Trading knowledge on community disability workers in Africa

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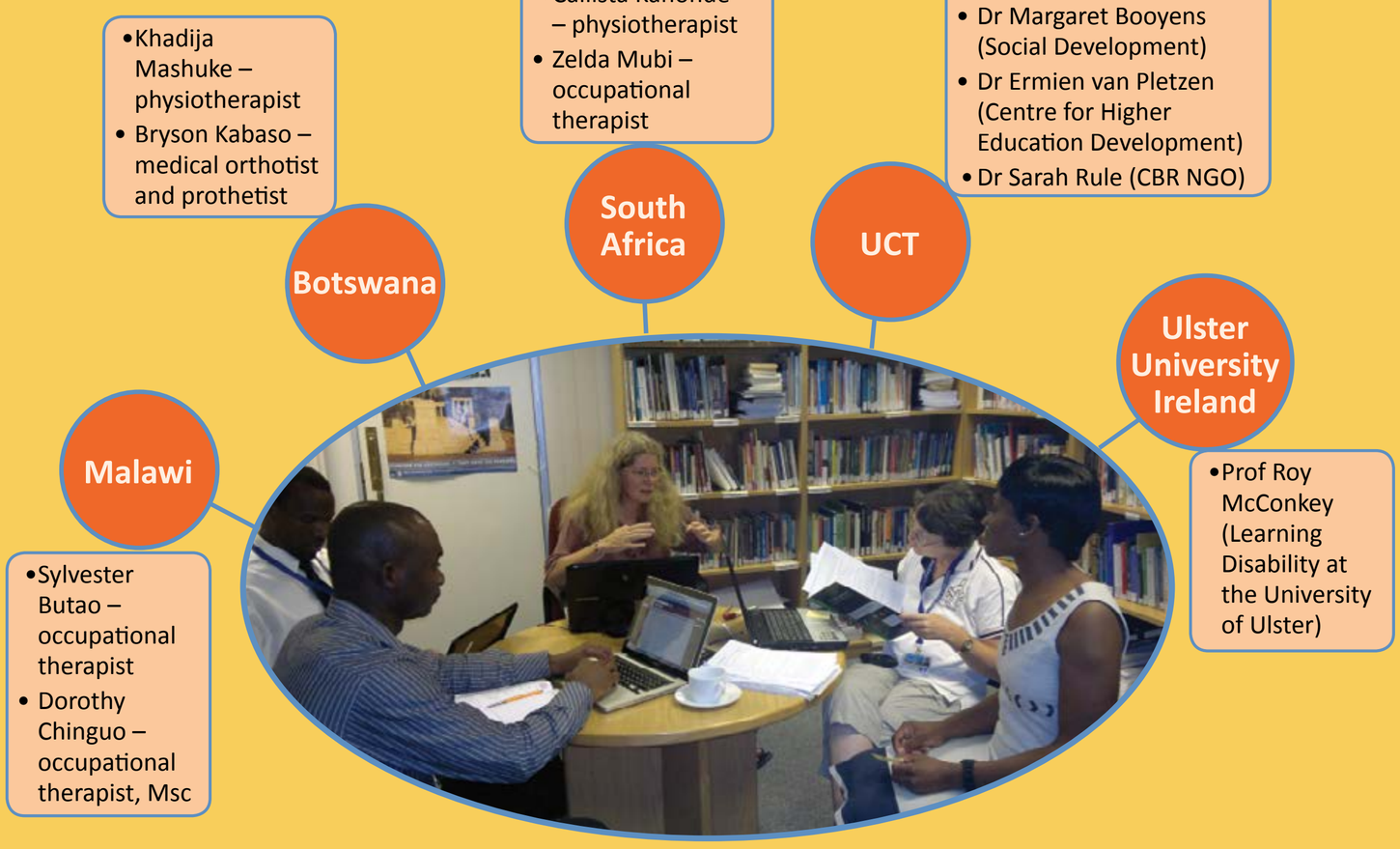
Abstract: Our methodology explores an innovative synergy between experienced researchers in public health, community-based rehabilitation and social development and a cohort of postgraduate students from Botswana, Malawi and South Africa who are emerging researchers embedded in disability work and who need training in aspects of qualitative research. The whole group (academics and students) own the data and everybody is engaged in a reflective process of seeing the research and training unfold simultaneously, thus building reciprocal capacity in researching disability inclusion in service delivery across sectors.

Aim of study: To explore how the childhood experiences of community disability workers (CDWs) in rural communities in South Africa, Botswana and Malawi influenced their career choices and how their current experiences influence their work.

Problem statement: There is minimal understanding of the experiences of CDWs in facilitating disability inclusion and social justice for disabled people, especially in rural areas.

The **research team** consisted of six academics from different disciplines and five postgraduate students in Disability Studies, who were also from different disciplinary backgrounds (See figure).



Methodology: We combined the life history approach by the students with a phenomenological approach in the analysis of data.

Respondents: In-depth interviews were done with 16 community disability workers – 9 women and 7 men. The age range was 26-54 years, with an average age of 43 years. Only four CDWs were employed with NGOs and the other 12 worked for the Ministry of Health. The average years of (cumulative) experience was 13 years.

Country	Profession	Length of training	Disability in family
Botswana:	1 social worker	3 years	Self
	2 rehabilitation officers	4 years	1 child
	1 rehabilitation technician	2 years	Self
	4 family educators	6 months	1 child, 1 nephew and 1 grandchild
Malawi:	4 rehabilitation technicians	1 x 2 years, 3 x 3 years	
South Africa:	3 OT technicians	2 x 3 years 1 x 2 years	1 brother
	1 community development worker	1 x 1 years	self

Data gathering:

Proposal writing – The project leader had written a proposal to obtain funding.

Each student has to write a proposal and obtain ethical approval from the relevant health autorities in their country.

Training in interivew skills during both Critical Research Literacy course as well as workshop on life histories by researchers.

Data generation was done by 4 PG diploma students between Sept 2011 and Jan 2012.

Each student conducted an initial in-depth interview with a CDW.

Each student transcribed their interview and emailed to the researchers.

Training by team

The first interview was reviewed by the researchers.

Feedback was given before students conducted a follow up interview with first CDW.

The same process was followed with the other CDW interviews.

Each student analysed interviews of two CDWs and wrote up life histories. They drafted an article for Critical Research Literacy course exam.

Process of data analysis:

Three publications identified	• One group is writing a descriptive paper of both themes related to Personal Influences and Contextual Influences • A second group is writing a critical in-depth paper on Personal Influences • A third group will write a critical paper on the Contextual Influences
After the workshop, three researchers used *Dedoose*[1]	• Entered the interview data as a means of checking the salience and relationships among the themes identified • The PG diploma students asked the participants to confirm the thematic framework telephonically or by posting the summaries of the themes
Team used an interpretative phenomenological approach	• Considered how the sub-themes could be collapsed into two main themes: Personal influences related to growing up, personal characteristics and professional competencies; and contextual influences related to community, systems and services
During workshop - Team then divided into pairs	• Each pair analysed one further transcript using existing sub-themes and noting any new themes that emerged • Realigned some sub-themes and kept others distinct through consensus discussions • Each members was then assigned one of remaining ten transcripts to analyse individually
For a two day analysis workshop, one transcript was chosen	• Team was divided into two groups to analyse the same transcript independently • Compared the sub-themes to group common sub-themes • Discussed sub-themes that were different
Initial thematic content analysis done individually by team	• Read all the transcripts before meeting together for to plan for a data analysis workshop • Identified potentially most informative transcript

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1 A software programme for qualitative data analysis.