learners will be willing or able to disclose those deep-seated beliefs affecting their work (Maclean, 2010).

Another strategy is to use reflection journals, memos, diaries, worksheets or notebooks to record how background was considered in work. The process requires practitioners to document as they go and take time to think over what they have written. For example, after a counselling session, a worker takes five minutes to reflect or during fieldwork, a worker takes Friday afternoon to reflect in a quite environment. They could write about what they could have done better and how. They could also generate or draw mind maps (Maclean, 2010). These are representations of ideas in drawing.

Another way to reflect is to do critical thinking. Critical thinking involves practitioners using the best available evidence to assess their interventions. Evidence comes from theories, empirical sources but also policies.

Some western models of reflection

There are various models of reflective practice already in use, but practitioners can develop their own. Two models - Borton's Developmental Model for Reflective Practice and Gibbs's Reflective Cycle model will be discussed. Borton (1970) says reflection process involves asking three questions: What? So, what? and Now what? However, this model is too simple and offers less information about reflection. Gibbs (1988)'s Reflective Cycle model is more detailed and offers more understanding. The model shows that reflectivity is a strategy for both education and practice. Gibbs reflective process has the following stages:

(1) Description (what happened?)
(2) Feelings (what were you thinking or feeling?)
(3) Evaluation (what was good and bad about the experience? What does literature or theories say?)
(4) Analysis (what sense can you make of the situation? What does literature or theories say?)
(5) Conclusion (what else could you have done?)
(6) Action plan (if it arose again, what would you do? What are the alterative and better courses of action?)

The shortcoming with this model is that it is not contextual, it assumes practitioners reflect on observable actions alone yet they can also reflect on thoughts, knowledge, value and other non-observable phenomena. Gibbs's model overemphasises theories and literature, but practitioner also use cultural, personal, community and professional experiences in reflection. They also use policies and legal instruments. In Gibbs model, reflection is mainly about improving the practitioner, but it can go beyond that to generate outcomes for the service users, community, society, country and social work practice more broadly.

Methodology

The target population for this study were 50 students who had participated in the Step in Step mentoring project at the end of 2016. From this population we set an inclusion criterion that included students who had participated in at least three mentoring sessions, had finished their studies, consented to taking part in the research and had WhatsApp enabled smartphones. Students who had finished their studies participated in the discussion to ensure that they participated as peers with their former lecturers. A total of 10 students met this inclusion criteria. These 10 students participated in a focus group discussion that was organised on WhatsApp, a cheaper and user-friendly application. To ensure voluntary participation, the platform had a facility for group members to leave on their own, at any time. We also avoided use of actual names of students or their mentees in reports to protect their identity. The information statement, consent statement and discussion guide were sent to participants on their individual smartphones before the group was created. Participants had time to ask for clarifications and familiarise with questions. Once they all gave their consents, the group was created. The discussion guide had two main questions. These were:

(1) What did you learn about the situation and needs of the children?

(2) Share your experiences of reflecting during the Step in Step mentorship program?

The focus group discussion was done over one day after which a word document transcript was produced and shared on email with participants for their checking. Analysis was done at three levels: situational, methodological and process. Situational analysis was about understanding the situation of the children. For situational analysis, the transcript was read several times and organised into themes in Excel. The themes were crafted based on recurring patterns in the data: social, economic, psychological and educational circumstances. For process analysis,

the purpose was to make meaning from the reflection that the students did. For methodological analysis, the focus was on use of social media for research.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented in three sections: situation of the children, struggling with reflection and use of simple technologies in research.

Situation and needs of the children

Social

Some of the children were providing care to sick guardians at home. Some were orphaned due to death of parents, others were from divorced parents while and others were staying with single parents.

Family disintegration has largely is the major drive for the fall of living standards for the children. The six-tier system emphasize responsibility to be transferred from the biological parents to the nucleus family in the case of death to the parents, but due to the economic situation this traditional bond has fallen prey to the modern concept of individualism and as such the children get exposed to deprivation of basic human needs, like they can only afford two meals a day, Sadza in the morning with vegetables and supper, especially those who stay at Chanaka or BRDC (Tangai).

Economic

Children were from low-income families, lacked basic needs such as food, clothing and school fees. Statements from student social workers in support of this theme included:

Good morning. (I) will present briefly on social matters of the children. Now most of them are orphans or live with single parents. Those who have single parents , they are mostly mothers who are not formally employed but rely mostly on the informal sector i.e. vending or maids. If it's the mother who has passed away, the men have a tendency to remarry and put the children under the guardianship of other family members (Hama).

On economic conditions, the children I interacted with come from families where one parent mostly the father is the breadwinner. It appears as well that the salaries of the parent are not enough to cater for the children either through negligence or simply the fact that they are not enough. This also affects the child's social life, with a torn uniform and no shoes the child is likely to think lowly of themselves and

engage in deviant behaviour such as drinking alcohol. More so the picture I got from most of the kids is that the fathers do not reside with the family because of work hence there is lack of a male role model in most of them (Pasi).

Most of the children come from low income households who are in poverty. Absolute poverty is a social barrier which impedes participation at school resulting in poor standards in their curriculum. Due to poverty in absolute form some of the children come to school without food; payment of school fees is a hot potato; some travel long distances they come as far as Mupandenyama, Kitsi yatota and other places (Yedzai).

Psychological

Psychological issues reported or observed included low self-esteem, lacking love and affection and lacking role models.

Some of them seem to have low self-esteem. I assume this is largely due to the fact that in their interactions, it could be with peers or at home, they are looked down upon and told they do not amount to much. As the program progressed, I noticed a change in most of them, I think being part of a group lifted their self-esteem, it made them feel wanted and loved by those around them. We need to continually interact with them to enhance their coping capacity and maintain their newly developed high self-esteem (Ruva).

The children come from lower class households which may not be in a position to cater for the psychosocial needs of their children. This is linked to low self-esteem to the children between ages of 8-12. There is lack of self-motivation due to the socialisation at family level (Vimbiso).

Educational

Generally, a high number of the students was over age for their school level. Other educational issues reported included poor performance at school and travelling long distances to school.

Morning. Would like to first highlight that quite a number of the children are now in their teenage especially those in Grade 4 to 7, ranging from around 13 - 15yrs. After chatting with some of them on an individual basis I realized that they have spent many years in primary school mainly due to economic and social circumstances. Some of the kids lost their parents, mainly the breadwinner which resulted in them failing to attend school at the usually expected age. Some of the children stay with guardians who at times suffer from certain illnesses

and that at times finds the children failing to attend classes (Rurama).

For the students, understanding the situation of the children was not difficult. This could be because of their prior experiences, including their personal experiences. Identifying the needs could have been aided by the literature Department uses in the teaching and learning of social work including the National Orphan Care Policy and the National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (Government of Zimbabwe, 2003), the Children's Act (Government of Zimbabwe, 2001) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union (AU), 1990). These documents provide contextual knowledge and policy direction for services directed at children. The contextual knowledge allowed the students to understand the children's needs from a family, cultural and African standpoint. Another important factor that could have made it easy for the students to work on this part of the project easily was their familiarity with the local environment – both culturally and socio-economically. Interaction with teachers was another potential reason why this component was easy for students. Teachers already had a relationship with the children, that, it can be said, was transferred to the mentors. Lastly, the mentoring program used plays, dance, song, stories and games. Potentially, this made it easy for the mentees to relate with the mentors.

While understanding the socio-economic situation of the mentees was easy, the students did not have access to comprehensive needs assessment tools. This is something for thinkers, writers, practitioners, and researchers to propose in future.

Experiences of reflection

What students struggled with

Students struggled with answering and discussing the research question that focused on reflection. Students struggled with:

(1) Understanding reflection, what it is in theory and practice.
(2) Identifying the theories to use in their reflection.
(3) Applying the theories when reflecting.
(4) Methods of reflection, for example use of diaries.
(5) Planned formal reflection was new, in their life reflection is usually spontaneous, prompted or triggered

(6) Identifying research or literature to use in their reflection was problematic. Most of the research was inappropriate or students did not have access to research literature.

Students showed limited understanding of reflection, both theoretically and practically. The solution to understanding what reflection is might lie in using African languages or simplified English language. In most cases, literature on reflection is written from a western perspective and this limits student understanding. Related to this challenge, was the problem of selecting and applying theories in reflection. This problem seemed to emanate from the theories themselves, most of them are western centric. Further, the use of evidence in the whole process was problematic because students did not have research relevant to the particular group they were working with. This means that evidence is only meaningful when it is relevant.

The experiences of some social work students resonated with those of the children, making it difficult for them to see things differently, or to need theories in their analysis of the problems.

The methods of reflection themselves presented challenges, for example, use of diaries was not well recognized, perhaps because diaries are not often used in Africa. Further to this challenge, planned reflection was new to the students. Often, reflection is triggered, prompted or is spontaneous.

Reflection in action was problematic. There are several alternative settings for reflection, for example, reflection can happen while relaxing in bed, walking in the bush; in office or work room; at an important place (graveside, church or mountain); or when something is happening, for example, someone is being buried, or something has happened after the burial. There are several settings, and this can vary from practitioner to practitioner.

Reflection can be triggered or prompted, for example, by repeated mistakes, failure or success, critical incidents, near misses, isolation, criticism, arguments, at home and the like. For some people, a dream can prompt reflection. Seeing something in an odd place prompts reflection too, for example, an odd animal crossing the road or path at an odd time. Sudden change in behavior of a person prompts reflection. When working with children, observing or paying attention to a change in behaviour usually results in social workers getting new answers or realising new problems.

A general weakness with present western models of reflection is their neglect of culture and cultural

interpretations yet culture plays an important role in understanding social problems and crafting solutions. Related to this, the practice experience of workers is usually given a minimal role in reflection, theories and literature usually get preference.

In summary, the cultural and experiential context in which reflection happens matters, so does the theories and literature and methods of reflecting. The four – culture, professional experience, theories and literature – are some of the most important sources of knowledge in social work, and should all be prioritised during the process of reflection.

Proposed model of reflection

The proposed model has seven components that also act as stages of the reflection process. It can be used to think about reflection, as a framework to structure reflection or as a template to report reflection. At the beginning, the practitioner experiences or observes a situation, occurrence or happening. They then decide to reflect on the situation to help them understand it better but also to help them improve their intervention. The decision to reflect, is often prompted or triggered. It is important for this to be recorded to help the practitioner in future reflections. For example, a practitioner will have a pattern that shows them what often triggers or prompts their reflection. Next, the practitioner has to think about the situation from a cultural, experiential and policy perspective but also theoretical and empirical perspectives. These are not in any order, and they may not all be important in all situations. At the end, the practitioner lists the changes, improvements, decisions and suggestions made as a result of the reflection.

The components are:

(1) *What are you reflecting on* – what is the situation, occurrence or happening?
(2) *Prompt or Trigger* - what prompted or triggered this reflection? Is this an unusual observation, situation, occurrence or happening? Is it part of your work procedure to reflect?
(3) *Cultural Interpretation* - what is the interpretation from the culture of people involved?
(4) *Policy or Legal Interpretation* - what does relevant policies and legal instruments say?
(5) *Theoretical or Empirical interpretation* - what is the interpretation from local theories and literature?
(6) *Experiential Interpretation* - what is the interpretation based on your personal, community or professional experience?
(7) *Outcomes for Practice* - what does this mean for my practice? What are the lessons? What was improved, changed, or suggested?

The strength of this model lies in its contextual application. It considers the cultural and policy contexts but also local theories and literature. It also acknowledges the professional experience of the practitioner. In short, it acknowledges multiple sources of knowledge, including those usually neglected in social work.

The contextual model of reflection					
(1) - What are you reflecting on? What is the situation, occurrence, observation or happening?					
(2) - Prompt or Trigger	*(3) - Cultural interpretation*	*(4) - Policy or Legal interpretation*	*(5) - Theoretical or Empirical interpretation*	*(6) - Experiential interpretation*	*(7) - Outcomes for Practice*
What prompted or triggered this reflection? Is this an unusual situation, observation, occurrence or happening? Is it a formal requirement of your work to reflect?	What are the interpretations in the culture of people involved and the practitioner's culture?	What do relevant local, national and organisational policies and legal instruments say?	What is the interpretation from local theories and literature, including orature (oral literature)?	What is the interpretation based on my personal, community or professional experience?	What does this mean for my practice? What was improved, changed, or suggested? What are the lessons?

Using simple technologies in research

One theme that came from analyzing the method employed in this study was the usefulness of using simple technologies in research in Africa. In this case, we used WhatsApp. WhatsApp is a social media application that allows people to chat in groups at very affordable costs. WhatsApp has a group chat facility that can accommodate 300 participants at a time with moderators called administrators. It also has an application to load all shared data onto a word processor. Further, it has end to end inscription that ensures privacy of conversations. This social media platform was user friendly, it did not disrupt the daily plans of participants. Questions were responded on the go. Having research in resource poor countries with unemployed students also presents challenges with cost of research, hence we chose a platform that was minimal in terms of cost.

On the downside, the writing style used in WhatsApp requires some experience to comprehend it easily. This is because of shorthand, where words like have are put as 'hv' and between as 'btwn'. While this makes typing and communication quicker with another advantage of making messages shorter, the messages need cleaning before reporting.

Conclusions

We make conclusions from our findings as follows:

1. It was easy for social work students to understand the circumstances of children they mentored mainly because they understood the general socio-economic and cultural environment but also because of relevant local literature used in their training.
2. Reflection proved to be very difficult for the social work students. This was because the reflection literature, theories and approaches introduced to them were all western. The students struggled to make sense of western approaches to reflection.
3. In African teaching and learning, western concepts should not be transplanted wholesome and used in the African classroom. Theories, teaching content, teaching methods and literature must be contextual.
4. Simple technologies are useful in African research because of low cost on the part of universities, researchers and research participants. These simple technologies allow for research to be more collaborative, meaning, participants have opportunities to engage and

collaborate with researchers at every stage of the research process. We strongly recommend use of platforms like WhatsApp in data collection.
5. Areas for further research include (a) development of a needs assessment tool for children (b) testing and validating the usefulness of the proposed contextual model of reflection (c) development of a step-by-step guide to using social media for research

Conclusion

This study examined a project called Step in Step that was implemented by academics in the Department of Social Work, Bindura University in Zimbabwe between 2013 and 2016. The project involved lecturers mentoring social work students who in turn mentored primary school children. While the project contributed directly to meeting the psycho-educational challenges of the children, it also had a component of improving the skills of student social workers. One skill that was identified was reflection, but as reported in this paper, the western models of reflection did not work. Social work students struggled with understanding and applying them. In African teaching and learning, western concepts should not be transplanted wholesome and used in the African classroom. Theories, teaching content, teaching methods and literature must be contextual. Besides this theme, the authors also analysed the process of doing this research and concluded that using simple, accessible and cheap technologies in research was viable and a preferred option in resource poor settings. Overall, this research has contributed at three levels: situational (situation of orphans and vulnerable children), process (struggling with reflection) and methodological (using WhatsApp in research) process.

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Journal of Development Administration (JDA)

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