

# Participatory Action Research Approach: Strategies to Encourage Community Participation in Reducing Child Sexual Abuse

Samson Mabade

(PhD), University of Limpopo, Turfloop, Republic of South Africa

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**Abstract:** The focus of this article is the experiences of educators, nurses, social workers, civic members, police, victim empowerment group, church leaders and traditional leaders who were engaged in a participatory action research (PAR) project with a PhD student from the University of Limpopo. The aims of the project were to encourage community participation in the reduction of child sexual abuse and to educate the community about child sexual abuse. The purposes of the project were to improve the quality of life of the community members and to promote personal interrelationships in the community.

In this article, Mabade briefly described participatory action research project. The remaining sections focused on the research target groups' reflections. The focus groups indicated some of the strategies employable to encourage community participation in reducing child sexual abuse. The data collected through interviews was analysed using data matrix. The participants indicated that individual education was not enough for reducing child sexual abuse but recommended that community education by community members of that particular community. The last section stated the importance of participatory action research type in dealing with community-based problems such as child sexual abuse.

**Keywords:** Participatory action research, child sexual abuse, community and community education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although child abuse seems to be a worldwide social problem, it was not addressed as earnestly during the apartheid dispensation as it is being done in the new democratic South Africa. By and large, human rights were ignored before the advent of the new democratic South Africa in 1994. According to Mabade (2013) the effort of the Government alone was not enough to reduce child sexual abuse. The researcher suggested that community-based problems can be tackled earnestly by the community affected hence child sexual abuse. Individual education was not enough to reduce child sexual abuse instead community education organised by the community itself appeared to have more contributions to the reduction of the problem. The researcher opted for participatory action approach to establish a project because the researcher (Mabade) belonged to the community under study.

Participatory action research is a research approach that focuses on the participation and involvement of all role players in the research. The researcher and participants are equally important in the process. In participatory action research, the researcher is from the community under research. In participatory action research, the researcher and participants become actively involved in collective efforts to address and solve their social problems so that their knowledge and skills are increased. The community should therefore be able to define their problems. It helps the community to create informal social support networks in cooperation with professional helpers to prevent or cure a problem. Participatory action research endeavours to empower deprived and disenfranchised people with research capabilities to enable them to identify and transform their situation for themselves (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delpont, 2011)

Participatory action research needs to be a cyclical process. The cyclical process should take place until there is a positive change within the community. The aim of the participatory action research is to empower community members to take collective responsibility for the planning and implementation of the action plan and for the evaluation of educational programmes of community education within the community (Du Plooy, 2001). Community members help to develop a research framework that incorporates the community's concerns and priorities. Community-based participatory action research is a means to negotiate a mutual agenda between the community and the researcher (Mosavel, 2005).

McIntyre, Chatzpoulo, Politi and Roz (2007) explain that participatory action research has a collective commitment to investigate a problem in a particular community, a desire by people themselves to engage in their own as well as collective reflection in order to gain clarity in the investigation, a joint decision to engage in individual or collective action that leads to a useful solution, which benefits the people involved, and a recognition that the term 'researcher' refers to both local participants and those people who contribute specialised skills to problem solving.

According to Stringer (2005), community-based participatory action research does not solve all problems but it provides a means for people to get involved in their situation and formulate effective solutions to problems they face in their public and professional lives. Community-based participatory action research builds positive working relationships and productive interactional and communicative styles. It also provides a climate that enables disparate groups of people to work harmoniously and productively to achieve their various goals. People are engaged directly in formulating solutions to problems they confront in their community lives. The purpose of community participatory action research is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and resolving problems that confront them. Participatory action research is democratic, equitable, liberating and life-enhancing.

The role of the researcher is to facilitate the process of defining the group's problems and to support them in working towards effective solutions to their problems. The researcher works as a catalyst that stimulates people to change. Another key role of the researcher is to encourage people to develop their own analysis of the problem. The researcher also stimulates people to change; helps people to analyse their situation, consider findings, and plan how to keep what they want. The researcher should not focus only on solutions to problems but on human development (Stringer, 2005).

In this article, participatory action research is a collective effort to define a problem as well as the development of the strategies that can contribute towards the solution to the problem. The ultimate result of participatory action research is the empowerment of the participants.

## 2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Stringer (2005) states that although participatory action research is not the best or only research approach, it has a number of advantages for both the researcher and the participants:

- It motivates those directly involved.
- It is most relevant and flexible for working with people.
- It can have greater impact than the conventional expect role of the researcher in stimulating and guiding change.
- It is a hands-on procedure and is practice-oriented.
- It makes change a self-generating and self-maintaining process that continues after the research process.
- It provides full participatory involvement.
- It refuses to treat the individual as the subject or object of study. It is consensual, informed, sophisticated joint construction.

McTaggart (1996) contends that participatory action research solves a practical problem systematically and collaboratively. Furthermore, it improves the practice of learning, teaching, training, management and professional development as well as the social context and conditions in which this practice takes place. This type of research enhances the participants' own learning, insights and professional development and advances knowledge in management and higher

education by generating grounded theory, research and publications. Finally, it documents excellence in teaching or management.

In participatory action research, sound relationships, effective communication and effective participation are predominant.

Relationships in participatory action research should promote feelings of equality for all people involved; maintain harmony; avoid conflict, where possible; resolve conflict that arises, openly and dialogically; accept people as they are, not as some people think they ought to be; encourage personal, cooperative relationships, rather than impersonal, competitive or authoritarian relationships. In participatory action research the researcher must be sensitive to people's feelings (Bray, 2000).

Communication in participatory action research is effective if researcher listens attentively to people; accepts and acts on what they say; ensures that he or she is understood by everyone; is truthful and sincere; acts in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and regularly advises others about what is happening.

Participation is effective in participatory action research when the researcher allows for significant levels of active involvement; enables people to perform significant tasks; provides support for people so that they learn to act for themselves; encourages plans and activities that people are able to accomplish; and deals personally with people rather than with their representatives or agents.

In conclusion, participatory action research involves maximisation of the involvement of all relevant individuals and all groups affected. It includes all relevant issues such as social, economic, cultural, and political rather than focusing on narrow political agendas. Participatory action research ensures cooperation with other groups, agencies and organisations. It also ensures that all relevant groups benefit from all activities.

According to Mabade (2013), in participatory action research there is a desire by people themselves to engage in self- and collective reflection in order to gain clarity and awareness about the issue under investigation. It entails a collective commitment to investigate a problem in a particular community and it involves a joint decision to engage in individual and or collective action that leads to a useful solution which benefits the people involved. Finally, it is the recognition of the term that the researcher applies to both local actors and those people who contribute specialised skills, knowledge or resources to the process.

### 3. THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

My engagement in the project helped me (educator) to learn from other people such as the traditional leaders and church leaders who are not professionals. Again, engaging in the project challenged me to reflect upon and change my assumptions about child sexual abuse in this community. When we started this project I thought it was just a waste of time to talk about child sexual abuse because community members do not want to break the silence. Several times during discussions I found every body participating and taking initiatives and responsibilities towards reducing child sexual abuse. I started to question my belief that individual education is important in the reduction of this problem because community education appeared to be the best education as long as it is organised by community members themselves.

This is a great challenge to me (police) to be welcomed by the community as a whole to work in collaboration for a harmonious relationship amongst community members. If all traditional leaders, civic members, nurses, educators, victim empowerment group and church leaders support us, the police would never hesitate to respond to any community call. This project has improved each participant's understanding towards community-based problem such as child sexual abuse. The relationship amongst all participants would improve after this project.

It is easy and interesting to learn from one another. I (Victim empowerment group) would suggest that community education programmes be established in all communities because we (participants) have benefitted from this project. It is obvious that this community will benefit sooner or later as a whole.

#### **The aims and objectives of the study:**

The following aims of the study were identified:

- To encourage community participation in the reduction of the problem

- To educate the community about child sexual abuse

The objectives of the study were the following:

- To document the participants' experiences of child sexual abuse
- To generally improve the quality of life of the community members

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

The researcher opted for a participatory action research approach within a critical research paradigm theory. The data was collected in five different phases. The first was a preparatory phase, the second phase consisted of focus group interviews and discussions, the third phase consisted of individual interviews while the fourth phase consisted of further focus group interviews and discussions. The fifth phase consisted of learners who were victims, parents and the perpetrators' interviews and discussions.

#### 5. RESEARCH DESIGN

The researcher worked qualitatively within the critical paradigm theory by means of participatory action research. In the preparatory phase, the researcher worked with 16 participants. The participants included two nurses, two educators, two church leaders, two social workers, two members of the civic organisation, two traditional leaders, two policing staff, two Victim Empowerment members, two learners and two parents. The participants were selected purposively in view of their experience of the problem under study. The first phase of interviews and discussions occurred at the Madala clinic in the Khakhu area of the Vhembe district of Limpopo. In the second phase, the interviews and discussions with the focus group were also conducted at the Madala clinic in the Khakhu area of the Vhembe district. There were 16 participants in the focus group; the same participants and the same number as in the preparatory phase. In the third phase, 16 participants were interviewed individually at their homes. In the fourth phase, 30 focus group participants were interviewed in the hall. In the fifth phase, victims and parents were interviewed individually.

#### 6. RESULTS

##### **Strategies to encourage community participation in the reduction of child sexual abuse:**

The educators suggested that community participation can be promoted by campaigns such as door-to-door campaigns against child sexual abuse. Community meetings should be organised frequently to discuss community problems affecting the community. One of the educators indicated that the community should organise celebration parties annually at local councils.

The nurses suggested that community participation can be encouraged by campaigns focusing on places where there is a concentration of people. They also suggested that someone who had once been a perpetrator of child sexual abuse could be included in the campaigns to share his/her experiences with other people. Where possible, a victim of child sexual abuse can be requested to share his/her suffering with other children.

Church leaders suggested that the community should become involved in the fight against child sexual abuse. The council meetings should be organised by the traditional leaders. The church Sunday school programme needs to be promoted in order to engage children. They indicated that sports days must be organised in the community.

The social workers proposed that community members can be encouraged by motivating them to report child sexual abuse (e.g. by giving them awards). They further indicated that sporting activities should be organised where children and adults can communicate.

The Victim Empowerment Group suggested that campaigns can be one of the strategies to encourage community members to get involved in the reduction of child sexual abuse. The group also indicated that another strategy is to involve victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse to present their experiences on child sexual abuse. The Victim Empowerment Group further mentioned that the community should be encouraged to visit prisons where the perpetrators are incarcerated and hospitals where the victims are taken care of. The members of the civic organisation suggested that

child sexual abuse can be included in the church programme to encourage the community to participate in the reduction of child sexual abuse. At all community meetings, child sexual abuse can be on the agenda to encourage every community member to participate. They further indicated that during sporting activities, child sexual abuse can be talked about. They pointed out that at school, Life Orientation educators can emphasise the reduction of child sexual abuse. Traditional dances such as *tshikona*, *malende* and *tshigombela* can be used to get the community together to fight child sexual abuse.

The traditional leaders suggested that invitations to community meetings should be extended to all community members. They further indicated that awards to community builders can be another strategy to encourage all community members to participate in community activities.

In their responses to the interview question individuals indicated that campaigns, frequent community meetings, annual celebration parties and council meetings can be used in counteracting child sexual abuse. They also believed that visits to prison, sporting activities and traditional dances such as *tshikona* and *malende* can help.

The Life Orientation educators suggested that awards can be another way to encourage community participation in the community's activities. These awards may be in the form of certificates. They further indicated that sponsorship can help to encourage community participation in the fight against child sexual abuse. In this case professionals should provide sponsorship to help the community to sustain the educational programme.

## 7. DISCUSSION

In the literature, there are many theories on child sexual abuse and community education. According to the theoretical framework, there are a few factors that are related to child sexual abuse. There are a few community education programmes used to reduce child sexual abuse. Some of the related factors are the community's lack of proper social norms and values which contributed to child sexual abuse. The theoretical framework indicated that the problem under study occurs in both rural and urban areas.

### Some damaging norms that contribute to child sexual abuse:

Each community has values and norms that influence the philosophy of life of community members. Some of these norms and values endanger the life of children. A few of the norms that contribute to child sexual abuse are indicated below:

- **Traditional male roles:** This refers to a situation where society promotes domination by man and the exploitation, control and depression of girls.
- **Limited female roles:** This includes the sexualisation of childhood, where people are sexualised through the media and marketing setting at an early age.
- **Power:** Traditional power expectations promote the notion that children should be seen and not heard, making them an especially vulnerable community.
- **Violence:** This refers to situations where aggression is tolerated and accepted as normal behaviour and can be used as a way to solve problems and get what one wants.
- **Privacy:** This refers to the privacy of norms associated with individuals and family. Sexual violence against children is stigmatised and anybody who wants to witness will be discouraged (Brown, Cohen and Lyles, 2009).

All sexually abused children have the same perceived level of self-concept, social support or traumatic symptoms. It has been found that sexually abused children who had a positive self-concept had higher perceived levels of social support (Reyes, 1996).

It is clear that these damaging norms prevail in the community under study. The traditional male domination, power domination and limited female influence are evident.

The damaging norms which are mentioned in the theoretical framework are among the factors contributing to child sexual abuse in the community under study. It appears that earlier researchers did not give much indication of how damaging norms and values can be addressed in order to reduce child sexual abuse. It is believed that the current research can offer possible strategies to address the problem.

**Types of community education:**

The type of problem in a particular community dictates the type of community education to employ. The various types are briefly outlined below.

**A participatory programme:** This type of programme is one that has an impact at the individual, community and societal level. At a community level it results in the creation of new leaders. This type of programme is also known as a self-empowerment community education programme (Young and Padilla, 1990).

**Community education that caters for training, information and entertainment:** This type involves activities and projects that enrich the lives of the participants and provide avenues for others to exercise initiative and enterprise. The community-centred cultural education for blacks, which was started by the University of Natal (Van Graan, 1991), is one example.

**Community education that focuses on attempts to educate the community on AIDs:** This type refers to community-based AIDs programmes (Bersani, Chen, Pendleton and Denton, 1992).

**Community education focusing on environmental education:** This type of programme aims to make a positive contribution through educating the community education in environmental matters. It can enhance conservation at a much broader level (Todd, Dale and Johnson, 1994).

**Community education focusing on museums and zoos:** This refers to education that empowers the community to serve museums and zoos. The museum can address the cognitive needs of the community (Van der Stoep, 1990).

For this study, a participatory programme of education was employed together with community education that focuses on the attempts to educate the community on child sexual abuse. The type of education can also be influenced by the factors that are related to the problem.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Participatory action research appeared to be one of the best strategies to empower the community. Community members can contribute towards the solution of any community-based problem. In the project established, participants were zealous to contribute towards the solution of child sexual abuse. They were confident that they would contribute to the success of community education programmes with the aim of improving the quality of life of children and developing harmonious interpersonal relationships. At the end of the project, participants appeared to be ready to share their experiences with the whole community. The participants appeared to have been empowered at the end of the project. Again the spirit of cooperative learning seemed to have been established within the community under study. The community members who participated in the project learnt that a happy and harmonious community is the ultimate results of community participation in any community-based problem.

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