PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS REGARDING THE ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT (ABCD) APPROACH: A SOUTH AFRICAN STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Asset-based community-driven development (ABCD) has gained momentum in social work education over the last ten years. This mix-method study presents students' perceptions of the relevance and application of ABCD in social work education at two universities in South Africa. The students perceived ABCD as a relevant approach that shifts community members from a deficit orientation focused on lack and needs to one in which people utilise their assets and take ownership of their own future. However, students experienced challenges in facilitating community members' movement from being passive recipients of services and benefits to seeing themselves as change agents driving their own development. The results are intended to contribute to curricular and pedagogical improvements.

Key concepts: asset-based community-driven development (ABCD); problem-based approach; social work education; social work students

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, asset-based community-driven development (ABCD) has grown over the last few years with an overwhelming response and interest from government, the corporate sector, civil society and academia (Mansvelt, 2018; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; 2005; Nel, 2018a; 2018b). This approach has proved to be appropriate in addressing poverty, unemployment, inequality and social injustice (Nel, 2018a; 2018b; Landry & Peters, 2018; Pretorius & Nel, 2012); it embraces indigenous knowledge systems and cultures, and enhances decoloniality practice, citizenship and democracy (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; 2005). In addition, ABCD

is strongly associated, ideally, with the social developmental paradigm of South Africa (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1997), which forms the foundation of all teaching and learning activities in social work education. The social developmental paradigm perceives community members not as passive recipients of services and benefits, but as change agents driving their own development, which also characterises the core of ABCD. Both the ABCD and social development approaches aim to bring about social and economic improvements in the lives of primarily the most vulnerable, enhance their human capabilities, opportunities and choices about the lives that they wish to lead (Frediani, 2010; Nel, Louw, Schenck & Skhosana, 2021; Patel, 2015). Thus, the ABCD model seems to be potentially helpful in addressing developmental challenges in South Africa.

In academia, the theory and practice of ABCD have been introduced by various disciplines such as education, anthropology, development studies, social work and community development (see, for example, Mathie, Cameron & Gibson, 2017; Nel *et al.,* 2021). Although students have reported positively to lecturers and facilitators in their field practice education written reports about ABCD, and even though students experience challenges in practising ABCD, no formal study has been done in this regard globally. A qualitative study of limited scope has been conducted on the responses of second-year social work students regarding ABCD in their field practice education (Mansvelt, 2018). The findings revealed that students responded positively to ABCD and recommended that more time be allocated to ABCD practice, in order for future students and practitioners to gauge signs of sustainable development in vulnerable communities.

To address the scarcity of research of this topic, two departments of social work at two universities in South Africa, namely the Nelson Mandela University (NMU) and the University of Johannesburg (UJ) that were engaged in addressing ABCD in theory and field practice education were interested in exploring the students' experiences of the ABCD approach with a bigger sample of students. The main question was: What are the perceptions of students in terms of the relevance and application of ABCD? The aim of the study was to contribute to the relevance of ABCD to sustainable development, and also to strengthen the curricular and pedagogical dimensions of the Social Work degree. A limitation is that the views of lecturers, supervisors and practitioners were not included in this study.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Both universities in the study offer comprehensive professional and vocational training programmes. Graduates studying the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) in South Africa are required to have applied competence and skills in nine core learning areas, as well as proficiency in the central features infusing the social work professional identity. Graduates should be able to execute these competencies – also called Graduate Attributes – by the time they exit the BSW (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2015). Students are exposed to field practice education from the first year of study, with an increase in hours of field practice education from the first to the final year.

Both universities include ABCD training in their theory and field practice education. ABCD theory is introduced to students from the first year of their BSW degree up until their fourth

and final year in the training programmes of both universities. The ABCD approach in field practice education begins from the second year in NMU and the third year in UJ, and both programmes continue with ABCD practice until the fourth year. Field practice education is structured, time bound, intermittent and periodic in nature. Students in the third year of their studies at both universities were initially exposed to practice one day per week and by fourth-year level three days per week.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ABCD, a globally adopted approach, recognises and builds on the strengths, gifts, talents and resources of individuals and communities to create inclusive and sustainable communities. The approach was first instituted by Kretzmann and McKnight in the USA in 1993. ABCD has since become popular as a community development approach globally, and stands in stark contrast to the needs-, deficit- and problem-based approaches, which still tend to drive the development agenda (for example, Homan, 2011; Nel & Pretorius, 2012; Pretorius & Nel, 2012). The deficiency-based approach focuses on identifying and meeting needs, while the ABCD approach focuses on opportunities, assets and strengths, and is developmental in nature. With reference to the problem-based community development approach, the point of departure is the mapping and analysis of needs, problems and deficiencies and/or impediments in the community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Weyers, 2011). By focusing on the problems, the professionals and the community members tend to concentrate on what is dysfunctional and/or absent in the community. Community members establish a poverty mindset, develop a sense of entitlement and dependency, and community members start believing that their problems could only be solved by outside assistance (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, p.35) are of the opinion that "communities are not built on their deficiencies, but rather on the capacities and assets of the people and the place". ABCD acknowledges the important role that communities play in their own development and therefore places communities at the centre of development initiatives (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Nel & Pretorius, 2012). ABCD perceives communities as the drivers of their own development process by identifying and mobilising individuals, associations and institutions to come together to identify existing but often unrecognised or hidden assets, thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunities.

Studies show that ABCD may change consciousness, minds and attitudes from one of dependency and a sense of entitlement towards the realisation that they (the community) can lead their own development (Mathie *et al.,* 2017; Nel, 2018a; 2018b; Nel & Pretorius, 2012; Pretorius & Nel, 2012). It is thus evident that ABCD can reverse internalised powerlessness, strengthen opportunities for collective endeavours and help to build local capacity for action. When communities have been engaged, using their assets in building their livelihoods, they may be strategic in pursuing appropriate development initiatives in line with their own values, culture, traditions and aspirations (Mathie & Cunningham, 2005; Morse, 2011; Nel & Pretorius, 2012; Pretorius & Nel, 2012). Thus, ABCD contributes both towards building responsibility and accountability, and also claiming rights by holding government accountable for certain responsibilities. This approach thus addresses social injustices, power imbalances and inequality through ground-level participation and mobilisation in building the community

internally by putting community members in control of their own decision-making (Green & Haines, 2002; Landry & Peters, 2018; Nel *et al.,* 2021; Preece, 2017).

Principles underlying ABCD

Based on the theory, it could be argued that ABCD is driven by the following principles:

(1) Despite the situation in which people find themselves, even in the direst situations, community members and their communities are or should be perceived as having assets, and that each person has something to offer;

(2) Development goals should involve community members on ground-level and should be community-led. Local people and their assets should be utilised in community-building initiatives, which are rooted in local cultural traditions;

(3) Community-building actions need to be based on positive, participatory and collaborative relationships, and be focused on inviting people to discover their own answers;

(4) The collective process must involve the immediate community members and as well as the wider community, with the different stakeholders and role players incorporated in a meaningful way into the change process;

(5) Both formal and informal leaders from various sections in the wider community – government, voluntary associations, congregations and local businesses – should be engaged in the community-building initiatives. This kind of leadership uses relationships and inclusion, which are based on trust;

(6) The organisation which coordinates community-building initiatives should be a citizen-centred organisation, in which local people control the organisation and set the organisation's agenda;

(7) Institutions such as government, not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) and businesses do not see themselves as members of these organisations as drivers of development, but see the community as experts on their own development and engage the community as learning partners to solve community problems;

(8) Community members, leaders and all stakeholders and role players should hold each other accountable for the development of the community. Structural inequities should be addressed in a collaborative way by all stakeholders (Ashford & Patkar, 2001; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; 2005; Nel, 2011; Nel, 2018a; 2018b; Nel *et al.,* 2021; Nel & Pretorius, 2012; Landry & Peters, 2018; Preece, 2017).

Leadership in ABCD practice

To create sustainable communities, the community practitioner must strengthen a specific type of leadership in the community. The leadership appropriate for ABCD-sensitised communities is value-driven, shared, transformative, appreciative and service-orientated (Nel, 2019; Nel *et al.,* 2021) The nature of leadership in ABCD communities is one where people proclaim their rights and recognise, develop and/or enhance the potentialities of their assets to achieve their socio-economic wellbeing. Especially in South Africa, the ABCD community practitioner aims

to instil a kind of leadership which moves communities from focusing on a reactive orientation which dwells on the past, and which focuses on lack and needs, towards an orientation where people use their assets and proactively take ownership of their future in collaboration with external resources. The community practitioner's intention is to develop a type of leadership through which activities are relationship-driven, inclusive and positive in nature, and through which community members turn creative potential into positive power. This, in turn, sets in motion ripples of confidence, energy, enthusiasm and performance (Nel, 2018a; 2018b; Whitney, Trosten-Bloom & Rader, 2010). Developing leadership skills in ABCD practice is a process of equipping team members of the core group to envision and shape plans, develop their capacity and potential, confront social injustices and establish a culture of collective sharing and action. The core group moves towards a stage where the team members have full autonomy (Nel, 2018a; 2018b; Nel *et al.,* 2021).

Critique of ABCD

There is however a criticism that ABCD over-emphasises the contributions of community members and associations in terms of community-building initiatives. This could distract attention from the role and responsibilities of external stakeholders such as government and businesses in the development of communities (Foot, 2012; Friedli, 2011; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014). Secondly, MacLeod and Emejulu (2014) have argued that ABCD is "neoliberalism with a community face", meaning that the approach encourages a free-market system and a hostility towards government-sponsored social welfare. ABCD communities thus have to learn to survive within Western societies that are driven by neoliberal models instead of, for example, challenging the economic system. Thirdly, while ABCD opens up some opportunities for setting up dialogue with the macro-level structures that impact on communities, for example, government, municipality and businesses, the approach has been criticised because it tends to ignore issues related to power imbalances and oppression (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Lastly, a major criticism of ABCD is that written descriptive reports primarily written by the agency that undertook ABCD initiatives focus mainly on reporting on the capacity building of community members and associations (internal-looking) without reporting on structural changes (external-looking) brought about by the approach (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Foot, 2012; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An exploratory, triangulated, mixed method research design used both closed- and open-ended questions in a survey questionnaire to produce more complete and well-validated conclusions (Delport & Fouche, 2011). In terms of the closed-ended part of the questionnaire, a five-point rating scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) with 15 statements were used, e.g. "I regard ABCD as relevant to the curriculum; I can apply the ABCD model; The ABCD model does not fit my leadership style; I feel the ABCD model can change people's lives in a sustainable way". Three semi-structured questions were asked in the qualitative section, namely (1) In what way(s) have you applied the ABCD model in your practical work? (2) What has been challenging for you in applying ABCD in your practical work? (3) Do you have any comments or recommendations regarding the ABCD model that you want to bring to the attention of your lecturing team? The statements of the quantitative section and the questions of the qualitative

section of the questionnaire were formulated and analysed by the three authors of the study, who are researchers, lecturers and/or practitioners well versed in ABCD theory and practice (Delport & Roestenburg, 2011b).

The research population was all third- and fourth-year students registered at the department of social work at both universities. These groups of students were purposefully selected because of their known exposure to ABCD in lectures and practical internship training. To test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted at both institutions with two students.

Data collection and analysis

Hard copies of questionnaires were distributed to the students in a theory or internship lecture, and voluntary participation was emphasised. An information letter with background information and a consent form were attached to the questionnaire.

The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed according to clear methods and procedures. The SPSS computer software program was used for the analysis of the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages and averages, were used to present the demographic information of the group.

In terms of analysing the five-point rating scale's internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used as a statistical technique in an exploratory factor-analysis exercise (Delport & Roestenburg, 2011a). Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to cluster the 15 statements or items of the quantitative part of the questionnaire. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient produced four sufficient groups of factors based on the closed-ended items or questions. The four groups of factors were ABCD competency, leadership style, attitude towards ABCD and relevance of ABCD to Social Work and Community Development.

The data of the semi-structured questions were analysed guided by the four factors identified in the quantitative part of the study according to the following five steps (Creswell, 2014; Grbich, 2007; Henning, 2004):

(1) After the transcribed interviews were read at least twice and general notes made, data were read again to look for answers to the research questions, units of meaning (topics) were identified, and codes (names) assigned to the units of meaning (topics);

(2) Codes (names) were organised into categories and sub-categories, by moving from units of meaning (topics) to coding and then to categories and sub-categories by constantly comparing the units of meaning (constant comparison method);

(3) Categories and sub-categories were organised according to themes from the data and theory

(4) Each theme and sub-theme analysed, and quotes (*verbatim*) were selected that represented the unit of meaning;

(5) Lastly, themes, sub-themes and categories were analysed and linked with findings in the literature. The themes of the qualitative analysis were based on the Cronbach's Alpha

coefficient analysis, namely ABCD competency, leadership style, attitude towards ABCD and relevance of ABCD to Social Work and Community Development.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness were applied to ensure the rigour of the qualitative data: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Triangulation of different methods was utilised to enhance the credibility of the findings. The qualitative and quantitative elements of the findings, as well as the involvement of three researchers in the study, contributed to more complete and well-validated conclusions. The researchers kept audit trails, which contributed to the conformability and transferability criteria of trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance had been obtained from the relevant university committees at both universities (H18-HEA-SDP-010 – Nelson Mandela University); (01-00171-2018 – University of Johannesburg). The questionnaire was anonymous, and respondents participated voluntarily. Participants were encouraged to give their honest opinions of their experiences of ABCD. Students were not penalised for negative responses. There was no financial or non-financial incentive or compensation for their participation in this study. All data were kept on an encrypted and password-protected computer drive at the two universities and only the three researchers had access to this information through password-protected files.

DISCUSSION OF QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The quantitative findings are presented first, followed by the qualitative findings. The demographic information is discussed below. The findings of the two universities were combined because of their similarity.

Demographic information

A total number of 176 students from the third and fourth year of studies completed the questionnaire, 67 (38,1%) of whom were from NMU and 109 (61,9%) from UJ. The percentage of students at NMU (140 in total) who participated in the study was 48% and the percentage of students at UJ (209 in total) was 52%. The average response rate for both universities was 50%, which indicated a high reliability in terms of the findings. More female students (n 145) participated in the study than male (n 27), as female students are usually in the majority in social work education and consequently in the profession. These percentages reflect the gender distribution in the profession of social work. Most of the students, namely 83,5%, who completed the questionnaire were in their fourth year of study. At both universities, students at fourth-year level are required to spend three days per week in field practice, where they have to apply the three main methods in social work.

Factor analysis of quantitative data: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient

By means of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient an analysis was done on the quantitative items in the questionnaire; the items or questions were clustered by the Cronbach Alpha technique into four factors or themes: ABCD competency, leadership style, attitude towards ABCD and relevance of ABCD to Social Work and Community Development. The Cronbach's Alpha

reliability of all four factors measured high and produced similar findings for both universities. Table 1 below presents details about the items or questions.

Table 1: **Students' responses in terms of four factors of two institution**

Institution		Factor 1 ABCD competency	Factor 2 Leadership style	Factor 3 Attitude towards ABCD	Factor 4 Relevance of ABCD to the curriculum
NMU	Mean	3,8831	4,0299	4,2836	3,7239
	Std. Deviation	0,75253	0,81388	0,81496	0,96249
UJ	Mean	3,9725	3,9358	4,4144	4,2844
	Std. Deviation	0,79082	1,00766	0,67266	0,77390
Total	**Mean**	**3,9384**	**3,9716**	**4,3646**	**4,0710**
	Std. Deviation	**0,77552**	**0,93731**	**0,73060**	**0,89079**

In terms of competencies in ABCD (factor 1) the majority of the students were of the opinion that they could apply the ABCD model to practice, could link the theory of ABCD to their practical internship, have been sufficiently exposed to practical examples of ABCD, and that lecturers were sufficiently acquainted with ABCD. Reliability with regard to the Cronbach's Alpha was 0.774.

Regarding factor 2 (leadership style), students were of the opinion that the ABCD model fitted their personal convictions, suited their personal leadership style, and felt that once they have graduated they will be able to apply ABCD in their work as a social worker. The Cronbach's Alpha measured 0.684.

In terms of factor 3 (attitude towards ABCD) the students believed that ABCD could change people's lives in a sustainable way, that all students should know about ABCD, but to fully benefit from ABCD more in-depth training in ABCD is needed. The Cronbach's Alpha rated 0.674.

The items grouped in terms of factor 4 (relevance of ABCD to social work and community development), students were in favour of the application of ABCD in social work and community development and affirmed that ABCD was relevant to the curriculum. The Cronbach's Alpha was 0.786.

In terms of the above analysis, it appears that the questionnaire has yielded acceptable levels of internal consistency and could be redrafted with the possibility of including more items, as well as exposure to broader testing and refinement of the questionnaire.

DISCUSSION OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Students of NMU experienced community development in rural, disadvantaged, poor and black communities, while students at UJ were placed in both rural and urban communities, but also with disadvantaged, poor and black community members.

The four factors from the quantitative part of the study, namely ABCD competency, leadership style, attitude towards ABCD and relevance of ABCD to the profession, will be further explored through the qualitative findings under themes 1 to 4. The qualitative findings add rich information to the quantitative findings. Both positive experiences and challenges described by the students will be highlighted in this section.

Theme 1: Competencies in ABCD

In terms of competencies in ABCD (factor 1), based on the quantitative findings, most students felt that they could apply the ABCD model to practice, could link the theory of ABCD to their practical internship, were sufficiently exposed to practical examples of ABCD, and that lecturers were sufficiently acquainted with ABCD. Although the majority of students had success with the application of ABCD to practice, some students found it challenging to apply ABCD principles and methods to actual communities and their material conditions, as explained in sub-theme 1.2 below.

Sub-theme 1.1: Competency level of students

Participants at both universities used ABCD as the primary model of community work in their field practice education. Students' general remarks were that they facilitated community members as the key actors of development in identifying the different assets, strengths and capabilities of community members and the assets in the community. The aim of the students was to make community members aware of their assets, and to mobilise them to use their assets in building their communities. Multiple students' comments in this regard included:

> *ABCD is about the assets of the community; in my practical work I looked at the assets the community has and how they can be used to their benefit.*

> *...applied it through community assessment in identifying community assets and strengths therefore looked at some assets the community can use to develop the community.*

Students tried changing community members' dependency and poverty-focused mindsets to a mindset where they realised that they have assets and can apply their assets to build their communities. Students tried to change community members' mindsets, as suggested in the following quotations:

> *It is challenging to shift clients' way of viewing their situation ... they have been accustomed to a certain way of thinking.*

> *...focused on problems rather than assets.*

Students mentioned the use of different asset-based tools and methods that made people aware of their assets, such as appreciative inquiry, asset mapping (for example the "head, hands, heart" exercise), mapping of physical and natural assets, the leaky bucket tool to map the economic situation, and Venn diagrams to map the social assets. These tools are often used by practitioners with community members to reveal human, social, physical, natural and financial assets. Students' comments were:

I was given an opportunity to work with community members where I learnt about them and the community they lived in; using the hands, head and heart diagram, they were able to identify their abilities and through the Venn diagram they were able to see and appreciate the social assets of their community.

Discover clients' strengths and weaknesses during the inquiry, teach community members on how to use their strengths to better their lives, and not only to look at the weak or negative side of things but to look at existing assets that could assist them.

The above findings are evident of the key characteristics of the ABCD approach. It seems if students had a satisfactory level of competence in ABCD. Students made use of various tools and methods in practice but noticed that they spent a lot of time on starting up processes, and facilitating people in discovering their assets (Homan, 2011; McKnight & Block, 2010; Nel *et al.*, 2021).

Sub-theme 1.2: Challenges in applying competencies

Students' competencies were challenged in their practice education placements. The following five challenges were mentioned by students.

Communities accustomed to a problem-based approach: Thirty (17%) students experienced challenges with community members who were accustomed to the problem-based approach, an approach that created a sense of entitlement, dependency and internalised powerlessness. Community members saw themselves as recipients of services and expected the government, professionals and experts to bring about change in the communities. Community members required payment for participation in projects, did not view themselves as active participants in the projects but as recipients of hand-outs and services; they were not motivated to participate and did not believe that they as community members could bring about change in their lives and communities; hence, they did not take ownership for the future. Remarks from students in this regard were**:**

… communities think that social workers are supposed to bring something to the community and the people are just supposed to receive; this was a problem for me as they had no understanding of ABCD.

… are more familiar with needs-based assessment, so they were reluctant of the new model ABCD.

Community members often focus more on their problems and want to focus on them and not their strengths.

… no matter how the question is asked, the community members always come up with negative responses and more needs than assets.

Expecting professionals and government to bring projects, assistance, change, payment for participation.

… sense of entitlement, wait for hand-outs.

Above is a description of the problem-based, deficiency approach which many organisations and institutions apply in communities in South Africa. They are service-oriented instead of developmental in nature. It is evident from the research that the effect of the service-orientated, deficiency approach created a sense of entitlement and dependency on outside assistance (Nel, 2018a; 2018b; 2020; Nel & Pretorius, 2012; Pretorius & Nel, 2012).

Internalised powerlessness of communities: Students (5,1%) found it difficult to facilitate community members' movement from a mindset of powerlessness and dependency to a mindset of recognising assets, strengths and capabilities, which could be used in building their own future. Comments from students in this regard were:

> *It is challenging to shift clients' way of viewing their situation because they have been accustomed to a certain way of thinking and viewing their situation so it's difficult for them to change and have an optimistic way.*

> *... focused on problems rather than assets.*

The study shows that students found it difficult to facilitate community members' shift from an internal sense of powerlessness to a mindset and situation where community members are galvanised to use their assets towards developing self-reliant independent living, which is an important factor of the ABCD approach (Mathie *et al.,* 2017; Nel, 2018a; 2018b; Nel & Pretorius, 2012; Pretorius & Nel, 2012;). It seems as if some students (20%) tried to convince or even force community members to believe that they have or are assets, which indicated a shortcoming in our students' undergraduate competency in facilitating community members towards discovery of their assets, which could lead to self-reliance. Students' remarks in this regard were:

> *In working with people from a poor community, we had to strongly convince them that they have assets.*

> *I managed to make them realise that they have strengths, abilities, resources and assets that they can use to their advantage to change their lives and the situations they face.*

Community development is a slow process and because of the time-bound and temporary involvement of students in practice, students found it difficult to facilitate the ABCD process appropriately (Kramer, Amos, Lazarus & Seedat, 2012; Mansvelt, 2018; Weyers, 2016;). This could have contributed to the challenges experienced mentioned above.

Basic needs should first be addressed from outside: Although most students were able to apply ABCD in most disadvantaged, poor communities, some students were not convinced that the ABCD approach could be applied in those communities. Some students, although in the minority (14,7%), believed the poor and disadvantaged communities in which they did their field practice had no resources (4,5%) and basic needs must first be addressed from outside (1,7%) before ABCD can be applied. From the responses it was evident that students from both universities were overwhelmed by the poverty they encountered, and the negative, devastated mindsets of community members. Students said:

> *I was manipulated by community members having no assets and needed support from outside.*
>
> *There were no assets in the community or more needs than assets.*
>
> *ABCD is not really effective because most of them do not have enough resources for development.*
>
> *I also have a different perception on the thought that all communities have assets.*
>
> *I beg to differ on that as I feel that is not the case – some communities do not have assets.*
>
> *... the community I was placed in has less strengths therefore it needs external help. Upliftment and/or meeting basic needs are required before ABCD can be applied.*

Above responses are an indication of students who are not convinced about the efficacy of the ABCD approach, who did not have a thorough grip on ABCD, and were stuck in a similar mindset as community members, namely one of internal powerlessness, or who looked through a poverty-focused lens (Demeshane & Nel, 2018; Eliasov, 2013; Eliasov & Peters, 2013; Hope & Timmel, 1995;).

Integration of theory and practice: The quantitative findings showed that most students were of the opinion that the theory and practice of ABCD were well integrated and that they were competent in applying the approach to practice. However, 12,5% of the students indicated in the qualitative part of the study that the theory and practice could have been integrated better. Students asserted that the theory was understandable but difficult to apply to practice. The students lacked an in-depth understanding of the theory as well as the skills for implementing it in practice (4,5%). 1,1% of students did not understand the value of assets. Some students (3,8%) admitted that they had not done enough reading on the ABCD approach. In addition, some students (4,6%) were of the opinion that campus supervisors were not sufficiently knowledgeable or in favour of ABCD, and thus not able to train them properly in the ABCD approach. Students' comments were:

> *... campus supervisors are not knowledgeable or in favour of ABCD.*
>
> *I have not done in-depth reading on ABCD.*
>
> *Struggle to apply and integrate theory to practice.*
>
> *...do not know how to identify assets properly and how to network (4,5%); do not understand the value of assets (1,1%).*

From these remarks it is clear that some students did not have a clear understanding of ABCD for the reasons mentioned above and were thus not able to apply the theory in practice.

Students' poverty-focused mindsets: Some students (2,7%) had personal problems, struggled with their self-confidence, their own levels of deprivation and were not convinced of the positive effect of an asset approach on their own lives. Comments included:

> *... intra-personal factors.*

... my confidence levels and networking.

... my own need to respond to deprivation.

Although most students have made personal mindset changes from a problem-based to an asset-based, self-driven mindset, some students found it difficult to make these changes on a personal basis (Emmett, 2000; Nel & Pretorius, 2012; Pretorius & Nel, 2012; Nel *et al.*, 2021).

Theme 2: Leadership style

Regarding the second theme (Factor 2: leadership style), findings from the quantitative results showed that the leadership required in ABCD practice fitted students' personal convictions, suited their personal leadership style and established their ability to apply ABCD in their prospective work as social workers. The following qualitative comments of students contributed to richer findings on leadership within the context of ABCD.

Sub-theme 2.1: Participatory, shared, appreciative and transformational leadership approaches

The qualitative remarks by students indicated that they made use of participatory, shared, appreciative and transformational leadership approaches in their communities. In the quantitative analysis students confirmed that these leadership approaches fit their personal convictions and personal leadership style well. Students' (14,9%) remarks in the qualitative section confirm the quantitative findings:

...using hands, head and heart diagram they were able to identify their abilities and through the Venn diagram they were able to see and appreciate the resources and assets their community has.

Discover clients' strengths and weaknesses during the inquiry teach community members on how to use their strengths to better their lives and not only to look at the weak or negative side of things but to look at existing assets that could assist them.

The above remarks are evidence of the participatory, collaborative and appreciative leadership approaches which they executed with community members. These approaches are relevant within the context of ABCD and social development (Nel, 2018a; 2018b; 2019; Nel *et al.*, 2021).

Sub-theme 2.2: Organisation support

Students received support from their supervisors in the organisations, were well supervised, coached and mentored. However, there is no evidence that the organisations that accommodated students were ABCD-driven. The characteristics of ABCD-sensitised organisations are *inter alia*: to be citizen-centred with local people controlling the organisations and setting the organisations' agenda (Landry & Peters, 2018; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; 2005; Nel *et al.*, 2021; Preece, 2017). Students (3%) mentioned general challenges experienced in the organisations, such as finding venues for meetings in the community, lack of support from the organisations and ward councillors, conflict in the communities that prevent them from going to their communities. Students commented:

Finding venues for gatherings in the community.

... lack of support from ward councillors, conflict within the community, students were not allowed to use resources in the organisation because they were reserved for the organisations.

Students were negative about placements in schools and were of the opinion that ABCD competencies could not develop properly in schools where ABCD had to be practised. Students were, for example, allowed to do their community projects only during the breaks. Students mentioned:

Don't include schools in the internship; ...schools are not geared towards community development and ABCD practice.

It is evident that although the ABCD leadership approaches fitted students' personal leadership styles and convictions well, the agencies where students were placed for their practical experience were not all citizen-centred and driven by local people (Emmett, 2000; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; 2005; Nel, 2011; Nel, 2018a; 2018b; 2019; Nel & Pretorius, 2012).

Theme 3: Attitude towards ABCD

In terms of theme 3, the students' attitude towards ABCD was positive. Their positive attitude was noticed in the items on the quantitative questionnaire, namely that ABCD could change people's lives in a sustainable way. Their positive attitude was also reflected in the recommendation that students at all levels of the degree, staff members, social workers and other role players, such as supervisors in the organisations, including government, should be trained in the ABCD approach. They were of the opinion that, for the sake of sustainability, all role players should work according to the principles and methods of the ABCD approach.

Sub-theme 3.1: Expand awareness of ABCD through training to all social workers, students and staff members

Although students were challenged with communities' deficiency-oriented and dependency attitudes and behaviour, they were of the view that ABCD had potential to shift people towards engaging with sustainable development. Their qualitative comments complement the quantitative findings and are an indication of the positive attitude students have towards ABCD. Some students (4,7%) believed that all role players should be orientated and trained in the ABCD approach, including social workers at all levels, as well as students and staff at all the universities in South Africa. This applied to urban and rural areas, and on local government level and local businesses as well. Comments in this regard were:

The concept of the ABCD model is effective and should be introduced in all universities that teach social workers.

... it will benefit most rural communities and sustain lives.

It should be taught to all practicing social workers.

There is a need to also introduce this approach to social workers that are already in the field as they seem to lack this based on my observation, in other words update them about ABCD.

If the actions of all the stakeholders in the development field are implemented according to the principles and methods of ABCD, the likelihood increases that communities would take responsibility for their future (Emmett, 2000; Nel, 2020).

Sub-theme 3.2: Specific role for government in the ABCD process

Students' positive attitude towards ABCD was also noticed as they (3,9%) were of the opinion that government fosters dependency within communities, and that government needs to change the way in which they intervene in people's lives. A comment in this regard was:

ABCD needs to encompass a way of how the government can intervene when the community needs an intervention instead of depending on the government for development.

Theme 4: Relevance of ABCD to the curriculum

Regarding items grouped in terms of Factor 4: relevance of ABCD to social work, students were in favour of the application of ABCD in social work and they felt that ABCD was relevant to the curriculum.

Most students felt that ABCD is relevant for social work practice in South Africa and could be widely applied. ABCD was applied either as a primary approach in community work practice, using specific phases, tools and methods. Or in addition, ABCD was applied in combination with other development approaches such as the problem-based, sustainable livelihoods (SLA) and social development approaches. Furthermore, students applied the ABCD tools and methods in various settings and projects.

Sub-theme 4.1: ABCD in combination with other approaches and different settings

The students (4,8%) used the ABCD approach in combination with other approaches such as the needs-based approach. The students used the ABCD tools and methods also in different settings, such as in capacity-building projects and the establishment of income-generating projects. This is evidence of creativity and the innovative way in which students used ABCD. To be professionally competent, students should be able to integrate various theories depending on the situation, hence the importance of integrating the ABCD with various appropriate theories. Students' comments in this regard were:

I do not use it alone, I incorporate both ABCD and needs based approaches.

Carrying out a capacity building project in the community I work with.

I have started a project in a community to empower the people with skills that they can use in small businesses to start making profit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the discussion of the findings, the literature and the authors' opinions that students could experience the sustainable advantages of ABCD if curricular and pedagogical recommendations are made, including curriculum changes in terms of preparation of students, staff and communities, and the expansion of workshops on ABCD to all social workers, staff members and students at all universities' Social Work departments.

Preparation of students: Firstly, the theory of ABCD should be offered earlier in the curriculum and in various years. Secondly, the application of ABCD in practice is time-consuming and a slow process and more time should be allocated to the practical application of ABCD. Thirdly, students should be better prepared for the ABCD approach. As community members, as well as some students, are more prone to accepting the problem-based approach, time should be spent in the classroom with students on how to change problem-based mindsets to an asset-based approach. In-depth induction of methods and techniques, such as appreciative inquiry as well as real live examples from practice, should be done in class before approaching communities. ABCD practitioners should be invited to give lectures. Fourthly, the ABCD approach should be integrated with other approaches such as the rights-based approach, the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) and needs-based approach. Lastly, after the completion of the internship when students leave the communities, the universities and the organisations that coordinate the practical education should follow up on the interventions of students and make sure that sustainability measures are applied.

Preparation of staff: Lecturers and campus supervisors should be better prepared in terms of theory and skills in the ABCD model.

Preparation of organisations and communities: The supervisors, managers and staff members of organisations which accommodate students should be prepared in advance on ABCD and the role they should play in the supervising, mentoring and coaching of students. Community leaders should also be engaged in the preparation.

Orientation and training on a bigger scale: It is recommended that all social workers, staff members and students at all the universities should be orientated towards the ABCD approach. For ABCD to be successful, training should also be done with people involved in organisations driving development, including all role players and stakeholders.

Further research: Research could explore the integration of ABCD with other theoretical approaches such as the problem-based approach, social justice approach, and the social development and sustainable livelihoods approaches. A similar study should be conducted with supervisors and lecturers to get a holistic picture on the topic. Organisations driving ABCD interventions should be included in a study to address the challenges of community development in higher education institutions, especially field practice education. This study should also be conducted at more universities to be able to generalise findings.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study focused only on the perceptions of students and not of lecturers, supervisors, and community members; in addition, the data were collected before the Covid-19 pandemic and the effect of the pandemic could not be reported on.

While a mixed-method design was employed, the use of open-ended questions in a questionnaire to cover the qualitative approach was limiting. The researchers were unable to follow up or probe deeper on emerging themes as the questionnaires were administered in a lecture anonymously and not done face to face.

The questionnaire was completed in the middle of a semester when students were not yet done with their practical work requirements/component for the year. This means that they might still have been busy with setting up processes with community members and had not yet experienced the outcomes. Their perceptions by the end of the practicum could have been different from their perceptions during the process.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the findings it is evident that most students did gain general competencies of ABCD, they had a positive attitude to ABCD, they presented leadership styles applicable to ABCD, and perceived ABCD as a relevant approach for South Africa. The students were of the view that the approach makes community members identify their potential and, in a collaborative way, build the wealth of the community to become self-reliant and independent citizens of the country. However, the problem-based approach which still dominates the development arena gave rise to challenges; students found it hard to change people's internalised powerlessness and dependency in favour of a belief that they (the community) have assets and in using their assets they could build their own future. The ideal training of students is that in which they experience ABCD to the extent that community members work collaboratively with the organisation and other stakeholders in the community as learning partners, using their personal assets and the assets of the community towards sustainability. In addition, to deliver well-rounded students into professional practice, students need to integrate different approaches with the ABCD approach such as the problem-based and social justice approaches.

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