

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITHIN A SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMME IN RURAL INDIA

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Interweaving community engagement into education coheres with social work's commitment to social justice. This paper focuses on a visit to an academic department in India. The visit focused on understanding the placement of students in a community context and its related projects. A qualitative design was used to conduct interviews and focus group discussions with academics, students and a community leader. Data were also gained through a field visit in the village. Valuable lessons emerged regarding the importance of community engagement in social work education and how social justice, advocacy and empowerment were interweaved into students' learning experiences.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Social work education stands at the juncture of international calls to prepare students to work with diverse populations in various community contexts (Cox & Pawar, 2006). Of importance is that social work education must prepare students to become advocates for social justice, which includes a mandate to improve the wellbeing of vulnerable populations. Community engagement can be seen as a distinctive pedagogical tool that fosters the development of partnerships between social work academic departments and communities in order to improve the psycho-social wellbeing of individuals and families and to address socio-economically related problems in communities. Social work education integrates learning with practicum experiences, in a myriad of community settings, that entrenches social work within higher education's mandate for academics and students to become more engaged (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco & Swanson, 2016). Whilst there has been some attention in the social work literature to community engagement, much of the discourse has focused on service learning as one particular form of engagement (Ishisaka, Sohng, Farwell & Uehara, 2004; King, 2003; Knee, 2002; McKay, Nudelman, McCadam & Gonzales, 1996; Rocha, 2000). Very little literature has focused on community outreach programmes or on using the community as a context for strengthening teaching and learning. In South Africa in particular social work literature at the juncture of community engagement specifically is sparse. This paper is therefore important, as it highlights how an academic social work department used engagement successfully as a crucial pillar to support learning.

The paper begins with an overview of conceptual issues in relation to community engagement. The methodology is discussed followed by a presentation of the data and a discussion of the salient findings. The conclusion draws together valuable threads that can enable bringing community engagement into social work education.

### **CONCEPTUALISING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Boyer (1990) was one of the earliest scholars to describe community engagement in an academic context. He said that it is the means by which universities are reshaped as they enter into collaborative arrangements with community partners to address pressing social, political, economic and moral issues. He added that it is through this process that student learning is reshaped and enhanced, as are the pedagogical strategies of academics as well.

Higher education is nestled in a pivotal position to transform society (McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck & Fitzgerald, 2015; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008;). Community-university collaborative initiatives should intertwine research, teaching and service to address community-defined issues as such initiatives have the potential to

improve the quality of life for those in greatest need (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016). Hence “students and faculty become the agents of social change by creating, learning, and by scholarly processes that explicitly address such problems with the intent of fixing them” (Marullo & Edwards, 2000).

Community engagement refers to the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. In this vein the South African Council on Higher Education (2010) expressed the view that universities should “demonstrate social responsibility ... and their commitment to the common good by making available expertise and infrastructure for community service programmes.” The purpose of engagement is the partnership of the university’s knowledge and resources with those of the community “to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good” (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015). This definition suggests that engagement differs from traditional notions of public service and outreach, which entail linear approaches to delivering knowledge and services to the public. Engagement, in contrast, is underpinned by a two-way approach in which institutions and community partners collaborate to develop and apply knowledge to address societal needs (Boyer, 1996).

Social work’s use of field placements reflects the profession’s commitment towards building students’ understanding of their place in the environment and enhancing an understanding of how the structural and political aspects of such environments affect wellbeing (Cox & Pawar, 2006). Experiential learning increases the capacity to become more effective in implementing social work interventions with diverse communities, which solidifies social work’s role as an engaged partner. Whilst there are always challenges associated with engaging with communities, social work in particular has an increased opportunity to respond to the call, to move beyond teaching and research to include community engagement as part of its scholarly work.

This paper captures an innovative and creative method to undertake training where the opportunity for a traditional field placement was limited. It highlights a valuable alternative that was used in a rural context, where there was no infrastructure for placements. It is the rural village itself which is situated in the milieu of the university that provided the placement opportunity, where both learning and engagement occurred. The following sub-sections present the methodology and the findings arrived at through a qualitative inquiry.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on a field visit to the Department of Social Work at the Bhagat Phool Singh Vishwavidyalaya, which is situated in rural Haryana in North India. This entailed a site visit both to the university as well as a visit to the village within which the social work department conducts its learning and engagement work. The visit was part of a

series of visits to other universities in India that were conducted to deepen the researcher's understanding of community engagement in India.

This was an exploratory study that was guided by a qualitative research approach. Data were collected using unstructured interviews and a focus group discussion. Three in-depth interviews were held with senior management, which included the head of the Social Work Department and the former Vice-Chancellor of the University, a focus group discussion with five academics, one of whom was the Vice-Chancellor, and unstructured interviews with five social work students. One interview was also conducted with one of the community leaders of the village. These samples were convenient and accessible during the site visit, but they were also purposefully selected for their information richness. In addition, rich observational data were obtained from the visit to the village, where the researcher was able to meet the village people and also speak with the social work students, who held an exhibition of the diverse engagement activities that they implement in the village milieu. Field notes were taken and wherever possible interviews were recorded for transcription as well.

Given that this was an exploratory study, analysis revolved around the objectives of the study. Rains, Archibald and Deyhle (2000) wrote that qualitative researchers who conduct descriptive qualitative studies not based on a specific tradition may perform a thematic analysis of data. The process adopted in the current study mirrored that described by Beck (2003), who said that thematic analysis may be used to break data collected from interviews, reflections and focus groups into smaller units and grouped according to common themes. After transcribing the interviews and typing up field notes, the data were read and all similar meaningful extracts that emerged were noted. Colour coding was used to enable similar themes to be grouped together (Michelene and Chi, 1997). Because this was an exploratory study, questions during the informal unstructured interviews revolved primarily around the objectives and hence the themes that emerged coalesced around the objectives.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In this section the key findings of the site visit are presented in relation to the objectives of the inquiry. The latter focused on understanding the university's commitment to engagement, how engagement occurs within the context of the Social Work Department, student projects, and the social work intervention and challenges encountered. The data derived through this inquiry are presented according to these broad themes in the subsections that follow. This is followed by the conclusion, which presents important points for enabling academic-community engagement.

### **The university's commitment to engagement**

An interview held with the former Vice-Chancellor of the university confirmed that the Bhagat Phool Singh Vishwavidyalaya started off as a Gurukul, i.e. a small school, and later grew into a university. It is a small publicly funded university located within close proximity to a rural village, in Haryana in North India. According to the former Vice-Chancellor who was interviewed, "there was a growing realisation from the people, outside the university, that the university should contribute to the development of

people, outside the University. This served as a mandate to develop the area around the university.” She added that this mission grew to obviate notions that “the university was seen an ivory tower that produced graduates without knowledge of society and skills.” The university built itself on the values of social justice. It was named after a local spiritual leader who was especially committed to the education of young girls and was assassinated for leading this mission. Its mission consequently has at its core a deep commitment to the empowerment and development of women, as well as to the community.

### **The village context**

The village men and women are involved primarily in farming and agriculture, although craft building also provides a means of living (Panwar, Mathur, Chand, Dhaka, Singh & Moxley, 2014). This was observed during the field visit and corroborated by the village leader. Observation and interviews further reflected that not only do students engage deeply with the community, but so do the staff. This includes the current and the former Vice-Chancellors, who supported the engagement work of the Social Work Department. This is in line with O’Meara’s (2002) arguments that management and faculty support is crucial in driving the engagement agenda.

There are no formal social work services within the village, which presents a lack of support for the villagers (Panwar *et al.*, 2014). It also means that there are no organisations within which students can undertake their practicum. Morin, Jaeger and O’Meara (2016) noted that “reciprocal, mutually beneficial interactions between graduate students, faculty, and members of the public” are crucial components of successful engagement activities. Whilst the poor socio-economic context of the village presented structural deficiencies that challenged the students, these problems provided rich opportunities for learning within the village context.

Interviews with academics indicated that these villages form the context for the practicum sites of first-year Social Work students. Engagement creates a crucial learning space for students to have a deeper sense of village life, coupled with the opportunity to develop micro and macro practice interventions that prioritise developing the quality of life, wellbeing and to address various forms of social injustices that have become entrenched within the social system through the years.

It is only in the second year that students are placed out at organisations. The first-year placement occurs within the villages, as this university, like other universities in India, has a mandate to serve the villages (Watson, Hollister, Stroud & Babcock, 2011). It is also believed that first-year students should first gain exposure to how to undertake service delivery directly to people in the community. Furthermore, because the village is situated within the immediate milieu of the university, it forms a natural context within which the students can do their placements. Whilst transportation is provided to the village, the village itself is within walking distance to the university, thereby enabling easy access to the community for the students.

The placement begins with a two-week immersion in the second semester in the village, where the students map out the area and prioritise community development activities for

attention. After the two-week period, students go to the community centre twice a week, i.e. on a Wednesday and Friday, where they can assist community members by linking them to appropriate resources and plan their respective programmes. One of the community resource centres was built in the village by the university through sponsorships and acts as a space within which the students can work. Hence the students do not live in the village for the placement period. Prior to the students entering the village, it is the academics who form relationships with community members through a walk-about. This is followed by a joint walk-about so that the villagers may become acquainted with the students. An asset-based approach guides identification of the community assets and strengths, and students subsequently present their findings to the village leaders (Green & Haines, 2015). They also consult actively with the political leaders, village leaders or elders to identify issues that require attention. It is the support received and the relationships that academics and students forge with these respective parties that enable students to gain entry into the village and take up issues, which otherwise would not have been possible.

Students are closely supervised by the academics themselves in the village and they share an equally close partnership with community members. They also rely on the village leaders to nurture their relationship with the community members and guide their engagement activities. In fact, so close is the university-community partnership that even the Vice-Chancellor is known to the community and is invited to the activities that both the students and the village host.

Ahmed and Palermo (2010) wrote that community engagement “is a process of inclusive participation that supports mutual respect of values, strategies and actions for authentic partnerships of people affiliated with or self-identified by geographic proximity, special interest or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of the community.” This mirrors the process at the Bhagat Phool Singh Vishwavidyalaya, where academic staff also embed themselves within the community so as to create a unique working and learning environment. University-community partnerships therefore become the foundation for teaching and research activities, which are underpinned by a search for new knowledge, integration that connects disciplines and communities of interest, and the transmission of knowledge through teaching beyond institutions (Checkoway, 2015; Driscoll & Sandmann, 2001).

### **Community engagement in the Department of Social Work**

Data reflected that the Department of social work focused on the need to support the development of local villages and to address in particular the poor living conditions and the ensuing problems for the local villagers. According to the head of the Department of Social Work, students in their first year are immersed in the local village under the supervision of their Social Work lecturers. Hence fieldwork placements differ from the traditional practicum placements in South Africa, where training occurs within the context of an organisation under the supervision of an experienced social worker. According to her, much of the focus of intervention is linked to the needs of the local villagers and intervention has thus focused on educating rural people on health and

wellbeing, and on fostering the importance of educating female girls in particular. In addition to this, the projects have focused largely on women's rights and empowerment with specific reference to controlling female foeticide, as well as on how to sensitise and mobilise rural women to enhance their skills for employability.

Eminent scholars in the field of engagement have pointed out that leadership is a critical tool in facilitating institutional movement towards engagement by communicating the value of engagement both internally and externally, and in aligning the resources and structures to promote engagement (Neumann, 2006; O'Meara, Sandmann, Saltmarsh & Giles, 2011).

### **Process of engaging the community**

Data reflected that a particular process was adopted by the Department, which set the pace for engagement. One academic indicated that to prepare for community engagement learning experiences, social work academics and students prioritised establishing a respectful relationship with the village head and other elders to gain entry into the community. Students were oriented first before being immersed in the village.

Interviews also reflected that students "gained entry into the community through building a relationship with the village, through relationships with members of religious organisations and youth clubs to deepen an understanding of the difficulties village folk experience and more importantly what young girls and women face." Hence they get to know the community first through informal engagement with the villagers before walking through the village to understand better both its geographical space and socio-economic challenges.

Conversations are then held and meaningful relationships developed with village heads and district officials. Once this orientation is completed and students have developed a relationship with the local village people and are aware of the community strengths and deficiencies, they formulate an action plan based on what they have prioritised. This process reflects what Panwar *et al.* (2014) describe as "deep listening", which is achieved through interactions with the village residents.

Hence, as per the norms guiding engagement, intervention plans are not imposed but supported by the local village residents as issues important for social change. According to one participant, the implementation of projects occurs within the second semester and focuses on the interweaving of social work theory and intervention within real life spaces. Hence creative opportunities are presented for learning in the village context, which move beyond the traditional boundaries of the university classroom space. By the end of the project students would have learned how to engage, as well as how to both build the capacity of and empower certain groups in the rural villages. In this vein Driscoll (cited in Ishimaru, 2014) said that "for any real meeting between the worlds of the professional and for the community to occur, especially when race and class also divide those worlds, new rules of engagement that respect the lives of both parties need to be developed."

## STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THE VILLAGE

Data reflected that not all the students were from the villages. Hence they had different life experiences prior to their entry into a rural context and village life. One student said that *“at first I was a bit anxious about coming into the village and I found it hard to understand how the people lived and behaved. After some time I got to understand it better and it became easier to get work done.”* Other students expressed that they had learnt a lot through being *“immersed,”* in the village. They were able to integrate what they had learned at university, together with the values that the university subscribes to, and were able to use that to deal with problems experienced by the local villagers, especially the women.

Students also indicated that as they continued to spend time in the community, they began to realise the potential of learning more from the community they were serving. One student said that *“The people in the village become like family. You learn about their real issues, their life in their family and community. You do not get this information in the classroom.”* This was observed as there seemed to be strong rapport and mutual respect not only amongst the students and villagers, but also the staff and the village community. Another student expressed the view that *“you learn about problem solving, as you have to keep teaching them (village women) about how to find solutions to their problems.”* Enhanced student learning that encourages engagement with the learning process has been conceptualised as active learning in the scholarly literature (Bowen, 2005).

Empirical work on community engagement reflects that students who have community engagement experiences have a heightened sense of civic responsibility, are prepared to challenge stereotypes, become more culturally aware, and appreciate similarities and differences across cultures (Hunt & Swiggum, 2007). According to Schaffer and Hargate (2015), community engagement experiences enable student leadership, critical thinking and social skills. Furthermore, learning outcomes are achieved better through a pedagogy that includes active learning and collaboration with community partners and mentors. These data indicate that adequate orientation of students, clear expectations to address specific issues in the village and establishing respectful relationships with community members were critical to the process of engagement.

### Learning through engagement

The data reflect that the university-community partnership has strengthened over the years and has not only resulted in a deeper understanding of village issues, but has served to advance the village residents' understanding of the role of social workers. The latter factor becomes more accentuated by the fact that the students are women themselves, which has resulted in changing the traditional lens through which women are viewed within the village.

According to academic staff, although certain sectors of the community were resistant to their presence and their advocacy for women's rights, they persisted in their efforts to engage villagers, who welcomed their helping intervention and led to heightened awareness of gender inequalities and other forms of oppression of women. Much of the



work undertaken by the students involved advocacy, lobbying for social justice, empowerment and education. The data indicate that students actively drive the social justice agenda in the village “by actively empowering women.” One academic said that there has been a strong cry in India to stop “*female foeticide (which), is rampant in the villages.*” Students lobby against this form of violence and “hold regular street campaigns to educate people in the villages using posters “which call for the violence against women to stop and to stop the termination of pregnancies where the foetus is female.” Another academic reported that “*students endeavour to promote national initiatives*”, namely the “*save the girl child campaign,*” and the “*educate the girl child.*” There is also greater awareness of girl child marriage and the importance of educating girls for their future. According to one academic, research has shown that the gender ratio has improved, following this active promotion of awareness and lobbying.

Students also engage in other advocacy and education work. According to social work academics, students are involved in a number of ways.

- “*Door-to-door rallies are held by social work students.*”
- “*Awareness is created through street plays, particularly regarding liquor, which is a big problem.*” This is done through marches through the streets and “*street plays are held which focus on the impact of alcohol on families.*”
- “*Regular exhibitions using posters are also held. Students make their own posters which focus on the effects of alcohol use and on the prevention of female foeticide.*”

Students also teach women craft-related skills such as sewing and weaving in preparation for entrepreneurship.

- “*Students receive training which prepares them to teach villagers literacy skills and other basic skills on how they can open up a bank account.*” This enabled financial independence and opportunities to bank revenue derived through entrepreneurship. One academic said the self-help groups are used “*to mobilise women and empower women socially, economically and politically.*” The other empowering benefits relate to developing confidence, leadership and entrepreneurial skills (Panwar *et al.*, 2014).
- “*Rallies and talks are held on the importance of cleanliness and good hygiene.*”
- “*Health camps are also held on exercise and yoga.*” These are arranged in conjunction with academics from the Department of Ayurveda at the University.

Social work allies itself naturally with social justice and prepares students to become agents of social change. One potential strategy for creating social justice learning opportunities is through the use of innovative community settings where students encounter social injustices. Through this creative fieldwork placement, students were able to formulate responses to poverty, substance abuse, gender inequalities, and the marginalisation of women and children, and to work better towards empowering those who were vulnerable while promoting equality and social change. Because of social work’s emphasis on social justice, it forms a natural host to learning innovations that are underpinned by student reflection, community service and empowerment-oriented

mutual collaboration with communities (Lemleux & Allen, 2007). McLeod (2015) in fact articulated the need for social work education to use new and creative approaches to engage students not only in course content, but also “in relevant, connected, and meaningful learning experiences.”

Through fundraising the students have been able to build a community room, which serves as their outreach facility in the village. This is used for meeting children, women and families. Children are also engaged in small group activities such as drawing, dancing, literacy teaching and recreation at this Centre. There is also a dedicated academic who works closely with the village residents to enable access and strengthen opportunities for collaboration with the villagers. O’Meara *et al.* (2011) noted that engagement is successful particularly where academics engage not only their professional but personal passions, values and commitments in their academic work.

### **Challenges faced by students during engagement**

Students expressed the view that initially “*it was difficult to get support and do their work in the village.*” Academics confirmed this, saying that whilst they had achieved a lot, village residents “*did not always understand what social work*” was about, leading to “*mistrust.*” This was exacerbated by the fact that social work academics and particularly students from this university were all females who were both educated and empowered. Even in the most urbanised contexts in contemporary India women have been relegated to a lesser domestic role and hence support for social change in underdeveloped areas, driven by women, is viewed with scepticism and met with resistance. One academic said that “*students were challenged by men who prevented their women folk from engaging in the activities of the self-help groups,*” despite its potential to build entrepreneurial skills and the capacity of the women. Data also indicated that “*initially the villagers were resistant to the presence of the students*” and “*asked a lot of questions.*” Furthermore “*students faced challenges if they were advocating against drinking,*” which was quite a serious problem in the community.

Much of this was overcome, however, through relationship building with the village leader, elders and political leaders by the university management, particularly the Vice-Chancellor, who set up regular meetings with the village leader to advance their understanding of social work and the benefits of engaging with academics and students. Through developing these relationships based on mutual respect, many of these challenges dissipated. One academic said that “*the women are very supportive and are becoming more powerful in expressing their views.*” Through the presence of the students, village women say “*look our girls should be more like the students and lecturers.*” Hence both female academics and female students “*serve as a role model and send a clear message about the value of women and the value of educating women.*”

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Support from university management is crucial in building engagement initiatives. Such support enables the community to see the university as a “*trustworthy partner,*” and entrenches engagement within the curriculum as part of teaching and learning. The strong support received from management at this university mirrors arguments in the

literature that engagement has to be institutionalised in order for academics and students to embrace engagement as an equal pillar alongside teaching and learning.

Whilst the South African scenario differs in terms of the fieldwork placements both in terms of the year in which students are placed and in the setting, the Indian experience opens up possibilities for advancing the same opportunities in South Africa. Although the university being reported on is sited within the milieu of the village, other universities in India engage with villages beyond their direct proximity as part of their community engagement agenda. This suggests the need for a deeper consideration of the need to extend learning opportunities to traditional or rural community contexts which have no infrastructure. As Kezar and Rhodes (2001) lamented, the current status of service learning has been re-invented and re-structured to fit academic elitism and poses the danger of creating yet another form of an institutional conceptual box that limits the processes and outcomes intended to promote a broader community engagement agenda in higher education. Where the current fieldwork placements in South Africa may stifle more enriched opportunities for such learning, community engagement presents a chance to reconsider the traditional fieldwork placement and its context. This will require that academics move beyond the traditional boundaries of the university into the more disadvantaged, materially poor and under-serviced areas. Whilst an already overloaded teaching and research workload may be potential challenges, there remains concern about the loosening of the commitment to the professions' social justice roots. Empowerment and advocacy are embedded in social justice education in social work, which requires that academics inspire and open up opportunities to pursue learning opportunities in the contexts which demand transformative learning.

Hence the local field education component must be revisited as an untapped opportunity to effect what Gutierrez (2006 cited in Birkenmaier et al. 2011) stressed is the salience of engaging social work students for greater civic engagement within her reconceptualisation of field placements as sites of community engagement, political advocacy and civic participation. To do this, however, requires a shift from working within the comfortable space of community organisations into the space of those communities without infrastructure, where students can learn explicitly to engage in activities that address social injustice. In the absence of supervisors in these contexts, educators must be prepared to create a structured, field-based educational process in tandem with community members (Birkenmaier & Cruce, 2011) and to act as supervisors themselves.

Despite challenges, mutually beneficial relationships for the betterment of the village has enabled a sustained engagement relationship. The academic role at this Indian University has transcended that of academic to that of an "engaged academic." Whether the focus is on student learning, through service learning or through a university-community collaborative venture, "the objective is to facilitate the empowerment of those who have been traditionally disempowered" (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Progressive academics have a key role to play in identifying engagement opportunities to create more enriched experiences for their students. Most importantly they must engage on the basis of the following principles:

- The community should have a determining voice in deciding on the initiatives to be implemented;
- Community members should be empowered in ways that will ensure the sustainability of initial initiatives;
- Community strengths and resources should be developed and take precedence over university gains;
- The social, civic and political participation of students and community members must be enhanced for the greater collective good.

Community engagement enables the transformation of students into social justice activists, and the profession and the university within which it functions into an agent of social transformation. Furthermore, the work undertaken is underpinned by social justice values that are deeply embedded in the institutional mission of the university. The intimate interaction with the village community reflects a university which has refused to remain aloof from its community context, thereby dispelling notions of these two entities as privileged and less privileged groups respectively. Most important, however, is that it advances the importance of learning in the space of the people whom students will ultimately serve. This process of embedding knowledge and skills in a way that is not alienated from communities is where social work practice begins. Social educators must therefore consider in earnest more enriched ways to foster learning within communities and empower students with the knowledge and skills that mirror the needs of such communities. Community engagement creates this pathway for social work education.

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