Chapter 10
Online Counselling for Children and Young People: Using Technology to Address the Millennium Development Goals in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The central thesis of this chapter has three main components. Initially, the authors propose that online counselling can be of benefit to Kenyan children and young people in providing access to psychological help and support. Furthermore, specific technological support can be developed to provide opportunities for Kenyan children and young people to derive the same benefits as those in countries in which youth online counselling has already become established. Secondly, the authors outline how online counselling has the potential to address four of the eight United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Finally, the chapter reflects on how technology to support online counselling for use with Kenyan children and young people needs to develop so that it can be utilized to meet its full potential. In particular, appropriate technological advances need to occur to enable those in remote areas to benefit, thus providing the infrastructure for online counselling to become a realistic means of supporting Kenyan children and young people.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-204-4.ch010
INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals encapsulate the development aspirations of the world as a whole. But they are not only development objectives, they encompass universally accepted human values and rights such as freedom from hunger, the right to basic education, the right to health and a responsibility to future generations (Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General United Nations, 25th September, 2008).

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2006), levels of mental health problems in children and young people are increasing worldwide. The prevalence of mental health problems such as depression (43.7 percent), anxiety (12.9 percent), and obsessive compulsive disorders (69.1 percent) among Kenya’s school children is worrisome; and of particular concern is the 4.9 - 5.5 percent of children and young people who have suicidal thoughts and plans. The high levels of mental health problems and emotional distress in Kenyan schools have been found to be at least as high as levels in developed countries (Ndetei, et al., 2008). In the United Kingdom (UK), the prevalence of mental health problems among children and young people is increasing, with one in ten children having a diagnosable mental health disorder (Green, et al., 2004). The UK has one of the lowest levels of positive mental health amongst European countries, coming near the bottom of the league table as twenty-fourth out of twenty-nine countries (Eurochild, 2009) and having the most unhappy children and young people among the world’s richest countries (UNICEF, 2007). The mental health of children and young people in the UK is so problematic that a Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition has recently been formed (2010), comprising many major organisations in the UK.

The central thesis of this chapter comprises three main parts: firstly, that online counselling can be beneficial for children and young people in Kenya; secondly, that the use of technology for the provision of psychological help and support has the potential to address four of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2, 3, 6, 8; UN, 2008a); and thirdly, that the development of technology and its operationalisation is required to support the provision of online counselling in Kenya. Camilla’s story is representative of this underlying thesis. Camilla, aged 13 years, had witnessed many events of domestic violence towards her mother and siblings by her father. She was silent and withdrawn at school, in spite of her teachers’ attempts to include her in classroom activities. Camilla’s school does not have a counsellor, yet her teachers believe that counselling may be helpful to her because they have heard that Camilla’s family situation is difficult and have seen research evidence that counselling can be helpful for distressed children and young people. Camilla has recently been exhibiting symptoms of extreme emotional distress; she has picked at her hair until several bald patches have appeared and she does not engage with any learning activities at school. She sits with her arms wrapped tightly around herself and only speaks if directly spoken to. Camilla’s teachers are very concerned about her. Although this is a fictional account of a child in psychological distress in a Kenyan school, it is based on real-life case-material and could just as easily be a child living in any part of the world.

This chapter draws on knowledge, experience, and research in online counselling in the UK and knowledge transfer from educational technology solutions for learning in remote areas in developing countries. Online counselling, like any other form of counselling or psychological intervention, is founded upon a particular approach with underpinning theoretical and philosophical beliefs translated into practice for clients through a delivery framework and a set of skills along with a knowledge base. For online counselling, there has been a leap in technology over the past decade that makes this possible and developments in the field of counselling that have allowed, and in some ways, facilitated this. Online counselling
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