**CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: SOCIAL WORK STUDENT PERSPECTIVES OF COMMUNITIES IN KWAZULU-NATAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

Social work students are expected to adopt a critical reflexive approach in order to deal 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 paper concludes 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 promoting social justice and human rights in communities.

**Key words:** reflexive practice, community work and 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 the optimal training of future human service graduates, but to the higher education agenda (Erasmus, 2005). In fact, the Higher Education Quality Committee in 2006 acknowledged that engaging actively with communities is a reciprocal and inclusive relationship that higher education institutions 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 have been an integral part of practice education and training. Additionally, 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, improving and changing practice and to offer a platform for alternative meanings for student experiences (Waghid, 2002; Bender, 2008). Raniga (2012) argues that this will produce a cadre of professionals who are not just well-prepared to meet the complex development challenges in communities but are able to commit to social justice and human rights despite the challenges presented by a neoliberal economic agenda.

In order 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 in different South African communities. Using qualitative methodology a key objective of this study was to explore students’ experiences of engaging with community stakeholders on their reflections of the social problems in their respective communities and the solutions put in place by the community to deal with these problems. Using critical reflexivity as the epistemological position for this study, three key themes that emerged 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 forth 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 paper contributes to the body of knowledge in two ways: providing a nuanced understanding of conceptualising community in times of neoliberalism from the perspectives of students and secondly, 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 of neoliberalism on social problems in South African 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 of the article synthesises the students’ reflections on reflexive practice in community work practice training and highlights key implications for student-community partnerships in contemporary South Africa.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REFLEXIVE PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND 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 the sustainability of such community partnerships with higher education institutions requires attention to the benefits and perceptions of the partners 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 to support social work practice in authentic ways, for example, working with vulnerable communities (Raniga, 2012). As 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 UKZN social work students. Taking into account their own prior knowledge and social and cultural experiences that they had 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, 2006; Schon, 1983; Morley, 2015). It is a concept that is often conflated with critical reflection and is perceived as a key element of student learning together with the ability to look at the influence of oneself on application of learning in society. Bellefeuille (2006) noted that instructional design in social work modules comprises the rational development of an instructional system using learning and instructional theory to ensure 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 that they receive are central to the debate about critical reflexivity in social work practice (Morley, 2015). In the didactic triangle (educator-student and subject matter), reflexivity shapes learning as it refers to the capacity of one to look or act back upon oneself within the learner’s space and environment and this facilitates one’s own investment in the learning process (Wilson, Walsh & Kirby, 2008). Proponents of both postmodernist and social constructionist approaches perceive students and educators as co-creators of knowledge and the learning context between the partners is characterized by transparent dialogue, open-minded learning and responsible action (Bellefeuille, 2006). Furthermore the strategies and outcomes of the learning process are not quantifiable and are not 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 but they are expected to justify their formulations and responses taking into account the profound connectedness between knowledge, self and society. In the community work practice module the authors believe that by giving students the opportunity to compile profiles of a community of choice was incumbent on a multifaceted interplay of factors, namely students’ existing knowledge of the resources and assets in the community, their understanding of the stakeholders in the community and the understanding of 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 10 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 forth by the authors in the teaching of the community work module to social work students was to critically reflect on the impact of neoliberal capitalism on communities in South Africa. The following discussion provides an overview of some 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 requires 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 will provide a framework for challenging community work practice in both the developed and developing nation states (Stepney and Popple, 2008; Sewpaul, 2014). 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 the rich and poor within 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 since 2008 and uprisings such as the occupy movement and Arab Springs are examples of the protests against neoliberalism throughout the world (Sewpaul, 2014). Advances in information and technology, unfair trade, relocation of manufacturing, and the large importation of foreign products has led to high levels of poverty and inequality in South African communities (Sewpaul, 2014; Stepney and Popple, 2008; Triegaardt, 2009). The disparities between the Global North and South show the distorted impact of neoliberalism, where access to power, status, prestige and resources are often related to race, class, gender or some form of exclusion in the lives of social service users and that a range of these oppressive experiences can easily be internalised as normal in communities (Sewpaul, 2014; Esau and Keet, 2014). These prominent writers also argue that historically there is a tendency to blame poor people for their own adverse circumstances rather than the structural and economic factors that contribute to these circumstances. They add that the trend over the second wave of democracy in South Africa has been for the state to relinquish its social responsibility to communities by ‘encouraging’ communities to become self-reliant and sustain themselves. This is in line with Ferguson’s (2007) view that the efforts undertaken by 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. Communities continue to find ways of dealing with challenges they face.

To date there are few published studies documenting the perspectives of students and local community members on the social problems in communities and local initiatives to resolve these issues. This study was an endeavour to fill this empirical gap. A reflexive exercise was used where students were expected to visit their communities in order to understand how the social problems evident in communities were connected to the structural and economic systems in 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 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 how self-reflexive insight and the meaningfulness of practices are contingent upon the context of their production. In this study the aim was to create the opportunity for students to engage in a context of multiple ways of knowing to understand social problems in communities and therefore offer alternative meanings for experiences (Ruch, 2002; Lyons, 1999). Although an instructional design theory specifically for community work practice training has not yet been developed, we propose that the combination of experiential community learning and postmodernist reflexive instructional design is a logical and coherent match (Sandy and Holland, 2006; Morley, 2015). 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, in order 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, to review documents such as 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). Students went on several visits to the community 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 (Wilson et. al. 2008; Bellefueille, 2006; Morley, 2015). Since 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. 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 communities using Freirean pedagogy and thus students were expected to individually find out about structural factors such as the social, spatial, functional and cultural-symbolic dimensions that impacted the functioning of the communities in KwaZulu-Natal. The sampling strategy used was purposive, availability sampling (Marlow, 2012) as the authors invited those students who obtained a mark of 65% and above to submit their individual profile reports for analysis as these reports were well-conceptualised and well-written. Data were distilled by content analysis from 74 students who volunteered to participate in the study and gave permission for the use of their written work. 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 expressed by the students was the tight timeframe to visit communities, conduct interviews, and clarify responses with community members who were interviewed. One must also be mindful that in the interpretation of data from isiZulu to English loss of meaning in some contexts may have occurred. 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 section describes the students’ reflections of communities in South Africa in contemporary times, and the second section addressescommunity 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 connect to students’ inner and outer worlds and the influence on community work practice. Payne (2002) links the goals of social change to social work students who are committed to a transformatory agenda and who potentially would challenge and resist current forms of domination. Students’ geographic classification of communities in this study was indeed interesting. Table 1 below illustrates the categorisation of communities by students. We used the guidelines provided by Statistics South Africa (2003) in the categorisation of communities in this instance, where an urban area refers to a town with a population size of more than 1000 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 to categorise communities. Those students who visited rural communities, could easily identify with the symbolism, processes, and socio-cultural values of these communities. These students stated that there was a sense of cohesiveness which resonates with the philosophy of ubuntu in rural communities. Students were of the view that a possible reason for this was that rural communities were not so materially driven, as opposed to urban communities who 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 |
| Rural-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. These were aligned to the Statistics South African categorisation of communities. This implies that students viewed informal housing as rural regardless of where the structures were located. Sewpaul (2008:98) provides a comprehensive and relevant definition of community 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 (1996) categorises different municipalities, their boundaries and powers, the distinction between different categories of municipalities is rather vague. A study by Statistics South Africa (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.

It was positive to note that the majority of the students stated that the opportunity to engage with stakeholders in communities helped them to 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, Weyers (2011) mentions that Wilson *et al.* (2008:36) 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’ as 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 is explored further in the discussion below.

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 translated into practice (Ife and Tesoriero, 2006). This module emphasised valuing indigenous knowledge systems evident in local communities and acknowledged local expertise and experiences of community members in solving their development problems. In so doing, the authors also asked students to pay attention to how their own life experiences, their background 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 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 communities but had chosen to visit rural communities. One of the students stated further that the task of profiling a community was perceived as 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 welcome by community members when they visited their respective communities. Some of the narratives shared by students are as follows:

*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 were able to gain insight into how actively involved local people were in solving their development problems. The students were able to appreciate the partnership-based approach of teaching by the community work practice module. Students also reflected that being humble and respectful of community processes are important principles when working in communities (Weyers 2011). They were able to appreciate 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 continuously find themselves having to adjust to issues of crime, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, food insecurity, domestic violence, and child headed households, leading to helplessness, isolation, weakness and vulnerability (Chambers, 1983; Swanepoel and De Beer, 2006). Chambers’ deprivation trap shows how poverty may affect all aspects of a community. The cycle of poverty was so entrenched mainly in the rural communities that it had become perceived as ‘normal’ and the effects were felt from household (micro) to community (macro) level. The profile reports of communities presented by the students was 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, such as youth unemployment, lack of basic services, domestic, child and substance abuse as discussed below.

Students generally felt that if poverty could be addressed, then it was possible for other social problems to be alleviated. 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. The 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 amongst the people of our township, especially the youth leads them to crime.*

Not only were issues related to unemployment but access to basic services such as clean drinking water and refuse removal, inadequate housing and lack of infrastructure were more pronounced in rural and informal settlements. Although the Constitution assures all citizens of their right to free basic services, this has not always translated into reality for many communities. The 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.*

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

*I wish the police would raid all the illegal taverns, they sell liquor to school children and they also make so much noise. I don’t think the drugs enforcement agency is doing any work in Umlazi.*

These problems are interlinked and poverty was cited as a major reason for many problems in the community. The high unemployment rate in working-age persons is a reality that many communities live with. Some quotes from students:

*The community of Clylesdale 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 were a priority despite local businesses’ 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 further below.

**Community reflections on resolving development needs**

Students asked the community members about how they dealt with their development challenges. The responses from community members ranged from micro and mezzo to macro level strategies, contingent upon the resources available in the respective communities. Although there were local businesses run by members of the community in response to local needs, students felt that because these businesses were informal they were undervalued by community members despite meeting local needs, for instance, some of the community views:

*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, a student reflected on what a community member stated:

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

Some local economic initiatives by self-help groups such as sewing groups, basket and broom making initiatives, sculpting, beading, hair and beauty salons and car-wash businesses are some of the local 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 earn a living using the available resources and infrastructure.

Despite the hardships that communities are expected to endure, their survival strategies are relevant to the 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 shown 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 one thousand households headed by children as young as 12 years of age 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 to care such as those suffering from HIV-related illnesses, child-headed households, the elderly and people with disabilities. 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 in relation to food gardens and animal husbandry. Students reported that communities are encouraged to look at other 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 which are 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 the community has made use of resources that are at their own disposal and also use indigenous farming methods that are valued by the community. The above economic initiatives by community members 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.

In order to ensure that communities thrive and inequalities are reduced, structural issues that continue to impinge on society, particularly vulnerable groups have to be addressed. An enabling environment suitable 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 and this remains paramount when educators, students and community members interact with one another.

**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 in contemporary South Africa through the perspectives of social work students. Social work students represent the next cadre of professionals in the profession and through embracing a critically reflexive epistemological position, students were given the opportunity to acknowledge how their own social and cultural influences contribute to the process of community engagement and prepares them to effectively respond to the developmental challenges facing communities. The paper also highlights the benefits of the triad relationship (academics/researcher, students and community members) that is manifest in the supportive opportunities it afforded students to value local leadership, knowledge, processes, skills and solutions to contemporary social problems in communities.

The article concludes 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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