CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF COMMUNITIES IN KWAZULU-NATAL

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ABSTRACT

Social work students are expected to adopt a critical reflexive approach in dealing with the development challenges facing communities in contemporary South Africa. As an epistemological position that merges postmodernist thinking with the radical humanist goals of structural social work theory, the concept of critical reflexivity is often conflated with critical reflective competencies in the application of learning. Using qualitative methodology, the authors present 74 students' experiences of profiling communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Three themes emerged from the data distilled through profile reports and interviews: reflexivity and conceptualising community in practice, reflexivity in community profiling, and reflexivity and community needs. The authors conclude that a critically reflexive stance is fundamental for students to adopt in community work practice, and to recognise how their own social and cultural influences contribute to the process of knowledge creation and the promotion of social justice and human rights in communities.

Keywords: community work; reflexive practice; social justice

INTRODUCTION

In the post-1994 era, and as a national prerogative, it is widely acknowledged by scholars in contemporary South Africa that engaging in partnerships with local communities is fundamental not just to ensure the optimal training of future human service graduates, but also to advance the higher education agenda (Erasmus 2005). In fact, in 2006 the Higher Education Quality Committee acknowledged that engaging actively with communities is a reciprocal and inclusive relationship that higher education institutions (HEIs) need to nurture (Council for Higher Education 2007). Subsequently, many social science scholars have advocated for student–community–campus partnerships to become a more intentional and innovative component of their teaching curriculum, as well as a means to actualise the community engagement function of the higher education agenda (Bender 2008; Erasmus 2005; Maistry 2012). In particular, historically in the training of social work students, student–community–campus partnerships formed an integral part of practice education and training. Raniga (2012) argues that the high levels of poverty, HIV and Aids and unemployment visible in South African communities call for social work graduates to be able to deliver services optimally, value strengths, diversity, indigenous knowledge systems and local assets in communities where there are insufficient resources and in which there are competing development challenges. Furthermore, social work academics across the country have been urged by the Council for Higher Education, the National Department of Higher Education and Training and the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) to create a context in which students are exposed to multiple ways of developing practice-based theory, improve and change practice and offer a platform for fostering alternative meanings for student experiences (Bender 2008; Waghid 2002). Raniga (2012) argues that this will produce a cadre of professionals who are not only well prepared to meet the complex developmental challenges facing communities, but are also able to commit to social justice and human rights, despite the challenges presented by a neoliberal economic agenda.

To add to the body of knowledge on empirical data of student–community–campus partnerships, this article examines the community work experiences of 74 social work students who, in 2014, engaged with community members across South Africa. Using qualitative methodology, a key objective of this study was to explore the students' experiences of engaging with community stakeholders, to glean their reflections on the social problems in the respective communities, and to investigate the solutions put in place by the communities to deal with those problems. Using critical reflexivity as the epistemological position of this study, three key themes emerging from the data analysis are deliberated: reflexivity and conceptualising community in practice, reflexivity in community profiling, and reflexivity and community needs. The central premise put forward by the authors is that a critically reflexive stance is fundamental for social work students to recognise how their own social and cultural influences contribute to the

process of knowledge creation, and to meeting a social justice and human rights agenda in communities.

This article contributes to the body of knowledge in two ways: 1) by providing a nuanced understanding of conceptualising community, in times of neoliberalism, from the perspectives of students; and 2) by encouraging academic debate about the significance of critical reflexivity in community work practice education.

The article begins with deliberations on the significance of reflexive practice in social work education, followed by a discussion on the influences neoliberalism has on social problems in local communities. The discussion that follows provides insight into a postmodernist, reflexive instructional design as the key conceptual frame for community work practice education training in contemporary South Africa. Following the research methodology section is the presentation and discussion of the three key themes. The final section synthesises the students' reflections on reflexive practice in community work practice training, and highlights key implications for student–community partnerships.

The significance of reflexive practice in social work education in the context of this study

In social work it is difficult to imagine how the training of students would exist without the valuable partnerships between communities, organisations and universities. Sandy and Holland (2006) state that for community partnerships with HEIs to be sustainable, attention must be paid to the benefits and perceptions of both partners, each from their own perspective. The Global Qualifying Standards for Social Work Education and Training (Sewpaul and Jones 2004) as well as the National Qualifications Framework of the Bachelor of Social Work qualification underline the fundamental value of field practice education in social work education (Sewpaul and Jones 2004). In KwaZulu-Natal (as elsewhere in the country) a major concern is the need to facilitate students' learning opportunities and support social work practice in authentic ways, for example by working with vulnerable communities (Raniga 2012). In an endeavour to encourage the development of critical reflexivity beyond the social work classroom, the authors designed the instructional task of profiling communities as part of the community work practice module taught to third-year University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) social work students. The task took into account their prior knowledge, and their social and cultural experiences regarding their own residential communities.

Critical reflexivity is an epistemological position that merges postmodernist thinking with the radical humanist goals of structural social work theory (Fook and Askeland 2007; Morley 2015; Schon 1983). A concept that is often conflated with critical reflection, it is perceived as a key element of student learning together with the ability to look at an individual's personal influence in the application of learning in society. Bellefeuille (2006) notes that instructional design in social work modules comprises

the rational development of an instructional system using learning and instructional theory to ensure the quality of instruction. Underscored by postmodernist thinking, the instructional design in this study was based on the assumption that how students reflect on their own thinking and feelings about their learning contexts, and the academic support they receive, are central to the debate about critical reflexivity in social work practice (Morley 2015). In the didactic triangle (educator, student, subject matter), reflexivity shapes learning as it refers to an individual's capacity to look or act back on him/herself within his/her own space and environment, to facilitate his/her own investment in the learning process (Wilson, Walsh and Kirby 2008). Proponents of both postmodernist and social constructionist approaches perceive students and educators as co-creators of knowledge, where the learning context between the partners is characterised by transparent dialogue, open-minded learning and responsible action (Bellefeuille 2006). Further, the strategies and outcomes of the learning process are not quantifiable or intended to be the same for each learner. However, while different learners will reflect and draw their own unique conclusions, it is not a speculative encounter – they are expected to justify their formulations and responses by taking into account the profound connectedness between knowledge, self and society. In line with the community work practice module, the authors believed that giving students an opportunity to compile profiles of a community of choice was incumbent on a multifaceted interplay of factors: students' existing knowledge of the resources and assets in the community, as well as their understanding of the community stakeholders and the development environment which facilitated situation-specific understanding (Wilson, Walsh and Kirby 2008).

Bearing these deliberations in mind, the authors submit that reflexive community experiences not only offer students an innovative means by which to infuse postmodernist principles (where learners function as self-motivated, self-directed collaborative participants in the learning context), but also serve to enhance the creation of effective emancipatory learning environments. This position is supported by the findings of a recent qualitative formative evaluation which documented the experiences of ten social work students involved in community work practice, while promoting the learning and enhancement of skills sets for reflective community work practice (Raniga 2012).

One of the central ideological positions put forward by the authors in teaching the community work module to social work students was to critically reflect on the impact of neoliberal capitalism on local communities. The following discussion provides an overview of several of the conceptual debates.

Neoliberalism and its influence on social problems in South African communities

Unpacking some of the debates on the influences of neoliberalism and its connectedness to the theory of oppression was perceived as significant for the purposes of this study, as the large-scale poverty and oppression evident in contemporary South African

communities require social work students to apply competent community work skills as well as critical reflexive competencies. We must acknowledge the arguments presented by proponents of social justice that this theory, underpinned by radical humanistic thinking, provides a framework for challenging community work practice in both developed and developing nation states (Sewpaul 2014; Stepney and Popple 2008). As such, it is a grave concern that neoliberalism persists as the dominant global economic ideology, despite its devastating effects on communities (Sewpaul 2014). The widening gap between rich and poor in and between societies in the Global South and Global North indicates that economic gains have been made at the expense of social and human rights (Raniga and Zelnick 2014). The global recession post-2008 and uprisings such as the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring are examples of world-wide protests against neoliberalism (Sewpaul 2014). Advances in information and technology, unfair trade, the relocation of manufacturing, and the large-scale importation of foreign products have led to high levels of poverty and inequality in South African communities (Sewpaul 2014; Stepney and Popple 2008; Triegaardt 2009). The disparities between North and South show the distorted impact of neoliberalism, where access to power, status, prestige and resources is often related to race, class, gender or some form of exclusion in the lives of social service users – so much so that a range of these oppressive experiences can easily be internalised as normal in communities (Esau and Keet 2014; Sewpaul 2014). These prominent writers argue that, historically, there is a tendency to blame the poor for their own adverse circumstances, rather than the structural and economic factors that contribute to those conditions. They add that the trend during the second wave of democracy in South Africa has been for the state to relinquish its social responsibility to communities, by 'encouraging' them to become self-reliant and self-sustaining. This is in line with Ferguson's (2007) view that the efforts of the state to launch structural intervention programmes to deal with poverty, unemployment and inequality, and to empower communities to be self-sustainable have failed dismally because, in a neoliberal environment the focus is on productivity, profit and increased competition, rather than on social justice and human rights. Despite this, communities continue to find ways of dealing with the challenges they face.

To date, few published studies have documented the perspectives of students and local community members on the social problems in communities and local initiatives to resolve those issues. This study is an endeavour to fill that empirical gap. A reflexive exercise was used, whereby students were expected to visit their communities in order to understand how the social problems evident there were connected to the structural and economic systems in our society. They were expected to write up detailed community profile reports, which were used as tools for analysis in this study.

The following section provides insight into the postmodernist, reflexive instructional design which formed the key conceptual frame for the community work practice education training offered by the authors at UKZN.

A postmodernist, reflexive approach to community profile instructional design

One of the first social scientists to introduce the concept of reflexivity was Kelly (1955), who referred to the notion of reflexive practice to show that self-reflexive insight and the meaningfulness of practices are contingent upon the context of their production. In this study, the aim was to create an opportunity for students to engage in multiple ways of knowing, to understand communities' social problems and arrive at alternative meanings for experiences (Lyons 1999; Ruch 2002). Although no instructional design theory specific to community work practice training has been developed yet, the authors propose that the combination of experiential community learning and postmodernist reflexive instructional design is a logical and coherent match (Morley 2015; Sandy and Holland 2006). This approach opposes the historically orthodox modernist and positivist approaches (such as managerialism and evidence-based procedures) that have dominated social work education, leaving little space for more holistic and reflexive approaches to education, research and practice (Leung 2007; Ruch 2002). Hence, to inspire critical reflexivity beyond the classroom, students were encouraged to negotiate with stakeholders and community leaders. The academic task for this module was for students to profile the needs of communities from a social work point of view. They were expected to gather data by way of interviews with community members and to review documents (e.g. community newspapers, minutes of community meetings and information from the internet and other sources). Students were then expected to create a list of three of the priority social problems identified by the community stakeholders (ward councillor, priest, educator, inkosi, etc.). They went on several visits to gather information on the community's strengths and major challenges, and this enhanced what Ruch (2002) refers to as "feeling, thinking and doing" – conditions known to facilitate postmodernist and reflexive learning (Bellefeuille 2006; Morley 2015; Wilson et. al. 2008). Since the students conducted the visits to the community during the university term break, this allowed for self-paced learning and reflection – two core premises of postmodernist epistemology. By drawing on the strengths of reflexive community-based practice education training, postmodernist principles can be applied to curriculum development projects using a variety of creative strategic approaches to learning.

METHODOLOGY

Consistent with its objectives, this study utilised qualitative methodology. The aim was to give third-year students the opportunity to critically reflect on the socio-political, spatial and cultural dimensions of communities in contemporary South Africa. At the commencement of teaching the community work practice module, the authors provided a detailed overview of the purpose and objectives of the study to a total of 140 registered students. The students were expected to visit a community of their choice and submit a community profile report as part of the academic task set for this module. For the

purposes of the study, the authors conceptualised profiling using Freirean pedagogy, thus students were expected to individually find out about structural factors such as the social, spatial, functional and cultural-symbolic dimensions that impact the functioning of communities in KwaZulu-Natal. The purposive, availability sampling strategy was used (Marlow 2012), as the authors invited those students who had obtained a mark of 65 per cent and above to submit their individual profile reports (which were well conceptualised and well written) for analysis. Data were distilled by content analysis from 74 students who volunteered to participate in the study and who gave permission for their written work to be used. Following the mid-term break, when students were expected to individually gather their data, they were given the opportunity to debrief and reflect on their experiences in small groups. One of the challenges mentioned by the students was the tight timeframe to visit communities, conduct interviews, and clarify responses with those same community members. One must also be mindful that in the interpretation of data from isiZulu to English, loss of meaning may have occurred in some contexts. The authors believe that the prolonged engagement with students during classroom teaching and interaction, as well as the detailed profile reports documenting a comprehensive analysis of communities of their choice, served to enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the data (Marlow 2012).

Critical reflexivity beyond the social work classroom: Findings

The findings of this study are presented in two sections: The first describes the students' reflections of communities in South Africa in contemporary times and the second addresses community reflections on resolving social problems.

Reflexivity and conceptualising community in practice

Trevelyan, Crath and Chambon (2012) note that critical reflexivity places emphasis on the socially constructed, power-laden nature of knowledge acquisition and its connection to students' inner and outer worlds as well as its influence on community work practice. Payne (2005) links the goals of social change to social work students who are committed to a transformatory agenda, and would potentially challenge and resist current forms of domination. Students' geographic classification of communities in this study was indeed interesting – see Table 1, which follows the guidelines provided by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA)(2003), where an urban area refers to a town with a population size of more than 1 000 people per square kilometre. A rural area is defined as a settlement without a local authority, which is not necessarily situated within a tribal area but has formal and semi-formal dwellings such as houses, huts and rondavels. It was expected that students would use similar explanations to categorise communities or use some criteria to explain their decisions in this regard. Those students who visited rural communities could easily identify with their symbolism, processes and socio-cultural values. The students stated that there was a sense of cohesiveness which resonated

with the philosophy of *ubuntu* in rural communities, possibly because they were not as materially driven as urban communities, which are influenced by neoliberal policies of individualism and competition.

Table 1: Categorisation of communities by students

Classification	Number	Percentage (%)
Rural	39	52.7
Urban	21	28.4
Semi-urban	14	18.9
Total	74	100

It is interesting to note that all villages and areas under traditional authority were automatically classified as rural or informal, regardless of population size or level of development, the justification being simply that they "looked" undeveloped. Although some informal communities were located in the city of Durban they were classified as urban, however, housing developments in the urban areas whose dwellings were made of anything but brick and mortar were classified as semi-rural. This aligned with StatsSA's categorisation of communities. The implication is that students viewed informal housing as rural, regardless of where the structures were located. Sewpaul (2008, 98) provides a comprehensive and relevant definition which may be applicable to the students' perspectives of communities in contemporary South Africa: "A community may be conceived as groups of people who, although diverse, live in and share a specific geographic space within common mezzo level infrastructural development." Although section 155(1) of the constitution (RSA 1996) categorises different municipalities, their boundaries and powers, the distinction is rather vague. A study by StatsSA (2003) on the demarcation of communities indicates that the separation of rural areas from cities and towns has imposed artificial political and administrative boundaries between areas that are otherwise functionally integrated, therefore the division is not always evident.

On a positive note: The majority of students stated that the opportunity to engage with stakeholders in communities helped them develop critical self-awareness and reflexivity, which can be taught as a skill and a means for emancipation and a sense of deep learning (Freire 1973). Paralleling this, Wilson et al. (2008, 36 as quoted in Weyers 2011) indicate that "how students think and feel about their learning opportunities and support they receive are central to the debate about the quality of their learning experience". One student stated:

> I was able to see how much people suffer outside in the community. I also experienced how people in poverty are ignored by their ward councillor. I furthermore noticed that not only blacks are in severe poverty, even other groups are poor and apply for food vouchers.

Based on the foregoing discussion, one can infer that emancipatory education – which is the nucleus of reflexive practice – pays particular attention to more than the concept of "learning by doing". This, because it focuses on students being more attentive to how the process of their engagement in communities can be empowering, rather than assuming that their intentions will automatically produce tangible and empowering outcomes. Furthermore, a component at the core of both reflexive and reflective practice is dialogue; the idea that educators, students and community members interact with one another in a transparent space, and where all partners are committed to mutual trust and openness to learning, speaking and acting. Consistent with the radical humanist school of thought (social constructionism), the aim of such education, according to Freire (1973), is to develop critical consciousness. The students' reflexivity and profiling of community needs are explored further in the discussion which follows.

Reflexivity in community profiling

A key objective of this study was to provide students with the opportunity to understand how valuing local knowledge, skills, resources and processes translates into practice (Ife and Tesoriero 2006). This module emphasised valuing indigenous knowledge systems evident in local communities, while acknowledging local expertise and the experiences of community members in solving their development problems. In so doing, the authors asked students to pay attention to how their own life experiences, backgrounds and personal values impacted their professional community work training. Some of the comments that students shared about the experience contributing to their critical self-awareness are as follows:

> I had to wear a *doek* [head scarf] and a long skirt when visiting the *nkosi* in this rural area.

> I was mindful not to raise my voice above that of the person I was speaking with. Sometimes I did not agree with some of the ideas they were saying, but I didn't have the courage to disagree (with them). My father would be disappointed if I argue with an elder person, but I wish I had given my opinion and ideas.

It was interesting to note that the two students who shared these sentiments had been raised in urban areas, but had chosen to visit rural communities. One student stated that the task of profiling a community was exciting, as it gave her the opportunity to put into practice what she had learnt in the community work practice workshops. It was positive that all the students felt supported and welcomed when visiting the respective communities. Here are two of the narratives shared by students:

> She always starts by introducing herself and me and further describes the purpose of my visit.

> I really feel welcomed and treated as a child that belongs in this community.

Through the visits to their respective communities, the students revealed that they gained insight into how actively involved local people were in solving problems related to their development. The students were able to appreciate the partnership-based approach of teaching followed in the community work practice module. They also reflected that being humble and respectful of community processes were important principles when working in communities (Weyers 2011), and appreciated that engaging actively with communities is an important reciprocal partnership that social work academics need to nurture.

Reflexivity and community needs

Communities in South Africa find themselves continuously having to adjust to issues of crime, HIV/Aids, substance abuse, food insecurity, domestic violence and child-headed households, which lead to helplessness, isolation, weakness and vulnerability (Chambers 1983; Swanepoel and De Beer 2011). Chambers' deprivation trap shows how poverty may affect all aspects of a community. In many rural communities the cycle of poverty is so entrenched that it has come to be perceived as "normal", and the effects are felt from household (micro) to community (macro) level. The community profile reports which the students presented were diverse, even though the social problems across the communities were similar. The student profile reports discussed the impact of poverty on other aspects of life, such as physical weakness, isolation, powerlessness and vulnerability. Different issues were discussed in addition to poverty, including youth unemployment, the lack of basic services, and domestic, child and substance abuse (see below).

Students generally felt that if poverty could be addressed, it would help to alleviate other social problems. One student reflected:

> In the community of Ntshongweni there are no jobs, the youth are unemployed, the adults are unemployed, the elderly depend on social grants and there is nothing to do, jobs are very scarce. This leads to teenage pregnancy and crime.

In addition to unemployment, other social issues related to life tasks and stages of development were youth dropping out of school, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy. One student stated:

> Drugs are sold at taxi ranks, through street vendors in the community and at particular shebeens in townships around Pietermaritzburg. The rise of substance abuse among the people of our township, especially the youth, leads them to crime.

More pronounced in rural and informal settlements were issues related to unemployment and access to basic services such as clean drinking water and refuse removal, adequate housing and infrastructure. Although the constitution assures all citizens of their right to free basic services, this has not always translated into a reality for many communities. One student said:

> At Swayimana we get water from the rivers and streams, although some people have piped water it is not always available, so we use the untreated sources of water.

Another student said:

> When the people of Somsuku need medical help, they have to walk long distances because there is no local clinic. When we call the ambulance it takes very long to get here, and sometimes it reaches the person when it is too late.

The lack of services is not only evident in rural areas or informal settlements, but also in well-resourced urban areas. A student expressed this view:

> I wish the police would raid all the illegal taverns, they sell liquor to schoolchildren and they also make so much noise. I don't think the drug enforcement agency is doing any work in Umlazi.

These issues are interlinked, with poverty cited as a major reason for many problems in the community. The high unemployment rate amongst working-age persons is a reality that many communities live with. The students confirmed this:

> The community of Clydesdale is made up of young people, but they are not able to work as they do not have qualifications for high-paying jobs.

> Mr Phungula refers to unemployment as the umbrella concept that leads to all these other social problems in KwaMakhutha. People steal to make a living and this community offers nothing for them in terms of jobs and further education opportunities.

From the students' discussion, the need for jobs and employment in communities was a priority despite local businesses using innovative strategies – developed by communities – to deal with poverty and unemployment. Ferguson (2007) indicates that entry into the formal sector may never be a reality for most people in Africa, and argues for the growth and expansion of the informal sector where the community is able to support itself through "informal" yet effective activities. This theme is discussed below.

Community reflections on resolving development needs

When the students asked community members how they dealt with development challenges, responses ranged from micro-and meso-to macro-level strategies, contingent upon the resources available in each community. Although some local businesses were run by community members in response to local needs, many students felt that because these businesses were informal they were undervalued by community members, despite meeting local needs:

> It is better to buy from Shoprite which has specials and their food have expiry dates, you don't get that at the tuck shop.

> Everybody here sells beads, who will buy them? Maybe if there was a market. But I don't see how I can pay for a house with money from beads.

However, others felt that small businesses are important and meet community needs. One student reflected on what a community member had stated:

> People operate *spaza* shops from their homes which are located within walking distance and sell products that the community needs.

Local economic initiatives by self-help groups (sewing groups, basket- and broom-making initiatives, sculpting, beading, hair and beauty salons and car-wash businesses) are industries and services which are informal, yet provide employment and reduce poverty. Ife and Tesoriero (2006) would refer to such initiatives as examples of valuing local knowledge and strengths. Ferguson (2007) also sees the value of informal trade in South Africa. Instead of aspiring to enter the formal employment sector, perhaps the focus should be on expanding the informal sector so that people can earn a living using the available resources and infrastructure.

Despite the hardships communities are expected to endure, their survival strategies are relevant to local needs. Home-based care groups have been formed to assist families in need of care, such as those suffering from HIV-related illnesses, child-headed households, the elderly and people with disabilities (Triegaardt 2009). In addition to meeting physical needs, there is also psychosocial support, education and referral to service providers, as mentioned by this student:

> In the community of Ntombe, there is a community project that helps youth with skills development, women empowerment projects and an agency focusing on sewing and gardening skills.

Another student pointed out that the community of KwaDabeka had an organisation called KwaCare, which assists over 1 000 households headed by children as young as 12, by giving them monthly food parcels. The student stated that this organisation also has a soup kitchen on Thursdays which offers any member of the community a hot meal. Volunteers from the community run this organisation and it has, over the years, grown to include a home-based care programme to deliver services to families in need. In many home-based care programmes there is strong peer education and counselling support.

The authors found that students were aware of government-led programmes related to food gardens and animal husbandry. Students reported that communities are encouraged to look at alternative means of income generation. Initiatives such as food gardens have also been formalised and the Department of Agriculture and Forestry spearheads the "one home, one garden" programme to curb poverty and food insecurity. Students observed that in the rural areas, resources such as land are often not recognised or are underutilised, for instance in the community of Ladysmith, agrarian farming has been turned into commercial farming through cooperatives funded by community organisations and government. In addition to vegetable farming, students commented

on animal husbandry projects such as the Zamukuphila Piggery farming cooperative in Ladysmith, where community members make use of the resources at their disposal and use indigenous farming methods that are valued by the community. These economic initiatives reveal how local talents, expertise and interests have been successful in "regenerating economic activity and pride in local achievements" (Ife & Tesoriero 2006, 217) by turning local economic practices into businesses, for instance in animal husbandry and food gardens.

To ensure that communities thrive and inequalities are reduced, structural issues that continue to impinge on society (particularly on vulnerable groups) have to be addressed. Creating an enabling environment suited to local economic, social and cultural conditions, is crucial. Students also need to remember that social work services must be in line with the needs of communities – this remains paramount when educators, students and community members interact.

CONCLUSION

This article discussed the findings of an exploratory qualitative research project based on 74 profile reports that examined the socio-political, spatial and cultural dimensions of communities in one province of South Africa, through the perspectives of social work students. These students represent the next cadre of professionals, and by embracing a critically reflexive epistemological position, they were given the opportunity to acknowledge how their own social and cultural influences contribute to the process of community engagement. In turn, that prepares them to effectively respond to the developmental challenges facing communities. The article has highlighted the benefits of the triadic relationship (academic/researcher, students, community members) that is manifest in the supportive opportunities afforded students to value local leadership, knowledge, processes, skills and solutions to contemporary social problems in communities.

The authors conclude that integrating critical reflexivity in curriculum teaching shapes the training of future social work professionals, who will be able to engage and influence national and local transformative action and ultimately contribute to promoting social justice and human rights in communities.

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