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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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The focus of AJHECE is Community Engagement and Development Research addressing topics on social injustice, poverty, corruption, inequality, unemployment and epistemic injustice, among other social and economic issues.

The main aim of AJHECE is to contribute to building a body of knowledge on Community Engagement (CE) for the African continent. The journal aims to publish and report on a wide range of aspects relating to Community Engagement and Community Development in Southern Africa, the region and elsewhere, with a strong focus on research and praxis. The journal's publications will reflect the diversity of practice in Community Engagement and the diversity of voices that participate in the co-creation of knowledge for individual, community and societal well-being. The journal actively seeks out international dialogue within the global South and partnerships between the global South and the global North that provide perspectives on and for Community Engagement in South Africa and the rest of the African region. By providing a forum for researchers, scholars, practitioners (community and institutional) and policy makers, the key objectives of AJHECE are to:

- Contribute to the body of knowledge on CE produced in Africa; encouragement of the African voice and voices from the global South in general, which may aid in combating epistemicide and marginalising alternative knowledge paradigms at higher education institutions.

- Grow community engagement as a discipline with philosophies, theories and praxis relevant to the African context, and a practice that contributes to the various dimensions (social, economic, cultural, psychological, spiritual, and political) of human and community development.

- Embed community engagement in all activities of the university, especially research, and signal the importance of scholarly work on community-university partnerships.

- Advance collaborative research methodologies, especially community-based participatory research (CBPR), where communities and academics are knowledge co-creators and collaborators in research practice and knowledge dissemination. This kind of research, which values the input of and produces knowledge for and with local communities, can contribute to the process of decolonisation of universities in Africa.

- Provide a space for professional development, discourse and debate on community engagement and sharing knowledge through the scholarship of engagement in the African context, the global South and partnerships with the global North that provide perspectives on and for Community Engagement in South Africa and the rest of the African region.

- Incorporate an author and young editorial board members support programme to encourage new authors in the field to establish themselves as scholarly writers and a new generation of editorial board members.

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The African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement (AJHECE)

Foreword

Prof Sizwe Mabizela, Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University

Often, higher education community engagement serves as a 'bridge' between the university and its 'external' communities. It will take some time as community engagement, the public good arm of higher education institutions, progressively (albeit slowly), builds strong, trusting and sustainable relationships with local communities. While the word 'community' is not limited to people of a specific geographic area that is located in close proximity to a university, it is nevertheless, important for universities generally to make attempts to establish collaborative relationships with local communities, so that they can play their developmental and transformational purposes in contemporary South Africa. Universities need to see themselves as an integral part of their surrounding communities just as they are of the broader society nationally and globally.

Community engagement research, for the promotion of knowledge democracy, and community engaged teaching, for the promotion of experiential learning through critical service learning, are dependent on the nature of community-university relationships. Knowledge building in community engagement requires us to be mindful, to be aware of the interconnectedness of people and the environment, and of all forms of life. Mindfulness increases collaborative knowledge creation and knowledge sharing (Issac, Dhir & Christofi, 2024). Laila Marouf (2023) affirms that when we understand the whole spectrum of knowledge, with all its multidimensionality and interconnections, we can cultivate our abilities as leaders to reach deep into ourselves and out to others. Knowledge mindfulness requires us to be active and mindful in the way we understand and relate to knowledge, its creation and purpose.

One of the objectives of the African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement is to build a body of knowledge on Community Engagement which is context-specific but relevant globally. This second issue of the journal focusing on the theme of *relational ways of learning, knowing, and being in African universities,* challenges us to break out of old ways of thinking and embrace different ways of relating to communities. Importantly, not as 'apart' from universities but an 'integral part' of the whole and must therefore be considered co-creators of knowledge that affects their wellbeing and life through engaged research and engaged teaching. Community engagement as the 'bridge' between communities and universities has a significant role to play in enhancing the interconnected relationship between these two systems through collaborative knowledge creation.

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Editorial: Towards relational ways of learning, knowing, and being in African universities

Margie Maistry, Chief Editor and Research Associate, Rhodes University
Claire McCann, Mentee and Assistant Editor, Rhodes University Community Engagement Editorial Team

> *Campuses and institutions – as if they were not spaces where people learn – live, fall in and out of love, grow, find and lose and redefine themselves, as social beings (Tumubweinee & Luescher, 2019, p. 6).*

Community engagement redirects scholarship from an expert model of knowledge production to one of engaged scholarship, emphasising collaboration and the co-creation of knowledge with external partners, be it individuals, groups or communities. The question of who or what is 'community' continues to be an ongoing debate influenced by the context and history of individual higher education institutions. The Council for Higher Education (CHE) (2020) affirms that "the conceptual complexity of community engagement has been influenced by the histories, cultures, and community contexts of the different universities that have formulated them. In addition, the different terminologies belie the unexplored (mis)perceptions surrounding not only community engagement, but also how universities conceive of their role and responsibility in relation to both 'community' and 'engagement'" (CHE, 2020, p. 3).

Higher education institutions, even those mired in tradition, are not static; they are dynamic, capable of changing and being changed through *being in community* with others. Community exists within a university, made up of the staff and students comprising the higher education system (Hall, 2010, pp. 16-17). This community can extend beyond geographical proximity as universities comprise larger knowledge communities. On the one hand, knowledge communities are not bound by immediate geographic bounds but are brought together by shared epistemological, political, and experiential conditions, transcending university walls and national borders (Anderson, 1983).

On the other hand, knowledge communities, though expansive, may be bounded. For example, many universities established in former British settler colonies historically formed part of a circulating imperial network (Pietsch, 2013). As universities in the metropole increasingly became connected to higher education institutions in settler colonies, the British epistemic community was unmoored from geographical grounding, and networks

between these institutions straddled the local and global. This is evident in the fact that some settler colony universities enjoyed greater status than the 'red brick' universities in Britain – often, the "personal ties that straddled oceans would frequently fail to cross the country or even the road" (Pietsch, 2013, p. 200). The boundaries of the British knowledge community thus became less about geography and more about a distinct racial and cultural community (ibid).

Universities in the twenty-first century are international spaces that respond to the world in various ways and although universities are role players in the international arena, they also exist in specific locales: "*if universities have neighbourhoods, then they cannot be 'islands'*" (Watson, 2014, p. xxii). Universities are as local as they are international, dependent as much on their local communities as they are on global knowledge communities. Yet, when we think of universities 'reaching out' to local communities, the communities that come to mind remain those marginalised from 'expert' knowledge communities; these may be civic organisations, informal settlements, schools, or 'the people', often near but not part of higher education institutions (Hall, 2010). We tend to imagine a community 'out there' and separate from universities.

This dichotomy between university and community reflects the persistence of a historical enclosure of knowledge, which, through credentialed discourses of expertise, may nurture specific epistemic communities whilst simultaneously side-lining knowledge creators and constructors existing outside the academy (Bezerra et al., 2021). However, possibility may emerge in the twenty-first century as academics are no longer the only agents of knowledge communities in which reputational value is claimed, contested, and distributed. The boundaries of what counts as legitimate knowledge, and from where it can emerge, are not fixed but can change over time (Hall, 2010). Knowledge communities are therefore not static but can expand to include various other agents (Bezerra et al., 2021; Mamdani, 1993).

In pursuit of this expansion, we may learn from the historical experiences of African countries, as the relevance of local communities to universities is not necessarily a new idea on the African continent. Examples of this awareness can be found in postcolonial Tanzania's connecting university education to the nation-building goal of *Ujamaa,* in Kwame Nkrumah's claim that a "university must relate its activities to the needs of the society in which it exists" (Nkrumah in Ashby, 1964, p. 58), and in what may be termed '*liberatory community engagement*' – collaborations between communities and some university students in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. While much of the literature on the scholarship of engagement appears to emerge from the Global North, manifestations of this idea have a long-standing history on the African continent.

Relational ways of being, learning, and knowing

These histories can inform our present and future ways of being, learning, and knowing within African universities. The historical experiences may guide us as we pursue a *knowledge democracy,* which seeks to affirm multiple epistemologies, knowledge created and represented in multiple forms, knowledge embedded in social movements, and the knowledge of those historically excluded from higher education (Hall & Tandon, 2017). The idea of knowledge democracy implies a society in which a diverse group of actors hold relevant knowledge(s) to address societal issues, and these are significant as we aim to use knowledge(s) to advance social justice and individual and societal transformation.

The pursuit of a knowledge democracy challenges a dominant Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm. This paradigm depicts knowledge (as opposed to knowledges) production as discovery through the study of isolated parts of a system by seemingly independent researchers. Descartes' (1637) famous statement, "I think, therefore I am", shaped the dominance of scientific inquiry. It suggests a disembodied 'I' that can produce universal truths, detached from time and space (Grosfoguel, 2013, p. 75). An ontological dualism thus emerges, separating the mind and body, as well as the individual, rational 'subject' and the 'object' of research (Grosfoguel, 2013; Quijano, 2007). This subject produces knowledge with a 'God-eye view' (Grosfoguel, 2013, pp. 75-76). Research becomes synonymous with observation, while the eye given primacy as research instrument, no longer is seen as part of a larger, embodied existence (Popkewitz, 1997). By contrast, the objects upon which this eye gazes become passive, fixed in time, and devoid of context. For Grosfoguel (2013, p. 76), this construction obscures that the eye does not only observe but also constructs: "our experiences are mediated through language, and we do not merely see but are socially disciplined in ordering, dividing, and conceptualising possibilities".

Many thinkers from the Global South offer alternative paradigms to affirm multiple forms of knowledge, and the relations between them. Lugones (2003) draws on the idea of pilgrimages, or movements that loosen oppressive institutional structures, to cultivate something new and perhaps more humane in the liminal spaces. She argues that this potential lies in "travelling between worlds, or epistemic pilgrimages that require witnessing faithfully and making space for multiple visions and forms of sense-making" (Lugones, 2003, p. 16). This idea of 'world'-travelling is not what is generally understood from the Western, leisurely sense of the word – as these movements typically do not necessarily entail movement between *epistemic* as well as physical worlds. Instead, genuine 'world'-travelling allows us to think about knowledge as dynamic and relational. Our grounds for knowledge and learning are not abstracted but socially situated, "saturated with history and social life" (Harding, 1993, p. 57). Knowledge therefore is not confined to formal institutions of academia and policy. Rather, there exists a plurality of knowledges found in various institutions and locations. Aligned with this idea is the acknowledgement that knowledge does not only exist as written literature, but may be expressed in stories, songs,

folklore, languages, and artefacts Chilisa (2012). Storytelling is an especially significant form of meaning making in various contexts around the world.

This idea of 'world'-travelling is not only an acknowledgement of relational forms of knowledge, but could also be an act of relational ways of loving and being, as we recognise and witness those who have historically been constructed as different to us. Lugones (1987, p. 8) argues that it is "world'-travelling and recognising the 'other' that enables us 'to *be* through *loving* each other". This recognition is about more than identifying with the 'other'; it is also about recognising the self, and specifically the self in the 'other's' world (Kelland et al., 2024). This idea manifests strongly in Lugones' (1987, p. 8) statement that "I am profoundly dependent on others without having to be their subordinate, their slave, their servant". The interdependence suggested in this statement highlights that our ways of being are predominantly relational.

This recognition has implications for our ethical commitments as we create and share knowledge. 'World'-travelling requires rejecting the boundaries built by ideological mechanisms that produce dichotomies between social groups, such as the opposition between universities and those beyond their walls. It requires a relational ethical framework calling on us to see the 'self' as a reflection of the researched 'other', disrupting the ideological dichotomy between these groups. Ultimately, the 'subject' is not that different from the 'objects', or those from whom data is gathered. This perspective contests dominant forms of meaning-making separating the subject from object of study (Rendon, 2008).

Recognition of this relationship between researcher and the individuals/communities with whom she generates knowledge, could be one step towards transforming these dichotomous structures. Researchers do not construct knowledge in isolation but in conjunction with research collaborators; our knowledge claims therefore "bear the fingerprints of the communities that produce them", as learning is generated through relationships with others (Harding, 1993, p. 57). In the end, it is communities and not primarily individuals responsible for knowledge production: ideas are socially constructed and legitimated as knowledge by connected societies (Chilisa, 2012). *Relational humility,* or the recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge and the epistemic agency of others from whom one can learn, becomes critical in engaged research (Dalmiya, 2007).

As we move towards relational ways of being, learning and knowing, community engagement may hold unique offerings. Community engagement may demonstrate commitment to the importance and complexity of the 'local' (i.e., place), anchoring university institutions in their context (Almjeld, 2021). By focusing on the knowledge of surrounding communities, community engagement indicates the value of relational ways of understanding and meaning through context. Community engagement also requires the sharing of physical and epistemological space in reciprocal ways and, when these values underpin our knowledge generation processes, they could bring us closer towards a knowledge democracy.

Overview of the contributions in this issue

The idea of relational ways of being, learning, and knowing in the African continent, and broader Global South, finds resonance in the manuscripts included in this issue. They were selected from presentations made at the 2024 International Community Engagement Conference, held at Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa, centred on the theme of '*Community Engagement and the Trajectory of Community-University-Society Relationships: Past, Present and Future Possibilities*'. The AJHECE is also planning another issue drawing from this conference for publication in May 2025.

Kirsten Kingwill, **Andrew Todd**, **Jonathan Davy** and **Siphosethu Pama** open this issue by offering a reflection on a community-based participatory approach to understanding the challenges of patient record-keeping in a clinic in Makhanda, South Africa. The research project upon which this reflection is based is located within a Human Factors and Ergonomics (HKE) approach, which seeks to generate knowledge through study of the interaction of interdependent components of a system, rather than the observation of isolated aspects. Insights from both the primary university researcher and her community-based collaborator highlight the synergies of HFE systems methodology and community-based participatory approaches. Together, these reflections illustrate a relational process of learning and generating knowledge. This reflection could be especially relevant as guidance for other researchers, especially early-career academics, navigating the practicalities and complexity of collaborative knowledge generation processes.

In his paper, **Flip Schutte** brings attention to the challenges and perceptions surrounding community engagement in South Africa's private higher education institutions (PHEIs). This focus addresses a silence in the literature, namely the understanding and execution of community engagement within PHEIs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with stakeholders as well as desktop research, Schutte traces perceptions of community engagement within PHEIs and identifies key challenges such as lack of funding, unclear conceptual understanding, lack of time and capacity and difficulties related to distance learning models which raise further questions about the nature of relationships between 'local' communities and PHEIs for community engagement. Findings of this paper highlight that PHEIs, as institutions required to effect community engagement but without any of the government support that public universities receive, may experience community engagement differently. There is therefore need for more nuanced understanding and dialogue about what constitutes community engagement in these contexts. Schutte's findings on PHEIs may offer insights for policymakers at a timely moment, as the South African government considers how these institutions fit into the higher education landscape.

Darren Lortan's thought piece explores Nouwen's (1986) notion of hospitality as a heuristic device for introducing participatory research to academics with little experience in community engagement. According to Lortan, community-based participatory research (CBPR) involves communities as collaborators throughout the research process

and encourages critical questioning of the power relations embedded in knowledge generation processes. Thus, it could move us closer towards a knowledge democracy and promote epistemic justice. Although the enactment of Nouwen's (1986) hospitality cannot be considered a replacement for a more rigorous collaborative approach, it affords the opportunity to share the ideas underpinning participatory research with academics, opening dialogue about how we orientate knowledge creation processes towards social and epistemic justice.

In his theoretical paper, **Christopher Burman** calls on us to rethink dominant conceptualisations of community engagement. In so doing, he opens space for critical discussions about whether existing approaches are sufficient in addressing contemporary challenges. In his reimagining, Burman places emphasis on engaged transdisciplinary knowledge co-production as a challenge to mono-disciplinary scientific methods linked to the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm. 'Critical epistemological selectivity' is proposed to bridge strong and weak transdisciplinarity, allowing researchers to choose methods based on the specific needs of the system with which they are engaging, rather than applying rigid or universal methodologies. Contrasting with some of the other pieces included in this issue, Burman questions whether the current focus on social justice as the main goal of community engagement is the best approach. Thus, this paper challenges us to examine our 'habits of the mind' and explore other guiding principles or 'spirits' of community engagement.

Jenita Chiba explores the connections between engaged research and intervention research design, the latter referring to a process involving collaboration between researchers, organisations and practitioners in distinct stages. In this exploration, Chiba draws from the concrete example of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention, a cash plus intervention for families receiving the child support grant in South Africa – a programme whose design and development followed the intervention research design process. In her reflection, Chiba argues that an engaged orientation towards research may enable stronger focus on community collaboration in intervention research. Intervention research, in turn, might offer engaged research approaches with a platform for rigorous fidelity, feasibility, and efficacy evaluations of programmes implemented in communities.

In his thought piece, **Matías Flores** reflects on two South-South exchanges in which he participated, at Universidad de la República in Uruguay and Rhodes University in South Africa. He argues that these dialogues offer an alternative to collaborations where Global North voices are most prominent, marginalising the insights and knowledges of those from the Global South. Flores' pilgrimage to both exchanges was perhaps as epistemic, embracing different knowledges, as it was physical; he reflects on the diversity and difference of perspectives embraced in these dialogues, as no universal experience or Southern model was assumed. This thought piece leaves the reader with five provocative questions and takeaways which offer direction to future South-South and global collaborations.

Finally, **Sisesakhe Ntlabezo** and **Ashley Westaway** provide an account of the 2024 Education Summit, a two-day reflection and learning process which brought together over 350 education stakeholders across the city of Makhanda in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The authors trace the decade-long journey that enabled this Summit, focusing on a range of educational interventions implemented through community-university and community-community partnerships. The convening of the Summit, and the journey preceding it, are assessed through the lenses of community engagement and social movement theory. From this vantage point, the authors argue that the Summit might constitute the beginning of an organic movement based on a shared commitment to improve the city's educational sector. This contribution highlights the significance of learning and growing together in pursuit of social change, emphasising collaborative characteristics such as reciprocity and partnership, sustained commitment to galvanising the agency of all those involved, and bold leadership.

Concluding remarks

The contributions in this issue resist universality, highlighting relational ways of knowing, learning, and being. Drawing from diverse perspectives and contexts, the authors highlight Southern knowledges and stretch the epistemic and physical boundaries of universities. Together, they underscore the importance of situated, dynamic, and reciprocal knowledge-making processes in addressing contemporary societal challenges. By building on these diverse perspectives, we are reminded that the pursuit of knowledge democracy requires humility, sustained commitment, and a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings and of local and global contexts. These relational paradigms, which resonate deeply with African histories and philosophies, may offer a foundation for more humane and responsive universities.

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Reflections on an engaged research approach to understanding patient record-keeping systems in a local clinic in Makhanda

Kirsten Kingwill, **Andrew Todd** and **Jonathan Davy**, Rhodes University, Department of Human Kinetics and Ergonomics, **Siphosethu Pama**, Joza Clinic

Abstract

The taking and archiving of accurate record-keeping is an essential part of caregiving in health care. There is extensive evidence that record-keeping systems are affected by systemic problems which impact healthcare provision globally, and South Africa is no exception, particularly in public healthcare. Human Factors and Ergonomics has been applied in studies of healthcare settings to address these systemic challenges, including those related to record-keeping, but not in South Africa. Given that Human Factors and Ergonomics advocates for a participatory approach, a community-based participatory research framework can be used to understand and optimise systems such as those linked to record-keeping. This reflection provides an overview of how a Human Factors and Ergonomics approach was applied, using a community-based participatory research framework, to understand the challenges affecting patient record-keeping in a clinic in Makhanda. Specifically, it provides insights into how community-based participatory research was applied, as well as reflections on this experience from both the researchers' and collaborators' perspectives. The importance of patience and flexibility, empathy, constant feedback and consultation and listening to collaborators' and participants' contributions emerged as important lessons. The community collaborator found the process to be positive and reflected that being able to help guide and facilitate research was an empowering experience, which, in turn, revealed challenges that affected the daily running of the clinic. The collaboration using the community-based participatory research approach was a practical and inclusive framework for applying several Human Factors and Ergonomics approaches to understand the challenges around record-keeping.

Keywords: *community-based participatory research, human factors and ergonomics, patient record-keeping, healthcare, reflection*

Introduction

Providing safe, effective, and timely care to patients in healthcare systems requires accurate patient records to be taken and maintained, in addition to many other factors (Berger & Scott, n.d.). However, globally, as well as locally in South Africa and specifically noted by these researchers in the city of Makhanda, patient record-keeping activities are associated with high workloads for clinicians, which can result in inaccurate or lost records, ultimately affecting the provision of ongoing care (Marutha & Ngoepe, 2017; Pirkle et al., 2012). Additional challenges include insufficient time to retrieve and complete patient records, an excessive burden of work, healthcare staff demotivation, inadequate access to record-keeping materials such as forms and stationery, a high number of patient admissions, and a shortage of staff (Bizimana & Bimerew, 2021; Luthuli & Kalusopa, 2018). Many of these challenges emanate from the overall design of healthcare systems. It is important, therefore, to interrogate the design of these systems and how they influence the work of clinicians.

As a discipline which focuses on understanding and optimizing human-system interaction, Human Factors and Ergonomics (HFE) is well placed to understand and help address any emergent challenges with record-keeping processes (Blijleven et al., 2017; Khunlertkit & Paine, 2015) while acknowledging the broader context in which this work occurs (Dul et al., 2012). In understanding the challenges present in any system it can be useful to adopt a participatory research approach, in which members of the community in focus are involved in the research or problem-solving process from its inception to its completion (Schmittdiel et al., 2010). This research approach challenges more traditional, Western-based methods of research and knowledge generation and contributes to decoloniality in the research process (Nhemachena, Mlambo and Kaundjua, 2016; Omodan and Datile, 2023). It is argued by Omodan and Datile (2023) that the participatory research approach is an effective and valuable tool in achieving decoloniality through the research process, because it allows for the research subjects to have input into the process, their voices are acknowledged and recognised, and they are provided with a platformthat promotes agency and self-determination. These elements, therefore, resonate with the decolonial agenda to deconstruct oppressive power structures and remembering those who have been historically dismembered by systems of colonial occupation. Participatory research can be achieved by adopting a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach (DeJonckheere et al., 2019; Minkler, 2005; Telleria, 2021).

Aim of this reflective paper

Internationally, successful interventions have been applied to healthcare record-keeping systems across various settings (Bunting & de Klerk, 2022; Glen et al., 2015; Goveia et al., 2013; Homb et al., 2014; Mahomed & Asmall, 2015; Okaisu et al., 2014; Pezaro & Lilley, 2015; Tola et al., 2017). However, little to no research has applied HFE through a

CBPR paradigm to understand record-keeping in a South African context. Therefore, this paper explores, in a reflective manner, the process of adopting a participatory approach when applying HFE to understand record-keeping challenges in a local clinic in Makhanda, South Africa. There is also little guidance on how to carry out CBPR in situ. Therefore, the secondary aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the process followed in applying CBPR to a local healthcare clinic record-keeping process. Critical reflections and important lessons learned during the implementation of CBPR are presented by both the researchers and the community collaborator.

Literature Review and Background

Patient Record-Keeping

Patient record-keeping is an essential process in healthcare systems, as a way to store and collect important patient information such as demographics, progress notes, vital signs and medical histories. Due to the essential nature of patient record-keeping, the importance of good quality records and the barriers to accurate record-keeping will now be explored.

Good quality records

The information contained in medical records is necessary for healthcare professionals to make critical clinical decisions around patient care (Ohuabunwa et al., 2016; Wong & Bradley, 2009). Additionally, these records are medico-legal documents that support patient management, continuity and quality of care, and provide evidential support to healthcare professionals and institutions during litigation (Britz, 2018). Therefore, records must be accurately and sufficiently completed, given their value in the provision of safe and effective care (Mutshatshi et al., 2018).

Globally, and more locally in South Africa, good patient record management is often neither prioritised nor even possible under the constraints of the healthcare system (Marutha & Ngoepe, 2017; Wong & Bradley, 2009). This lack of prioritization decreases the accuracy of patient records, meaning that records could contain erroneous information, be incomplete, or be of poor quality (Wong & Bradley, 2009). The safety and quality of current and future patient care can therefore be threatened by poor record-keeping (Pirkle et al., 2012). An example of inadequately managed patient records is the loss of patient records, which are reported to be as high as one in every seven records in the case of hospitals across Limpopo, South Africa (Marutha & Ngoepe, 2017). Incidences of incomplete or lost records increase the demands on healthcare staff and their decision-making, and therefore, may impact patient care and potentially affect patient's lives (Bizimana & Bimerew, 2021; Marutha & Ngoepe, 2017).

Barriers to record-keeping

Healthcare professionals face many barriers to accurate and good-quality record-keeping (Wegner, 2013). The two categories of record-keeping barriers are charting barriers, relating to recording patient information, and archiving barriers, relating to issues around the retrieval of charts and records (Pirkle et al., 2012). Some common record-keeping challenges include poor handwriting, lack of documentation, missing information, miseducation regarding the importance of medical records, replication of patient numbers, lost records, information recorded on scraps of paper which are never transferred to proper records, and poor, disorganized archiving (Pirkle et al., 2012).

In a South African context, various authors have reported several factors that impact the record-keeping processes (Bizimana & Bimerew, 2021; Luthuli & Kalusopa, 2018; Marutha & Ngoepe, 2017; Mutshatshi et al., 2018). Clinicians report having insufficient time to complete or retrieve records. This is likely exacerbated by clinician workload, where staff shortages and high patient numbers increase time pressure. Additionally, several storage and filing-related challenges have been reported, where facilities do not have a designated filing system and poor infrastructure, resulting in inappropriate handling of records, problems locating files, and the damage, loss, or theft of records. Another common challenge is a lack of budget for record-keeping materials (Bizimana & Bimerew, 2021; Luthuli & Kalusopa, 2018; Mutshatshi et al., 2018). From an organisational perspective, poor leadership and staff management, as well as a lack of training, often result in poor management of records, demotivated staff, inconsistency of record completion and poor staff buy-in (Bizimana & Bimerew, 2021; Luthuli & Kalusopa, 2018).

Given the impact of various systemic challenges on the record-keeping process, a systems discipline such as Human Factors and Ergonomics (HFE) is well placed to begin to understand and improve the systems around record-keeping.

Human Factors and Ergonomics (HFE)

The International Ergonomics Association (IEA) defines Human Factors and Ergonomics (HFE) as "The scientific discipline concerned with the understanding of interactions among humans and other elements of a system, and the profession that applies theory, principles, data, and methods to design to optimise human well-being and overall system performance." (IEA, 2000, (https://iea.cc/about/what-is-ergonomics/). From this definition, three fundamental characteristics of HFE need to be expounded.

The first characteristic is that HFE takes a systems approach by acknowledging and accounting for all the interacting components that contribute to a system and how it functions (Dul et al., 2012). For example, various components exist and interact with one another within a working system, which is closely related to the concept of interdependence discussed later in this article under participatory research. These components can include the people performing certain tasks using specific tools and under different organizational, physical, and social conditions, as demonstrated in the System Engineering for Patient Safety

(SEIPS) model and its various components (Carayon, 2006). The second key concept of HFE is that it is design-driven and aims to optimize work through system design or re-design. In other words, this refers to designing systems before their implementation, or creating change in the environment or workplace to suit workers to improve performance and well-being rather than changing people to suit the work (Dul et al., 2012). This underscores the point that people are central to the HFE discipline and emphasises that system redesign must be user-centred. The third focus of HFE is the need to optimise interactions between people and systems to maximise performance, safety and well-being outcomes for people within the system (Dul et al., 2012). Capturing these three fundamental principles is the application of HFE in practice, where it has been and continues to be applied in the design of healthcare systems to improve performance and safety and reduce healthcare costs, thereby improving the system for both patients and clinicians (Aceves-González et al., 2021; Hignett et al., 2013). This can be achieved by taking a systems view and a human-centred design approach to improve healthcare safety (Norris, 2012).

Over and above these high-level principles that characterise the approach and intended outcomes of HFE, Wilson (2014, pp.5-13) provides additional clarity by outlining six notions that define and characterise good HFE, which provide guidance on what human-system interaction is, and how to understand it. We have already highlighted that HFE adopts a systems focus, which Wilson extends by arguing for the importance of adopting the first notion of a *system* framework (discussed in more detail in Thatcher and Yeow, 2016). Briefly, this refers to the importance of appreciating the nested nature of systems, and how macro-level (organisational) factors influence meso-level (team dynamics and performance), which in turn impact the individual people (workers) at the micro level (Karsh et al., 2014). Appreciating the nested nature of systems allows for interventions to be developed at appropriate levels in the system. The second notion is the importance of understanding the *context* of interactions between people and the systems around them, which is best understood in Wilson's words as 'in the wild' (Wilson, 2014, p.7). Thus, understanding systems and the impact of the context in which they exist is essential when trying to understand how the *interactions* (the third notion) between system components (humans using technology to work in an environment) influence the well-being and performance of people. To understand the effects of human-system interactions, HFE must adopt a *holistic* approach in which people's physical, cognitive and social characteristics are monitored before and after any form of intervention (Wilson, 2014). For the fifth notion, *emergence*, Wilson argues for the importance of observing the emergent outcomes of how systems are designed, which often reveals unexpected outcomes, innovative workarounds by humans to poorly designed systems or new human-system interactions not imagined by the designers. Lastly, Wilson contends that to be able to understand the interactions occurring between humans and the systems in context, *embedding (spending time)* in that context is vital to solving or designing for solving system problems. These notions guide the approach of HFE specialists to understanding human system interaction thoroughly. However, to do so, adopting a participatory approach is critical.

Given the human-centred approach to design in HFE, adopting a participatory approach is necessary to understand and redesign a system for the optimal performance and well-being of workers within a system (Burgess-Limerick, 2018; Shepherd et al., 2020). Participation in system design or redesign using an HFE approach involves workers and/or those performing tasks in the identification and solution development of existing challenges, as well as the development and implementation of appropriate, co-constructed changes in the workplace. The aim of these changes is to improve productivity, reduce risk factors and ultimately achieve desirable workplace goals (Burgess-Limerick, 2018).

Participatory research

Characterisation and Benefits of Participatory Research

Participatory research is an action-based research paradigm whereby researchers actively and meaningfully involve and collaborate with system stakeholders representing the studied population or the community in focus to address community issues (Key et al., 2019; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). The community can be defined as a group of members affected by a common issue, who share common attributes and space, and work towards a common goal (Schmittdiel et al., 2010). Identifying and collaborating with relevant members of the community is an essential step towards fully understanding the challenges they experience and how, through collaboration, these challenges can be overcome so that meaningful and sustainable change can occur (Costa-Black & Arteberry, 2020; Mayosi & Benatar, 2014). Adopting such research methods continues to challenge predominating Western/Euro-centric approaches to knowledge acquisition and generation by, as Omodan and Dastile (2023) argue, dismantling power structures, giving agency to the partnering communities and legitimising their knowledge and experiences towards promoting the democratisation of knowledge generation.

Within participatory research, several approaches can be adopted to facilitate community engagement and participation (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Participation and engagement in this context have overlapping definitions, which refer to the inclusion of and communication with community members. These can range from being informed by a community to research being driven by a community (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). While a review of the different methodologies is beyond the scope of this paper, some of these include action research, participatory action research, team science and user-centred design research (refer to Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020 for more details). Each of these forms of engagement with the community in the research process falls into a continuum of community engagement research, ranging from having the community participate in research programs that are largely researcher-driven, to the community being collaborators or equal partners in research rather than being only research participants, to the research being owned and driven by the community (Brown, 2022; Key et al., 2019). No one form of community engaged research is better than another (Key et al., 2019). However, it is critical that participation and engagement are not superficial and that full and active participation

is both valued and utilised throughout an engaged research process (Martinez-Vargas, 2022).

Participatory approaches in research can yield several benefits, such as addressing specific challenges outlined by the community and enhancing real-world knowledge, experience and capacity for researchers and communities, which are likely to create actionable and sustainable solutions to challenges (Bourke, 2009; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Importantly, adopting a participatory approach requires interdependence, with interactions and reliance between system components and between researchers and community members in the co-creation of knowledge (Wallerstein et al., 2005). This aligns well with the systems focus of HFE, where consideration is made for the interaction between all system components and how these interactions impact system outcomes. In a working context, involving workers (and other relevant stakeholder groups) early in the process has resulted in the development and implementation of changes in the workplace, which in turn has resulted in improved productivity, reduced risk factors and achieving desirable workplace goals (Burgess-Limerick, 2018; Haines et al., 2002; Van Eerd et al., 2010).

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

A common participatory research framework often used is community-based participatory research (CBPR). This is defined not as a method but rather as an orientation toward research that can use a combination of qualitative or quantitative methods (Minkler, 2005) and in some instances, indigenous research methods (Drawson et al., 2017), to understand, ideate about and eventually address challenges with a community. When adopting this orientation towards research it is particularly important to involve people with lived experiences in the community and with the challenges at hand (Corrigan & Oppenheim, 2024). This involvement is important in the identification of challenges and inequalities and, importantly, how they may be addressed (Corrigan & Oppenheim, 2024). There are four core principles of CBPR as described by Schmittdiel et al. (2010): i) researchers should engage with the community in all phases of the research process, ii) researchers should build on a community's existing resources and goals, iii) researchers should invest in sustainable long-term partnerships and iv) the research process should take place through a cyclical and iterative process. A guideline of steps that can be followed when embarking on CBPR is outlined by Israel et al. (2013) (Figure 1), starting with forming a partnership and ending with sustaining, evaluating and maintaining the partnership.

Figure 1: Steps to follow when conducting CBPR, adapted from Israel et al. (2013) with arrows representing the iterative nature of the approach
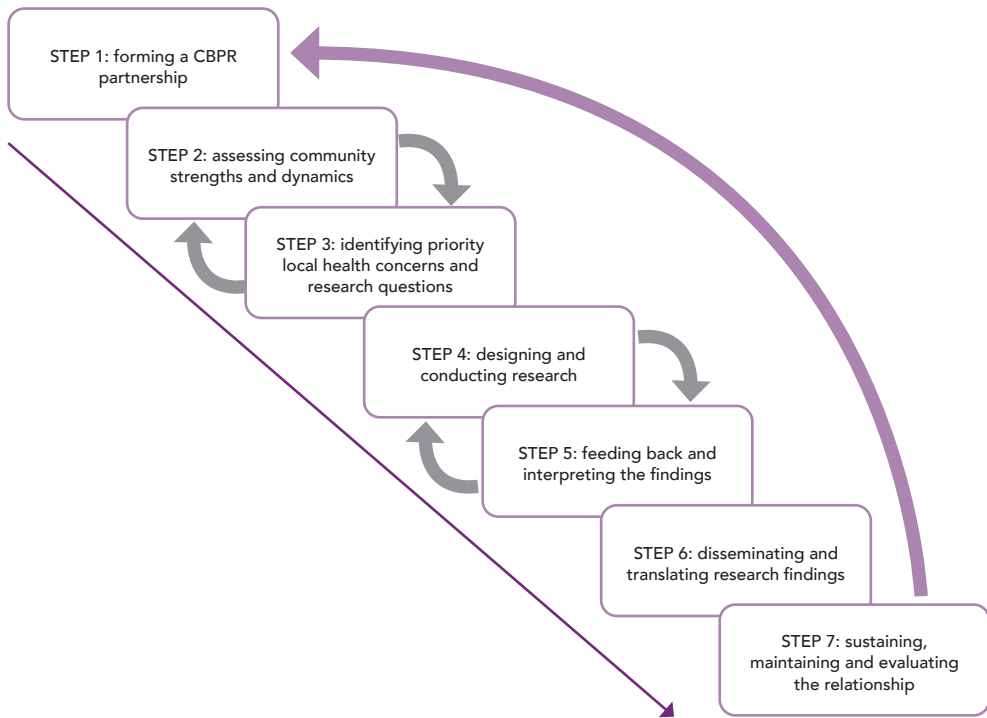
This process requires more than just tokenistic involvement of the community in the identification, solution development and implementation. As Telleria, (2021, p.459) argues, adopting this approach ensures that research is conducted "by the people, for the people" and not "for the people, by the experts". This ensures that the research process is sensitive to any contextual or cultural nuances that may impede the research, which Minkler (2005) calls cultural humility. In addition, approaching the engagement with what Dalymiya (2007, p.297) refers to as 'relational humility' as a basis for interacting with the community emphasises that researchers need to acknowledge and embrace the fact that they do not have exclusive power of knowledge and can and should work together with the community and utilise their knowledge and insights to co-create new knowledge and understanding (Dalymiya, 2007). These humble interactions are essential to balancing real or perceived power dynamics, which empowers the community to take ownership of the project and appropriately guide the research team. This type of attitude also enables a community to look for ways to drive their own self-improvement, based on their interactions with the research team.

A synthesis of paradigms: HFE and CPBR

HFE, by its nature, is a human-centred, systems-focused discipline used in the attempt to optimise human-system interactions by adopting a participatory approach that often involves embedding in a system, with the ultimate intention of improving human performance and wellbeing. Although HFE has a long history of adopting participatory approaches in practice, few researchers have applied a CBPR framework in a context such as healthcare. CBPR provides a way of collectively understanding challenges while giving agency to 'the researched' (Omodan and Dastile, 2023), allowing them self-determination over how research is conducted with them. The synergies between HFE as a discipline and CBPR, an approach or orientation to working with humans, provide a clear argument for extending HFE approaches by integrating CBPR. In this study, it was applied to understand the barriers and facilitators to effective record-keeping in a local clinic in Makhanda.

The city of Makhanda

Before unpacking the approach taken in applying CBPR in a local Makhanda clinic, it is important to contextualise the history of the city and its socio-economic position today. Makhanda, previously known as Grahamstown, is a small city in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, rich in history (Heshu, 2020; Irvine, 2021). The land that is now Makhanda and its surrounds was inhabited by local people for many years before the town was officially established in 1812 and grew with the arrival of the 1820 settlers (Heshu, 2020; Irvine, 2021). Since the arrival of the British settlers, the city has transformed through colonialism, the post-colonial period and into the apartheid regime which formally segregated people (Heshu 2020; Irvine, 2021). Now, 30 years post-apartheid and 30 years into democracy, the extent of social, economic and spatial changes remain problematic and the city is still shaped by its historical roots (Irvine, 2021). Challenges defining the city today include issues of structural unemployment and inequality, water scarcity, extensive potholes, poor service delivery and municipal corruption (Heshu, 2021; Irvine, 2021).

Approach to applying Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) in a clinic in Makhanda

Using the guidelines outlined by Israel et al (2013) (Figure 2), this section provides a brief overview of the approaches adopted in this study to holistically understand the tasks associated with the patient record-keeping process and the various systemic factors which influence it as part of the care provision process. Following this framework as a guideline in the research process, enabled researchers to consider the views of others and consider how to undertake the research process in collaboration with community members. A crucial part of applying CBPR and understanding the clinic record-keeping system was having the researchers work closely with a community collaborator whose role was to guide the researchers through each step of the research process. The community collaborator in this study was a clinic staff member (SP) appointed as a lay counsellor. SP worked closely with

all other staff members. Additionally, their enthusiastic nature and love of working with people led the facility manager to suggest that they work with the researchers during the research process. The community collaborator guided researchers in practical ways when working with other staff members and assisted with continuous feedback. While we cannot share any of the study's findings yet due to constraints as per the ethical agreement with the Department of Health, we (the research team and community collaborator) offer some critical reflections on the experience of applying CBPR.

Forming the relationship: Making contact and meeting with the DoH

The researchers (JD and AT) had an existing research collaboration with the local Department of Health office (DoH), which originated before the COVID-19 pandemic. This research focused on understanding the systemic barriers to the provision of effective healthcare across several clinics surrounding Makhanda. Based on this research and more recent discussions between the researchers (JD and AT), the student researcher (KK) and the connection at the DoH, various areas of possible research were explored through several meetings. Areas of concern discussed included the patient record system, which led to the involvement of the facility manager of the clinic in which this research occurred.

Figure 2: Steps to follow when conducting CBPR (adapted from Israel et al. (2013)) with the addition of practical steps in the circles below.
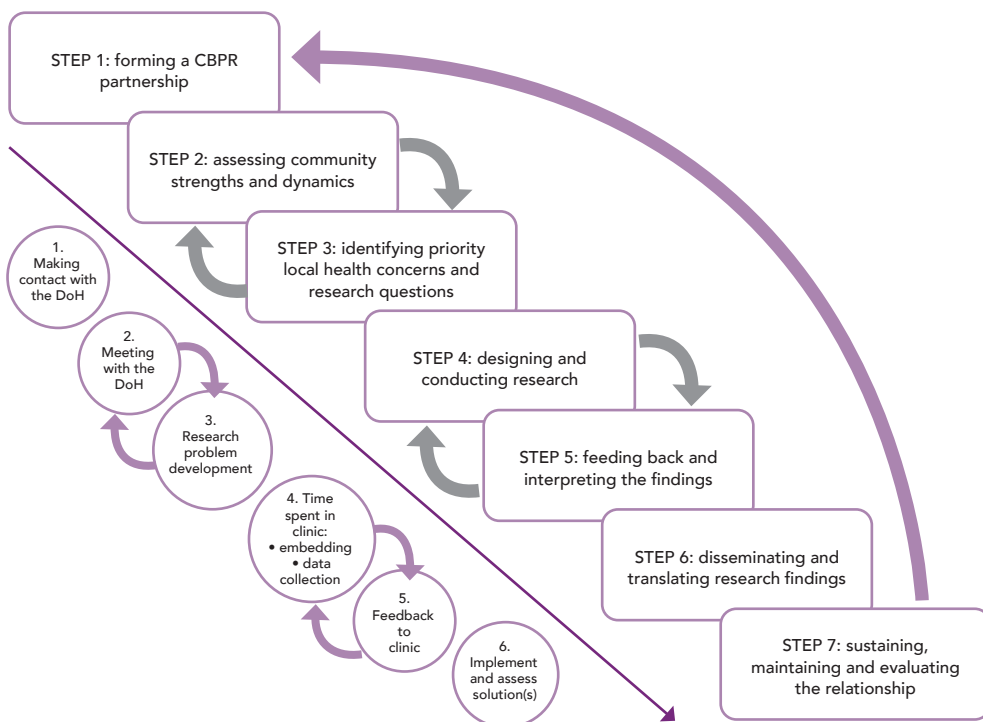
Research problem development

Steps two and three (Figure 2) took place through an iterative cycle, whereby after each meeting the KK would consult literature around challenges discussed at meetings and discuss this with the supervisors (JD and AT) before attending the next meeting. Through this iterative process and discussions regarding all the challenges faced in local primary healthcare clinics, the record-keeping system was highlighted as a persistent area of concern to the DoH. This was a critical step towards the co-construction of an actual, tangible challenge experienced by the Department and not one that the researcher imposed upon them. This led to the collective decision that the research collaboration should be centred on the record-keeping element of the clinic's work. The final meeting with the facility manager confirmed record-keeping as a challenge within her facility.

The initial step in preparing for the research collaboration with the clinic was to elect a community collaborator from the clinic whose role it was to guide KK through each element of the research. When KK approached the facility manager regarding the election of a community collaborator, the manager immediately suggested the above-mentioned individual. SP was consulted and agreed to work with KK. The collaborator's role would change throughout the data collection process but would be primarily related to assisting KK in making decisions about how best to go about the research process, how and when to approach clinical and support staff, interpretation of data and assisting with feedback and clarification of findings at the end of data collection.

Conducting the research

Embedding

In order to understand the context, system, interactions within the system and emergent outcomes one needs to take a systems approach by embedding within the system (time spent in the clinic to familiarise oneself, build trust and become part of the given system), as suggested by Wilson (2014). At the start of the embedding process KK attended a clinic staff meeting first to confirm that clinic staff indeed found record-keeping to be a challenge in their clinic and to explain what the research would be about. This also served as an excellent opportunity to gauge the staff's willingness to participate in the study and to listen to any insights or questions they had. The purpose of being embedded and spending time in the clinic, both before the official start and during data collection, was for KK to become familiar with and understand the clinic system and, more importantly, to build trust with clinic staff.

For the three months spent embedding, KK would go into the clinic for two or three hours a day, three times a week, and in all a total of 35 hours was spent in the clinic. During this time, KK sat in the reception area conversing with staff, asking questions and observing how things were done. The community collaborator (SP) also taught KK how to retrieve files from the cabinets, and during very busy times KK helped retrieve and deliver files to

clinicians and thereby obtained first-hand experience of the work associated with patient record-keeping.

Data collection

Once ethical clearance was obtained from Rhodes University (tracking number: 2023-7391-8094) and the Department of Health, official data collection could begin. Data collection occurred over four months in three overarching phases, as displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Phases of data collection from February to May 2024
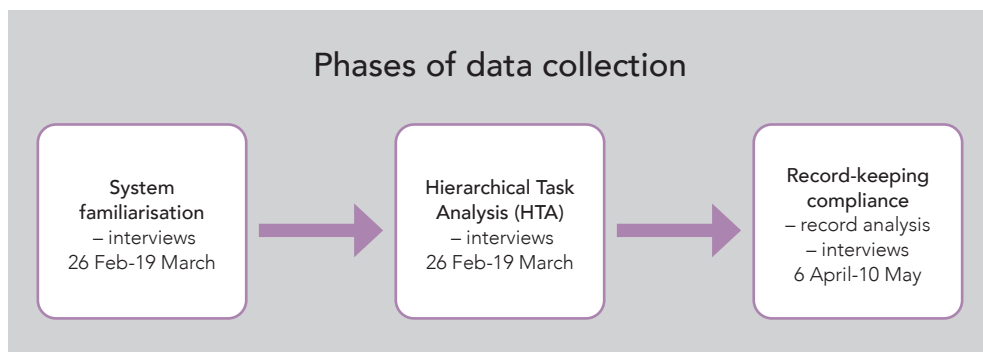
Phase one consisted of observations, discussions and semi-structured interviews on the various components of the clinic system and how they interact to form the system. This included understanding the people, tasks, tools and technologies, organisation, environment and outcomes, and how these different system elements interacted with and influenced the record-keeping system. A total of 10 interviews (nine individual interviews and one combined interview) were conducted with 11 staff members including clinicians, pharmacy assistants, the administrative clerk, a lay counsellor and the facility manager (Figure 3, Block 1). Phase One and Phase two interviews were combined to reflect information on the components of the clinic system and more specifically details regarding the tasks and processes involved in the record-keeping process. The process of record-keeping and the tasks involved in record-keeping were presented in a Hierarchical Task Analysis (HTA), where different steps or tasks associated with the process of record-keeping were placed in a hierarchical organisation in relation to the goal (Figure 3, Block 2). Doing so helped participants to visualise what steps should be followed during a task if done correctly, which could then be compared to how it is performed in reality (Shepherd & Stammers, 2005).

Phase three included two parts, firstly, the analysis of 55 patient files, where a frequency count was conducted on what information clinicians filled in or omitted within different sections of different types of patient files (Figure 3, block 3). This analysis was compared to a national checklist of what should be completed in a patient file. The second

part of Phase three involved understanding the findings of the frequency count and staff perceptions regarding why certain patient file sections were or were not adequately completed. This was done by conducting semi-structured interviews and reviewing a blank patient file with three clinicians and capturing their experiences and insights around what they generally fill out in patient files and why.

The importance of constant and transparent feedback with community partners

During this study, feedback on the research findings was given in various ways. The first was continual feedback from clinic staff throughout the research process and during interviews, as well as from the community collaborator and other staff members. This ensured that what was observed and reported by the student researcher was an accurate representation of their lived experiences of their work. This emphasises the importance of consultation and clarity-seeking throughout the data collection process. At the time of writing this manuscript, data collection and analysis had just been completed.

Critical reflections on CBPR implementation

Reflections from the researchers

The process of applying an HFE systems methodology using a community-based participatory approach yielded several important insights, which are given here as reflections from the researchers (JD, AT and KK). Key insights were the importance of being patient and flexible, listening carefully, having empathy and appreciation for the constraints that staff work under, and providing regular feedback and consultation with staff during the research process. Some reflections from the researchers on working with the community collaborator conclude this section.

Patience and flexibility

Through conducting CBPR, a valuable lesson learnt was the importance of patience and flexibility. Many staff members were happy and willing to work with the research team. However, the clinic continued running, and as such, staff members had tasks to complete which necessarily interfered with data collection. For example, during interviews some staff members, particularly those in administrative roles, continued to work on their operational tasks. During interviews, another staff member would often knock and walk into the room to ask a question of the person being interviewed. Sometimes when an interview was conducted over the telephone, other staff members would need to use the same phone simultaneously. These factors meant that interviews were often interrupted.

Patience was also required given that staff members often did not have the time to have a conversation or interview or had to postpone a scheduled interview. This occurred for various reasons, including the clinic being understaffed on certain days, the clinic being

extremely busy, clinicians not being in on the day of a scheduled interview or staff members taking days off due to family emergencies. Often, patience was required when KK arrived at the clinic and could not speak to anyone.

These experiences are described in literature as what Minkler (2005) refers to as 'constraints on community involvement' where it is often the case that the individuals one works with cannot give up their time and energy due to operational constraints. Ironically, in the case of this study, the constraints limiting individuals' time given to the research were some of the limitations being understood through the research. The researchers viewed this as a positive point, as it shed further light on the constraints the clinic staff faced and gave the researchers an appreciation for the work of clinic staff under these constraints, as will be discussed. Rosen (2023) mentions that throughout a research project the pace or enthusiasm from the community may fluctuate depending on various factors, and this phenomenon emerged in this study. This demonstrates the emergent and dynamic nature of the work studied, and the system's design should reflect this and be equally as flexible.

Listening

While listening is generally important when working with people, it was found to be essential when applying CBPR in the interactions with the various levels of stakeholders, from the study's inception to the completion of data collection. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, feeling heard and having someone willing to listen and care about their work and perspective instilled a willingness in the clinic staff to continue working together during the research process. This speaks to the iterative cycle of listening, dialogue, action, re-listening and reflection on action, as discussed by Parajón et al. (2021). It is also an important step towards empowering the community, in this case, the clinic staff, to co-construct knowledge and possible solutions with the research team through trust building (DeJonckheere et al., 2019; Telleria, 2021). In this research project, trust building was done through the process of listening and being responsive. However, most of the trust built between the student researcher and clinic staff was during the embedding process, where the clinic staff and KK became comfortable working together and sharing information in the clinic space.

Secondly, even if participants did not answer exactly what was being asked, particularly in interviews, it was important to listen and note what participants said. When trying to understand how the design of a system affects their work and well-being, any insights provided by workers are valuable for several reasons. Firstly, as outsiders looking in, researchers may make assumptions about challenges within a system and not even ask the right questions. The interaction between the researchers and staff in this study opened up a space for them to share. Secondly, often responses did not reflect the challenges, and rather focused on potential solutions. This speaks deeply to the notion of taking a systems approach, understanding the context of a system and the impact of this context, looking for, or in this case listening for emergent challenges and suggested improvements and seeing the clinic staff holistically, as advocated for by Wilson (2014). It also emphasises

the utility of this participatory methodology, which facilitates the opening of space for research participants to share openly and honestly, which is an important step towards the co-construction of solutions.

Empathy and appreciation

During the research process, the constraints and affordances under which the clinic staff work, became more apparent. Additionally, it became evident that several systemic challenges beyond their control impacted their ability to provide effective and efficient care. These challenges included time-related, workload-related, budget, broken or lacking equipment and infrastructure, and space-related constraints. In addition, most work spaces in the clinic are too small for the population they serve. All of these challenges, unfortunately, are common problems faced across the public healthcare sector in South Africa and globally (Bizimana & Bimerew, 2021; Luthuli & Kalusopa, 2018; Marutha & Ngoepe, 2017; Mutshatshi et al., 2018). However, despite these extensive challenges the staff manage to provide primary healthcare services to the large patient population that the clinic serves. As researchers, we now appreciate the difficult work of the clinicians and the service they offer to their communities despite these challenges.

Feedback and consultation

Feedback has been crucial throughout the research process, specifically achieved through regular and transparent consultation with the clinic staff. This was important, as during interviews and discussions, feedback was obtained by clarifying whether we (the research team) accurately understood what clinic staff members were telling us, which emphasised the democratization of knowledge rather than a researcher-imposed understanding of the data being collected. Additionally, feedback was received by going back to the community collaborator and other staff members after interviews had been analysed, to ensure, for example, that the researcher had recorded an accurate representation of the record-keeping process.

Challenges around feedback and how best to share and release findings with communities are common in CBPR projects (Minkler, 2005). These challenges were addressed by continuing to communicate with the community collaborator regarding how to constructively share results with the clinic staff. Despite continuing data analysis and interpretation, it was decided that an initial feedback session was necessary. This happened over a lunch held at the clinic during their weekly meeting with all staff who were available to attend. The purpose of this meeting was two-fold, i) to give feedback on key findings from the study to clinic staff members, and ii) to discuss what staff felt were the most important findings and what they would like to be further disseminated to the DoH as part of a report based on key findings and areas for potential change. This report is now in preparation.

Reflections from the student researcher (KK)

The student researcher (KK) worked closely with the community collaborator throughout the research process and, therefore, reflected on this experience. Before unpacking these reflections, it is important to acknowledge the positionality of the student researcher, which may have unconsciously impacted each step of the research process. These imposed self-titles include but are not limited to being a white South African female from a privileged and educated background.

The first reflection explores the role of the community collaborator, how she was well positioned and how her nature was well suited to collaborating with the researchers throughout the research process.

> While the community collaborator did not work with the files as regularly as the clinicians (as mentioned in her reflection), we did not feel this negatively influenced the research process, as her ability to work with people and guide me to the right people was immensely valuable. This highlights how well she knows the clinic, how passionate she is about the clinic and her work, and how she was always willing to help in reception or with anyone else who needed a hand. I would also like to acknowledge the facility manager here. When I approached her about having a community collaborator from the clinic staff, she had no hesitation in supporting the idea. She suggested the community collaborator chosen, due to her enthusiastic nature and ability to work with people.

The next set of reflections explore the overall experience of adopting a participatory research approach. This includes how the approach allowed for a change in traditional research power dynamics, which highlighted some of the benefits of adopting a CBPR approach. The benefits highlighted included gaining deeper insights into the clinic system and remaining true to adopting a decolonial research approach through the engagement process.

> In terms of power dynamics, I feel that the embedding process and building trust with clinic staff before the election of the community collaborator and official data collection allowed for reduced power dynamics. This, in turn, allowed for more honest conversations and deeper insights in discussions and interviews between clinic staff and myself, particularly with the community collaborator being honest in guiding me through the research process. I also believe these honest discussions and deep insights are reflective of the importance of adopting a CBPR approach, working closely with and being led by people from within the clinic system, the honesty, the depth of insights and the trust built would not otherwise be reflected in the results of the study. This was an important demonstration of some of the key notions of HFE, in particular, the idea that HFE cannot be done from the outside but rather only from being embedded within the system.

> I think it is also important to reflect on previous research conducted by various University faculties in the given clinic. In the clinic where I conducted the study, researchers are often referred to the clinic to conduct their research due to its high volume of patients. During the

feedback session, the facility manager mentioned that it was often the case that researchers would enter the clinic, extract the data they needed and report back to the district office (or not at all) with the clinic staff not knowing the outcome of the research. I believe this further shows the importance of adopting a CBPR approach, working with the community and following through each step of the process, including the feedback process and, in time, the development of co-constructed solutions.

Reflections from the Community Collaborator and Facility Manager

Community Collaborator Reflections

After the data collection, the community collaborator shared both positive and negative reflections and the facility manager shared her brief reflections of working with KK in this research project. The community collaborator shared more positive reflections then negative which included themes of guiding the researcher which revealed a sense of empowerment in the community collaborator.

My first reflection point concerns the positive experience of working with the research team, where I could guide and facilitate the researchers as I know the clinic and people well. This guidance was mainly around the best times to visit the clinic, helping set up appointments with clinicians when they would have some free time, and pointing researchers to the best people to ask for feedback for specific questions or details required. I also feel like working together was a positive experience as we communicated well, facilitating the sharing of ideas. During the research process, being a collaborator and working together has helped me understand my role in the clinic better and that I like things done well and being able to oversee things. While I am not a clinician, I can be there to assist others and have weight in meetings.

Additionally, the presence of the student researcher in the clinic was well received by staff members and it was perceived that the research method allowed for challenges faced by the clinic to come to light in ways that they had not before. This was both a positive aspect of the research process, as it identified an opportunity for improvement, but had a negative aspect, as this could have created an additional burden on the clinic, given that the additional constraints identified through the research would compound existing challenges they had.

It was well received by other staff members that the researcher gave one-on-one time with many clinic staff, as shown in the feedback I have received from other staff members. The presence of the researcher and sharing ideas through the research process also allowed for the importance of record-keeping and the various elements within the process to be brought to the attention of myself and other clinic staff, as well as some of the challenges we truly face. I feel that this aspect of the research has resulted in some changes in the clinic record-keeping process. An example of this is that file retrieval in both the reception and by the antenatal care staff is now occurring more consistently than before the research.

Over and above these positive reflections, the community collaborator also shared a few difficulties she faced during the research process around her role in the process and clarity of this role. These reflections emphasise the importance of researchers being better prepared and able to communicate the expectations of the community collaborator clearly.

I also had some difficulties in working on this research project. Sometimes it wasn't easy to advise researchers as I do not work with files as frequently as clinicians. The final reflection, or area for future improvement, is that at the start of working together, I felt that it was not clear what was expected of me and did not always know what work to do. However, as time passed and we continued to work together, the practical side more clearly demonstrated my role as the advisor. This shows that in the future, it is important to ensure clarity at every step of the process.

Facility Manager reflections

While we did not specifically garner reflections from all staff members on their experience of working with the researchers on this project, the facility manager shared some important reflections during the initial feedback session. One particular reflection she shared supported using CBPR as a decolonial research methodology. To this end, she indicated that the research project differed from previous research conducted in the clinic, where researchers collected data, extracted knowledge and never returned or gave feedback or outcomes to the clinic staff members. This emphasised the importance of forming a meaningful relationship before and during the research process and, critically, sharing the findings, and learning how they can be interpreted through the lens of not only the researchers, but also those from whom the data were collected.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

While several valuable lessons were learned in the application of CBPR in this study, some limitations impacted both the experience of the student researcher and the data that she could gather while working in the clinic. Firstly, the time constraints of the clinic staff, which often meant that interactions had to be brief or repeatedly rescheduled, impacted the ability to collect data. Secondly, the study results and reflections about the experience of working at this specific clinic are not generalisable to other clinics. Therefore, future research should focus on working with other clinics and record-keeping systems to gain a broader picture of primary healthcare clinic record-keeping. This is a very important step in the engagement process in that it is iterative and sustainable, demonstrating a commitment from both stakeholders (researchers JD and AT as permanent staff members) and the participants. Solutions could be co-constructed and be more widely applicable. Importantly, any research that involves communities must ensure that appropriate, timely and meaningful feedback is provided back to the community. Not doing so runs the risk

of reducing community interest in collaborating with researchers, where both parties will miss the opportunity to mutually benefit from this collaboration.

Conclusion

This paper addressed two core aims, i) demonstrating the application of CBPR and HFE together in situ and ii) sharing the experiences and reflections of applying CBPR within the local Makhanda context of a primary healthcare clinic record-keeping system. The experience of the researchers in adopting an HFE approach to understanding the challenges around record-keeping in a local clinic using a CBPR approach has revealed the synergies between CBPR and HFE. More specifically, it has emphasised the utility of integrating CBPR into the participatory HFE methods, to allow researchers to effectively elucidate the interactions between the various system components and the people involved through understanding the insights and lived experiences of those within the system. While the insights and understanding of the record-keeping system challenges cannot and have not been discussed in this paper, future researchers in the HFE or related disciplines should consider using this approach in understanding work and developing solutions to improving work. We have also highlighted three critical, practical takeaway points to close this reflective paper.

i) The CBPR approach is not an easy or linear process to follow, as the method was designed to enable working with communities to understand the challenges they face comprehensively and iteratively work with them to co-construct ways of addressing these.

ii) Patience, trust, and listening are fundamental skills to learn and implement when working with all community levels, particularly when identifying emergent challenges or solutions.

iii) Despite not yet being at the formal feedback stage of the research process (as data collection has only recently been concluded), we have learned that bidirectional feedback and consultation at every stage of the research is crucial in conducting CBPR, to ensure that researchers gain insights into work or life as done or lived, not just life or work as they (the researchers) perceive it to be. This feedback and consultation ensure that challenges and potential solutions that can impact the lives of clinicians and patients (in this case) are co-constructed, which is more likely to result in actionable and sustainable change.

Notes on Contributors

Lead author
Kirsten Kingwill
Rhodes University, Department of Human Kinetics and Ergonomics
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0078-5293

Co-author
Andrew Todd
Rhodes University, Department of Human Kinetics and Ergonomics
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2286-434X

Co-author
Dr Jonathan Davy
Rhodes University, Department of Human Kinetics and Ergonomics
Jonathan.davy@ru.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7529-5590

Co-author
Siphosethu Pama
Joza Clinic

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Private Higher Education: A Qualitative Study into Community Engagement Challenges

Flip Schutte, Stadio Higher Education

Abstract

This study examines the complex challenges and perceptions surrounding community engagement within Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa. Recognised as integral to teaching, research, and innovation, community engagement is mandated by the Council on Higher Education for both public and private institutions. However, PHEIs encounter distinctive obstacles in this domain, including limited resources, competing institutional priorities, a lack of embedded tradition in community engagement, and divergent interpretations of what constitutes "community." This study uses a qualitative methodology to incorporate desktop research alongside semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with five academics across diverse PHEIs. Findings highlight critical needs for PHEIs to formulate strategies that facilitate sustainable community relationships, establish a cohesive definition of community, and secure the requisite time, funding, human resources, and logistical support to engage effectively. Additionally, the study underscores the necessity for adaptable models incorporating distance learning students in community engagement initiatives to extend the reach and impact of PHEIs in South African society.

Keywords: *Community engagement; private higher education; challenges in PHEIs; community-engaged research.*

Introduction

Community engagement (CE) is one of the core pillars of higher education, alongside teaching and research (Van Eeden, 2022). However, in the context of South African Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), community engagement is often underdeveloped due to various institutional constraints. Unlike public universities, PHEIs are not permitted to be called universities, as stipulated by the Higher Education Act of 2016, and they do not receive any government subsidies or financial support (Coughlan, 2012; Tankou epse

Nukunah et al., 2019). This lack of funding compels PHEIs to adopt an entrepreneurial model for financial sustainability, which in turn limits their capacity to invest in CE initiatives on a scale comparable to public institutions (Somerville, 2024). Given these financial and regulatory limitations, many PHEIs lack a dedicated history, culture, or personnel structure for fostering CE.

The role of CE in higher education is essential for fostering societal transformation and addressing community needs (Van Eeden, 2022). In post-apartheid South Africa, higher education policy reforms were introduced to encourage institutions to become more responsive to societal challenges through CE initiatives (Mohale, 2023). However, the implementation of these policies remains uneven across the sector, with PHEIs often struggling to align with national priorities due to resource constraints. While public universities have developed various models for community engagement, there is no unified framework guiding its implementation across the entire sector (Petersen & Batchelor, 2022), leaving PHEIs at a disadvantage in fully realising the potential of CE.

PHEIs in South Africa are currently experiencing a period of significant transition. The CHE increasingly acknowledges the crucial role PHEIs play in the overall higher education system. This recognition is reflected in the CHE's initiatives to involve PHEIs in institutional audits, working groups, and other traditionally reserved processes for public institutions. The Ministry of Higher Education is also actively considering the potential reclassification of PHEIs to grant them university status. This possible reclassification has sparked important questions about the future role of PHEIs in the South African higher education landscape, especially regarding their responsibilities toward Continuing Education and their broader impact on the country's overall higher education system (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2024)

The progress notwithstanding, there is still a notable research void concerning the understanding and execution of CE within PHEIs. The existing body of literature predominantly concentrates on state-funded universities, resulting in a lack of exploration into CE's distinct challenges and opportunities within the private educational sector. This research endeavours to fill this void by delving into how PHEIs perceive community engagement, pinpointing the specific obstacles they encounter, and examining how these institutions can adapt to the evolving requirements of CE in the context of the ongoing transformation of South Africa's higher education landscape.

Literature Review

Understanding Contextual Challenges in Community Engagement

CE is grounded in the understanding that universities are not separate from society but rather integral parts of it (Petersen & Batchelor, 2022). Therefore, they are tasked with playing a role in enhancing society's overall well-being (Vally, 2021). Community engagement can improve economic, educational, social, and civic outcomes by facilitating collaborative partnerships between universities and local communities (Hintea et al., 2022). Nevertheless, implementing community engagement initiatives within South African higher education, especially in PHEIs, faces various challenges (Van Eeden, 2022).

Defining Community Engagement and its Complexity

The lack of a clear and universally accepted definition of CE has resulted in varied interpretations across institutions (Van Eeden, 2022). Johnson (2020) highlights academic frustration due to these different conceptual understandings, which impede coherent implementation. One perspective on CE views it as a means to promote social change and address community problems through collaborative partnerships between academic institutions, practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders (Thompson & Hood, 2016). This approach emphasises the role of universities in leveraging their research, knowledge, and resources to resolve pressing social issues (Du Plooy, 2022). Proponents of this model argue that by engaging with the local community, universities can foster meaningful change and demonstrate their relevance beyond the confines of the ivory tower.

In contrast, another conceptualisation of community engagement focuses on the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources between universities and their surrounding communities (Dippenaar et al., 2022). This framework emphasises the development of reciprocal partnerships, where the academic institution and the community work together to share and apply knowledge in a context of mutual respect and shared goals (Huijstee & Ronay, 2019). This approach highlights the potential for community engagement to enhance physical and psychological well-being, self-confidence, and personal relationships.

A third perspective on community engagement emphasises the importance of place-based initiatives, which involve universities deepening their connections with the local neighbourhoods in which they are situated (Bidandi et al., 2021). This approach encourages universities to focus their engagement efforts on the specific communities and geographic areas surrounding their campuses, fostering a sense of shared identity and collective responsibility (Petersen & Batchelor, 2022).

The diversity of these definitions, while not mutually exclusive, nevertheless, highlights the challenges universities face in consistently implementing and measuring the impact of CE. Without a clear and unified understanding of what CE entails, universities may struggle

to align their priorities, governance structures, and financial resources to support effective community partnerships (Hollingsworth, 2019; Van Eeden, 2022).

Similarly, Bhagwan (2017) points out that the definition of "community" is not the same everywhere. Some define it broadly as sustainable networks, partnerships, and activities between higher education institutions and communities at different levels (Jacob et al., 2015). Others restrict it to rural or disadvantaged populations, overlooking other potential stakeholders such as industries or professional communities. Some focus on communities in their geographical area, and some even view international interest groups as their communities (Vanaja et al., 2024). This ambiguity affects how PHEIs approach CE, as they must navigate these multiple definitions while developing their engagement strategies.

The absence of a shared understanding of CE creates an additional barrier in PHEIs. These institutions often lack the history, resources, and infrastructure of public universities, leading to fragmented approaches to engagement. Therefore, clarifying the role and scope of CE in PHEIs is critical for their effective involvement with communities.

Challenges to Community Engagement in PHEIs

Power Dynamics and Institutional Reluctance

A significant challenge to CE in public and private universities is the reluctance to treat civic engagement as a core function (Mohale, 2023). Johnson (2020) argues that many universities do not view community partnerships as central to their mission, often focused on teaching and research. Universities' hierarchical and bureaucratic nature further complicates collaboration with external communities, as these institutions are often perceived as unapproachable or difficult to navigate by non-academic partners.

This issue is exacerbated in PHEIs, where institutional owners or shareholders prioritise profitability over engagement initiatives. Community engagement in such environments is often sidelined, as it does not directly contribute to the institution's bottom line (Burger, 2021). Limited personnel dedicated to CE results in further challenges to institutionalising engagement.

Financial Constraints and Sustainability

Securing funding poses a significant challenge for CE (Du Plooy, 2022), particularly for PHEIs that do not receive financial support from the government. Unlike public universities, which have the advantage of receiving state funding for their research and community involvement initiatives, PHEIs primarily depend on student tuition fees as their primary source of income (Somerville, 2024). Consequently, these institutions have limited financial leeway to allocate resources towards community-based projects, especially when such endeavours are perceived as less essential than teaching and traditional research activities.

Despite the challenges, public-private partnerships could potentially solve the funding gap (Burger, 2021). Exploring these avenues, alongside government intervention to subsidise private institutions, could enhance the sustainability of CE initiatives in PHEIs. However, such solutions are rarely implemented, leaving many PHEIs without the necessary resources to engage meaningfully with communities.

Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity in Engagement

Building trust and fostering long-term relationships with communities is vital for the success of CE, but this can be especially difficult in South Africa's complex socio-political landscape (Materechera, 2022). Movements like "Fees Must Fall" and incidents of violence on university campuses have strained relations between higher education institutions and local communities (Johnson, 2020). Given their internal governance and security struggles, there is widespread scepticism regarding universities' ability to address community issues.

The challenge is even more pronounced for PHEIs, as they must balance their business-oriented model with community needs. Engaging with communities requires a nuanced understanding of local cultures and socio-political dynamics (Materechera, 2022). However, PHEIs often lack the institutional infrastructure to support such sensitivity, which can undermine trust and reduce the effectiveness of engagement efforts.

Measuring Impact and Evaluating Success

One persistent challenge in CE is the difficulty in measuring its impact. The lack of a national framework guiding CE in South Africa has led to inconsistent interpretations and poor implementation of community-oriented initiatives (Mohale, 2023). Johnson (2022) highlights the scepticism among university leaders regarding CE, with some believing that existing research engagements already fulfil the institution's societal responsibilities. This perspective underscores the need for more apparent metrics and evaluation mechanisms to assess the true impact of CE initiatives.

The situation is more challenging in PHEIs due to limited resources and the lack of established research cultures. Most academics in PHEIs see themselves as emerging researchers and often cannot effectively balance teaching, research, and community engagement (Deacon et al., 2014). Without a framework for evaluating success, CE initiatives may remain superficial and fail to produce tangible outcomes for the institution or the community.

Addressing the Gaps: A Focus on PHEIs

While much has been written about CE in public universities, there is a notable gap in research focusing on PHEIs. These institutions face unique challenges, including financial constraints, the lack of a CE culture, and limited academic capacity. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how PHEIs perceive CE and their implementation challenges. By

addressing these issues, PHEIs can better align with national transformation agendas and contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities.

Methodology

The research project employed a carefully crafted qualitative design, utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews to delve into the intricacies of community engagement within PHEIs. The selection of five stakeholders, each responsible for driving community initiatives at different institutions, ensured a broad representation of perspectives and experiences. Eleven different PHEIs were contacted; only five indicated they had a person responsible for CE. The five became the sample because all indicated they were willing to participate in the study. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the various strategies and practices employed in community engagement. The decision to utilise semi-structured interviews was motivated by their ability to accommodate follow-up questions and navigate complex or sensitive topics, as discussed by DeJonckheere (2019).

The data collection process adhered to rigorous standards, incorporating two primary methods. Firstly, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing for nuanced exploration and in-depth understanding of the participants' viewpoints. Furthermore, the researcher utilised desktop research to supplement the primary data, drawing from secondary sources, as highlighted by Denvir (2016). This multi-faceted approach, enriched by the analysis, contributed to the overall robustness of the research findings and provided a deeper contextual understanding of community engagement practices within PHEIs.

To ensure accuracy and reliability, the interviews were conducted using the online platform Microsoft Teams, which facilitated the recording and transcription of each session. This meticulous approach aimed to capture and preserve the richness of the data. Subsequently, thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed data to identify recurrent patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. This analytical process reinforced the validity and reliability of the findings and provided a comprehensive insight into the complexities of community engagement within the context of PHEIs.

Findings

After reading the findings from the interviews a few times to ensure that all nuances were understood and all relevant themes were identified, the challenges and perceptions of the anonymous participants were summarised and presented below. The challenges are presented in Table 1, and the perceptions are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Challenges experienced by PHEIs

Participant	Challenges
Participant one	As private institutions, we do not have the luxury of government funding. We do not have money to pay page fees for publications or attend conferences. With what money must we engage with communities in upliftment programmes and activities? If you distribute blankets and food, it is not community engagement. It is charity. For any bigger projects, there is just no time or funds available.
Participant two	Much has been said and discussed regarding Community Engagement, and public universities might have been doing this for years already. However, it is still only a concept and not a reality in private institutions. We took note of it but have not started yet.
Participant three	Privates do not have the capacity or funds to uplift communities with sustainable programmes.
Participant four	We have mostly distance learning programmes. It is thus impossible to engage students in these projects. Because we do not have a face-to-face campus, office space is limited. So, most academics work from home, all over the country… The minimum academic staff lives within the boundaries of the community where the campus is. It is thus also impossible to get them involved and engage them in the community with projects.
Participant five	We present classes online to students worldwide, and our academics are also from worldwide because we teach online. The challenge is thus to find and define a community and to get online students and staff involved in a community project. As PHEIs, we do not have the luxury of state funding, money, or capacity in the form of tutors, assistants, or secretaries. We do everything ourselves. We lecture and do all the admin for our programmes, and we have to produce research outputs. Although we understand the need for engagement, we do not have the capacity… because we also supervise M and D students apart from our lecturing obligations.

After a thematic analysis, the following themes were identified:

Lack of Funding and Resources

Participants consistently emphasised the challenge of insufficient funding and resources, particularly in comparison to public universities. Without government funding, PHEIs struggle to allocate resources for CE activities, which require financial backing and dedicated personnel. This lack of funding impacts the ability to execute meaningful and sustainable community projects.

Conceptual Understanding of Community Engagement

For many PHEIs, community engagement is still an abstract concept rather than an active practice. While public universities have incorporated CE into their operations for years,

some PHEIs have not initiated such activities. There is an understanding of the need for CE, but the actual implementation remains limited.

Challenges with Distance and Online Learning Models

Institutions offering distance and online learning face unique challenges in fostering CE. Participants highlighted that the geographic dispersion of students and faculty makes it difficult to identify a single community and engage in localised activities. Additionally, without physical campuses or face-to-face interactions, opportunities for faculty and students to participate in CE are severely constrained.

Lack of Time and Capacity

PHEI faculty members are often overburdened with multiple roles, including teaching, administrative work, research, and student supervision. This multitasking leaves little time or energy for additional responsibilities like CE. Participants described how the absence of support staff, such as tutors or administrative assistants, exacerbates this issue, further limiting their capacity to participate in or develop community initiatives.

Interpretation of Main Findings

The analysis reveals that PHEIs face substantial structural and operational challenges regarding CE. The most significant barrier is the lack of funding, as PHEIs do not receive government support, making it challenging to allocate resources for CE activities. This lack of financial support hampers engagement efforts and forces institutions to prioritise other operational needs, such as paying publication fees and maintaining research outputs. Another key challenge is the conceptual gap regarding CE. While most public institutions have long integrated CE into their core functions, PHEIs are still grappling with meaningfully engaging with communities, particularly when most of their operations are virtual or spread across vast geographical regions. This is further complicated by the predominance of online education models, which make it challenging to define a "community" or establish direct connections between students, faculty, and the public.

Finally, the overextension of academic staff, who are responsible for many roles, significantly limits the capacity for CE. Faculty at PHEIs often juggle teaching, research, supervision, and administrative duties without the support of additional staff, leaving little room for engagement initiatives. Despite understanding the importance of community involvement, the lack of time and personnel to organise and participate in these activities creates a persistent barrier. The findings suggest that the challenges PHEIs experience with CE are multifaceted, rooted in financial constraints and their operational models' structural limitations.

Table 2: Perceptions of Community Engagement by PHEIs

Participant	Perceptions
Participant one	All university research aims to solve practical problems in society or improve life, health, or business for those involved. Research from our postgraduate studies aims to solve problems in the workplace, other organisations, or communities. So, through research, we are engaged in the community. Distributing food or collecting blankets during winter is charity, not community engagement.
Participant two	We must focus on giving bursaries, bringing in people from communities, and educating them. Charity is not sustainable, and it creates short-term solutions. Education and a degree can create jobs, bring prosperity into households and communities, and create long-term solutions. This is the purpose of Higher Education. Leave us to do what we do well. The nucleus of being a higher education institution and teaching students is to be involved in, busy with, and doing it for the community.
Participant three	If CE is the university's version of social responsibility, it will not work. Corporates, in their nature, are there to make a profit. They can thus give a small bit of their profit back to communities by fulfilling their social responsibilities. Universities, in their nature, are there to educate the nation so that they can find employment and alleviate poverty. Universities are there to research problems in communities and find solutions. In their nature, they are responsible for society and engaged in the community. To expect corporate social responsibility from higher education institutions in the disguised form of Community Engagement is to ask them to do the same thing twice… and that is unreasonable. We incorporate the community's voice into research by getting their input as participants or respondents in research endeavours. By being respondents and participants, they already co-create all the knowledge.
Participant four	Community is a broad term. It is not only the location or place of the institution. It can be a bigger virtual or interest community.
Participant five	Thus, the world is our community, and we are engaged through the topics our students research wherever they are. All topics focus on finding a solution to an organisation or community problem.

The interviews underwent a thematic analysis, and the following were the emerging themes:

Research as Community Engagement

A prominent theme is the perception that CE is already inherent in the research activities conducted by PHEIs. Participants emphasised that through research, especially at the postgraduate level, PHEIs address practical societal problems, fulfilling their responsibility to engage with the community. They argue that research to improve the workplace, organisations, or broader societal issues is a form of CE.

Distinction Between Charity and Community Engagement

Participants consistently distinguished between charity and meaningful community engagement. Charity, such as distributing food or blankets, is seen as a short-term, unsustainable solution that does not address the root causes of societal challenges. In contrast, education and research are long-term solutions that can empower individuals and communities by creating sustainable economic and social advancement opportunities.

Education as a Form of Community Engagement

Several participants highlighted the role of education as a key form of CE. By providing education and granting degrees, PHEIs contribute to alleviating poverty, creating jobs, and fostering prosperity within communities. They perceive educating students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds through bursaries, as a meaningful and impactful way of engaging with and improving society.

Broad and Global Understanding of Community

The definition of "community" is broader than just the local geographical area around an institution. For PHEIs, especially those operating in online and distance learning environments, the concept of community extends to virtual or interest-based groups. Participants noted that their community is not confined to a specific location but includes any group or organisation their students and faculty interact with through research.

Critique of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Model

Participants expressed a critique of treating CE as a form of CSR for higher education institutions. They argue that universities, by their nature, are already fulfilling a societal responsibility through education and research. Expecting them to engage in community projects like corporations do through CSR is seen as redundant and misaligned with the core mission of higher education.

Interpretation of Main Findings

The analysis suggests that PHEIs perceive community engagement primarily through the lens of research and education rather than direct, tangible actions like charity. Participants strongly believe that their institutions contribute to societal betterment through research that addresses practical problems and the education they provide to students, equipping them to become agents of change in their communities. This view aligns with the notion that higher education institutions serve the community by producing knowledge and skilled individuals rather than through direct philanthropic efforts.

A notable distinction is made between short-term charitable acts and sustainable, impactful engagement. Participants are critical of charity as a form of community engagement, viewing it as insufficient and unsustainable. Instead, they champion education and research as long-term, systemic solutions that can lead to more meaningful societal

improvements, such as job creation and poverty alleviation. Additionally, the concept of community is not confined to a local geographic space for these institutions. Given the global nature of many PHEIs, especially those offering online and distance education, their CE is understood as having a broader, even global, reach. This perception is particularly relevant for institutions where faculty and students are dispersed across different regions, making localised engagement more challenging.

Participants reject the idea of CE as a form of corporate social responsibility. They argue that HEIs have a unique role in society, distinct from the profit-driven model of corporations. By integrating community voices into research and focusing on societal improvement through education, PHEIs believe they are already fulfilling their social obligations. The findings reveal that PHEIs view community engagement as an intrinsic part of their core functions—research and education—rather than through direct, hands-on interventions like societal upliftment. They see themselves as responsible for long-term societal improvement by equipping students with knowledge and solutions addressing broader societal issues.

Discussion

PHEIs, just as public higher education institutions, face various challenges in effectively engaging with communities, with resource constraints being one of the most significant hurdles (Van Eeden, 2022). Balancing academic excellence, research commitments, and community engagement is complex (Du Plooy, 2022), particularly given the absence of a strong tradition of community engagement within PHEIs. Additionally, the pressure to compete for students and funding in a market-driven environment often diverts attention from community-focused initiatives, further exacerbating these challenges.

Participants in the study provided valuable insights into these obstacles. Participant One emphasised financial constraints, highlighting the distinction between genuine community engagement and charitable acts. This participant underscored the need for sustainable and meaningful engagement beyond one-off contributions. Participant Two, on the other hand, positioned education as a sustainable solution, advocating for PHEIs to play a vital role in expanding access to education and creating opportunities, especially for underserved communities. This aligns with the broader mission of higher education to foster social mobility and contribute to societal well-being (Materechera, 2022).

Participant Three raised concerns regarding the expectation for PHEIs to operate like corporate entities, emphasising profit over public good. This participant stressed the importance of incorporating community input into research, suggesting that genuine engagement requires a collaborative approach where the community is an active partner in the knowledge production process (see also Petersen & Batchelor, 2022). This highlights the need for PHEIs to rethink their engagement strategies and ensure community voices are integral to their research initiatives.

Participant Four pointed out the logistical challenges associated with distance learning programs. These challenges complicate efforts to foster a sense of community on campus and make it more difficult to implement traditional models of community engagement. This participant also broadened the definition of "community," indicating that distance learners themselves could be considered a community requiring engagement (Peterson & Batchelor, 2022).

Participant Five highlighted the global reach of many PHEIs and the need for institutions to rely on their own resources due to the lack of government funding. This participant's insights reflect the broader reality of PHEIs needing to be resourceful and innovative in their engagement efforts, often leveraging non-monetary contributions such as student labour, expertise, and partnerships to make an impact (see Van Eeden, 2022).

These perspectives reveal a complex landscape for CE in PHEIs, where financial and institutional constraints shape their ability to contribute meaningfully to their surrounding communities. A significant misconception that emerged from the discussion is the belief that financial resources are always necessary for engagement. However, as participants suggested, PHEIs can explore alternative forms of engagement that involve non-monetary contributions, such as student skills, volunteer work, and knowledge-sharing initiatives. This could help broaden the scope of CE for PHEIs. This was also suggested by Dippenaar et al. (2022).

Furthermore, the study highlights a gap in understanding CE. Many PHEIs seem to lack a comprehensive understanding of what true engagement entails. Engagement goes beyond conducting research on a community or offering short-term charity. It requires sustained dialogue with communities, bringing their narratives into the classroom, and using these experiences to enrich teaching, learning, and the curriculum. Van Eeden (2022) also advocated this opinion.

Finally, financial constraints also limit PHEIs' participation in broader academic citizenship activities, such as attending conferences, publishing research, and undertaking community or institutional research projects. This further hampers their ability to engage with academic and local communities, reducing opportunities for collaboration and impact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while PHEIs face tangible challenges in implementing traditional forms of community engagement, they perceive their primary contribution to society through education and research as a valid and impactful form of CE. Their engagement is less about direct, hands-on interventions and more about long-term societal change through knowledge creation and the empowerment of individuals. The dual focus on the structural challenges and conceptual perceptions highlights that PHEIs experience community engagement differently from public institutions, suggesting a need for a broader understanding of what constitutes effective engagement in the context of PHE. Much work needs to be done in the context of PHEIs and community engagement in South Africa.

Innovative recommendations

PHEIs should seek partnerships with private organisations, alumni, and philanthropic grants to secure funding for CE initiatives. Institutions should create strategic plans prioritising community engagement alongside academic goals by reallocating resources and establishing a dedicated CE department. PHEIs should also promote a culture of engagement through training programs, incentives, and recognition of successful community partnerships. Private institutions should collaborate with public universities, non-profits, and government agencies to share resources and amplify their community impact. Institutions should involve communities in their research and decision-making through participatory methods and regular feedback. PHEIs with distance learning models should explore virtual volunteering, online forums, and digital platforms for meaningful community interaction. Given their global reach, PHEIs should integrate international perspectives into their curriculum and support global service-learning initiatives. Policymakers should reconsider the definition of CE to include teaching and research functions, recognising that education is a significant form of community engagement.

Notes on Contributor

Flip Schutte
Dean of Research and Head of the Institute for Postgraduate Studies,
Stadio Higher Education
flips@stadio.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6031-9206

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THOUGHT PIECE

Introducing Community Engagement through Hospitality

Darren Lortan, Durban University of Technology

Abstract

The objective of this thought piece is to explore Nouwen's notion of hospitality as a means of introducing participatory research, in particular community-based participatory research, to academics who may be interested in community engagement, but have little or no experience in recent scholarly developments in the field. This includes knowledge democracy, social and epistemic injustice, and epistemic agency. The approach is not intended to replace well established orientation processes, but to engender interest in further orientation in participatory research.

Introduction

It is widely held that there are three mandates or missions that constitute the *raison d'être* of universities, namely research, teaching and learning, and the public good. The third mandate has a variety of descriptions such as extension, community engagement, community service or simply engagement. The sequencing of the descriptions of these mandates are usually, and often intentionally ordinal, possibly because this component has historically been an afterthought in contemplations of the purpose of higher education (HE). In South Africa, the entrenchment of the third component began in earnest in response to the White Paper for Transformation of Higher Education (1997). The 1997 White Paper firmly inserted community service (the original description of the third component) as a mandate of higher education institutions (HEIs). Prior to 1994 and during the transition to democracy, the strong tradition of university academics and students working closely with civil society and grassroots structures continued (Vally, 2023). As universities lacked democratic accountability and responsiveness to the needs of the majority, few meaningful reciprocal engagements and partnerships between universities and communities occurred (Bunting,1994, cited in Saidi 2023, p. 5). While community engagement emanated from some university students and academic activism as part of the liberation struggle, anomalously, most universities were disconnected from local communities. Community

engagement began establishing its roots firmly in South African universities, following the Conference on Community Engagement in Higher Education, organised by the Higher Education Quality Committee and the Joint Education Trust Education Services in 2006 (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, & Slamat, 2008).

By 2010, community engagement became the term used in South Africa and other parts of the world to describe the third component or mission. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC, 2004, p. 19) in its foundation document of CE in South Africa, defined community engagement as initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the higher education institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to the community. The evolution of community engagement led to the creation of community university partnerships (CUPs), which over time became the instrument through which the objectives of the mandate would ordinarily be realised. These partnerships usually begin as relationships between representatives of communities and their higher education counterparts, and as these developed into partnerships, the terms and conditions of the CUPs often determined their success and longevity.

Community-based participatory research

A number of community engagement activists have in recent times adopted community-based participatory research (CBPR) as their approach to the movement from relationship to partnership. Walker & Boni (2020) describe community-based participatory research as a co-learning process in which a mutual exchange of expertise between all partners occurs. The participatory approach to research advocates the treatment of all participants as effective knowledge creators, requiring that all sources of knowledge and knowledge types, are included throughout the research process – from inception to dissemination of findings.

The participatory approach enables participants to question power relationships in the creation of knowledge, as well as navigate the boundary between what is recognised as knowledge and what is not. Carstensen-Egwuom (2014) posits that participatory research is crucial in supporting continuous attention to and reflection upon the social practices of positioning (reflexivity) and that it enables critical awareness of hierarchies and power relations that are otherwise taken for granted. Due to its participatory, collaborative and contextually focused approach to knowledge creation, CBPR has the potential to promote the levelling of hierarchies and power dynamics because it taps into the worldviews, language and knowledge personified in the lived experiences and realities of communities participating in the research process (Maistry & Lortan, 2017; Hall & Tandon, 2020). Synergies between local, popular, practitioner knowledge and academic, theoretical and empiricist knowledge can be created and sustained through a commitment to underpin the work of the community university partnerships with the principles of knowledge democracy.

Knowledge Democracy

Knowledge democracy means (among other things) recognizing civil society or community as sources of knowledge about complex issues (Israel, Schultz, Parker & Becker, 1998). Over the many years of their work together as the UNESCO Chair: Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education, Hall and Tandon (2020) have crystalised five principles of knowledge democracy, three of which are pertinent for this piece namely: (1) recognition of a multiplicity of epistemologies and ways of knowing; (2) recognition that knowledge emerging from the daily lives of excluded persons is an essential tool for social movements and other transformational strategies; and (3) sharing research findings in a free and open manner, while protecting the ownership of knowledge held by communities. These principles of knowledge democracy are underpinned by two drivers considered to be core to this type of participatory research: social justice and epistemic justice.

Social Justice and Epistemic Justice

Inherent features of a socially just society include the recognition of diversity, economic fairness, non-violent conflict resolution and participatory democracy (Warren, 1998). Socially just societies are characterised by people not being discriminated against, nor is their welfare and wellbeing inhibited or prejudiced based on gender, age, race, religion, beliefs, location, social class or socioeconomic circumstances (Centre for Economic and Social Justice, 2016). According to Restrepo (2014) epistemic justice is the assuring of the conditions that allow communities to create their own life experiences from their everyday knowledge. It entails inclusion, participation, and recognition that knowledge required to solve prevailing social/human problems also exists outside the university boundaries, specifically within local communities. Epistemic justice also includes the process of identifying epistemic injustices and defining the basis upon which to generate epistemic justice. If you are in a disadvantaged position to influence dialogue during deliberations in CUPs, for example, you are likely to experience epistemic injustice and decreased epistemic agency (Fricker, 2015). Recognising potential disadvantages before and during dialogue and creating conditions for enhancing epistemic agency during the deliberations may be the first step to promoting epistemic justice. In the process of creating and sustaining CUPs, however, social and epistemic injustices may be difficult to recognise.

Two forms of epistemic injustice are explained by Fricker (2007). In the first the speaker may be regarded by the hearer as incapable of contributing knowledge by reducing the level of credibility of the speaker due to prejudice against the speaker. The hearer may regard them as incompetent or stupid, or both. This is referred to as testimonial injustice. A typical example is that in HE scientific knowledge or knowledge that follows formal structure for its construction (Boni & Velasco 2020), is often considered of greater epistemic value and credibility than that of other knowledges such as community-based knowledge.

The second form of epistemic injustice is described by Fricker (2007) as hermeneutical injustice which is structural and becomes evident in attempts to make an experience intelligible to oneself or to someone else. For example, apartheid prevented citizens from making full sense of their oppression as black South Africans. In other words, for some the experience was not fully intelligible and hence they were disadvantaged in making sense of social experiences as black South Africans (Walker, 2020).

Lortan, Maistry and Grobbelaar (2023) argue that one of the core functions, if not the core function of community engagement, is the enabling of social and epistemic justice through providing a platform for community-based participatory research. They posit that by including elements of CBPR in an Academic Development programme for newly appointed academic staff, awareness of the complicity of the academe in social and epistemic injustice could be raised, while promoting epistemic justice and the adoption of knowledge democracy in the research that is undertaken through CUPs. Academics who participate in such CBPR academic development programmes will be afforded the opportunity to become acquainted with the scholarship of engagement. There are a number of approaches to unpacking CBPR for new academics who may not be capacitated or even attuned to participatory research, including short-term and long-term orientation (Lortan & Maistry, 2019). The use of the notion of hospitality as defined by Nouwen (1986), is explored as a formal introduction to CBPR.

Nouwen's notion Hospitality

Nouwen's (1986) description of hospitality offers an approach to cultivating epistemically sound community university partnerships. Nouwen viewed hospitality as the creation of a free space into which the stranger can enter (by invitation) and become a friend instead of an enemy. In the context of community engagement, the free space would be a newly formed community university relationship whose formation affords the opportunity for the establishment of a partnership (Nouwen's friendship), while recognising that the opposite is possible (Nouwen's enmity). According to Nouwen, hospitality is not an attempt or effort to change people but to offer them this space where change can take place. The space itself enables change, through the exploration of commonalities. At the heart of the Nouwen notion of hospitality is the pursuit of commonality without abandoning differences. The guest need not be brought over to the host's side; the host is to afford the freedom to the guest not to be disturbed by any dividing lines – real or apparent. Nouwen's hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adore the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to express his own. When the lifestyle of the host is inconsequential to the quality of the hospitality, in the space in which the hospitality is unfurling, the opportunity of self-expression of the guest's lifestyle is afforded the guest, as opposed to mimicking that of the host. As an extension of Nouwen's idea, it is may be necessary to contemplate the potential for the roles of guest and host to be switched, without the conditions changing.

Introducing Participatory Approaches through Nouwen's Hospitality

Elements of Nouwen's hospitality are a good metaphor for the promotion of epistemic agency, which could be enacted in a performance before academics (new or experienced) participating in an Academic Development Induction programme usually run over a semester. Many of the participants may not have encountered the notion of epistemic harm or injustice. A short two-part sketch involving a host and a guest in which the former enacts Nouwen's version of hospitality could be staged to depict epistemic injustice.

The sketch

In the first part of the sketch, the intended outcome in Nouwen's hospitality is not achieved – the guest is made to feel uncomfortable in the created space, either verbally (language content, tone or both) or non-verbally (body language or actions). The verbal and non-verbal communication combines to restrict the self-expression of the guest, diminishing free participation in the activity contrived for the purposes of the sketch. For example, the guest may be invited to sit in a particular place prior to dinner and may be assigned a place at the dining table and may be informed of the cutlery to use during dinner. Over dinner, the differences in lifestyle between the two are subtly referenced in conversation. Further conversation is limited, and the guest does not stay in the free space for long.

In the second part of the sketch the activities are repeated, with the intended outcome in Nouwen's hospitality achieved – the guest is made to feel comfortable in the created space, both verbally (language content, tone or both) and non-verbally (body language or actions), encouraging the self-expression of the guest. For example, the guest may be informed of a few seating options (lounge, dining room or kitchen), or the guest may be given the option to choose whether to use cutlery or not during dinner (when eating a roti or bunny chow). The differences in lifestyles between the two are teased out in hilarity, without offense. The conversation continues for some time, and the guest stays in the free space, until eventually, almost unwillingly, the guest leaves the free space.

The post-sketch discussion

After the enacting of the sketches described above, the audience should be invited to discuss the differences between the two approaches as a precursor to a discussion on power imbalances, epistemic harm and injustice, and epistemic agency. In the sketch the role of the host is to make the guest as comfortable as possible, to the point of feeling 'at home.' The role of the guest is to ensure that the host is not burdened while undertaking the role and discharging the duties of host. Politeness on the part of both is key to sustaining the hospitality. In CUPs, there are guests and hosts. Neither role is confined to one of the partners. In Nouwen's hospitality, the free space setting may be on a university campus

or within a community hall. The free space may be depicted by a telephone conversation or a series of exchanges via email between two representatives of the partnership. Each time the stranger enters the free space, an opportunity for friendship or enmity is afforded the relationship. The more often that friendship is chosen over enmity as an outcome, the longer the partnership that develops will be sustained. Sustaining the friendship requires both parties to commit to 'politeness' during the unfurling of the free space. In the discussions the notion of epistemic 'politeness' could be co-constructed. After the enacting of the sketches, discussions could be encouraged among academics about how tacit power imbalances may lead to diminished epistemic agency. The discussion would need to foreground that community partner perspectives are no less valuable or meaningful than academic perspectives in community university deliberations, in the same way that discrepancies in the use of cutlery during dinner do not lead to discrepancies in the taste of the meal. If the sketches are enacted with community representatives also participating as actors, the ensuing discussions may provide opportunities for these actors to share their experiences of being on the receiving end of epistemic harm or epistemic 'impoliteness'. The sketches may also depict what happens when inhibition meets confident exuberance and may demonstrate that neither is an indication of epistemic prowess. In CUPs both may be encountered initially and in the language of Nouwen, it is possible for inhibition not to adore the lifestyle of confident exuberance but take advantage of the space to express itself freely. In other words, an approach could be adopted to mitigate both inhibition and confident exuberance over the course of the CUP, without diminishing the value of either.

Conclusion

The description of the enactment of Nouwen's hospitality cannot replace the rigour of participatory orientation. The latter is a long-term commitment to inclusive, representative engagement between partners who have already determined to work with each other, while working against social and epistemic injustices that may rear their ugly heads during the process of engagement. What Nouwen's hospitality affords, is the opportunity to share the notions underpinning a participatory approach to community engagement with a captive audience, in a manner that engenders serious deliberation about ways of knowing, ways of harming and ways of addressing and redressing the harm, afforded through the scholarship of engagement.

Notes on Contributor

Darren Lortan
Professor, Department of Mathematics, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa
ORCID 0000 0002 6199 4606

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Re-imagining engaged scholarship in South Africa: a transdisciplinary perspective

Christopher J. Burman, University of Limpopo

Abstract

This paper represents a constructive disruption of the extant habits of mind associated with community engagement in South Africa. The constructive disruption is developed by applying a critical realist method placing emphasis on engaged transdisciplinary knowledge co-production processes. The argument that is developed suggests two plausible disruptions. The first disruption argues that it is possible to consider a second order form of methodological decision making using a concept labelled 'critical epistemological selectivity' as a mechanism to increase the armamentarium of engaged, transdisciplinary scholarship. The second disruption focuses on the real-world utility of the current 'spirit' of engagement – 'social justice' – in the face of increasingly complex global challenges. The article concludes by suggesting that second and third order perspectives could contribute to a more reflexive form of engaged scholarship that may be of benefit to both academe and its neighbouring communities.

Keywords: *community engagement; constructive disruption; critical epistemological selectivity; second and third order engagement*

Introduction

This paper presents a constructive disruption of the current habits of mind that influence community engagement in South Africa. The purpose of the constructive disruption is to stimulate critical debate about whether the current habits of engaged minds are likely to sustain community engagement as a responsive form of transdisciplinary scholarship in the face of increasingly complex global changes. Emphasis is placed on transdisciplinarity because – as Palmer (2001, p. vii) – notes "real-world research problems .... rarely arise within orderly disciplinary categories, and neither do their solutions". The disruption is articulated through a critical realist method called 'AART' (Abduction, Abstraction, Retroduction and Testing) which was developed to re-interrogate an object of research in

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order to catalyse novel "hypothesis-generation for innovative theorizing" (Decoteau, 2017, p. 72). In this instance the object of research is transdisciplinarity and engaged scholarship in South Africa.

Two novel heuristics derived from the literature relating to transdisciplinarity which are labelled as 'both–and' and 'boundary stretching' are applied as referential axes of enquiry for the re-interrogation. The re-interrogation is also influenced by first, second and third order learning which refers to the different levels of learning associated with Gregory Bateson (Bateson, 1972). The expression 'first order' refers to uncritical analytical perspectives that rely on descriptive and relatively superficial modes of enquiry associated with reductionism to achieve scientific results (Smith & Berg, 1997). The expression 'second order' refers to the inclusion of the "the underlying systems and social structures that proliferates the issue in the first place" within the analytical frame (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014, p. 15). 'Third order' points towards a more reflexive process of "*seeing our* worldview rather than *seeing with* our worldview so that we can be more open to …. other views and possibilities [representing] a dramatic shift of consciousness" (emphasis in original, Sterling, 2010, p. 26).

The findings point towards two plausible novel hypotheses relating to engaged scholarship in South Africa. The first novel hypothesis reflects a project level of granularity and focuses on 'weak' and 'strong' forms of engaged transdisciplinarity. The project level novel hypothesis suggests that by conceptualising 'weak' and 'strong' transdisciplinarity as an interdependent whole could be of utility if engaged scholars are equipped with capabilities relating to a concept labelled 'critical epistemological selectivity' which is a concept that is developed further towards the end of the paper.

The second novel hypothesis relates to a national level of granularity and reflects on the appropriateness of the current 'spirit' of engagement which is postulated to be social justice. The expression 'spirit' of engagement is an adaptation of the argument by Basarab Nicolescu that improving the real-world utility of transdisciplinary scholarship requires a novel "spiritual metaphor of enquiry" that is shared by both academe and civil society (Nicolescu, 2014, p. 212).

The national level novel hypothesis queries the logic of maintaining social justice as the dominant 'spirit' of engagement in South Africa in favour of alternative conceptual 'spirits' that reflect contemporary real-world problems. The purpose of querying the extant 'spirit' of engagement in South Africa is to ask if alternative, real-world 'spirits' might improve the utility of engagement as a responsive form of transdisciplinary, engaged scholarship in the face of increasingly complex global / local challenges.

Materials and methods

The conceptual research methodology is presented as follows: an overview of Boyer's conceptualisation of engaged scholarship; a summary of the evolution of community engagement in South Africa and a re-interrogation of community engagement in South Africa using the first two 'AA's of the AART method. The findings are then presented as a

discussion about the novel hypotheses because, strictly speaking, the novel hypotheses do not represent results or findings; they are constructive theoretical disruptions of the habits of mind that influence the 'spirit' of community engagement in South Africa.

The article concludes by suggesting the utility of community engagement in South Africa could be improved if second and third order forms of scholarship are further developed and applied. It is also suggested that the emergent third order forms of engagement could be reinforced if the current 'spirit' of engagement – social justice – is simultaneously problematised.

Engaged scholarship: Boyer's contribution

In an essay titled 'Scholarship reconsidered: priorities of the professoriate' the late Ernest Boyer, initiated what is now recognised as a tipping point in the development of engaged scholarship (Boyer, 1990). Boyer's position was that it was necessary to consider "[e]nlarging the [academic] perspective" towards increased civic engagement through four interrelated themes: the "the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching" (Boyer, 1990, p. 16), Table 1.

Table 1: Boyer's 'Scholarship reconsidered', selected extracts. Source: Boyer (1990, pp. 17-23)

The scholarship of ….	Brief description
'Discovery'	Research that "contributes not only to the stock of human knowledge but also to the intellectual climate of a college or university." (p. 17).
'Integration'	Places emphasis on giving "meaning to isolated facts, putting them in perspective. By integration, we mean making connections across the disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating non-specialists, too" (p. 18).
'Application'	Requires that "the scholar asks 'How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems? How can it be helpful to individuals as well as institutions?' And 'Can social problems themselves define an agenda for scholarly investigation?'" (p. 21).
'Teaching'	The teaching engagement "becomes consequential only as it is understood by others. ….. When defined as scholarship, however, teaching both educates and entices future scholars" (p. 23).

Boyer's ambition was not to revolutionise academe, but "rather to broaden and deepen the possibilities for civic engagement in higher education" (Barker, 2004, p. 125).

Boyer went on to argue that academics should become what "Donald Schön of MIT has called 'reflective practitioners,' moving from theory to practice, and from practice back to theory" in order to inculcate a culture of iterative, critical and collaborative re-interrogation of their knowledge stock as a day-to-day scholarly norm (Boyer, 1996, p. 17).

Boyer argued that the critical skills associated with 'reflective practitioners' could enable academe to become a "more vigorous [institutional] partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, [thereby] reaffirm[ing] its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement" (Boyer, 1996, p. 11). Whilst Boyer's interest was primarily to reconsider the purpose of higher education in the United States, the concept of engaged scholarship has gradually secured a global foothold in variable ways (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Post et al., 2023).

Community engagement in South Africa

Boyer's theorising about the potentials of engaged scholarship coincided with the South African transition to democracy, but did not initially influence higher education in South Africa. Nevertheless, in 1997 the White Paper on Education positioned the earlier vestige of community engagement – "community service" – as a mechanism to "promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes", as well as to demonstrate the "social responsibility of institutions and their commitment to the common good" (DOE, 1997, pp. 10-11). The White Paper also emphasised that social responsibility required academe being "responsive to societal interests … [within] … the national and regional context" (DOE, 1997, pp. 6 & 10).

At that time, community service in South Africa was deemed to be a mechanism to promote institutional 'social responsibility' in 'responsive' ways, rather than remain exclusively a scholarly activity – but the White Paper indicated that there were potentials for 'community service' to "enhance the Culture of Learning, Teaching and Service in higher education" (DOE, 1997, p. 18). Whilst there is legitimate ambiguity in this latter statement, it is evident that there was an intuitive belief that community service had potentials to influence scholarship that could be further developed.

This opportunity for the transformation of the potentials of community service was reflected in subsequent reports in which it became evident that the localised, South African, conceptualisation of 'service' was becoming increasingly influenced by 'responsiveness' and 'scholarship'; viz: "knowledge based community service" (HEQC, 2001, p. 9); "responsive …. community engagement" (HEQC, 2004, pp. 3-4) and then, following Boyer, the expression "engaged scholarship" (HEQC/JET, 2006, p. 188). Conceptualising community engagement as a form of responsive scholarship was further reinforced in a subsequent policy document which stated that community engagement should be "formalised and integrated with …. teaching and learning and research, where appropriate" (HEQC, 2007, p. 24).

Despite a growing consensus in South Africa that community engagement should be positioned as a form of engaged scholarship integrated with the other core functions of higher education institutions (HEIs), a debate about how to define community engagement emerged (Hall, 2010). Critical commentators took the view that "finding a generalisable definition [for community engagement] *as a starting point* …. is too ambitious ….. rather, [it is] something to work towards through a deliberative process" (Slamat, 2010, p. 109-110).

Whilst identifying a single definition of community engagement was contested, there was agreement that engaged scholarship was multidimensional in nature and contained unifying characteristics of which the most dominant included social justice and partnerships between academe and non-academic stakeholders (Bender, 2008; Briffett Aktaş, 2024; Maistry & Lortan, 2017).

From the unifying characteristics, secondary engaged operational characteristics emerged and included, *inter alia*: transdisciplinarity (Cole, 2017); knowledge mobilisation (Hart et al., 2013); reciprocity (Davis et al., 2017); participatory processes (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015); co-creation, of actionable knowledge (Bell & Pahl, 2017); sustainable partnerships (Kline et al., 2018); co-identification of research priorities, co-designing research methods and co-assessment of subsequent outcomes (Lam et al., 2017) and mutual learning and beneficiation (van Veen et al., 2013).

In South Africa, the contemporary landscape of engaged scholarship relate to different perspectives connected to the umbrella theme of social justice including, *inter alia*: epistemic (in)justice/s (Maistry & Lortan, 2017); indigenisation of knowledge co-production processes (Ross, 2018); the decolonisation of knowledge co-production processes (Le Grange, 2023) and postcolonial feminist theory (McCann, 2023) – all of which include, in variable degrees, some examples of transdisciplinary forms of knowledge co-production which is reflected on below.

Transdisciplinarity

The expression 'transdisciplinarity' was reportedly first used by psychologist Jean Piaget in the 1970s amidst the growing anxiety that the extant mono-disciplinary knowledge production method had insufficient utility in a world that was becoming 'too big to know' (Weinberger, 2011). The argument that the world was becoming to 'too big to know' reflected, on the one hand, respect for the advances made through mono-disciplinary modes of knowledge production, and simultaneously, on the other hand, critical concerns that the mono-disciplinary knowledge project had, under many circumstances "reached its own limitations with far-reaching consequences not only for science but also for culture and social life" (Max-Neef, 2005, p. 21).

The emergence of transdisciplinarity

One of the primary drivers of the emergence of transdisciplinarity was prompted by the perceived deficiencies of what is often labelled as the "classical Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm" (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 40). The Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm is a descendent of the Aristotelian traditional which presupposes that the world is a tangible entity which is separate from the observer, thus can be rationally known to the observer, and a world that is functionally sustained by linear relationships between multiple entities (Lent, 2017). Scientific analysis of linear relationships – reductionism – requires deconstructing the system into its parts so that "each part [can be] solved separately to construct the full solution" (Rickles et al., 2007, p. 934).

The dominant presupposition that justifies the reductionist mind-set is that the linear relations between the parts of the whole operate under universal laws which make the future a predictable entity if appropriate scientific analysis is undertaken. This, in turn, generates a rationale for the universality of the scientific method in which every statement can, with appropriate scientific enquiry, be labelled as either correct or incorrect. It has been argued that the embeddedness of the reductionist mode of enquiry within academe gave rise to habits of mind which are summarised below.

"[O]bjective knowing of exterior objects (over subjective knowledge, i.e. feelings); quantifiable, verifiable data (over qualitative, subjective data); reductionist focus on parts (over holism); deterministic laws of cause and effect (over chance events that laws cannot predict); certainty (over uncertainty); universal knowledge (over local knowledge); one correct view of, or right ways for, a situation (over multiple, relevant, views) and either/or thinking (over accepting with working with ambiguity and paradox)." (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 47).

Multiple commentators have argued that these habits of mind reinforce the legitimacy of mono-disciplinary scientific methods that are invariably tied to the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm as the *sine qua non* which, to this day, saturates much of mainstream academe. Almost every critical commentator who recognises deficiencies in the universal application of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm recognises that *under certain conditions* the assumptions that underpin the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm have had, and continue to demonstrate, extreme utility (Weaver, 1948).

However, it has also been argued that the Achilles Heel of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm is not the paradigm itself, but rather the uncritical (or naïve) application of the method, *irrespective* of context (Preiser & Cilliers, 2010). It has been argued that in a world which is becoming 'too big to know', the all-important contexts that exacerbate the Achilles Heel are global phenomena created by non-linear systemic interactions, such as a climate variability or food insecurity which manifest – and are experienced in – dispositional ways within different localities around the globe (Taleb, 2007).

These global challenges have been labelled as 'wicked problems' which refers to "any complex issue which defies complete definition and for which there can be no final solution .... in that they resist the usual [Cartesian-Newtonian] attempts to resolve them" (Brown et al., 2010, p. 302). Despite the agility of complex problems to resist endeavours to find solutions to them, it has been argued by some commentators that it is possible to build resilience to – or, "tame the growl" of – wicked problems (Churchman, 1967, p. B-141). The source of the 'agility of complex problems to resist endeavours to find solutions to them was, and remains, attributed to the universal application of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm, *irrespective* of the wicked context which opened a door towards "a new way of thinking about, and engaging in, inquiry" (Montuori, 2008, p. ix).

Transdisciplinarity – growing pains

The development of the concept of transdisciplinarity was an enterprise that emerged from earlier efforts to overcome the sub-optimal capabilities of mono-disciplinarity:

> *"While **multidisciplinarity** studies a topic not in one but in several disciplines at the same time, whereas **interdisciplinarity** is concerned with the links and the transfer of knowledge …. from one discipline to another, **transdisciplinarity** is concerned with what is between the disciplines, across the disciplines and beyond the disciplines" (Padurean & Cheveresan, 2010, p. 108).*

This represents a critique of earlier attempts to improve collaborative forms of knowledge co-production through multi-, pluri- and interdisciplinary methods that are implicitly based on collaborations which only addressed what is *between* and *across* disciplines, but erased the question of what is *beyond* disciplines (Max-Neef, 2005).

The primary critique of the earlier forms of multi-, pluri- and interdisciplinary efforts to improve collaborative knowledge co-production processes was that despite the intention of moving beyond the constraints of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm, they typically resulted in "an accumulation of [independent] visions emerging from each of the participating disciplines" (Max-Neef, 2005, p. 5). In other words, their collective ontological premise remained closely tied to the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm; hence the overall epistemological potentials remained constrained within the very paradigm which they were intended to supersede.

In order to go beyond the constraints of the multi-, pluri- and interdisciplinary conceptualisations of knowledge co-production towards a conceptualisation premised on horizontal (rather than hierarchical) *inter*dependencies (rather than an accumulation of isolated, thus conceptually fragmented, *in*dependencies) enabled Nicolescu (2002) to introduce the concept of 'weak' and 'strong' transdisciplinarity.

Going beyond disciplines requires moving beyond binary, meaning-making – "good or evil, right or left, heaven or hell, …., rich or poor" – that emerges from habits of mind associated with the Aristotelian logic of exclusion (Nicolescu, 2010, p. 30). In contradistinction to the 'either/or', binary habits of mind, Nicolescu theorised in favour of an 'included middle' which he later elaborated on as being both a metaphor and logic that "allows us to cross two different levels of reality or of perception and to effectively integrate, not only in thinking but also in our own being, the coherence of the Universe" which represents both an intellectual tool and embodied experience (Nicolescu, 2010 31), Figure 1.

Figure 1: Nicolescu's 'included middle'. Source: adapted from Ross and Mitchell, 2018, reproduced with permission (Ross & Mitchell, 2018b).
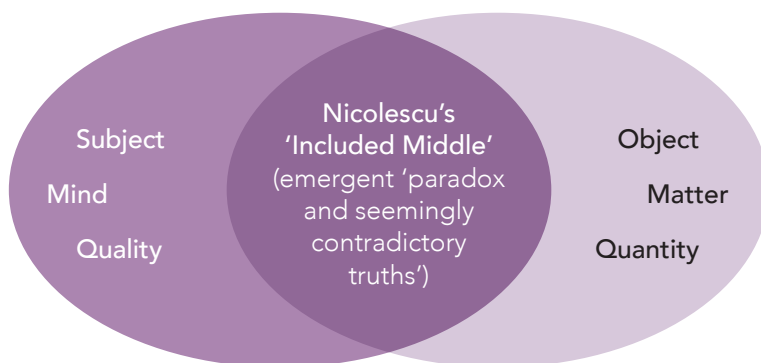
The 'included middle' enables "paradox and seemingly contradictory truths …. that point to different levels of reality, where their unity is explained" to emerge and be analysed, rather than be satisfied by the binary conventions of academe that the 'either/or' habit of mind sustains (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 44)., 'Weak' transdisciplinarity thus represents collaborations which "remain within the scope of linear logic, which is characteristic …. of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm" (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 40). In contradistinction, 'strong' transdisciplinarity represents "a clear challenge to the binary and lineal logic of the Aristotelian tradition" (Max-Neef, 2005, p. 35). This provided the platform from which Nicolescu (2014, p. 212) argued that, ultimately, for the full potentials of transdisciplinarity to be realised, required a broader societal shift towards a new form of "spirituality" that he labelled "cosmodernity"; meaning "essentially that all entity (existence) in the universe is defined by its relation to all other entities."

More recent theorising by Ross and Mitchell (2018a) supports the earlier arguments that under certain conditions – especially 'wicked' conditions – it is pragmatic to be critical of the universal application of the Cartesian-Newtonian method, but suggest that the existing transdisciplinary modes of knowledge co-production may be too narrow a perspective. Their alternative conceptualisation is based on the premise that ontology, epistemology and axiology are components of peoples' "worldview" which is, more broadly speaking, comprised of multiple, integrated and interdependent "meaning systems (mythic structures)" (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 47). The kernel of their argument is that to increase the accessibility of transdisciplinary methods requires reflexivity because worldviews are comprised of variable, often culturally patterned, constructions.

The alternative conceptualisation included two interdependent suggestions. The first is to broaden the transdisciplinary perspective to include "cosmology, anthropology and social vision" to make the transformative heuristic more inclusive of pluralistic worldviews (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 48). The second is to adopt a holistic focus on "third order learning

intent, in which the entirety of the meaning systems of our paradigms and worldviews are *stretched*" to achieve a broader "transformative" conceptualisation (emphasis added, Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 50). The process of 'stretching' represents a reflexive process of problematising the assumptions that sustain the "Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm, through deeper and more critical reflection on and mindfulness of the assumptions and beliefs within which we operate and thus the [associated] outcomes" during transdisciplinary collaborations (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 51), Table 2

Table 2: The spaces that a 'stretched' form of transdisciplinarity enables. Source: selected extracts adapted from Ross and Mitchell (2018a, pp. 42 & 50).

System	Beliefs and embedded assumptions in the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm	Vignettes associated with transdisciplinary perspectives
Cosmology: origins of the universe	"The universe is a predictable machine".	"The universe is a self-organising, creative and co-creating realm in which the possibilities …. are so infinite that it is impossible to predict the future".
Ontology: how we define reality	"Reality is defined by absolute permanency ….. Nature is deterministic, governed by causal laws".	"There are different [interdependent] levels of natural and social reality and correspondingly, different levels of perception. … meaning that any level of analysis can only ever be an extremely partial view".
Epistemology: Knowledge (truth claims) and understanding (grasped meaning)	"Knowledge is a finite, ….. Rationality is separate from and superior to experience and emotion. Reductionism is the primary method for understanding phenomenon".	"Knowledge is temporal, historical, relational, emotive, refutable, perspectival, inseparable from the knower, ephemeral, partial, collatable and intregratable, loving, more-than-human, easily rationalized. Transrational-intuitional and embodied knowing is valid and valuable".
Axiology: values	"Value is separate from, and has no place in, objective thought. It is possible to separate values from knowing, and from the means of achieving our ends".	"The subject and object, researchers and researched, are re-integrated, e.g. values and subjectivity are explicitly recognised within enquiry".
Anthropology: the role of humanity	"Humans are separate from, and superior to, nature".	"Humans explore trans-anthropocentric, trans-simplistic relationships with nature, in which nature, with equal rights and consciousness, is valued, and deep interconnectedness is recognised".
Social vision: how society should be organised	"Democracy and capitalism are superior forms of social organisation".	"A vision in which liberation, hope, and equity are prioritised over economic and government ideologies".

Ross and Mitchell's contribution to the on-going conceptualisation of 'transformative' transdisciplinarity provides useful heuristics that are inclusive of multiple components of peoples' 'worldviews (mythic structures)' as entry points for 'paradigmatic reconstructive learning' in concert with 'boundary stretching'. These transformative heuristics contribute to the re-interrogation of transdisciplinary, engaged scholarship in South Africa using the AART method.

The AART method

The AART method that was formulated by Jean Laurier Decoteau (2017) has origins within critical realist ethnography. The AART method consists of 'A' – "abduction"; 'A' – "abstraction"; 'R' – "retroduction", and T – "testing" (Decoteau, 2017, p. 58). For the sake of brevity, the AART method is summarised below, Table 3.

Table 3: The AART method summarised. Source: adapted from Decoteau (2017).

Phase	Description
Abduction	• Recontextualising the object of enquiry using new referential axes of enquiry; • Identify the associated social relations/structures that the object of enquiry is situated within, and • Determine – if possible – the relationships the object of enquiry has with the associated social relations/structures.
Abstraction	Use the abductive findings to consider new theoretical perspectives about the relationships that connect the object of enquiry to the associated social relations and/or structures.
Retroduction	Involves constructing a model, or models, that aims to explain how the emergent abstraction would actually work in practice.
Testing	Involves rigorous empirical testing of the model to determine its utility in real-world settings.

The AART method is designed to constructively disrupt existing patterned 'habits of mind' in order to catalyse novel "hypothesis-generation for innovative theorizing" about the object of research (Decoteau, 2017, p. 72). In this instance the object of research is engaged, transdisciplinary scholarship in South Africa using heuristics labelled as 'both – and' and 'boundary stretching' which are underscored by second and third order learning perspectives, as disruptive referential axes of abductive enquiry.

The 'both – and' heuristic is derived from Nicolescu's 'included middle', Figure 1, and the implicit "paradox and seemingly contradictory truths" that are contained therein, as a metaphorical alternative to the "either/or" habit of mind that is associated with reductionist thinking (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, pp. 44 & 47). The 'boundary stretching' heuristic is derived from Ross and Mitchell's argument in favour of 'stretching' worldviews

and paradigms as a mechanism to promote transdisciplinary engagement. Augmented by critical systems and complexity thinking, the analysis, below, is restricted to the first two 'AA's of the AART method.

Re-interrogating transdisciplinary, engaged scholarship in South Africa

Two novel hypotheses are presented. Novel hypothesis #1 focuses at a project level of granularity and reflects on the notion of 'weak' and 'strong' transdisciplinarity. Novel hypothesis #2 focuses at a national level of granularity and problematises the contemporary 'spirit' of engagement in South Africa. Prior to presenting the novel hypotheses a brief statement is provided about 'means' and 'ends' from a critical systems perspective in order to introduce the use of the expression 'critical epistemological selectivity'.

Critical systems thinking: second and third-order 'means' and 'ends'

A scientific method represents the '*means*' that is applied to achieve an '*end*'; viz: from a Newtonian-Cartesian perspective a bonafide 'end' would be a 'correct solution' to a problem derived through a reductionist first order 'means'. From a 'wicked' perspective, a legitimate 'end' would be a resilience strategy, or multiple resilience strategies and is derived though a systemic, second and/or third order 'means'. Invariably, the way that the 'end' is defined reflects components of peoples' worldview – and the justification for the applied 'means' is typically derived through a particular worldview. The 'means' thus represents selectivity relating to a real, or perceived, connectivity with an 'end' within a particular methodological decision making context. In other words: "What we believe the world to be, *ontology* ('ends'), which defines the questions we wish to ask, determines how we study and understand existence, *epistemology* ('means')" (parenthesis added, Cole, 1999, p. 222).

Proponents of critical systems thinking advocate that "reflective practice requires that we make ourselves and everyone concerned aware of this *selectivity*; for once our .... designs ('means') become a basis for action, selectivity turns into partiality .... thus some parties may be better served ('ends') than others" (parenthesis and emphasis added, Ulrich & Reynolds, 2010, p. 253). For the purpose of the constructive disruption, 'selectivity' is co-opted using the label 'critical epistemological selectivity' from the perspectives of the two novel hypotheses presented below.

Novel hypothesis generation #1: the 'both – and' and 'boundary stretching' heuristics ('weak' and 'strong' forms of engaged transdisciplinarity)

The first novel hypothesis focuses at a project level of granularity and reflects on the notion of 'weak' and 'strong' transdisciplinarity. As exemplified in a recent publication (Van Eeden et al., 2022), most literature relating to engaged scholarship in South Africa tends to position transdisciplinarity within a 'weak' first order paradigm. Such a paradigm is restricted to descriptors of the simultaneous application of two, or more, disciplinary

modes of knowledge production which necessarily erases the potentials 'strong' second and third order perspectives may contain for engaged transdisciplinary knowledge co-production processes. A second and third order conceptualisation that relates to engaged scholarship is the basis for disruptive novel hypothesis #1, below.

Critical epistemological selectivity

At first glance, the descriptors 'weak' and 'strong' transdisciplinarity appear to represent a pair of opposing concepts which, if left unconnected, represent a binary, 'either/or' first order representation. However, it is possible to make a second order connection between the two concepts by focusing on the system dynamics within which the knowledge production process is situated. The perspective that is proposed is underpinned by the argument that the Achilles Heel of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm is not the paradigm in itself, but rather the uncritical application of the method, irrespective of context – which, in this instance, is countered by systems and complexity thinking, placing emphasis on system dynamics and knowledge *co*-production processes.

System dynamics and knowledge co-production processes

A heuristic called the Cynefin framework has been used to argue that leaders can improve the utility of their decision making by problematising the context within which a decision is being made (Snowden & Boone, 2007). The authors argue that there are four dominant contextual decision making domains which must be treated in qualitatively different ways if optimal decision making is to be achieved. In this instance, two decision making domains are considered: 'ordered' and 'unordered'.

The ordered decision making domain represents systems that are at, or close to, equilibrium. The system dynamics of the parts within these types of system are linear and consequently generate predictable outputs. For example, the parts that comprise a functioning machine have linear interactions that consistently produce a specific output. Ordered systems are a manifestation of the type of system that require a 'means' that the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm is familiar with (i.e., a reductionist 'means'). Snowden and Boone describe the ideal-type decision making response within the 'ordered' decision making domain as "sense, categorize, and respond. That is, [leaders] assess the facts of the situation, categorize them, and then base their response on established [Cartesian-Newtonian] practice" (Snowden & Boone, 2007, p. 69).

On the other hand, the 'unordered' decision making domain represents systems that are *in extremis*, in a state of 'chaos', but, more-often-than-not, are far from equilibrium, thus complex. The system dynamics of the parts within the unordered domain are non-linear and consequently generate unpredictable, but patterned outputs. These types of non-linear interactions represent complex system dynamics that are "reflected in patterns of behaviour, that is, shapes in space or movements over time, which are never exactly repeated but are always similar to each other" (Stacey, 2003, p. 44). Unordered system dynamics thus represent a manifestation of the type of system that requires a 'means' that

is 'a clear challenge to the binary and lineal logic of Aristotelian tradition'. Snowden and Boone argue that decision making in the unordered, complex domain requires leaders to "probe [the environment] first, then sense [what happens after the probing], and then respond" (Snowden & Boone, 2007, p. 72). The logic behind their decision making heuristic is that when working within the unordered domain it is necessary to anticipate a patterned response to the probe (an input into the system) which acts to alter the non-linear system dynamics, but the details of what emerges (outputs) during the patterned response are unpredictable – therefore it is pragmatic to wait and see what type of particular emergence is generated prior to making a decision.

It is possible to transpose the systemic influences that Snowden and Boone propose into the domain of 'weak' and 'strong' transdisciplinarity. 'Weak' transdisciplinarity implicitly refers to forms of knowledge production within ordered systems (i.e., 'remains within the scope of linear logic' of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm). On the other hand, 'strong' transdisciplinarity implicitly refers to forms of knowledge production within unordered systems (i.e. systems that represent 'a clear challenge to the binary and lineal logic of Aristotelian tradition'). These qualitatively different transdisciplinary knowledge production contexts ('weak' or 'strong') are generated by qualitatively different system dynamics ('ordered' or 'unordered'), thus require qualitatively different knowledge production methods.

From an engaged perspective, there is no need – or logic – in 'challenging the binary and lineal logic of the Aristotelian tradition' without due systemic cause. What is required is a conceptualisation that obviates the binary, 'either/or' first order perspective in favour of a systemic conceptualisation that makes 'weak' and 'strong' forms of transdisciplinarity a functional, engaged whole, Figure 2.

Figure 2: Weak' and 'strong' transdisciplinarity fused into an engaged, systemic whole through 'critical epistemological selectivity'. Source: author's contribution.
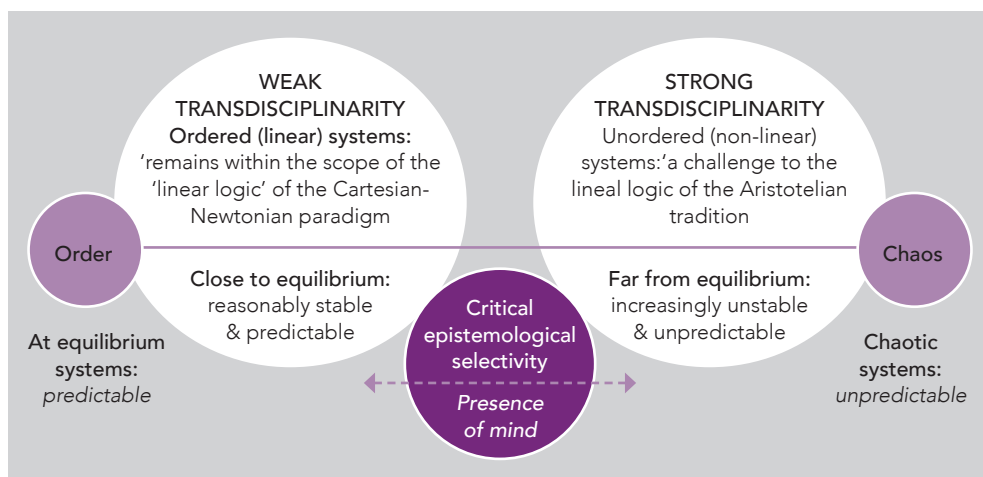
From the perspective of engaged scholarship, one mediating factor that brings utility to the conceptualisation of 'weak' and 'strong' forms of transdisciplinarity, as well as unifies the concepts into a systemic functional whole, is – as Snowden and Boone argue – the ability of leaders (in this instance, engaged scholars) to "know not only how to identify the context they're working in at any given time but also [to know] how to change their behavior and their decisions to match that context" (Snowden & Boone, 2007, p. 75). In other words, a high utility engaged, transdisciplinary schemata must be inclusive of the dexterity to critically apply a methodological 'both – and' *presence* of mind (critical epistemological selectivity), rather than a universal, thus exclusionary, 'either/or' *habit* of methodological mind in, in order to determine the systemic properties of a knowledge production context, prior to methodological decision making.

For example, within an engaged project lifecycle the likelihood is that both linear and non-linear challenges will be encountered. Possessing the *presence* of mind and the selective epistemological dexterity to respond to variable system dynamics within a knowledge production context is, most likely, a transdisciplinary capability that can add value to engaged partnerships. The value emerges from the increased synchronicity between the system dynamics of the challenge being encountered and methodological decision making through a process of critical epistemological selectivity prior to implementation. From the perspective of the engaged practitioner, the agile *presence* of mind referred to above, could be operationalised at an institutional level by applying a heuristic labelled here as 'boundary stretching'.

'Boundary stretching' and critical epistemological selectivity

The expression 'critical epistemological selectivity' enables a comment about 'disciplinary boundaries' proposed by Beaulieu et al, (2018) in their 20 year global scoping review of engaged scholarship reflects a first order position: The analysis reflects a first order position in which a key transdisciplinary "principle" of engaged scholarship is the capacity to cross disciplinary borders.

> *"[E]ngaged scholarship fundamentally involves a multi-inter-transdisciplinary approach [and] …. . It assumes an interaction across disciplines and relevant sectors. Moreover, engaged scholarship must overcome disciplinary boundaries" (emphasis added, Beaulieu et al., 2018, p. 9).*

An alternative position is a third order perspective of transdisciplinarity which manifests through a process of "boundary *stretching*" entailing "reflection on the mythic structures that direct our ways of knowing, being, and doing" in order to problematise the assumptions that sustain the universal, uncritical application of the Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm (Ross & Mitchell, 2018a, p. 51). These two conceptualisations are qualitatively different.

The 20 year scoping review presented by Beaulieu et al. (2018) reflects a first order transdisciplinary disposition which is limited to surface descriptors without consideration of the system dynamics (the context) that are being 'crossed'. The first order descriptor position exclusively assumes a universal system dynamic thus – for as long as this universal position holds for engaged scholars – the need for any form of critical epistemological selectivity becomes, by default, superfluous to the knowledge co-production encounter.

The concept of third order 'boundary stretching' which Ross and Mitchell implicitly propose emphasises the relevance of system dynamics during collaborative knowledge co-production processes. Being responsive to system dynamics which define the knowledge co-production context demands a process of reflexive 'stretching'. In the context of engaged scholarship, the reflexive 'stretchiness' implicitly suggests an elastic boundary dynamic – with the degree of elasticity being interdependent with the presence of mind (reflexivity) of engaged practitioners to determine and respond to variable systemic knowledge co-production contexts (critical epistemological selectivity). As such, the third order position which is inclusive of engaged minds with the capabilities to apply 'critical epistemological selectivity' to determine the system dynamics of particular knowledge production contexts prior to methodological co-decision making may represent an opportunity to 'stretch' the transdisciplinary methodological armamentarium of engaged scholarship.

Novel hypothesis generation #2: The 'spirit' of engagement (historicity and 'beyond disciplines')

The second novel hypothesis focuses at a national level of granularity and problematises the contemporary 'spirit' of engagement in South Africa. The expression 'spirit' is co-opted from Nicolescu's expression "spirituality", referring to "cosmodernity" – meaning "that all entity (existence) in the universe is defined by its relation to all other entities" (Nicolescu, 2014, p. 212). It is postulated that the dominant 'spirit' of engagement in South Africa is social justice. The justification for this claim is that the extant identity attributed to the 'spirit' of engagement by South African academe has developed in variable ways in relation to (1) the injustices associated with the legacy of apartheid, and, (2) the perceived hegemony of the northern knowledge project in the real-world context of place-based inequalities, as is evidenced in the epistemic (in)justice/s, indigenisation and decolonisation of knowledge co-production arguments.

Whilst there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the focus on social (in)justices; it is also legitimate to ask if the extant 'spirit' of engagement represents a *habit* of mind that may unintentionally constrain the contemporary potentials of engaged scholarship in the face of global, wicked challenges that manifest locally in variable ways. History provides insights.

Between 1990 and 1996 Earnest Boyer re-imagined a more engaged academe. During the same period South Africa journeyed into the democratic transition. The convergences of the two concepts had sufficient synergy to contribute to a shift in South Africa from

'community service', to 'knowledge based community service', to 'community engagement' and then 'engaged scholarship'. By 2007 there was also a consensus that community engagement must be integrated ('both - and') with the other core functions of HEIs (HEQC, 2007).

This shift in focus from non-academic 'community service' to integrated 'engaged scholarship' emerged over a ten-year period in South Africa through some 'paradox and seemingly contradictory truths' – as is evidenced by the inability of South African academe in 2007 to agree a single 'generalisable definition' for community engagement. Nevertheless, just over a decade and a half later, the secondary operational characteristics of engaged scholarship became institutionalised as a uniquely South African form of differentiated community engagement placing social justice as an 'end' and engaged scholarship as the 'means', Figure 3.

Figure 3: *The emergence of the 'spirit' of engagement in South Africa, 1994 – 2024. Source: author's contribution*
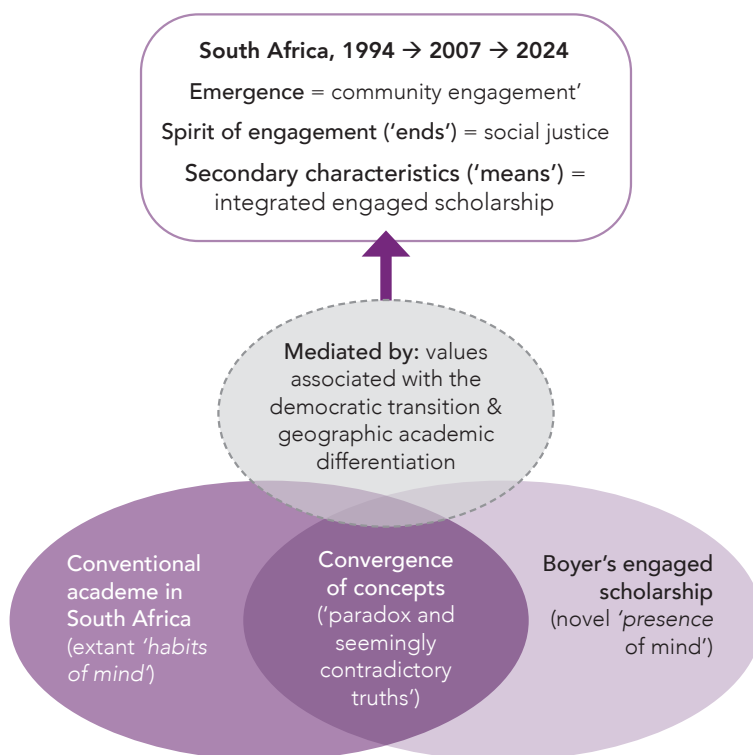

Figure 3 represents the emergence of a South African 'spirit' of engagement which influenced and developed through the historical, 'both – and' convergences of Boyer's

engaged scholarship and the extant South African habits of academe (primarily situated within the Cartesian-Newtonian tradition). The particular South African identity of the 'spirit' of engagement has developed though two dominant mediating co-factors: the values associated with the national democratic shift and geographical differentiation of engaged HEIs. Simply stated: the uniquely South African form of community engagement that we see today has emerged through a historical, interdependent process reflecting *'both'* the axiological primacy placed on social justice which reflected the broader national context *'and'* the localised geographical differentiation of HEIs.

Discussion: the South African 'spirit' of engagement re-considered

The unique form of engaged scholarship in South Africa has emerged through transdisciplinary 'boundary stretching' of South African academe with Boyer's conceptualisation of engaged scholarship which was enabled by a 'both – and' presence of mind, as well as some 'paradox and seemingly contradictory truths'. The new form of engaged scholarship was also influenced by a sufficient presence of mind to deliberate on the potentials of the 'both – and' of the South African Constitutional principles and the localised geographical differentiation of academe.

This combination of 'boundary stretching' and 'both – ands' was facilitated by a presence of collective engaged minds that provided impetus for the historical development of what has now become an established form of community engagement in South Africa. From this perspective, it becomes evident that South African academe has, in variable ways, 'gone beyond disciplines' because community engagement was not a scholarly activity two decades ago, but is now institutionally embedded as integrated scholarship alongside teaching and learning and research (HEQC, 2007).

However, the secondary operational characteristics (properties) of the systems associated with engaged scholarship in South Africa are potentially constrained by a 'spirit' of engagement that (1) has a tendency – if novel hypothesis #1, above, is credible – to be restricted to first order, 'weak' transdisciplinarity, and (2) champions social justice to be an 'end'. By re-considering these habits of mind, – given that the South African Constitution enshrines social justice as both a 'means' and an 'end' *and* most contemporary policy documents prioritise more tangible, real-world issues as 'ends' – it is possible to problematise the primacy given to social justice as an 'end'. The questions that seem relevant include:

- Does the contemporary South African context justify championing social justice as an 'end', or is that conceptualisation an inappropriate, or outdated, habit of mind that now constrains the potentials of community engagement?
- What would happen if social justice became a 'means' to achieve multiple different 'ends'?
- What sort of presence of mind would be required to catalyse new 'ends'?

- What type of transdisciplinary 'means' might support alternative 'ends'?
- What type of potential 'means' and 'ends' candidates could be considered?.

For the sake of brevity, one suggestion about a potential candidate that could disrupt the primacy status that is currently bestowed on social justice is considered: 'second order science'. Second order science is a nascent method that aims to respond to the wicked realities that confounds the Cartesian-Newtonian tradition (first order science). The secondary operational characteristics of second order science are situated within the logic of 'strong' transdisciplinarity and has synergies with the secondary operational characteristics of engaged scholarship, including, *inter alia*: "shared research problems" (Alrøe & Noe, 2014, p. 69); participation in the research process by multiple "communities of practitioners" (Lissack, 2017, p. 12) and a focus on both "[real-world] solution [oriented] processes …..[while being] reflexive" (Fazey et al., 2018, p. 57). However, for the full potentials of the second order science candidate to be activated within an engaged context requires at least one new mediating factor. One exemplar of a potential mediating factor is considered: a commitment to 'taming the growl' of wicked problems by developing resilience strategies to the problems, rather than aiming to identify correct solutions, Figure 4.

Figure 4: A disruptive 'spirit' of engagement. Source: author's contribution
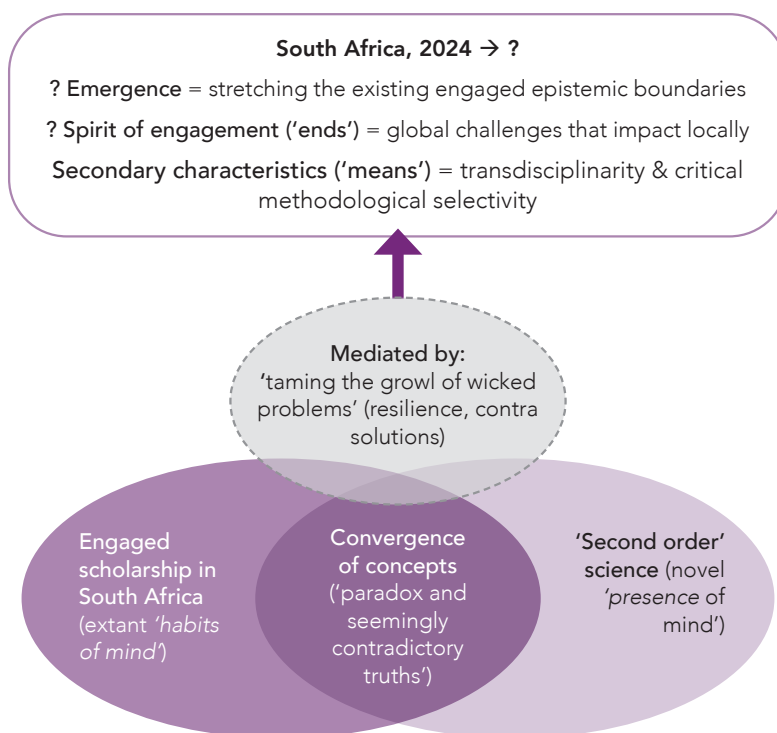
A conflation of the concepts associated with engaged scholarship and second order science could stimulate sufficient disruptive presences of mind to generate 'paradox and seemingly contradictory truths' from which a new form of third order engaged scholarship might emerge. The example of second order science is presented as a potential disruptive candidate – but the candidate is a biased example, amongst multiple potential candidates. Nevertheless, re-considering the 'spiritual' primacy of social justice as an 'end' against *'both'* multiple disruptive contenders with multiple possible 'means' *'and'* realist mediating factors could expand the potentials of engaged scholarship in South Africa.

Limitations of the conceptual research methodology

This article has taken a theoretical position which, for many readers, may seem overly complicated and distant from the 'real-world' practice of engaged scholarship. The article has also not included several avenues which could illuminate transdisciplinary engaged case studies – such as the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education which supports the Knowledge for Change Global Consortium.

That being said, if the article catalyes sufficient interest from engaged practitioners then the next steps would be to ask practical 'how to' questions so that the theory that has been presented above could gradually become adapted into a workable methodology. Whilst this endeavour may, at first glance, appear to be an unlikely scenario there is ample case material that can be drawn upon to provide stepping stones towards a workable model. Global examples include Bakhache et al. (2017) and Bartels et al. (2019). Closer to home, there are examples from South Africa including Burman and Aphane (2019); Cunningham (2020); Strydom (2023); Van der Merwe et al. (2019) and van der Merwe et al. (2020) from which valuable lessons could be learnt.

Concluding comments

The purpose of this article has been to constructively disrupt the current habits of mind with regard to community engagement in South Africa using the 'both – and' and 'boundary stretching' heuristics, underscored by second and third order learning as disruptive referential axes of abductive enquiry. Two novel hypotheses have been presented. The first novel hypothesis refers to a project level of granularity and argues that the notions of 'weak' and 'strong' forms of transdisciplinarity could be transposed into engaged scholarship if the concept is applied with a presence of mind labelled as 'critical epistemological selectivity'. The second novel hypothesis refers to a national level of granularity and queries the utility of the extant 'spirit' of engagement – which places primacy on social justice as an 'end'. The reason for querying the primacy placed on social justice is not to denigrate social justice, *per se*; but rather to ask if social justice could usefully become a 'means' that contributes to more tangible, real-world 'ends'?

Both novel hypotheses are underpinned by the concepts of 'habits' and 'presences' of mind which enables a broader historical reflection. The period from 1994-2007 represented a period dominated by a fragmented and geographically differentiated national South African *presences* of mind relating to the potentials of Boyer's conceptualisation of engaged scholarship within the emergent democratic context. However, there are indicators that in the post 2007 era South African academe has seemingly gravitated towards a *habit* of mind which could be constraining the potentials of community engagement.

The primary constraint is that community engagement in South Africa appears to have retained an inward, first order, localised habit of mind associated with the Cartesian-Newtonian tradition. This represents a limited, if not uncritical (naïve), conceptualisation of transdisciplinarity when there are second and third order alternatives that can be considered. Likewise, for as long as the 'spirit' of engagement in South Africa is retained as social justice through first order, ahistorical (the reification of the democratic shift) and predominantly localised perspectives in the face of multiple, real-world global challenges that 'wickedly' manifest in particular contexts, it is plausible that engaged scholarship could become a sub-optimal vehicle to ameliorate the impact of those challenges.

In summary, there is a risk that the individual agency and collective axiological presence of engaged minds which contributed to the development and institutionalisation of community engagement in the 1994 – 2007 – 2024 period could render itself in a deficit position in the face of emergent wicked global challenges for as long as engaged scholarship retains an inward, first order, localised habit of mind. Hopefully, this article contains sufficient 'paradox and seemingly contradictory truths' to contribute to a transition towards a more contemporary form of critical, second and/or third order transdisciplinary engagement that can become mutually beneficial to both academe and its neighbouring communities in the future.

Notes on Contributor

Author

Dr Christopher J. Burman
Senior lecturer
Turfloop Graduate School of Leadership
University of Limpopo
Polokwane, South Africa
christopher.burman@ul.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5861-2446

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Exploring the synergies between intervention research and engaged research in South Africa

Jenita Chiba, University of Pretoria

Abstract

Engaged research is a space where collaborative work takes place with groups of people within a specific geographic area and special interests in relation to their well-being – this being understood as a community. Intervention research design is a dynamic process which involves researchers (based within universities), organisations and practitioners and follows distinct stages, with collaboration at the core of each stage. Given that collaboration is a core theme for engaged research as well as the intervention research design process, the question arises if the intervention research design process could be considered a tool to promote engaged research. The Sihleng'imizi family intervention was designed as a cash plus intervention for families who have children who received the Child Support Grant (CSG). Ten families participated in a twelve-week psycho-educational family intervention. The design and development of the Sihleng'imizi family programme followed the intervention research process. Thus, the aim of this paper is to provide insight into how intervention research could be considered as a form of engaged research through the example of the Sihleng'imizi family programme. The paper will look at how collaboration was a feature in each of the phases of the intervention research design. A reflective discussion on the successes of collaborative work and how this may contribute to engaged research, as part of community engagement, will be discussed.

Keywords: *Intervention research, engaged research, continuum of collaboration, child support grant*

Introduction

In professions such as social work, psychology, nursing, and public health, the design and implementation of interventions often involve a multifaceted and iterative process aimed at addressing complex social issues. These interventions, while intended to create positive outcomes for individuals, also have broader implications at multiple levels of society. Understanding the effectiveness of interventions requires a comprehensive approach that examines not only the outcomes of the intervention but also the processes involved in its implementation. Intervention research design is a systematic approach to developing, testing, and refining practice models to ensure they achieve their intended goals. According to Gilgun & Sands (2012), intervention research encompasses the creation and evaluation of the practice models from their conceptualisation through to dissemination. For the purposes of this paper, practice models can be understood as social work interventions or programmes that are to be implemented for service users or clients.

An example of such a practice model is the Sihleng'imizi family intervention, which was developed and tested within the framework of the intervention research design. This programme illustrates the application of intervention research principles to a real-world problem, specifically aiming to enhance the impact of the South African Child Support Grant (CSG) by integrating a family strengthening component. Through a detailed examination of the intervention's design, pilot testing, and evaluation phases, this paper explores how collaboration, context-specific adaptions, and iterative refinement play crucial roles in the research process.

The discussion extends to consider whether intervention research aligns with principles of engaged research, which emphasises collaboration and community participation. One form of engaged research is that of community-based participatory research (CBPR). Koen (2021, p. vii) highlights that through this approach, "research is conducted by [with] and for the participants." By exploring the intersection of intervention research and engaged research practices, the discussion will contribute to a broader understanding of how research methodologies can be used to address social challenges. It must be noted that at the time the research (Chiba, 2022) was conducted and written, the author only used the intervention research design. It was after the completion and submission of the research report that the author reflected on how the element of collaboration featured in the phases of intervention research design and whether, if at all this could be aligned with engaged research practices. Thus, the paper has been written as a reflective piece drawing on key elements of the intervention research carried out but taking into consideration the theoretical framework of engaged research (Key et al., 2019).

Literature review

Community engagement

Community engagement is understood to be a third function or mission of South African higher education institutions, alongside that of teaching and research. Hall (2010, p. 25) explains that

> community engagement is a process of creating a shared vision among the community (especially disadvantaged) and partners (local, provincial, national government, NGOs, HEIs, businesses and donors) in society, as equal partners that result in long term collaborative programmes of action with outcomes that benefit the whole community equitably.

This definition points to an important element of collaboration. Maistry (2023, p. i) further highlights that community engagement in higher education institutions "serv[es] as the bridge between universities, local communities, and the broader society." It is through community engagement initiatives that ideally the community and higher education institutions are brought closer together, and where knowledge is co-created with and for communities (Keet & Muthwa, 2021), which in turn can contribute to transformation and decolonisation of teaching. There are many ways in which community engagement is implemented, and this includes service learning, volunteering (engaged citizenry), or engaged research. These forms of community engagement can lend themselves to range from being informal to more formal arrangements such as projects. The common thread through all the forms of community engagement is that of reciprocity in the collaboration between universities and the communities for sustainable partnerships (McCann, 2023). With regard to this paper, engaged research as a form of community engagement will be the focus. The central idea is that "engaged research practices … may bring universities and communities closer together, helping to cultivate a knowledge democracy" (McCann, 2023, p. 45).

Within the social work profession, intervention is at the core of working with individuals, families, and communities. It is also imperative that interventions are informed by best practices or are evidence-based. This assists in improving the quality and effectiveness of the interventions for the service users. One way in which the social work profession is able to ensure that interventions are informed by best practices is through intervention research. However, Gilgun & Sands (2012) point to the shift that intervention research should be understood through a developmental lens. Thus, the following section will look at what the intervention research design entails and how one may consider using a developmental lens, such as that of engaged research, to better understand the importance of including the community as part of the development and design process.

Intervention research design

Gilgun & Sands (2010, p.349) define intervention research as "research that involves the development and testing of practice models, descriptions of change processes, and the application of models of practice to new populations and contexts." This implies that interventions are assessed from the initial stages of development through to dissemination. Thus intervention research involves an ongoing process of design and development (D&D) which occurs sequentially but also in an iterative way (Gilgun & Sands, 2010; Rothman & Thomas, 1994). Various activities contribute to the D&D model of intervention research and these activities lead into and inform the activities and stages that follow it. Rothman & Thomas (1994, p. 9) provide specific stages of the D&D model, as follows:

1. problem analysis and project planning; information gathering and synthesis;
2. design;
3. early development and pilot testing;
4. evaluation and advanced development; and
5. dissemination.

The intervention research phases presented by Fraser et al. (2009) are similarly conceptualised and follow the same processes.

Prior to an intervention being designed, researchers seek to understand social challenges and problems in order to inform interventions; this could lead to positive impacts in alleviating these challenges. This requires a comprehensive understanding of how people and communities make sense of and experience their challenges, as well as all other influences, risks, protective factors, and resources that have a bearing on the problem or issue at hand (Gilgun & Sands, 2012).

The information gathering and synthesis phase consists of reviewing literature to identify existing intervention models and empirical studies and their effectiveness in different contexts from which target groups might benefit most. This information, along with data obtained from the problem analysis and project planning phase, is used to set goals and objectives, identify useful theoretical frameworks to guide the study, and determine the operationalisation of the variables or dimensions that will be the units of analysis. These would ideally provide the conceptual framework for the study and the hypothesised changes that are expected to occur as a result of the intervention (Rothman & Thomas,1994).

Included in this information gathering phase should be a review of the intervention successes, programme components that did not work, and the conditions in which this occurred and for whom (Fraser et al., 2009; Gilgun & Sands, 2012). This knowledge of existing programme successes and difficulties is anticipated to assist the intervention team in identifying useful elements to consider for inclusion in the programme. This

information, along with what was gathered in the initial stages of the process, which include an understanding of how communities experience their challenges, will help guide the design phase of the D&D model (De Vos & Strydom, 2011).

The design phase of intervention research requires various elements to merge prior to piloting a programme. This may include the development of programme components and content. Manuals that provide extensive details on the programme topics and activities are developed. Included in this phase is the design of the observational system (De Vos & Strydom, 2011) or the monitoring and evaluation framework of the intervention which considers the theory of change, the definition and operationalisation of its concepts, and the fidelity and feasibility of the programme.

The next phase is piloting the intervention. However, prior to this, training of the intervention team on programme implementation needs to occur, specifically with respect to their role in facilitating the intervention and, where applicable, data collection for the pilot evaluation. Pilot testing is an important process in intervention research as it provides details on whether the intervention will work in settings that are similar to that in which the intervention will take place (De Vos & Strydom, 2011). This phase provides valuable information on the effectiveness of the intervention and identifies the various elements that may need revision (De Vos & Strydom, 2011).

Fraser et al. (2009) posit fidelity as an integral element of piloting and evaluating an intervention. Fidelity refers to the "extent to which a program[me] follows an intended program[me] model" (Fraser et al., 2009, p.124). Programme fidelity links the implementation to the intervention outcomes. Measuring programme fidelity will include the quality and strengths of the intervention as well as how the service users experienced the intervention. Other elements, such as the programme manual, duration and length of the programme, frequency and intensity of the intervention, all provide information on the extent to which the programme will be replicable (Fraser et al., 2009). The pilot enables the testing of the design features, components, and intervention hypothesis. This evaluation provides evidence of what has worked well, and the areas that need to be redefined will be made visible. An assessment of the feasibility of an intervention during the pilot phase provides details on the cost-effectiveness of an intervention and whether it would be sustainable. Considering the constrained and limited resources available in the South African context, an evaluation of the feasibility of an intervention is necessary.

Following the pilot study, interventions are often refined, and plans for advanced testing and evaluations are put in place. Here interventions are often tested using experimental or quasi-experimental research designs (Rothman & Thomas, 1994), where control groups are included as a way to compare changes and whether these can be attributed to the intervention. This data too will provide valuable information about the intervention and whether its intended aims have been met. This will feed into another round of refinement of the intervention before it may be disseminated and presented as a feasible model to be implemented for scaling up.

There is an element of collaboration within each of the phases of the intervention research design. However, depending on the nature of the intervention as well as the specific phase of the research, the nature of collaboration may differ in intensity, as suggested by Key's et al. (2019) framework of engaged research. It is at this point of the continuum of collaboration that some synergies can be linked to engaged research and the intervention research design. This will become clearer in the discussion below on the insights of the D&D of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention.

When carrying out intervention research, there needs to be an awareness of potential limitations of the design. The intervention research design literature suggests that the intervention team (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010; Fraser et al., 2009; Rothman & Thomas, 1994) is key to the rollout of the intervention that is to be studied. The intervention team is understood as the team that is responsible for the overall implementation of the programme. Fixsen et al. (2005) suggests that the implementation team is also understood as the purveyors of the programme, change agent, linking agent, programme consultant, or site co-ordinator.

Fraser & Galinsky (2010) indicate that it must not be assumed that the intervention team will be able to keep to the fidelity of the programme through the use of just a manual. It is imperative that supervision be built into the intervention design, as it is through this support that the team will be able to adhere to the implementation fidelity. Thus, part of the intervention team would include a supervisor. The supervisor would be responsible for providing support and guidance in relation to implementation fidelity throughout the intervention cycle. In social work, the supervisor would often be a senior social worker who forms part of the team. Given that this relationship is purely one of support for the implementation team in keeping with the fidelity of the programme, it must be recognised that there is an element of power dynamics that may influence the relationship within the implementation team.

Secondly, the outcome of the intervention research is heavily reliant on the implementation. Thus, even though a programme may be well conceptualised, poor implementation can compromise the outcomes of the study. Training and support for the intervention team would be very important to avoid poor implementation. Importantly too, there needs to be a good fit of the intervention team with the community in which the intervention is to be carried out. If the intervention team has a good contextual understanding of the community, this can mitigate poor implementation practices (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010).

Lastly, and somewhat related to the previous limitation, the intervention itself should always consider the context in which it will be offered. If the intervention is not contextually relevant to the community and the programme participants, this may have a negative outcome in relation to participation and retention numbers (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010). Thus, to prioritise that the intervention is contextually relevant, the question arises as to how intervention research can consider elements of engaged research in order to include communities in the various phases of the intervention research design process.

Given the discussion above related to community engagement and intervention research, the focus of this paper is to understand how intervention research can form part of engaged research as a method of community engagement. On its own, intervention research offers a platform to develop and implement evidence-based interventions within communities; however, it can lack community involvement (Fixsen et al., 2005). Community engagement and specifically the lens of community engaged research offers a valuable means of involving community members, researchers, and other stakeholders to engage in a research process that will be mutually beneficial to all involved. Currently, there is a dearth of literature regarding how these two approaches could form synergies, through their collaborative nature. However, before exploring this, a background to the Sihleng'imizi family intervention will be presented below.

Background and context of the study

Sihleng'imizi family programme

A family intervention was designed by drawing on research from The Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) at the University of Johannesburg, and its partners on family contexts, child support grants and child well-being in South Africa (Patel et al., 2017). The Sihleng'imizi Family Programme was specifically designed to complement and scale up the positive benefits of the CSG in South Africa. The programme was targeted at children under eight years of age, who were in Grade R and Grade 1, and who were receiving a CSG. The programme ran over twelve weeks and the whole family was invited to attend. It was delivered by trained social workers and childcare workers who formed the intervention/implementation team for the programme.

Sihleng'imizi is an adaption of the SAFE Children Family Intervention that was designed for poor urban families in Chicago, USA. While SAFE Children was created for a different context, it contains some of the key programme components relevant to disadvantaged and poor families living in difficult circumstances in South Africa. It was thus chosen as the basis on which to create a new, culturally relevant, and locally appropriate programme for South African families that receive one or more CSGs. Sihleng'imizi is a Zulu phrase that means we care for families.

The overall aim of the Sihleng'imizi family programme was to improve child well-being in poor households receiving the CSG (Sihleng'imizi (We Care for Families) Family Programme: Facilitator's Manual, 2016). The programme is a psycho-social educational intervention that draws on the social development approach to promote child well-being. It provides support, knowledge, and skills to parents/caregivers and families to enhance the well-being dimensions by providing an environment that will allow these dimensions to be enhanced. The social development approach that the programme is based upon is a synthesis of three specific theories and provides the theoretical framework of the programme. These

are the developmental-ecological risk theory, systems theory, and the psycho-educational approach to family intervention.

The developmental-ecological risk theory (Tolan et al., 1995) provides a way to understand and identify risk factors at the individual, family (relationship), community, and societal levels. From this standpoint, it is understood that individual development exists within various realms of the social structure of care and support of the child and the family. The individual exists within families, which may include extended families and friends. These systems in turn exist within broader social structures such as schools and neighbourhoods. These social structures form part of the wider community structures and society at large. It is understood that each of these contexts would have either a direct or indirect impact on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tolan et al., 1995).

The next theory that the Sihleng'imizi family programme draws upon is the systems theory. It emphasises a family's interaction with their social networks within the family and wider community. A family is conceived of as a system of interdependent relationships that need to work together synergistically to achieve ideal social outcomes (Galvin and Young, 2010). Bringing about systemic changes in family relationships and the way in which families interact with the wider community is anticipated to yield positive outcomes for the way in which families function. With regards to the Sihleng'imizi family programme, family is broadly defined and acknowledges the diversity of family structures and their social and economic contexts within which they live. The programme thus recognises the strengths, capabilities, and assets that these families have, as well as the agency that they possess to make decisions for themselves in order to achieve their hopes and dreams (Giddens, 1991).

The intervention also draws upon the psycho-social educational approach. This approach allows for the opportunity for parents/caregivers to increase their access to knowledge, skills, and information. Findings from Tolan et al's. (2004) longitudinal research of the SAFE Children programme indicate that this exposure to new information could prevent short-, medium-, and longer-term social and behavioural challenges in children. This approach is fitting for the Sihleng'imizi family programme as, in South Africa, many families lack information about how to access and navigate the use of resources that are available to them. Examples of these include how to access social grants, public works programmes, applications for identity documents, and housing subsidies. Barriers to access to social assistance and basic services such as water, sanitation, and social services such as psychosocial support are key determinants of child and family well-being. While positive educational outcomes depend on regular school attendance and quality education, parental and/or caregiver engagement with children's schooling also matters in enhancing school performance. Further, the social and emotional well-being of children is contingent on having warm, loving, nurturing, and cohesive family and home environments.

Positive child–caregiver relations are also influenced by effective communication, behaviour management, and monitoring and supervision of children. For caregivers, having a social support system, enjoying good mental health and psychosocial well-being, and access to material and non-material resources to care for children are other factors

associated with better well-being outcomes for children. Poverty is a significant risk factor for a child's well-being. Finally, having access to a cash transfer is critical to improving the material well-being of children, but when parents/caregivers lack financial knowledge and skills, this contributes to financial exclusion. These structural and systematic barriers compromise childrens' development and undermine the empowerment of families (Patel et al., 2018).

The conceptual framework that informed the design of the study was based on the above theories and is situated in the developmental approach to social work. The design of the intervention was based on the above theoretical assumptions and identified the outcomes to be achieved in the four key domains around which the programme content was structured. The domains include:

1. Child-caregiver relations (children and family),
2. Social and community connectedness,
3. Engagement in child's education, and
4. Financial capabilities.

The paper will now move on to providing the theoretical lens through which this paper is based. A discussion on engaged research will be presented below.

Engaged research

To fully understand the way in which intervention research could be considered as a form of community engagement, the theoretical framework of this paper will be discussed. Community engaged research is where groups of people who are either affiliated by geographic area, special interests or similar context engage in a process of working collaboratively (Balls-Berry & Acosta-Pérez, 2017). Further to this, community engaged research is to ensure that there are mutually beneficial outcomes for both the community as well as the research drivers (Sathorar & Geduld, 2021). The National Research Foundation's (NRF) vision 2030 (NRF, 2023, p. 2) suggests that "engaged research is an approach that involves public engagement as part of a participatory process and can enable collaboration and consultation with a wide range of societal actors, including society, academia, government, and industry. The nature, extent, and timing of engagements within the research process will be influenced by the type of research being undertaken, e.g. basic or applied, in its field and disciplinarity, e.g. intra-, cross-, multi-, inter-, and trans-, of its approach." Ohio University (2024) points to three approaches to community engaged research, which include traditional research, community engaged research and community-based participatory research. Each of these approaches differs with regard to the level of community involvement in terms of collaboration in contributing to the research objective, study design, recruitment, research tool, data collection, analysis and interpretation of data, and dissemination. Collins et al. (2018) strongly suggest that CBPR

lends itself to the most community engaged and collaborative research approach. Koen (2021) asserts that CBPR values the complex power dynamics of participation among community members and research scholars. Within the research project, all collaborators (community members and researchers) are viewed as equal, all voices are shared and valued, and there is a common goal to work together to bring about social change for the benefit of the community (Koen, 2021).

Importantly to note, the nature of CBPR in the global South has its roots in South America, Africa and Asia (Collins et al., 2018) and largely stemmed from the challenges of colonising the role of research and oppression from authoritarian rule. As a response to this, CBPR offered possible solutions for social change, with the collaboration of the community.

Although there is extensive literature that highlights the successes of engaged research, such as the CBPR approach, within the South African context, and especially for early career researchers based in universities, challenges are experienced in practice (James et al., 2024). Some of these challenges include research positionality, building relationships within communities as emerging researchers, and feelings of disconnection in engaged scholarship. The authors (James et al., 2024, p. 1) highlight that there is a great need for "mentorship from experienced community engaged scholars, resources for establishing community connections, guidance in navigating cultural nuances, and training for effective communication and relationship building in communities." However, it must be noted that these challenges can extend beyond general contexts where CBPR is carried out and is not limited to early career researchers.

Damons & Daniels (2022) reflect on their experiences as women in academia who have traversed engaged research with communities that were diverse, marginalised, and vulnerable. The authors reflect on the racial differences between the researchers and the community members and how South Africa's separatist past has contributed towards the mistrust of the intentions of outsiders. The authors highlight how this mistrust resulted in the research team spending close to a year visiting the community to gain the trust and permission to carry out the research with and within the community. This indicates that although engaged research such as the CBPR approach is seen as having the highest form of participation and collaboration between researchers and the community, within the South African context, challenges that exist cannot be dismissed. Alternative and creative methods should be explored to navigate such challenges that are experienced.

Key et al. (2019) provides an alternative to viewing engaged research as only falling into three distinct categories. Key et al. (2019) suggests that engaged research, or, as the authors refer – community engagement in research – should be viewed in the context of a continuum. This continuum ranges from *community consultation* through to *community-driven and led*, however, not disregarding that at times there may be *no community involvement* on the one end of the continuum. The authors suggest that collaboration will move along the continuum based on the level of community involvement and the meaningfulness of this collaboration for the partners at any point in time during the life cycle of the research

process. Thus, the emphasis is not on the research process but rather on the nature of the collaboration on this continuum. This alternative to understanding engaged research takes into consideration the contextual factors that may pose as challenges during the research process. Challenges as indicated above, such as trust, historical influences, and relationship building, can hinder the research process and the nature of collaboration with the community. Figure 1 below is a graphic presentation of the continuum of engaged research as presented by Key et al. (2019, p. 430).

Figure 1: Continuum of collaboration Source: (Key et al., 2019)
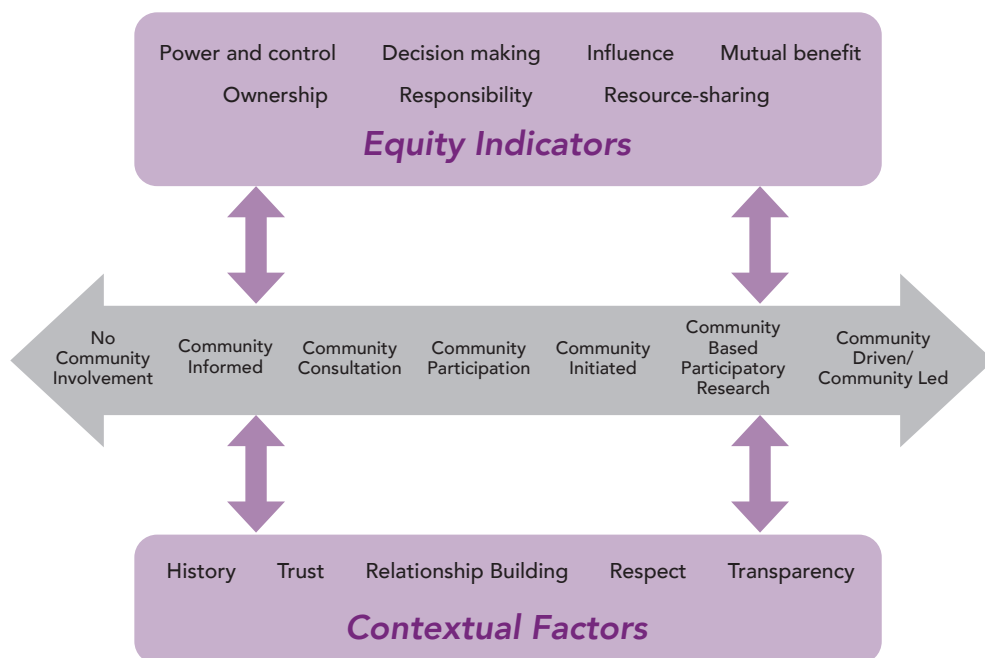
Additionally, important equity indicators, which often are not explicitly discussed in a research process, form part of the factors that contribute to the nature of collaboration on the continuum. This includes aspects such as power and control, responsibility, ownership, and resource-sharing, amongst others. Damons & Daniels (2022, ch13.5) succinctly share that "the dynamic and complex meaning-making that happens in any research relationship and context is unique, and all stakeholders should therefore remain open to the discomfort and excitement that engaging in authentic action research brings." This allows for engagement and collaboration to exist within a continuum through the phases of the research process. This is highlighted in Figure 2, below, where the community experience as well as the researcher's experience is noted along the continuum of collaboration and engagement.

Table 1: Community and researcher experiences Source: (Key et al., 2019: 432)

Community Perspective/Experience	Continuum	Researcher Perspective/Experience
We do not know about this project	No Community Involvement	We had no contact with the community
We may or may not be aware of this project but our information informed it	Community Informed	We sat in on a meeting and learned a great deal
Researchers met with us to present the project and asked for our input	Community Consultation	We met with several community organizations, they shared their concerns and gave us suggestions
Researchers provided opportunities for us to participate (e.g., recruitment, community advisory board)	Community Participation	We have defined role(s) for community to participate in the research
We told researchers what questions we need answers for	Community Initiated	We created the research in response to community identified issue(s)/question(s)
We participated in all aspects, equitably	Community Based Participatory Research	We developed the project together with community partners
We fully own the research	Community Driven/ Community Led	The community is in charge and we support their efforts when asked

The focus of the discussion shifts to the methodology and research design that were used as part of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention.

Method and approach: pilot Sihleng'imizi programme

A qualitative intervention research design was used, which involved the development and testing of a new practice model (Gilgun & Sands, 2010). The design that was followed was Rothman & Thomas' (1994) stages of intervention research. The initial stages of the design included an analysis of the problems facing CSG children and families. This was published as a research report (Patel et al., 2017), resulting in the design of the family strengthening programme and pilot testing – which was the focus of this study.

The research participants were selected through a community organisation in Doornkop, Soweto. Children who were in Grade R and Grade 1, who were CSG recipients and who lived close to the venue where the sessions were held, were recruited from a local school. In participant selection, the school considered all children in the two grades, and those children and their families were selected because they indicated some behavioural issues, which may have included late coming to school, frequent absenteeism, and difficulties relating to academic performance. These types of challenges were considered proxies for compromised educational and psychological well-being (Mboweni, 2014). Semi-structured research instruments were used to collect data from caregivers, teachers, and social workers

(intervention team). A total of 23 interviews were conducted with each of the three categories of research participants.

Table 2: Number of interviews completed

	Caregiver interviews	Teacher interviews	Social worker interviews	Total interviews
Baseline	10	0	0	10
Endpoint	9	2	2	13
Total	19	2	2	23

Caregivers were interviewed at both baseline (prior to the intervention) and endpoint (directly after termination of the intervention). The baseline interviews provided a life-context picture of the families who were to participate in the programme. The endpoint interviews were conducted with caregivers, the intervention team, and educators. The data generated provided information about the changes observed within families after attending the programme.

On completion of the interviews that were conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed. The researcher made use of thematic analysis and followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) procedures for data analysis. Atlas.ti was used and enabled the researcher to carry out the initial stages of thematic analysis. Initial codes were recorded with Atlas.ti. Open coding (Smit, 2002) was used where the data was compared and similar ideas and concepts were grouped together. From this, themes were looked at in relation to the programme dimensions and elements of programme evaluation.

A limitation of the study was the use of a translator during the interviews with the caregivers, which may have compromised the accuracy of what was actually said and conveyed. Meaning and nuances can get lost in translation (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011). In addition, during interactions with the caregivers, the researcher was aware of her positionality: firstly, entering the community as an Indian female, secondly, as a social worker and, lastly, the subtle element of power that caregivers may assume of the researcher. In addition, the researcher was aware of the language barriers that existed between herself and the caregivers. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg, Faculty of Humanities Higher Degrees Committee.

Insights from the D&D of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention

As indicated previously, the author's doctoral study (Chiba, 2022), which took place during 2016, was situated within the fourth and fifth stages of Rothman & Thomas' (1994) model – the pilot phase of the intervention. This pilot study formed part of a larger project that

was undertaken by the Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. The initial first three phases of the D&D model of intervention were completed by the research team at the CSDA.

The following section will present the Sihleng'imizi family intervention as a case study that followed the intervention research design process. The nature of the discussion that follows will focus on highlighting the element of collaboration within each of the stages.

The *initial problem analysis and project planning* phase sought to understand how the CSG could further be accelerated by combining it with a strengthening intervention to increase the already positive impacts of the grant. The CSG is one of the largest cash transfer programmes in South Africa, with close to 13 million children as beneficiaries of this grant (Hall, 2020). Research indicates that the CSG provides beneficiaries with the ability to convert their limited resources into opportunities to promote child well-being (Moodley et al., 2017). Positive child educational, health, and nutritional outcomes have been reported (Agüero et al., 2007; Coetzee, 2013; Delany et al., 2008). However, the grant has not been able to address the psychosocial challenges that CSG childrens' caregivers encounter on a daily basis (Hochfeld, 2015, 2022). Given that the social challenges experienced by families who live in poverty are complex and multidimensional, the provision of a social grant is not able to address all the psychosocial challenges experienced (Patel et al., 2018). Increasing research on cash plus interventions in the global South (Arriagada et al., 2018; Cluver et al., 2014; Lachman et al., 2020; Moura & Macedo de Jesus, 2012; Patel & Ross, 2020) indicates that where social protection interventions are combined with a strengthening intervention, child well-being outcomes are enhanced.

This initial phase of the intervention research process had limited opportunities for collaboration, as much of understanding and gaining perspective of the initial problem analysis included the synthesis of various research and literature on the topic. The project planning component of this phase included the research team (which comprised of the principal investigator and three researchers from the CSDA) conceptualising the research proposal with specific objectives to achieve for the next phase of the intervention research process. Collaboration here was mostly amongst the members of the research team as well as the gatekeepers of the communities to gain permission to carry out the research project in the next phase of the process. Prior to any engagement with the community, institutional ethical approval was obtained.

Research seeking to understand the family contexts of CSG beneficiaries and their bearing on child well-being outcomes was conducted (Patel et al., 2017). The *information gathering and synthesis* consisted of a rigorous study and statistical analysis of a national sample of children and their caregivers receiving the CSG and the factors that influence child well-being outcomes measured in terms of nutrition, health, and education outcomes. To gain further insights into the proximal family contextual factors to complement the quantitative study, focus group interviews were conducted with caregivers of CSG children (n=40) to gain information about their experiences as well as understanding their perspectives on caregiving, family beliefs, and their needs and challenges. A final element

that formed part of this study was a review of family interventions that are offered in South Africa. This was done via key informant interviews (n=10).

The nature of collaboration in this phase consisted of the research team working with the CSG caregivers to understand and gain insights into the family contexts as well as what they viewed as important aspects that they needed assistance with in caring for their children. Secondly, researchers collaborated with experts in the field of family interventions to gain an understanding of what family programmes already exist within South Africa. Additionally, information regarding the nature of these programmes was explored and included elements such as the nature of intervention, target population, duration, session topics, training, material, feasibility, and fidelity of the interventions. All of this information gathered in this phase, provided valuable recommendations for a family, and community-based strengthening programme, which could further scale up the existing positive impacts of the CSG (Patel et al., 2017).

From this data, a need for a family strengthening intervention for CSG families was identified, which informed the ***design*** phase of the process. A design model was developed through a collaborative adaption process, incorporating SAFE Children materials (Schools and Families Education (SAFE) Children, 2014) and Sinovuyo training materials (Lachman & Hutchings, 2014). The SAFE Children programme was considered because it has been evaluated longitudinally (Henry et al., 2012; Tolan et al., 2004) and the results of the intervention indicate that the approach, content, and focus were effective. Additionally, the programme was implemented with communities in the South of Chicago, which are considered to be deprived communities, and share some similar characteristics to the community from which the CSG families are from. The Sinovuyo programmes were considered to form part of the adaption as they were designed with the South African context in mind and underwent a randomised control trial (Cluver et al., 2016; Cluver et al., 2017; Lachman et al., 2018), and this indicated some evidence of a rigorous evaluation of the intervention. Importantly, the theory of change, which would guide the intervention as well as the eventual evaluation of the programme, was developed during this phase.

During this phase, key partners for the implementation of the Sihleng'imizi programme were identified. The key partners were chosen because of a long-standing relationship that the research team has had with the community organisation. The community in which the organisation is situated, has been identified as one of the poorest wards by the City of Johannesburg and the tenth most deprived ward in the city (De Wet et al., 2008). There is also a high uptake of the CSG in the area, and thus it was thought to be an appropriate community to locate the intervention. The collaborative aspect during this phase included the implementing partners of the SAFE children's programme (n=3), the identified supervisor (n=1), facilitators (n=1) and child carers (n=2) for the implementation of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention. Importantly, the facilitators and child carers that were identified had some connection to the community where the intervention was to be implemented. Some of the implementing team members worked for the gatekeeper organisation and thus were familiar with the community where the intervention was to take place.

The adaption process of these above-mentioned programmes formed part of the *early development* component of phase four. Rigorous and careful consideration was given to what content would be relevant to the needs of CSG families. The CSDA team (n=3) initially did a side-by-side comparison of the SAFE Children's programme and the Sinovuyo programmes (Families and Teens). It was found that some of the content covered by both programmes was similar, and there were some aspects not covered by either of the programmes. Additionally, the adaption process involved a review of each session to ensure that the language and content were relevant to the local context. Lastly, session activities were adapted and changed where necessary to make the material relevant to the context. Materials that were also reviewed and adapted during this phase included the facilitator manual (which had undergone significant adaptions), a family workbook, and a child carers manual. Specific design features such as the programme being group-based, size of the group, selection of participants, selection criteria, duration of the sessions, as well as the structure of each session, were decided upon.

Prior to the **pilot testing** component of this phase, the implementation team (n=6) underwent an intensive five-day training. On completion of this, the Sihleng'imizi family intervention was tested in a pilot study undertaken with four groups (two in an urban site and two in a rural site). At this point in the intervention research process, collaborative work took place between the community (including the schools (n=3) within the area), the intervention team, and the research team (n =4). Part of the pilot testing included an evaluative component, which forms part of the fifth phase of the research process.

The *evaluation* during the pilot testing included both the implementation evaluation and the outcome evaluation. With regards to the implementation evaluation, this related to the fidelity of the intervention, and included gaining information from facilitator weekly session reports, programme tracking checklists, session observations, and participant evaluations. The outcome evaluation looked at what changes occurred as a possible result of the intervention. Thus, data was gathered from baseline and endpoint interviews with the intervention participants, teachers, and intervention team; participant final group evaluation of the intervention; as well as a close-off intervention team report (Chiba, 2022).

Given the nature of this phase within intervention research, collaboration here took place on many levels and included the community, the school, families, the intervention team, and the research team.

The findings from the evaluation of the pilot Sihleng'imizi family intervention (Chiba, 2022) informed the sixth phase of the intervention research – *advanced development*. Here the intervention had undergone further refinement and adaption based on the findings that came from the pilot evaluation (Chiba, 2022) as well as a five-month follow-up study, which aimed to understand what changes were sustained within the families after the intervention (Fierloos, 2017). The advanced development of the programme included refining the number of sessions, session topics/content, and the incentive system. Once the intervention was adapted, this was then further tested with ten of the poorest wards within the City of Johannesburg (CoJ). Here the nature of the collaboration extended to the

ten communities and schools within the CoJ, the implementing team at the Department of Social Development within the CoJ (which included social workers and auxiliary social workers who worked in the abovementioned wards), and the research team. With this round of implementation, a more rigorous approach was used for the testing of the intervention where there was both a control group as well as the intervention group (Patel et al., 2019). Upon completion of the advanced testing and evaluation, the data obtained provided valuable pointers on how such an intervention could be taken to scale. Furthermore, a nine-month follow-up study was carried out with both the control and intervention groups (Patel et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2020).

Following this was the *dissemination* phase of the intervention research process. Importantly, a community dialogue took place after the pilot study, where the larger community was invited as well as all the families that participated in the Sihleng'imizi family programme, school representatives, as well as government officials from the Provincial Department of Education and Social Development. Following the advanced implementation and testing of the intervention, a research seminar was held where the wider public was invited as well as officials from the CoJ. Reports and articles have been published on the intervention, and as well as the manuals used for the intervention (Hochfeld et al., 2020, 2020; Patel et al., 2018, 2021)

Given the extensive discussion on the intervention research design and the case of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention, the question of whether this research design fits within engaged research practices arises.

Alignment of intervention research with engaged research

Intervention research focuses on the testing of practice models for intervention (Gilgun & Sands, 2012). De Vos & Strydom (2011) assert that these practice models (or interventions) have the aim of either preventing, alleviating social problems, or maintaining the quality of life. This implies that intervention research has an inherent aim of bringing about some sort of social change. This resonates with the intention of carrying out engaged research with communities, as stated previously.

Intervention research has the potential to exist at various points on the continuum of engaged research. As suggested through the narrative of the case study of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention, collaboration with the community existed on various levels in the course of the intervention research process. There was little to no collaboration with the community during the initial phases of the intervention research. As the research process evolved, there was more collaboration of the research team with the community, which included *community consultation* and *community participation*. Reflecting on the intervention research process that was followed, there appears to be synergy between the intervention research process and the engaged research continuum. The following areas indicate where there are strong overlaps between the two approaches:

- Community members were directly involved in identifying the locally relevant issues and challenges that CSG families experienced on a daily basis. This also included what the community members felt they needed more assistance within their family – lending itself to mitigating any risks that could develop further than their current situation.

- Researchers consulted with community representatives and gatekeepers in gaining access to potential participants of the intervention. Additionally, the community representatives assisted with the recruitment of participants for the Sihleng'imizi family intervention. This also included thinking about and contributing to appropriate retention strategies to keep the participants and the families from dropping out of the programme. At the end of the intervention, this collaboration resulted in a 100 percent retention rate of participants.

- Some of the instruments that were used for data collection were adopted from other studies. However, importantly, these research instruments were tested and adapted to fit the local South African context. Collaboration here took place between the research team and the intervention team (two of whom worked within the community).

- Community members participated in the data collection phase of the research at both baseline and endpoint. Without this valuable input, it would have been close to impossible to properly evaluate the intervention. Through this data, changes that occurred over the twelve-week intervention period were noted by the participants, and for some, they were able to directly relate these positive changes to the Sihleng'imizi family intervention. Importantly though, it was also this information that fed into further refining the intervention. Thus, although not a direct collaboration with the community members, the information provided did contribute towards the refinement of the intervention.

- Once all the data was analysed and the research reports were published, this was taken back to the community where the intervention took place. A community dialogue was organised, where the families who participated in the intervention were invited as well as the broader community. Included in this were stakeholders in the community, such as the schools through which participants were recruited, as well as the local Department of Social Development officials who are responsible for providing relevant preventative psychosocial services to the community. This dialogue allowed for all the partners to contribute to a way forward with the intervention. Reports have been published via the CSDA's website as well as through various peer-reviewed journals.

From the above, it is evident that there was some degree of community participation and involvement during the intervention research study of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention. It cannot be claimed to fit into the CBPR approach; however, the intervention research

design could fit into Key et al's. (2019) continuum. Thus, the intervention research design can be considered a research method that would fit appropriately into engaged research. The literature on intervention research design (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010; Fraser et al., 2009; Rothman & Thomas, 1994) does not have a strong focus on the element of collaboration; however, in practice, as suggested by the Sihleng'imizi family intervention, collaboration between the various partners is necessary for implementation of the research. Importantly, a strong focus and concerted effort to push forward collaboration in each of the phases of the intervention design process can bring it closer to a more engaged practice of research. Collaboration can also be reimagined in different ways; for example, in the first phase of the Sihleng'imizi design process, there was limited community collaboration. Creative ways to engage and collaborate with communities to gain a stronger and deeper understanding of the initial problem would possibly strengthen this phase. However, one should be mindful of the community's agency to be involved in such collaborations. Thus, drawing on Key's et al. (2019) suggestion of the continuum, it allows space for the community's agency to collaborate where they feel most comfortable to engage and collaborate.

Reflecting on Key's et al. (2019) presentation of engaged research, the intervention research design could exist and embed itself at any point on the continuum, but there needs to be a stronger focus on community participation in the initial stages of the research process. This would be important in order to have the community members well on board prior to the implementation of the intervention (Fixsen et al., 2005). Community involvement will contribute to the success of the feasibility of such interventions in the long term. Hill (2012) cautions that the design and development of intervention research can at times be driven by professionals (the implementation team and the research team) and not consider the views of the community. This is a gap where lessons could be taken from engaged research where collaboration with the community is highly valued.

Intervention research can lend itself to engaged research as it offers a platform for more rigorous fidelity, feasibility, and efficacy evaluation of programmes that are carried out in communities. This provides a base for evidence-based interventions, which if found to be effective, can be adapted and replicated to address specific challenges that may be experienced in communities. However, the principles of engaged research should be applied, and community collaboration should be an integral part of the process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, intervention research design is a crucial methodology for developing, testing, and refining practices aimed at addressing complex social issues. Following a structured process that includes problem analysis, design, pilot testing, and evaluation, researchers can systematically assess and enhance the effectiveness of interventions. The case study of the Sihleng'imizi family intervention illustrates this approach, highlighting the importance of iterative refinement and contextual adaption in achieving meaningful outcomes. The Sihleng'imizi family intervention, designed to complement the CSG, demonstrates how

research practices can be applied to real-world challenges. This process underscores the need for ongoing collaboration, local context consideration, and stakeholder engagement to ensure that interventions are both effective and relevant.

The exploration of whether intervention research aligns with engaged research practices reveals that while it may not fully align with the CBPR approach, it does fit within the continuum of engaged research. Intervention research often involves varying degrees of community involvement and collaboration, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how research can be both rigorous and responsive to community needs. By integrating principles of collaboration and contextual sensitivity, researchers can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of interventions.

Notes on Contributor

Dr. Jenita Chiba
Department of Social Work & Criminology, University of Pretoria
jenita.chiba@up.ac.za
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5932-9164

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THOUGHT PIECE

The Global South to the front: critical questions from two South-South dialogues on community engagement

Matías G. Flores, Cornell University

Abstract

In this article, I will reflect on the importance of two recent "South-South" exchanges organized by faculty and leadership from the Universidad de la República in Uruguay and Rhodes University in South Africa. I believe these encounters represent an innovative and much-needed alternative to collaborations where Global North voices are most prominent and Global South is reduced to an object of study. Finally, I identify five critical questions that emerged in these conversations for future South-South dialogues in the field: What is the Global South? Why should we have a dialogue? What should that dialogue look like? What are the main challenges for a South-South dialogue? What can the Global North learn from a South-South dialogue on community engagement?

Keywords: *community engagement, South-South partnerships, global dialogue, Global South*

Introduction

One thing that has concerned me the most in my exchanges with Chilean colleagues is how a considerable number would know more about the community engagement trajectories, programs, and networks from the US, the UK, Spain, and Australia than their Latin American neighbors. While there are notions about the history of a critical community engagement ethos in the continent (Flores et al., 2023), little is known about current structures and programs, such as the mandatory social services in Mexico, the constitutional-level integration of the three university missions in Brazil, or the socio-educational practices in Argentina. Similarly, experiences from Asian and African cases are barely mentioned.

This can be explained by the concentration of the field of community engagement in Global North cases and English publications, although several conferences, journals, and networks have been growing recently in either Spanish or Portuguese. In Chile, unfortunately, higher education policies typically follow the cases and trends in the Global North, while also maintaining a neocolonial mentality where everything that comes from the Global North and in English deserves special attention. *How to address this tendency and how to bring other voices into the conversation?*

In 2011, the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities edited a book on "engaged universities" at an international level as a response to the concentration of studies based on the Global North. In that book, the authors asked, "What can the Global North, and the whole world for that matter, learn from the civic engagement experience of the universities in the Global South?" (Watson et al., 2011, p. xxvi). The study included 20 universities: three universities from the North, thirteen from the South, and four from what the authors called a "transitional zone" (including Northern universities in "Southern skins" and Southern universities in Northern regions). They found a distinctive *Southern model of university-community engagement*[1] and concluded this Southern model "represents a rich and fruitful addition to the available models, mixes of intellectual capital and narratives in the field" (Watson et al., 2011, p. 249).

The scholarship by Watson et al. (2011) is one way to respond to this challenge, where Global South experiences are an object of study, and the active voices come from the Global North.[2] It centers on the Global South's absence and contributes important insights but without the Global South actors. In contrast, in this article, I will reflect on the importance of two recent "South-South" exchanges organized by faculty and leadership from the Universidad de la República in Uruguay and Rhodes University in South Africa. I believe these encounters represent an innovative and much-needed alternative to how to promote a global dialogue in the field. Finally, I identify five critical questions that emerged in these conversations for future South-South dialogues in the field.

Two prominent engaged universities in the Global South

Universidad de la República (Uruguay) clearly represents what is known as a *Latin American university model* (Bernasconi, 2015). This public university offers higher education with free tuition, no access requirements, democratic governance (voice and vote for faculty, students, and alumni), and community engagement (*extensión universitaria*) as a third mission or pillar. In 2006, it started a 'second university reform' process that promoted the

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1   They identified eleven characteristics that were different from Northern models: lack of comfort zone, drive for transformation, priority towards development and national cohesion, focus on human capital and employment, driven by necessity over choice, role of private institutions for public purposes, international partnerships for assistance, importance of vocational education, relation between religion and science, Mode 2 engagement, and a sense of societal pull (Watson et al., 2011).
2   All authors worked for institutions based in the US and England (Watson et al., 2011).

integration of teaching and learning, research, and engagement (Cano & Tommasino, 2017). This integration of the university missions was expressed in curricular spaces called *Espacios de Formación Integral* (Integral Teaching Spaces) and the *Programa Integral Metropolitano* (Integral Metropolitan Program), a place-based community engagement program in the marginalized neighborhoods of Montevideo. Universidad de la República led a revival of the Latin American debate on community engagement (*extensión universitaria*), organizing regional conferences and publishing an impressive number of books and articles on their experience.[3]

Rhodes University (South Africa), also a public university, has been developing a solid community engagement strategy following the South African government's positioning of community engagement as a university mission in the immediate post-apartheid moment (Department of Education, 1997) . In Makhanda (ex-Grahamstown), the Rhodes University Community Engagement division (RUCE) has developed engaged research, service learning, and critical active citizenry or volunteerism programs (Sibhensana & Maistry, 2023). Particularly concerned about public education since 2014, RUCE has promoted programs with impressive results on local students' trajectories and outcomes, such as the Nine Tenths Mentoring Programme (Rhodes University, n.d.). RUCE has also been leading the community engagement conversation in South Africa, organizing national conferences, establishing and publishing the African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement, and soon to be offering an accredited Post-Graduate Diploma in Higher Education Community Engagement.

Two South-South dialogues

In 2024, these two universities co-organized two encounters. In March 14, Universidad de la República organized the Seminar: *La extension universitaria en clave sur-sur: diálogos entre Latinoamérica, el Caribe y África*. On the first day of the seminar, a rainy day in Montevideo, a bilingual and virtual panel gathered Di Hornby, Director of the Community Engagement Division at Rhodes University, Margie Maistry, Research Associate at Rhodes University, and Darren Lortan, current IARSLCE President and Chair of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF) (Universidad de la República, n.d.-a). Two months later, on May 15, in the context of the Rhodes University Community Engagement 2024 Conference, the panel *South-South Partnership Relationships* included Agustín Cano, Professor at Universidad de la República, Kanya Padayachee, Research Associate, University of the Free State, Grey Magaiza, Head of the Sociology Department and Community Development Programme at the University of Free State, and me (Rhodes University, 2024).

In these spaces, all questions came from the Global South to Global South scholars and students embracing diversity and difference. There was no assumed and overarching

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3   All their publications and resources are in Spanish (Universidad de La República, n.d.-b).

'Southern model of university-community partnerships'; all participants tried to understand their differences and learn from one another. In Uruguay, Darren, Margie, and Di shared how Ubuntu philosophy, Tanzania's *Ujamaa* experience, and the student-led Black Community Programmes during apartheid, continue to inspire and shape an African way of engagement. In the South African panel, Agustín Cano raised questions to promote a global dialogue, linking the Latin American community engagement connection with broader social movements, Paulo Freire's legacy, and the agency of the students' movements in the university transformation.

Five critical questions and takeaways for future global dialogues

After participating in both events and revisiting its recordings, I identified five critical questions and takeaways that can inspire new global dialogues: What is the Global South? Why should we have a dialogue? What should that dialogue look like? What are the main challenges for a South-South dialogue? What can the Global North learn from a South-South dialogue on community engagement?

What is the Global South? The Global South cannot be reduced to a geographical location on a map. The concept refers to a shared experience of colonial violence, a subaltern position in uneven global power dynamics, and the results of constant epistemic violence, the outcome of a colonial erasure of knowledge. However, the Global South is not only a place of suffering and oppression; it also refers to a shared history of struggles for liberation and agency in the context of resistance. It is a living example that societies can and must change, in a dialectic relation between tragedy and hope.

Why should we have a dialogue? We still have an urgency for social justice and epistemic justice at the community and the university level. We need to revisit our past to learn from our mistakes and recover our attempts to create alternative relations between universities and communities. We must acknowledge the plurality of ways of knowing that are usually made invisible under the shadow of Western or neocolonial mentalities in our own institutions.

What should that dialogue look like? We should go beyond shallow North-South dialogues, where the agency is placed in the Global North. This means resisting both a homogenizing perspective, where the South should mimic or follow the North, or the othering/essentializing perspective, where the South looks too different or exotic to the North. In contrast, South-South dialogue should embrace diversity and multiplicity following the same nature and principles of higher education community engagement. It seems it is easier to engage in dialogue with our communities than other foreign scholars.

What are the main challenges for a South-South dialogue? One clear challenge is the language barrier, which in the case of the event in Uruguay was successfully addressed through simultaneous interpretation. However, this translation effort is more than just a literal translation. It implies a conceptual challenge where we need to deconstruct terms

and identify commonalities or equivalents. There is also an institutional challenge when we expect scholars to participate in the dialogue. Universities are based on prestige, and scholars seem to prefer spending time looking at the best practices while ignoring the not-so-good or bad and harmful practices. It is especially problematic whenever legitimacy is given by a global ranking that reproduces models of universities that are disconnected from societies. A final challenge is about understanding students as agents of change and not empty vessels to be filled with pre-defined vales and contents. Acknowledging their agency also implies that faculty need to be open to their vulnerability and unlearn harmful habits.

Lastly, paraphrasing and tweaking the Watson et al.'s (2011) question, *what can the Global North learn from a South-South dialogue on community engagement?* These dialogues showed how close the Global North is to "Southern" characteristics. In other words, the Global North is no exception to power imbalances and colonial and epistemic violence. Within the North there is oppression and resistance that need to be addressed in a global dialogue on community engagement, especially in a moment when the US had reenergized a sociopolitical trend sustained in fear and hate, when war and genocide are shaking the world, and the natural disasters cannot hide anymore the impact of the climate crisis. These trends shake us as humanity and require solidarity across the globe. A South-South dialogue can offer insights and hope.

Conclusion

Although I value the meaningful questions brought forward by Watson et al.'s scholarship, I believe the field needs to invite more Global South scholars to the front, allowing the agency to probe existing questions and raise new ones. Fortunately, there have been several efforts to promote a global dialogue from that 2011 book project (Global University Network for Innovation, 2014; McIlrath et al., 2012; Tapia et al., 2024). What sets the Universidad de la República and Rhodes University encounters apart is the active role of two key Southern institutions in shaping the conditions, questions, and goals for future global dialogues.

Notes on Contributor

Matías G. Flores
Cornell University
mf785@cornell.edu
ORCID: 0000-0002-3820-9681

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On the Makhanda Education Summit: A community convening for development

Sisesakhe Ntlabezo, Programme Manager: Makhanda Circle of Unity and **Ashley Westaway**, Manager of GADRA Education, Makhanda

Abstract

South Africa's education system was well-resourced and impressive for the minority and deeply unequal and inaccessible to the majority of the country during apartheid. Yet, decades into the democracy of South Africa, some of the inequalities experienced as a result of the apartheid education system still linger. In many parts of the country, the quality of basic education remains poor, classrooms are overcrowded, literacy rates are low, and there is a shortage of necessary educational resources. The challenges facing education in South Africa, be it basic or higher education, require a focused and nuanced strategic response. The 2024 Education Summit, a local transformative event, which unfolded in the Eastern Cape city of Makhanda, is one example of a response to the challenges of basic education in a given context. Over 350 local education stakeholders, including early childhood development centres, primary schools, high schools, non-governmental organisations, government, and Rhodes University, responded to the invitation from the university's Vice-Chancellor to participate in a city-wide Education Summit. A reason for the success of the Summit is that the university had spearheaded the implementation of a range of impactful interventions in the basic education sector for the preceding decade through partnerships. This paper describes the significant local transformation using the analytic tools of community engagement and social movement theory. As such, and against the backdrop of generally ineffectual community engagement in South Africa, the Rhodes/ Makhanda case may be seen as an exemplar of best practice with the potential of replication in other contexts.

Keywords: *Education Summit; community engagement; social movement; local development; partnerships; best practice*

Introduction

An oft quoted (and rightfully so) part of The Freedom Charter is its contemplation on education: *The doors of learning and culture shall be opened.* Indeed, one of the key focuses of the post-1994 dispensation in South Africa was to enable access to education for all South African citizens. The White Paper on Education and Training[1] (Department of Education [DoE], 1995) acknowledged that while South Africa's education system was well-resourced and impressive for the minority, it was deeply unequal and inaccessible to the majority of the country:

> *At the same time, millions of adult South Africans are functionally illiterate, and millions of South African children and youth are learning in school conditions which resemble those in the most impoverished states. In the large, poorly-resourced sectors for the majority of the population, a majority of students drop out prematurely or fail senior certificate, and a small minority win entrance to higher education (DoE, 1995, p. 18).*

Yet, decades into the democracy of South Africa, some of the inequalities experienced as a result of the apartheid education system still linger. As Modisaotsile (2012) notes, in many parts of the country, the quality of basic education remains poor, classrooms are overcrowded, literacy rates are low, and there is a shortage of necessary educational resources. Reflecting on the *#FeesMustFall* across South African higher education institutions in 2015 and 2016, Badat (2016) acknowledges that while higher education has held the promise and prospect of better futures, this bold ambition has not been realized for many students. The challenges facing education in South Africa, be it basic or higher education, require a focused and nuanced strategic response.

The 2024 Makhanda Education Summit is one example of a response to the challenges of basic education in a given context. The Summit was a novel one-of-a-kind convening of the basic education sector in the city of Makhanda, South Africa, led by the Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sizwe Mabizela. It followed more than a decade of deliberate and collaborative intervention in various schools in the city to improve learner performance. It represented a co-created reflection point on the development of the education sector following its sustained upliftment through engaged partnerships. In addition, the Summit was a strategizing space used to collectively identify key goals to shape the future of education in Makhanda and map out the shared pathway towards building a city of education excellence. It demonstrated the necessity and potential of collaboration for the common good and the essential role of higher education institutions in driving community development.

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1   The White Paper on Education sets out the Developmental agenda of education in South Africa and was published eleven months after the first democratic elections in 1994. Until 2009, the Department of Education (DoE) in South Africa oversaw basic and higher education. The portfolio was split in the first administration of President Jacob Zuma in 2009 into the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

This paper provides an overview of the decade-long efforts to improve the education sector in Makhanda that culminated in the convening of the Summit. Furthermore, the paper reflects on the strategic approaches to mobilise support and build a common purpose within the city's stakeholder network. This paper assesses the Summit's local approach to convening school leaders and educators after several years of sustained and impactful engagement through the theoretical lens of Social Movement Theory. Equally, it will be demonstrated that the collaborative efforts and sustained community engagement in Makhanda reflect the characteristics of a social movement driven by a shared agenda. The paper is organized as follows: it begins with an overview of the post-1994 history and current status of community engagement in South Africa, describes the Summit journey, and then discusses the Makhanda Education Summit. The Social Movement Theory is explained as an analytical framework for the Summit, leading to the reflections and lessons learned from the Summit.

Positionality and Reflection

Before outlining the central thesis of this paper, it is important to render explicit the authors' relationship with the subject matter and its related context. The paper is, by its form, a reflective piece on an important demonstration of community engagement (CE) in action: the Makhanda Education Summit. The authors of the paper were the principal organisers of this Summit, and oversaw the coordination of this event, along with its general facilitation. In addition, in their respective professional capacities in the education sector of the city of Makhanda, the authors were involved in many of the lead-up processes that comprise the Journey to the Summit. As such, the authors are well-located to reflect meaningfully on the Summit and the opportunity for collective learning it provides.

Educators recognize reflection as integral to learning (Mann, 2016). Some of the specific benefits of reflection are detailed as follows: it entails focus on experience, thereby fostering insight; it enables one to make meaning of experience; and it enables the drawing out of lessons to inform future practice (Mann, 2016). Reflection is regarded as particularly important in community development, because it can assist with conceptualising, designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating community-based projects and interventions (Moreno et al., 2020). As Moreno et al. (2020, p.13) observe, reflection can be beneficial in improving practices and actions of social change. In providing this reflective piece, the authors hope to contribute to the growing literature on community engagement in educational development by detailing the success seen in one city through utilizing CE principles of collaboration, partnership and co-ownership of processes.

The Community Engagement Context

Formalised, policy-based CE is a recent phenomenon in higher education in South Africa (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2020). In the contemporary era, community engagement is closely associated with transformation, social responsiveness, and partnerships (CHE, 2020). Thus, it is hardly surprising that universities were not encouraged nor required to practice CE during the apartheid era. Soon after the transition from apartheid to electoral democracy in 1994, CE was positioned as the 'third mission' or core function of higher education (Maistry, 2023), along with teaching and learning, and research. More recently, a more integrated conceptualisation of CE has found its way into policy. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training underscores the significance of funding provision for community engagement initiatives "linked directly to the academic programme of universities [and] part of the teaching and research function of these institutions" (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013, p. 39). It should be noted that, to date, CE is not and has not been directly funded as a national mandate.

Although CE now enjoys a high formal status in higher education, many commentators have pointed out that this is largely superficial because it has little coherence or substance. According to Mohale (2023, p.115) "CE remains a peripheral concern of universities" based on an analysis of the findings of the first Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC) CE audit, covering the period 2004-2012. She concludes: "The findings of the first audit cycle revealed an overwhelming deficiency" (Mohale, 2023, p.123). The problem is ongoing, to the extent that the CHE indicates that "community engagement as a function is increasingly being pushed to the periphery" in South African universities (CHE, 2020, p.7). Johnson affirms that one of the reasons for this is that CE is frequently an "unfunded mandate" in many universities (2020, p. 91). There are several other reasons that CE is failing to take its place as the country's third mission of higher education institutions and consequently failing to make any meaningful impact in communities (CHE, 2020, p.5). These include conceptual confusion and incoherence, policy inadequacy, and a lack of institutional integration (Mohale, 2023, p.118). The conceptual challenges are foundational; there is no clarity on the meaning of 'community', 'engagement' or 'community engagement' (Bender, 2008, pp.86-87).

This brief overview of CE in South Africa provides a useful backdrop against which to sketch some of the key elements that underpinned the Makhanda Education Summit. Since 2015, the leadership at Rhodes University, as well as the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) division, has been stable, enabling the development of a clear and consistent conception and practice of CE. The 'community' that Rhodes University works with is the community located in the city of Makhanda, where the university is based. More specifically, since Professor Mabizela's inauguration in 2015, a specific portion of the local community has been prioritised: the basic education sector. 'Engagement' over the past decade has been characterised by mutuality, reciprocity, and responsiveness (Hornby &

Maistry, 2022). More generally, Rhodes University has recently implemented a participatory approach to CE, in which community partners input into conceptualising and framing initiatives, which is seen as the key to engagement and development. This approach can be contrasted with a charitable or philanthropic approach, which regards the university agent as the giver and the community member as the taker or beneficiary. The Rhodes expression of CE aligns with the policy framework laid down by the National Commission on Higher Education (NHCE) (1996); this framework foregrounded participation, responsiveness, cooperation, and partnerships as the key principles for transforming higher education (CHE, 2020). As Bobo and Akhurst (2019, p.91) remark, CE at Rhodes is underpinned by principles of joint learning and co-management of programmes with community partners. These principles strongly align with those articulated by the NCHE. Though community engagement at Rhodes predates Professor Mabizela's tenure, this paper's focus is limited to the recent period.

The Journey to the Summit: A decade of development

To fully appreciate the journey taken to the Summit, it is worthwhile to reflect on the city of Makhanda briefly. At times spoken of as a "tale of two cities" (Kalina et al., 2023, p.1), Makhanda contains some of the best and most prestigious schools (alongside Rhodes University) in the country in the city's "west". Simultaneously, the city visibly grapples with the echoes of exclusion and inequality enabled by apartheid in the city's "east", with a majority of students relying on no-fee and low-fee public schools for their education. It reflects a microcosm of the wider context of South Africa's education system (McCann et al., 2021, p. 50), if not the whole of South Africa. There are stark inequalities that exist between the city's "east" and "west"; many residents from the "east" face challenges with access to developmental opportunities and inconsistent service provision (Kalina et al., 2023, p.1). For years, no-fee and low-fee paying public schools in the city's "east" received poor results in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations.

The inequalities faced in Makhanda inform a negative perception that its residents have of the more affluent educational spaces. As McCann et al. (2021, p.5) note, for many of the most vulnerable residents of the city (and for a long time), Rhodes University has been viewed as an "unreachable ivory tower". It was seen as an institution of further development that many may never access because of their own circumstances, and, for some, an institution divorced from the residents' challenges. This socio-political background is important in appreciating the context under which the Summit was convened.

The Summit is usefully understood as a milestone reached after a journey spanning approximately a decade to develop the city's education sector. In this light, it is necessary to outline some of the experiences and accomplishments that *enabled the convening* of a Summit. The journey generated energy, commitment, and commonality of purpose among the city's stakeholders. For the purposes of this paper, it begins in 2013, when the

National Senior Certificate (NSC) results were released[2]. The district of Makhanda (then Grahamstown) obtained a pass rate of 62.5 percent, making it the 10th worst-performing district in the country that year (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014).

This jarring reality served as a wake-up call to education practitioners in the city and highlighted the urgent need for an intervention in the sector. Facilitating a meaningful impact, however, would require a multi-pronged approach driven by and inclusive of all key stakeholders, in particular Rhodes University. McCann et al., (2021) capture this best:

> *Combatting this injustice-and ensuring Rhodes University's relevance in the setting of Makhanda-requires action on the part of the university and other community stakeholders to change the education trajectory of the district (p.50).*

So, a set of interventions were developed and implemented. In 2014, the first of these interventions began with the creation of the Principal's Forum. Initially created by Grahamstown Area Distress Relief Association (GADRA) Education, which was the oldest education non-profit organisation (NPO) in the city. This structure of school principals served as a vital point of engagement to enable collaboration and partnership and organically facilitate the development of a community of practice among school leaders in the city.

Two significant developments unfolded in 2015. Firstly, through funding from the Vestas Empowerment Trust, a multi-stakeholder consortium was created to manage a dynamic Primary Education Programme. This consortium, led by GADRA Education with partners such as the Lebone Centre, the South African Numeracy Chair Project and the Education Faculty at Rhodes University, focused on promoting literacy and numeracy in primary schools in Makhanda (O'Keeffe & Kay, 2022). Over the course of eight years, this consortium proceeded to develop numerous initiatives that were beneficial to the primary school sector, chief among them being the Whistle Stop School (a targeted literacy intervention focusing on improving reading skills) and the IsiXhosa Spelling Bee, a first of its kind in South Africa.

Secondly, Professor Sizwe Mabizela was appointed and inaugurated as the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University in 2015. Mabizela (2015), in his inaugural address as the Vice-Chancellor, identified a focus on education as being one of his three focus points in ensuring that Rhodes University contributes to building a vibrant and sustainable Makhanda (then called Grahamstown):

> *We must send a clear and unequivocal message that our University is not just in Grahamstown but is also of and for Grahamstown. We have a particular responsibility to contribute to the creation of a well-functioning, economically sustainable and prosperous Grahamstown (p. 16).*

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2   While the narrative focus of this paper begins in 2013, it is important to acknowledge that there were several efforts before this moment to build a community of practice in the education sector of Makhanda, led by various committed education activists and community engagement practitioners. Beginning the narrative in 2013 is not intended to erase nor minimize these efforts in any way.

Mabizela (2015), in outlining his vision, acknowledged the difficult context the schools functioned under and committed to working hand-in-hand with local stakeholders to improve the education outputs:

> *It is a matter of public record that the Eastern Cape Province is the worst performing province when it comes to public education…Every single year its matric pass rates have been way below the national pass rates… As an institution of higher learning, indeed, as a greater community that cares, we cannot sit and watch when young people amongst us are condemned to a life without hope; a life of despair because of the failure to provide them with the education they need and deserve. We need to work with our Education District Office, Subject Advisors, Principals and Educators to find ways of improving the quality of teaching and learning. I look forward to meeting all important role-players in the education sector to discuss how we might work together to make Grahamstown a true centre of academic excellence – from Early Childhood education to University, and a model for consideration more widely (p. 17).*

This re-orientation of the university as a partner to the wider community was a pivotal shift in the relationship it had with Makhanda. With this deliberate commitment by the University to support education development, a call to action was laid out.

The first step in giving life to this vision in 2016 was the creation of the Vice-Chancellor's Initiative (VCI) committee. This committee included experts in the education sector from within and outside the university and served as the anchor structure to oversee collaborative interventions from Rhodes University. At its core, the VCI sought to facilitate systemic change in Makhanda's basic education sector. Among its flagship initiatives is the Nine Tenths Mentoring Initiative, which involves a mentorship relationship between a Rhodes University student volunteer and a Matric learner (a learner in their final year of high school) mentee through a series of guided and structured contact sessions. This programme is geared towards providing important support for matric learners in local schools in Makhanda with the intent of enabling them to manage the demands their final year in high school adequately and, in doing so, enabling them towards reaching their full potential (McCann et al., 2021, p. 51). Approximately one-quarter of all public sector matriculants now benefit from mentorship support. The Certificate in School Leadership is another noteworthy programme, one focused on developing the leadership capacity of the members of a school's management team, with specific focus on Principals, Deputy Principals and Heads of Departments.

In 2017, Rhodes University and GADRA piloted a Bridging Programme to improve access for local disadvantaged students to the University. Through this programme, students registered as *Occasional Students* while simultaneously studying two NSC subjects to increase their university admission points. 2018 was the first year when the first 'green shoots' of the various interventions were seen in Makhanda: in this year, the city's fee-exempt public schools produced over 100 Bachelor passes (university-entrance level) in the NSC examinations for the first time (DBE, 2019). The various expressions of community engagement and partnership interventions were starting to pay dividends.

With this positive development, 2019 was situated as a year to deepen the interventions and collaborative partnerships in Makhanda. The Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) division redesigned its Budding Q programme. Through this new approach, the programme sought to address the literacy crisis in South Africa through a play-based approach starting in Grade R while pre-literacy skills are being developed. Following a series of stakeholder imbizos held in the same year, the Makhanda Circle of Unity (MCoU) was born. This initiative aimed to foster collaborations and partnerships amongst stakeholders in Makhanda to facilitate positive-oriented projects in the city through a series of thematic clusters. One of these clusters is the Education Cluster, which brings together individuals and entities in the city interested in developing the education sector.

In 2020, further evidence of the impact of concentrated interventions through collaboration and partnerships in the education sector of the city was seen in that year's NSC results. Makhanda emerged as the *best-performing city* in the Eastern Cape NSC results (Krige, 2024), seven years after it was amongst the worst-performing districts in the province. Of course, COVID-19 resulted in lockdown-enforced school closures that impacted the quality of education outcomes across the country. Propelled by a commitment to continuing the impactful work they had been doing, local stakeholders adapted their services to be responsive to the contextual challenges.

Despite the year's challenges, the city's positive trajectory continued. In 2021, the city achieved a record 300 Bachelor passes for the first time in the NSC Matric examinations (DBE, 2022). In the same year, the Nine Tenths Mentoring Programme received the first prize in the 2021 MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship (Tailores Network of Engaged Universities, 2021), becoming the first (and to date, only) South African university to receive the first prize (Rhodes University, 2021). This prize was a testament to the effectiveness of the Nine Tenths Programme and its potential to institute systemic change. Following the success of the various interventions at primary and secondary school levels, the VCI committed financial and human resources to the ECD sector as the next target for improvement.

By 2022, the positive developments following the multiplicity of concerted efforts to develop the education sector imbued an energy into the city's schooling sector. For the second year in a row, more than 300 Bachelor passes were achieved in the final NSC examination results. In turn, the retention rate in the schooling system had improved from 45 percent to 65 percent (Westaway, 2023a). It may seem odd to have focused on ten years of gradual development to contextualise one event. However, this context not only sets the scene for 2023 to become the year when planning for the Summit began, but it also informs an understanding of why it was important to convene a *Summit*.

The Year Before: The Engagement Process

In early 2023, a record number of 160 disadvantaged local students registered for full-time first-year study at Rhodes University. In February 2023, representatives of GADRA Education presented the organisation's new strategic plan to the Vice-Chancellor. In terms of the plan, GADRA's primary objective for the next few years was to contribute to Makhanda emerging as South Africa's leading educational locality and to be recognised throughout the country. This vision was borne out of the advances made in the city over the past decade. Professor Mabizela supported this objective and proposed that the university convene a summit of all education stakeholders in Makhanda to mobilise the collective around the vision of taking the city to the apex of the basic education summit in South Africa. Moreover, it was agreed in that initial discussion that Professor Mabizela would be the most appropriate convenor of the Summit, given the extent to which he is respected across the education community in the city.

On 5 April 2023, the VCI committee had its first quarter meeting, wherein a commitment to organise a Summit was affirmed. At this discussion, it was suggested that the theme of the Summit should be '*celebrate, share, strategize*'. Given that collaboration and partnerships had been hallmarks of a decade of development, it was deemed appropriate that the Summit should give further impetus to the ethos and practice of sharing. It was further agreed that the Summit should be a gathering of local organisations and individuals who have contributed to and were part of the educational landscape in the city. What has been achieved in the city has been driven by local citizens. It had not come about through outside intervention. Thus, it was decided to give local citizens\communities of the city a platform and a voice.

The planning process for the Summit was overseen by a committee comprising representatives of key education stakeholders in the city, including representatives from the University (specifically, the Faculty of Education, RUCE division and the Centre for Social Development (a non-government organisation affiliated to Rhodes University, which focuses on early childhood education), GADRA Education, the MCoU, public schools and private schools in the basic education sector. It was deemed necessary to ensure that the Summit planning committee was inclusive and representative, as this would play a vital role in the mobilising efforts needed to convene it.

The framing for the Summit's planning was broad and required extensive work. It had to ensure the following:

- The Summit would be structured as a two-day event, with the first day focused on reflection and celebrating the development over a decade. The second day would focus on collectively strategizing the next steps for the city's education sector.
- The Summit would consist of both plenary and working group sessions to encourage as much engagement as possible. Working groups would be formed according to phases of basic education, namely ECD, primary education and secondary education.

- To inform the discussions in the respective working groups, considerable preparation would be required. Each working group would require a detailed, comprehensive situational analysis of the respective sectoral phase to prompt engagement.

- Thus, it was agreed to form sectoral phase specific sub-committees to conduct these situational analyses. Three subcommittees-on ECD, primary and secondary schooling, respectively-were formed for this exact purpose.

In the latter half of 2023, the primary focus was on developing situational analyses. For the primary and secondary phases, participatory SWOT analyses were conducted with the school principals to ensure that the situational analyses reflected the prevailing realities and perspectives of the schools. As an added benefit, this process would help mobilise significant support amongst the school principals and leaders. During this time, research conducted jointly by GADRA Education, and the Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education revealed that 40% of Grade 4 children in Makhanda could read for meaning – more than double the national average (Long, 2023). This generated significant interest in the demonstrated strength of Makhanda's educational offering and the pending Summit.

Building on this work and energy was a sustained media and communication drive, with multiple newspaper articles published in local and regional newspapers (Westaway, 2023b). By January 2024, the focus shifted to ensuring that the key reports and inputs that would anchor and guide discussions for the Summit were appropriately finalized and reflected the collective insights of education leaders in Makhanda. The four key inputs were presentations on the three sectoral situational analyses and a consolidated overview of available data.

The Makhanda Education Summit

The Makhanda Education Summit took place at the Rhodes University campus on 27 and 28 January 2024 and was attended by over 350 local education stakeholders. The Summit marked a pivotal moment in the city's commitment to advance education for local youth. Delegates from the ECD, primary, and secondary school sectors convened to build upon the success achieved in elevating the quality of education and access to resources within Makhanda. Importantly, the Summit was used to find partnership-driven solutions to the existing challenges. Two significant results of the Summit were: firstly, each sectoral summit working group resolved on key sectoral focus areas for development and growth over the next few years. A clarity of purpose was developed by developing these focus areas through collective engagement and discussion. A clear roadmap for improving the education sector of Makhanda was laid out, one that could be adopted and embraced by the sector as a whole.

Secondly, a clear vision was articulated at the end of the Summit to anchor the above priority focus areas and set a tangible goal for developing the city's education sector. This vision is important because it represents the collective input of the delegates and because

its successful attainment hinges in many ways on the collective action of members of the city's education sector, from ECD to secondary school. The gist of the Summit vision statement is quoted below.

> By 2028, Makhanda emerges as the leading academic educational centre and city in South Africa and is recognised as such, thereby affording all local children and young people the benefit of good quality and relevant education at pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary levels (quoted in Amner, 2024).

For CHE (2007), the milestone of a shared vision amongst a multiplicity of partners as an outcome indicates effective community engagement. Given the effectiveness of Rhodes University's CE work in the basic education sector from 2015 to 2023, it seems fitting that the Summit adopted a shared vision.

Social Movement Theory

The primary conceptual lens used so far in this paper has been CE. However, it is clear from the above that, whilst Rhodes University played the leading role in convening the Summit, many organisations and stakeholders have been involved in the drive to revitalise public basic education in Makhanda. The diversity of participation – including all types of schools (public and private), NGOs and community activists – is adequately wide-ranging to consider the applicability of Social Movement Theory in this case.

Much has been written about Social Movement Theory, a field of study that saw rapid development and discourse proliferation in the 1950s and 1960s (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.1). At its core, this field of study seeks to understand what informs social mobilisation, how movements are organised and the various characteristics that help sustain them. The study of social movements was prompted by academic interest in collective behaviour (Weber & King, 2015, p.487). Della Porta and Diani (2006, p.13) point out that many insights that inform social movement theorists have been derived from studies into collective movements, defined as "meaningful acts, driving often necessary and beneficial social change". At the heart of these movements is collective action underpinned by a collaborative approach to achieving a shared goal (Snow et al., 2004, p.6). The societal context is important, as Morris (2000, p.446) cogently acknowledges that movements likely emerge under favourable external contexts and shifts in societal and political contexts.

Social movement theory has four main schools of thought: collective behaviour, resource mobilisation, political process (commonly referred to as political opportunity) and new social movements (Tarrow, 2011, p.22). In reflecting on the Summit, two of these schools of thought, namely resource mobilisation and political opportunity, seem most applicable. The resource mobilisation approach emerged as sociologists from the United States of America were interested in how the resources necessary to enable successful collective action were mobilised (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.14). Rootes (1990, p.7) suggests that resource mobilisation theory is underpinned by the recognition that movement participants create

strategies that utilize available resources as best as possible while reducing the need for unavailable resources to propel movements forward. Importantly, the resource mobilisation approach does not disregard the importance of the social context under which a movement operates-it also focuses on how movements connect to other groups and their reliance on the external context to enable success (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p.1213).

The political opportunity approach mainly focuses on the relationship between social movements and the political context they function under, as well as the variety of factors that may impact the success of movements (Rootes, 1990, p.7). Like the resource mobilisation approach, the political opportunity approach focuses on rational participants making deliberate choices to advance their movements. Still, it acknowledges the impact of the political environment under which social movements function (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.16). In essence, an enabling environment is important to create avenues for the emergence of movements.

Read together, the resource mobilisation approach and the political opportunity approach – while not interchangeable nor without limitations – offer useful analytic frameworks for the Summit. They acknowledge the necessity of people to drive the strategic steps needed to create social movements. As Morris (2000, p.445) puts it, "these approaches both recognise the importance of human agency in understanding social movements". Importantly, these theoretical approaches do not locate social movements as functioning solely around national matters; they can function locally depending on their scope and target (Snow et al., 2004, p.4). They provide a useful lens through which to understand why an event such as the Summit might constitute the beginnings of an organic movement, one premised on the shared commitment to improve a city's education sector.

Reflections and Lessons from the Summit

Much of the strength and impact of the Summit can be attributed to the processes taken to convening it and the various incremental steps taken over a decade of development. The convening of the Summit and its outputs are best understood through the lens of social movement theory. As Snow et al., (2004, p.3) argue, understanding how social movements function can inform an understanding of many developments in human history, and the Summit is no exception. Some key lessons that can be taken from the summit convening are discussed below.

Different co-ordinating structures coming together:

Over the past decade, several co-ordinating structures have emerged in the basic education sector. Three of the more important of these structures are the Vice-Chancellor's Initiative, the Makhanda Circle of Unity (specifically its Education Cluster) and the Principals' Forum. Each of these structures is collaborative, and each undertakes important work, as summarised below.

- *Vice-Chancellor's Initiative*: This is driven by a committee comprising representatives of various university entities and GADRA Education. It has been guided by Professor Mabizela consistently since its establishment in 2016. Essentially, it coordinates all initiatives in the basic education sector resourced by Rhodes University staff and students. It has been impactful and efficient, as evidenced by the Nine Tenths Mentoring Programme winning the international MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship in 2021.

- *Makhanda Circle of Unity (Education Cluster)*. This organisation is a growing and vibrant space that has brought together city school representatives and education advocates. It has been aimed at fostering a collective understanding of the sector-wide challenges faced and, where possible, identifying opportunities for collaborative solutions.

- *Makhanda School Principals' Forum*. GADRA Education established the forum, but since 2014, it has been convened, administered and sustained by the principals. It has provided principals with a supportive and collegial institutional space to share challenges and devise effective collective strategies to engage the DBE and other stakeholders.

What set the Summit apart from all previous interventions and processes is that it brought all these coordinating structures together. As Buechler (1993, p.229) argues, one of the most important parts of mobilisation is constructing a meaningful shared identity for participants. Bringing together these coordinating structures through the Summit created the opportunity to galvanise and mobilise a wide-ranging community of basic education stakeholders and activists in Makhanda.

Different parts of the education system coming together:

The Summit brought together the fee exempt, fee-paying, and private/independent portions of the basic education system in the city. In recent years, these portions tended to operate in silos, and there have also been inter-sectoral tensions relating to their different needs and interests. The resultant parochialism has militated against collaboration and solidarity.

The inclusive approach to the Summit preparation processes brought all these parts of the system together, for example, to formulate a joint situation analysis. Occasionally, this resulted in the aforementioned tensions surfacing. However, the difference is that the tensions were addressed rather than causing the parties to retreat into their respective laagers. This is in line with a vital purpose of social movements, which is to represent and provide solutions to challenges being faced (Hannigan, 1985, p.441)

The Summit has created an environment that is conducive to a set of possibilities that were not conceivable *without it happening*. Bridges across the different parts of the system are now being built; these linkages enable innovative collaborations. This is vital to the

continued efforts to mobilise support behind the shared vision. As Della Porta and Diani (2006, p.15) point out, effective mobilisation is informed by how movements can "organise discontent…utilise and create solidarity networks…[and] achieve external consensus".

Where leaders rise:

Social movements are reflective of and formed by ordinary participants and reflect a collective will and commitment to a goal (Hannigan, 1985, p.441). Indeed, ordinary citizens have played a crucial role in developing Makhanda's education sector. At the same time, Morris (2000, p.45) reflects on the importance of leadership in informing the origin and impact of movements. In the context of the journey taken to the Summit, the leadership of Professor Mabizela was essential in mobilising the Makhanda community behind the summit and enabling the adoption of a unifying vision to establish the city as the leading academic city in the country. What became apparent over the course of the planning process was the depth and breadth of leadership in the sector. All members of the Planning Committee took responsibility, invoked their networks and mobilised their constituencies. All those who facilitated and presented at the summit did so proficiently. It was a moment in Makhanda's education journey that enabled many leaders to learn and rise.

It could only happen <u>when</u> it happened:

The political opportunity framing of social movement theory offers an important insight on the importance (and value) of the timing of a social movement emerging. Importantly, social movements can capture and maximise existing opportunities and "strategise to create opportunities in which to act" (Tarrow, 1994, as cited in Buechler, 2004, p.62). For the Summit to become the success it was, it could *only* have occurred following a decade-long investment in the city to mobilise energies, develop a shared passion, and ensure buy-in from all relevant stakeholders. The process leading up to the Summit clearly shows that establishing healthy, trusting partnerships take time and it is an ongoing process. During the period 2014 to 2023, hundreds of individuals and many organisations had benefitted tangibly from the interventions and offerings described above; there was abundant goodwill. As Della Porta and Diani (2006, p.13) note, social movements reflect the efforts of groups to change their current status quo. Without the key activities taking place as they did, it may not have appealed to the variety of stakeholders it did, nor have the wide-ranging impact it had. Rather, it became a space to revitalize energies amongst stakeholders and deepen their shared purpose for Makhanda's betterment.

Conclusion

The array of interventions in the basic education sector in Makhanda, led by Rhodes University, offer a powerful example of effective and impactful CE in contemporary South Africa. Some of the hallmarks of Rhodes University's approach have been an embrace of reciprocity and partnership, a sustained commitment to galvanising the agency of the

student body and academics towards the goal of transformation, and bold leadership by several people in positions of influence, especially the Vice-Chancellor of the university. It is hoped that other universities will learn from this example so that their considerable potential as change agencies might be realised.

In reflecting on this partnership-driven approach to the education sector development in Makhanda, this paper has sought to demonstrate the potential impact that can be derived through utilising collaborative community engagement principles and activating the role of higher education institutions in community development. The use and applicability of Social Movement Theory as an analytic and interpretative tool to make sense of unfolding developments in the city is not just informative but relevant. It offers a useful lens to fully appreciate the magnitude of the event, and its indelible impact on the future of Makhanda's basic education sector.

Notes on Contributors

Sisesakhe Ntlabezo
Programme Manager: Makhanda Circle of Unity
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3196-2512

Dr Ashley Westaway
Manager of GADRA Education, Makhanda
ashley@gadraed.co.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7610-5800

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