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# Unravelling the dynamics of successful collaboration and the potential for community-based learning in child and youth care

**Raisuyah Bhagwan**

*Durban University of Technology, Department of Community Health Studies, Durban, South Africa*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1584-9432 *Bhagwanr@dut.ac.za*

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to investigate successful collaborative community-university partnerships. The intention was to identify factors that contribute to effective service in rural spaces as transformative teaching and learning environments for final-year child and youth care students from a University of Technology in KwaZulu-Natal. Utilising a qualitative research methodology, the research design involved non-probability purposive sampling, with twelve students recruited for semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to the effectiveness of the engagement process and its impact on both students and the community. The findings highlight the importance of mutual trust, clear communication and shared goals in fostering successful collaborations. The study underscores the potential for community engagement projects not only to serve local needs, but also to enrich students' educational experiences, ultimately suggesting that thoughtful partnerships can lead to sustainable community engagement and enhanced learning outcomes.

**Keywords**: child and youth care; community engagement; rural

## INTRODUCTION

The complexity of contemporary societal ills, such as poverty, health disparities and environmental degradation, has compelled higher education institutions to reconsider their societal role and become more creative in developing solutions that can improve the wellbeing of humankind (Holland & Malone, 2019). In order to do this, the expertise available within universities must be directed towards productive engagements with citizens, community-based organisations and other relevant partners (Holland & Malone, 2019). Engagement and collaboration with communities creates richer opportunities to co-create solutions to problems linked to the environment, health and wellbeing, poverty, homelessness, disengaged youth, economy-related crises and other complex societal ills (Bhagwan, 2017b). Moreover, the emerging understanding of engagement is predicated on the notion that not all forms of knowledge reside in universities and that enhanced learning opportunities in teaching can be found in community spaces (Fitzgerald et al*.,* 2012). In fact, Saidi (2023, p. 6) argued that community engagement should be prioritised in Africa, because the shift towards a transformed and decolonised higher education system in Africa demands that engagement be regarded as the "first mission" of universities.

This paper sheds light on a university-community partnership that was initiated between the Child and Youth Care Department at a University of Technology in eThekwini, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and the Ndwedwe community. The project involved immersing fourth-year students into the community to undertake their fieldwork practicum placements. In addition, three Master's students who were involved in a community-based participatory research project were also part of the engagement initiative. The aim of this study was to explore how the students were able to successfully collaborate with the community and implement engaged activities that facilitated community-based learning.

### The project in its context

Child and youth care education aims to prepare students for the world of practice, in a context of diversity and social inequalities. Child and youth care work focuses on promoting and supporting the wellbeing of children, youths and their families, encompassing a range of practices that prioritise the social, emotional and developmental needs of young individuals through various interventions and community resources. It is closely allied with social work, which also focuses on broader social issues and advocacy for and empowerment of disadvantaged communities. The scope of practice for child and youth care workers (CYCWs) encompasses a range of settings, including residential programmes, schools, community organisations and mental health services. CYCWs engage in direct care, advocacy and programmes development, utilising therapeutic approaches to support the holistic development and wellbeing of children, youths and families (Allsopp, 2021). Its focus is the implementation of therapeutic and developmental services with vulnerable children, youths and their families. One of the most significant parts of the Child and Youth Care degree relates to the field work placements of students at child and youth care centres, schools and other organisations, which creates opportunities to intervene in the lives of these children and their families (Stuart, 2013) This project went beyond the traditional practicum placement to explore a powerful opportunity for students to learn during their placements in a deep rural area of Ndwedwe.

Following the establishment of a partnership with the Tholompilo village organisation, an arrangement was made for the fourth-year students to be placed in the Ndwedwe community. Students typically spend six months at their placements, which in this case was the community. They begin with a two-week orientation programme and then spend a day there every week. They were expected to provide individual and group counselling and develop relevant community-based interventions. In this case they co-planned and implemented their interventions in tandem with community members and the community-based child and youth care workers. The project itself is linked to the NRF-SAASTA Grant: Science Shop under Science Engagement. The project placements began in March 2023 ended during 2024. In addition to the placement of these students in the community, three Master's students who were involved in community-based participatory research studies were part of the overall engagement initiative.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The university has been described as an institution that not only produces knowledge that can benefit society, but also educates students for productive roles in the modern world in a way that maintains excellent levels of scholarship through collaboration with communities outside its boundaries (Fitzgerald et al*.,* 2012). Engagement Australia (2008, p. 2) defined university-community engagement as "the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and skills between universities and their multiple communities," which includes universities "acknowledging community values, culture, knowledge and skills." Moreover, such engagement supports the integration of engagement into learning and research activities by ensuring that engaged research is designed and managed as a partnership that addresses both academic and community priorities, that programs are socially inclusive and are designed and managed in partnership with communities, that strive to produce engaged citizens, including students and graduates (Engagement Australia, 2008, p. 2).

Community engagement initiatives therefore synergise thought, action, reason and emotion by integrating student experiences with communities that interact with universities (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011). Underpinning many of the activities linked to community engagement is the philosophy of community-based learning, which acknowledges communities as legitimate spaces which are vested with valuable knowledge (Houston & Lange, 2018). Porto and Houghton (2023), for example, recognised the potential of disadvantaged and minority groups, with their diverse backgrounds who can provide meaningful, relevant, culturally and linguistically responsive learning opportunities for students. As such, academics have been urged to incorporate engagement activities into instructional practices to enhance student learning, which is embedded in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Ciccone & Meyers, 2006). Zlotkowski (2013) posited that deep learning amongst students emerges from active learning, which does not rest solely on cognitive development, but also includes affective experiences or lived experiences in real-world contexts.

The notion of mutuality of benefit was emphasised by Petter (2017), who argued that through the process of engagement, the university gains as much as it vests within the community and consequently strengthens its social relevance. The transformative power of engagement was further expounded by Bidandi et al. (2021, p.1), who described it as "a vehicle for bringing

about behavioural and environment change," by working closely with groups of people to address problems that influence their wellbeing. In fact, authors such as Fitzgerald et al. (2012) argued that academics have a responsibility to develop complementary relationships between scholarly achievement and societal good.

In the South African context, the necessity of community-based learning in social work education cannot be overstated. It is crucial for preparing students for real-life practice, particularly in a country marked by significant social disparities. In this regard, South African education has been driven by policy documents drafted by the Department of Education in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which established the three core functions of higher education institutions (HEIs): teaching, research and community engagement (Bhagwan & Rowkith, 2023; Padayachee et al., 2021: 33). This framework called for renewed relationships between HEIs and their surrounding communities, thereby promoting a holistic approach to education that extends beyond traditional academic boundaries.

The establishment of the South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum in 2009 provided further momentum for the discourse on community engagement in the country, underscoring the importance of collaborative efforts between universities and communities to address societal needs (Hoyt & Hollister, 2014). Bhagwan (2017a) emphasised that community-based learning within social work not only enhances professional competencies among students, but also fosters a sense of social justice and responsibility, pivotal in the South African landscape marked by its history of inequality and transformation. For instance, the University of Cape Town has long-standing community engagement projects extending to surrounding communities in the Western Cape. These initiatives ground their research in these communities and facilitate regular outreach programmes, illustrating the practical application of academic knowledge in local contexts (Favish & McMillan, 2009).

A study undertaken by Rowkith and Bhagwan (2020) found that community engagement supported the premise that diversity can be emancipatory and they therefore argued in favour of reciprocal partnerships between universities and communities, where the latter can serve as rich reservoirs of indigenous knowledge and consequently support learning. The study by Jose and Sahu (2023) also found that engagement enhanced student learning opportunities, helped academics translate theory into practice, whilst fostering more positive transformations in the community.

Describing the benefits that accrue to students, Benneworth (2018) posited that engaged teaching brings together academics, students and community partners within the context of a collaborative partnership that nurtures students' academic knowledge and civic learning simultaneously. Scholars have argued that engaged teaching not only supports theoretical knowledge, but strengthens personal values and fosters a deeper sense of social responsibility (Hart et al., 2023; Sugawara et al., 2023). It is against this backdrop that the current study sought to understand the experiences of child and youth care students who engaged with the Ndwedwe community.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research approach and design

This study aimed to explore how students collaborated with the community, the nature of their engaged interventions emerging from this partnership, and the benefits that emerged from this community-based learning. A qualitative exploratory research design was used to guide the study, which allowed the researcher to explore and gather rich insights on the participants' experiences within the Ndwedwe community (Anas & Ishaq, 2022). This design entails collecting descriptive data without imposing predetermined theories or assumptions, enabling researchers to capture the nuances of participants' experiences. The research questions guiding this inquiry were: How were the students able to collaborate with the Ndwedwe community? What did they learn as part of their community-based experience? What was the nature of their engaged interventions?

### Study setting

The Ndwedwe community, located in the iLembe District of KwaZulu-Natal, is characterised by deep poverty, unemployment, poor housing and a lack of infrastructure. Moreover, the phenomenon of grandmother- and child-headed households is prevalent within this community.

### Sample and sampling approach

Twelve students, who included nine fourth-year undergraduate child and youth care students and three Master's students, were involved in this engagement initiative. Although twelve were recruited to participate in this study, only nine eventually participated. A non-probability sampling strategy, specifically purposive sampling which is aligned with qualitative research approaches, guided the selection of the sample. Given that the aim was to understand the experiences of all the students linked to the engagement project, purposive sampling was most appropriate. The inclusion criterion was that only child and youth care students who were part of the engagement project in Ndwedwe in 2023 would be included in the sample.

Of the nine eventual participants, three were Master's students and the other six undergraduate child and youth care students. Eight were female and one undergraduate student was male.

### Data-collection method

Data were collected using a pre-tested interview guide, designed to gather rich descriptive information on the students' experiences in the Ndwedwe community and the benefits they derived from their engagement. Following ethical approval from the university (ethics number 197/23), the researcher visited the research site to conduct interviews at the community hall during September and October 2023. Participants provided written and signed informed consent, and were informed about their right to withdraw from the study without repercussions. The venue was a quiet space and interviews were scheduled on days when the hall was not in use. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 50 minutes, guided by the primary research question which was: What was the nature of the engagement experience for students and what interventions emerged through this engagement?" All the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and were subsequently transcribed. Data collection ceased

after nine interviews, as data saturation was achieved. Given that there were no new insights emerging and participants were reporting similar perceptions, data collection stopped.

### Data-analysis method

The data were analysed using thematic analysis by adopting the most recent guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2022). This process involves systematically identifying themes within the data sets that capture the participants' narratives. Theme identification emerged inductively through meticulous reading and re-reading of transcribed material. A pivotal step in this process involved refining and defining themes, recognising the essence of each theme, while determining which aspects of the data it encapsulates (Bricki & Green, 2007). An independent co-coder was used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis.

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the study was ensured by adhering to the four criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994): credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To ensure credibility, interviews were audio-recorded, followed by member checking to confirm that the transcripts accurately represented student realities. Although generalisability is not a primary focus of qualitative studies, detailed descriptions of participants, study settings, time frames and data-collection methods were provided to enhance transferability to other research contexts. An audit trail was maintained throughout the interview process to achieve confirmability. Dependability was ensured by providing a detailed methodological description, facilitating the potential replication of the study. As the researcher, I acknowledged that my background could influence data interpretation and hence the use of a co-coder was deemed necessary. To further address this, I engaged in ongoing reflection to minimise bias and ensure that the participants' voices remained central to the findings.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three themes (each with two subthemes) emerged from the data, namely the community space in context, learning from community and engaged activities.

***Table 1*: Themes and subthemes**

| Themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| **Theme 1: The community space in context** | Subtheme 1.1: Establishing meaningful relationships with community |
| | Subtheme 1.2: Understanding community needs through being in the community |
| **Theme 2: Learning from community** | Subtheme 2.1: New experiences: learning from community |
| | Subtheme 2.2: Learning from community: learning indigenous knowledge |
| **Theme 3: Engaged activities** | Subtheme 3.1: The potential for entrepreneurship |
| | Subtheme 3.2: Engaged interventions with the children and youths |

**Theme 1: The community space in context**

***Subtheme 1.1: Establishing meaningful relationships with community***

Students shared the view that a successful engaged partnership depends on developing meaningful relationships with the community. They said:

> *What I have learned is that in the community it is important to have a trusted partner. If it wasn't for him, as our trusted community leader, we would not have been able to identify the families that were in need, and the young people that we had to work with. So, it is important to have a healthy relationship with the community members … it is important to listen to the community members, it is important to listen to what they have to say and meet those needs*. (P4)

> *The partnership with the community head was great … we got to go out to the community now, just to see, to feel and to be, within this beautiful community. So, it was really great. We got an opportunity to engage and to talk to community members through home visits, and just seeing and hearing about their challenges first-hand for us, it was really an eye opener, we got to see the resilience of the community, and in all my experience, it has been really eye opening and very educational*. (P7)

The need to nurture a strong relationship with a trusted community leader who could acquaint them with the community and its problems appeared as an important initial factor in the engagement process. Students noted that it was the community leader who facilitated their engagement with other community members, particularly families in the area through home visits. Being able to walk through the community and enter their homes, especially those who were vulnerable, was only possible together with someone whom the families trusted. Other students emphasised the importance of developing healthy relationships with community members, through listening to them with authenticity and in collaborative caring ways, so that meaningful relationships could emerge between them as students and the community members. Strean (2012) wrote that by bonding with the community, and by expressing a desire to connect and help others, the commitment between the university and community solidifies.

Another student described the importance of becoming one with the community. She said:

> *I've never been exposed to a community setting, so we had to transition and become one of them, to understand their challenges. We have to become one of them, understand their way of living and get to know their values. So, for me that was a great experience … I had to shift from being a child and youth care student to being a community member*. (P8)

The shift from being a student to feeling like a community member reflects the importance of a deeply interconnected relationship and the inseparability of community from academics and students in an engaged approach. It further resonates with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which is predicated on the belief that humans' co-existence is based on mutual dependence on each other. *Ubuntu* plays a critical role in community development initiatives by empowering the "we" in communities. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) argued that *ubuntu* nurtures the capacity for all to be human, to respect others and to work towards helping others in a spirit of service. This interdependent relationship features strongly in the community engagement

literature, which emphasises that higher education institutions as social entities are required to contribute to societal good by fostering meaningful relationships with communities (Owusu-Agyeman & Moroeroe, 2022). Moran (2018) argued that when a student's vision of life includes the sustenance and growth of the common good, then their life threads become embedded within the fabric of community life, as evidenced in the narratives that follow.

> *The thing that I've learned in child and youth care is that when you are exposed to a community setting, you have to work with everyone…in order to work with everyone, you need to be very, very sensitive. You need to be a child and youth care worker and you also need to become like a community member*. (P8)

> *Just being there and experiencing the rural life. And experiencing the rural people and just seeing their values, how they treat each other, how they speak to one another and just seeing the different challenges that they face. It was humbling and it was just an experience of a lifetime. It still is even now.* (P3)

As narrated, the students' exposure to a rural community enabled them to appreciate a different way of life, a different value system and to understand the challenges confronting rural communities. Colbeck and Michael (2006) reflected on the community context as a rich landscape for nurturing students' discovery and learning about both local and global issues of relevance. Because of their geographic location, those in rural communities tend to endure greater hardship and have less access to social, medical and educational resources (Nanor et al., 2021). Coupled with this is the fact that those in rural areas are more likely to be impoverished, which in turn affects their physical and mental health and renders them vulnerable to trauma and adversity (Atinga et al., 2018). The Ndwedwe community is characterised by high levels of poverty and the prevalence of grandmother-headed households. The grandmothers struggle to access social support for raising their orphaned or abandoned grandchildren, particularly in the context of poverty. Hence engagement with this community created fertile opportunities for engaged interventions with them. This is reflected in the themes that follow.

In addition to grasping the realities of these adversities, students can also get the opportunity to learn the values of respect, integrity, trust and care, which have been identified as the core values that underpin successful engagement (Bhagwan, 2019). As evidenced in these narratives, students believed that they had to set aside their roles of being child and youth care students to become "one with the community," or be seen as a community member. This required that they worked in close spirit with them, with sensitivity towards their needs, and embrace their values and way of life. Inevitably the opportunity to work on the basis of these values strengthened the opportunity to also deepen values that are aligned with the child and youth care values of compassion, social justice and care.

***Subtheme 1.2: Understanding community needs through being in the community***

The second sub-theme focused on understanding community needs. Within a community engagement context, engagement scholars have argued that engagement creates the potential to leverage the resources of the university to address local community issues, concerns and challenges in a way that uplifts and benefits the community (Bhagwan et al., 2022). One of the pivotal aspects characterising the engagement relationship, however, is that the university places the needs of the community first and does not impose its agenda on those most vulnerable (Ohmer et al*.,* 2022). Hence, in this spirit of caring the students shared how the process of community asset mapping created the opportunity for them to understand the needs of local community members:

> *At the beginning when we first went to Ndwedwe, we did a map of the community, because that's how we got to see, how we would do things…and we also did home visits. That was the way we introduced ourselves to the grandmothers in the community, we went to many, many different houses and we got to build a special relationship with them.* (P3)

The process of "documenting the tangible and intangible resources of a community as a place with strengths or assets that need to be preserved and enhanced" (Hull et al*.,* 2003, p.3) can be regarded as an important first step towards understanding community needs. In the current study this involved mapping the assets of people like the grandmothers, networks or relationships, and becoming aware of organisations where communities converge. In the context of this project, community members frequently gathered at a local village organisation, which served as a central hub for recreational and social activities. One of the key gathering places was a "Safe Park," an outdoor space designed for children and families to engage in safe, supervised recreational activities (Reyneke, 2024). This park provided a welcoming environment for social interaction, fostering community cohesion and mutual support among residents.

Another student shared the value of a community walk about as follows:

> *There was the walk and talk … what we did was we went into the community, picked up dirt and we just went around speaking to people about the importance of a clean environment … that really helped as well because we were able to engage more with people and get to know them and their problems*. (P2)

The walkabout in the community therefore created the opportunity for students to grasp the needs of the community. Whilst an environmental clean-up occurred, it simultaneously created the chance to meet people and understand their needs. Engaged scholars have said that simple walks through a community and having one-on one conversations with members are good ways to interact with and get to know neighbourhood dynamics and problems. Informal conversations and encounters are therefore meaningful in terms of understanding a particular community and its cultural context (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2016).

Other students emphasised the importance of being in the community space to understand community needs better. For most of the students involved in the engagement project, the

experience of being in a community space went beyond their previous experiences of being placed at child care centres for their fieldwork practicum placement. One student said:

> *The difference is that you get to be in a space of those people in the community, you get to hear stories about their personal lives. It's more like who you are … I think you are more involved in their lives rather than being placed in a centre … here you are able to apply what you were taught in class with the community. It is very deep.* (P6)

In addition to being exposed to a deep rural context, students were able to apply what they had learnt in class to the problems that prevailed within the community. Other students emphasised the core values that needed to be interwoven within their relationship-building process with the community, as evinced in this comment:

> *We had to build relationships … build rapport so that community members trust us. This was important for them to share their experiences, to share their challenges openly, without the fearing of sharing things with you. I had to be sensitive to their needs and to their diversity, because we work in a Black community. So there are certain rules of values that they follow. For me to venture in and help them, I had to follow those rules and not become a CYC worker, without knowing their backgrounds or their cultures or beliefs. So, I had to attend to their beliefs and understand them, in order for me to work with them.* (P8)

In order to nurture and cement their relationship with the community, a student said:

> *I did a lot of home visits. So, I got to spend a lot of time with grandmothers that spoke about their grandchildren and how they've made certain choices in life like misusing substances or becoming pregnant. It was really heartbreaking to hear, because they were really saddened about it. They spoke about it as like something that really, really breaks their heart to witness. A lot of grandmothers that spoke about how their grandchildren are misusing substances and they've gotten into theft*. (P2)

> *When we were with the grandmothers listening to them, it was not like we were taking the theory and putting it to work. We had to listen to grandmothers sharing their stories with us and then we had to listen and assess their problems. Listening was important as they were the ones who were experiencing challenges. So we have to come with a blank mind …that is how it was different for me*. (P8)

Bhagwan (2017b) argued that the heart of engagement is guided by communication, which embraces conversation, connections and collaborations that catalyse fresh insights. He added, however, that this communication must occur in the light of a formal intentional enquiry. The narratives emphasise the spirit of service which undergirds the philosophy of community engagement. They reflect that students worked with the community with authenticity, empathy and care, which are the core values that underpin engagement (Bhagwan, 2019). They are also in line with the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which embraces kindness, compassion and service to humankind predicated on the notion that "I am because we are" (Bhagwan, 2017b). Moreover, the study emphasised the collaborative nature of partnerships with diverse stakeholders, ranging from the leaders to the community members, even to the elderly as in the case of this study. Community engagement then dissolves the traditional hierarchical

relationships, where academics are regarded as experts to embrace a more participatory approach where there is sensitivity towards the community and inclusivity within the relationship. The significance of collaborative relationships, which entail the inclusion of all regardless of age, abilities, background and culture, is that they are the hallmark of an engaged partnership (Osborne et al., 2021).

**Theme 2: Learning from community**

***Subtheme 2.1: New experiences- Learning from community***

The first theme focused on "learning from community." Students shared that they had very different experiences through their engagement with the community. They shared as follows:

> *There's a very big difference between people and communities in rural places, as compared to the urban areas. So, you get to learn a lot of things. You get to understand things on a deeper level in a rural space because life is very different … there is a lot of poverty, and you get to experience very diverse backgrounds of people*. (P2)

> *The difference is that you get to be in a space of those people in the community, you get to hear their stories, so you are more involved in their lives and have a better chance of applying what you learnt in class. It is very deep*. (P6).

Research has found that women and children form the majority of the population in rural areas and they have to survive under conditions of extreme poverty and ill health (Mdiya & Mdoda, 2021). In Ndwedwe, where the study was located, the phenomenon of child and grandmother-headed households is common (Khumalo, 2020; Mabhunu, 2021). There are a multitude of socio-economic hardships within these households that affect the wellbeing of children and youths as well as their elderly caregivers. The opportunity to engage with the grandmothers and these children in these spaces created a powerful learning opportunity for students who had never experienced this way of life.

Students said:

> *The experience was satisfying and informative because I have never been exposed to a community before as a child and youth care student … I got to understand the many different ways of working with people. Interacting with other people's experiences was different and the learning was very satisfying.* (P6)

> *In our space we had to provide support and show them empathy … I think all those characteristics that we learned throughout our years of child and youth care work, came into play and use the different types of child and youth care interventions.* (P1)

The community experience provided students with a deepened understanding of the rural space and its challenges, such as poverty and its associated ills. This interaction allowed students to engage with rural people and learn from their resilience. Service learning, which is a part of engagement, is crucial as it offers opportunities for students to engage with the community through experiential learning, enabling them to learn effectively and make a meaningful difference in the lives of community members. This approach emphasises the importance of

universities acting as co-learners, supporters and equitable partners in community engagement, fostering mutual benefits and empathy (Ohmer et al*.,* 2022).

Moreover, immersion in the Ndwedwe community created opportunities for students to reflect on issues of injustice, oppression and privilege (Bhagwan, 2020). Nieto (2000) rightly argued that creating opportunities for students to reconsider their assumptions about society and the people they interact with during community service can help them shift their stereotypical notions of difference. Moreover, it can catalyse a deeper interrogation of the origins and causes of social inequalities and push students to deepen their level of social responsibility (Nieto, 2000).

Another student commented on the opportunity to understand rural child and youth care work from those rural practitioners who worked in the community.

> *I learned new aspects of child and you care work, how child and youth care work actually works in like rural communities…or community organisations. It was such a great experience…the skills they have taught us, like being able to work with others such as our working with the community partners and developing an understanding of community problems. I enjoyed how we actually got to experience working with both young people and also community members.* (P4)

Despite the lack of formal infrastructure within the community, the National Association of Child and Youth Care Workers had trained community members to become child and youth care practitioners at the height of the HIV pandemic, that left many children orphaned (Jamieson, 2013). The need to support child- and grandmother-headed households was addressed through community members supporting and caring for those families (Rapoport et al*.,* 2020). As such the students were given the opportunity to partner with and work closely with the community-based practitioners. They were also able to develop relationships with specific community leaders, who became their partners and enabled them access to the villages and homes where child and youth care intervention was most needed.

***Subtheme 2.2: Learning from community: Learning indigenous knowledge***

Immersion in the community also created opportunities for the students to learn indigenous knowledge and how to take its value into account in therapeutic interventions. Students acknowledged the wealth of indigenous wisdom, which created an opportunity for learning. They said:

> *It's been a very different experience, a very fulfilling experience…to embrace a different culture … I learned a lot from the members of the community, and it was also a very different experience to learn about the cuisine, culture, and tradition*. (P5)

> *During the group discussions, the elders would come to the organisation and they would tell us about their community and it made us grow. It also made us learn certain things, especially about culture, traditions, so it was a very good experience*. (P6)

As indicated, students had opportunities to learn about African spirituality, particularly from the elders and the traditions that underpin this worldview. Most importantly, however, was the

realisation amongst students that African stories could be used in tandem with the Western childcare interventions they had learned in class.

> *I have learned …I wasn't aware that African spirituality can be used in CYC, but after collecting those stories … we get to learn that after working with those communities, we can also use African stories to create some interventions for young people and also for elderly people.* (P8)

> *Something new that I learned was how powerful African spirituality was. You can use it as a form of therapy. The elderly can use African spirituality to help young people connect with their roots, which can also be therapeutic. I've also learned that through African spirituality, you can actually use its knowledge as traditional skills.* (P4)

Community engagement legitimises the indigenous, traditional knowledge within the community milieu and should be embraced within the context of community-based learning (Bhagwan, 2017b; Medved & Ursic, 2021). Moreover, by acknowledging this indigenous knowledge, higher education institutions can start to utilise it and other sources of knowledge (Nicolaides & Austin, 2022) as part of preparing graduates to work in disadvantaged spaces. The emphasis on co-learning with community members emphasises the mutuality of benefits and reciprocal outcomes that emerge when universities work with communities (Bhagwan, 2017b). Writers such as Medved and Ursic (2021) affirmed that partnerships that enable co-learning or collaborative learning enrich the mutuality of benefits and give momentum to the notion that that the university is not the sole custodian of knowledge and practice. Hence acknowledging the voices of local community members in co-creating understanding contextually relevant knowledge is a powerful element of the community engagement process (Cherrington et al*.,* 2019).

One of the important support groups that students set up to was to support the grandmothers who were raising their orphaned grandchildren. During this activity they identified a need to engage them in African beadwork, which created the opportunity to design African pieces. Whilst this was an important entrepreneurial activity, student also got to learn some of the African spiritual stories that underpinned the designs. This is evident in the following narrative:

> *I enjoyed engaging with the community as a whole like the African spirituality group, because I also got to learn about my culture. I also got to learn how to do beadwork. I didn't know how to do that and it was such a great atmosphere, because the elderly were so into like teaching us and we were also helping them with how to market their beadwork … if they can and continue with the pieces of work that they were doing*. (P4)

Other students were exposed to indigenous knowledge related to agriculture and the value of working in an open space. One student said:

> *There was this spiritual story that the grandmothers shared, about the non kulani, so that is said to be like isiZulu … going for planting some crops and everything next to the river. With that, we learned that it is not only about working within the closed space, but you can also work outside the open space, work with people, try to plan something in order for you to meet some basic needs. These grandmothers can plant and make food out of those plants,*

> *so the African story is said to be very helpful for me and also for other students, because it made us to realise that we're not only working in a closed space, but we also work outside. We also work outside of the close space.* (P8)

Viewed metaphorically, this student began to value the outside open space as one where change, growth and transformation can occur. Not only was she able to grasp the value of the African spiritual stories, but with this came the realisation that child and youth care need not only be practised within the confines of an office, but also in an outside space. The opportunity to learn alternative forms of knowledge that are inherent within community spaces dismantles traditional elitist notions that community-based knowledge is non-expert or unscientific in nature and that universities are the sole custodians of knowledge (Chandramohan & Bhagwan, 2022). Weerts and Sandmann (2008) argued that there have been significant social constructivist shifts towards more democratic models of knowledge that honour experiential, traditional and indigenous knowledges. This notion resonates with the views of Rajah (2019), who argued that appreciation of local indigenous knowledge is critical to the substantive transformation that community engagement seeks to achieve. Humility has been identified as crucial to community engagement partnerships (Sugawara et al*.,* 2023), which can only be manifested with a transformation of mindsets and attitudes, particularly acknowledging and being respectful of community knowledge (Saidi, 2023).

**Theme 3: Engaged activities**

***Subtheme 3.1: The potential for entrepreneurship***

The potential for entrepreneurial activity also emerged from the data. Students shared how they empowered the community as follows:

> *In the spirituality group, we introduced African spirituality as a healing tool to this community. This was really a success as they used it in a way that helped them connect with their roots, find meaning, develop resilience, but they were also able to make money out of it with the beadwork they were making. So as child and youth care workers, we enabled some financial independence. This was teaching the elderly how to make their own money instead of just depending on social grants … and just be creative*. (P4)

> *With the idea of the African beadwork project was the idea to market their pieces, so the grandmothers could use that money to support their households.* (P8)

The narratives related to the African spirituality group reflect how African spirituality served as a healing process by helping community members reconnect with their traditional African beliefs and practices. Moreover, by encouraging use of their traditional practices such as African beadwork, and by fostering a sense of community amongst traditional healers and grandmothers through group activities such as singing and dancing, African spirituality emerged as a source of strength and support in the community. These initiatives further allowed participants to leverage their entrepreneurial skills enabling them to find markets for their products, thereby creating opportunities for income generation.

*In my African spirituality group, so, the grandmothers, or should I say that the traditional healers or leaders, would often speak about earning a living. We then discussed let us talk about our talents or things that we are good at. We discovered that some of the grandmothers are good at making straw mats. Some of them are good at beadwork … a majority of them were also just interested and intrigued to learn bead work. So, I'd say those are were our interventions, just advise them how to use their talents and their knowledge to earn a living and then we were speaking about just finding a market for them to sell these mats and beadwork, once they were done, then they could fund more mats and beadwork*. (P7)

*Most of them were really talented at singing at traditional dancing. So, what we also did was opened a group, you know so that they belong in a group, where could try to grow and entertain people and possibly go to various places where they perform for people and earn some money.* (P6)

The example of developing ideas to support entrepreneurship projects reflects how students can provide assistance to contribute to innovation and entrepreneurship among adults. Community engagement can catalyse change by transferring skills and knowledge to the community (Dube & Hendricks, 2023), strengthening local capacity for community development and uplifting the functional capacity of communities to engage in transformative processes (Sugawara et al*.,* 2023). Most importantly, it reflects the university as a potential catalyst of entrepreneurial ventures, particularly in economically distressed rural communities.

***Subtheme 3.2: Engaged interventions with the children and youth***

The nature of engaged activities ranged from involving children and youths in social and developmental activities to initiating support groups for the grandmothers from grandmother-headed households to developing a refresher programme for the community-based child and youth care workers.

One student described the initiation of a group to offer support to grandmother-headed households as follows:

*Within the group there were also grandmothers who'd speak about the difficulties that they are facing at home; what we did was we invited some of the grandchildren to be part of this group so that we could discuss and actually give them advice because, you know, all the people are just so knowledgeable. And so we made sure that we are not telling them what to do, but actually just giving them insights and how you face challenges*. (P7)

*Regarding young people and the safe parks, what we did was we formulated a tree … focusing on young people that included all the rights of young people, especially because of the high incidence of rape, which is almost silenced in the community. It also included positive words for young people, like words of encouragement … we included that so that young people, whenever they feel like may feel a sense of not belonging or maybe when they are unable to form relationships with other young people … we just taught them how to form relationships with others … speak to someone or talk to us as practitioners and tell us, because young people, they tend to not know how to deal with their emotions because they end up isolating themselves*. (P4)

> *So, I've been working with the child and youth care workers as well as the children, so together with one of the children in the community, we've done a values tree that is currently up in the community hall … we have also done, activities with children, like, dance, paintings and poems, with the children.* (P5)

A "values tree" is a visual tool co-created with children to promote core values like empathy and non-violence (Bhagwan, 2020). The process of developing this tool demonstrated how students and academics can move away from the development of discipline-based mastery and competence to social awareness and responsibility amongst the community (Bhagwan, 2020). Students identified rape as a huge problem in the community and the development of a values tree not only empowered children about their rights, but created awareness of the need for non-violence. This, coupled with therapeutic interventions such as dance, painting and poetry writing, enabled the positive engagement of children particularly in an attempt to teach positive social skills and keep them away from involvement in theft and violence.

Creative therapeutic interventions such as dance, painting and poetry can enable healing and wellbeing. They also have therapeutic benefits for children to express their emotions and develop social skills (Morrish et al., 2023). Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) are trained to implement such therapeutic interventions (Nakao et al., 2021) and can therefore leverage such interventions within disadvantaged community spaces as part of engagement.

Another student shared that the students had shared their knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom with the auxiliary community-based workers child and youth care workers:

> *With the child and youth care workers, we have done a lot of refresher programmes and that has assisted them. They have been working together with us, and I feel it has assisted them to refresh their knowledge … the feedback that we have got from the child and youth care workers was that they said that the refresher programme has helped them because obviously the knowledge led them to better care for community members.* (P5)

Capacitating the auxiliary community-based child and youth care workers reflects the co-learning process that is central to the engagement process. In this case it involved developing an innovative approach that would integrate the expertise of the students with the knowledge of the community-based child care workers, thereby creating a richer meaningful and sustainable community partnership rather than something more temporary at a superficial level. One of the key interventions within this engagement was to recruit other community members, train them with grassroots child and youth care skills and knowledge, so that they could continue the work initiated by the child and youth care students. They will not serve as auxiliary child and youth care workers, but as community volunteers. Capacitating citizens from the villages to work with the child- and grandmother-headed households in their milieu reflects community engagement processes which underscore the reciprocal participation of stakeholders of all ages, abilities, backgrounds and cultures (Osborne et al., 2021). Most importantly it reflects the sustainability of the project in that once the students leave the community space, these childcare workers would have a certain level of knowledge and skill to intervene in the lives of children and youth and their families.

This mirrors Preece's (2013) point that community engagement seeks to build on existing assets in order to construct a resource-led foundation for development which is controlled by the community rather than external agents. Similarly, Compagnucci and Spigarelli (2020) affirmed that community engagement contributes to the economic, social and cultural development of communities, where the community is capacitated through the transfer of university knowledge and skills.

## CONCLUSION

The immersion of students within a rural field setting, with its plethora of socio-economic ills, created the opportunity for students to learn, individually and in groups, about issues related to practice. Theory acquired within the classroom space was interwoven with knowledge acquired within the rural practice contexts. The practice context was embraced as a legitimate source of knowledge that students could incorporate into their repertoire of child and youth care skills.

The narratives further reflected the rich opportunities for students to co-learn with the community, given their rich indigenous knowledge systems. The study has captured the mutual benefits for both university students and community partners as well as community members. The study exemplifies a powerful opportunity to capitalise on community-based learning through engagement. It reflects the potential for both health and social science students to draw on diverse local community spaces, as well as to serve disadvantaged communities and learn from them. By forming meaningful, respectful partnerships with communities, academics and students can create pathways into community spaces where they can co-construct mutually beneficial engaged interventions for both students and community members alike.

## LIMITATIONS

The study focused on one discipline, namely child and youth care. The inclusion of other disciplines within the engagement project could have created richer opportunities to benefit the Ndwedwe community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that other disciplinary departments, particularly social work, reconstruct their traditional fieldwork placements by moving more into underserved or marginalised community spaces where students can engage, collaborate and plan interventions that address contextually relevant problems. Only through embracing community engagement as an equal partner alongside teaching and research can the shift towards integrating engagement in teaching and research be achieved. It is therefore recommended that universities support community engagement initiatives more robustly, so that they become entrenched within teaching and research in higher education.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Raisuyah Bhagwan** is a Professor in the Department of Community Health Studies at Durban University of Technology. She is passionate about social justice, community development, and spirituality, and has published extensively on these topics. The article resulted from a community engagement project implemented by CYC students in rural Ndwedwe, KwaZulu-Natal, conducted from March to October 2023.