Community Work through Reflective Practice: Social Work Student Perspectives

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Abstract
In this paper I present empirical evidence from the experiences of 10 final year social work students involved in community work practice. The students were involved in a garden project using a sustainable livelihood model in a low income community in KwaZulu-Natal. Data was produced in six phases involving methods of participant observations, interviews, and focus groups. The minutes of meetings held with students and members of the community were also sources of data. Three themes were distilled from the data: reflections on self, reflections on team meetings and reflections on working with community members. A major finding of the study was the importance of reflective practice for learning to be a professional social worker in general and understanding of community work in particular.

Keywords: Reflective practice; community work; student perspectives

Introduction
In the Post-1994 era, the South African government has challenged the higher education sector to become more inclusive and respond appropriately to the socio-economic challenges facing poor communities (Patel 2005; Lombard 2008). South Africa's high levels of poverty, HIV and AIDS and unemployment calls for future social work graduates to be able to deliver optimally, value strengths, diversity, indigenous knowledge systems and local assets in communities where there are insufficient resources and in which there are competing developmental challenges. Furthermore, as a national prerogative, social work academics across the country have been urged by both the National Department of Higher Education and Training and the

South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) to not only increase the number of social work graduates but to produce a cadre of professionals who are well prepared to meet the complex developmental challenges in communities as well as to continue with research once they leave university.

This article examines the quality of community work practice experiences of 10 final year social work students in the implementation of a community garden project using the sustainable livelihood model (SLM) from 2009 to 2011 in Bhambayi. Using participatory action research methodology a key objective of this study was to gain insight into students' reflections of the values that enhance community work practice. Using reflective practice as the conceptual foundation for this study, three key themes that emerged from the data analysis are deliberated: reflections on self, reflections on team meetings and reflections on working with community members. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge in two ways: providing a nuanced understanding of community work practice training from the perspectives of students and secondly, by encouraging academic debate about the significance of reflexive practice in social work practice education.

The article begins with a review of the current higher education context in South Africa and contextualises these debates within the welfare sector. The second section discusses conceptual debates about and the significance of reflective practice and reflexivity in social work education training in contemporary South Africa. Section three outlines the research methodlogy. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of the three key themes. The final section of the article synthesises the students' reflections on community work practice and highlights key implications of the research for academic institutions which offer social work field practice training.

Higher Education in South Africa and the Context for the Current Project

The question of how to make the educational programmes taught at universities more innovative, interesting and relevant to the wider community while embracing participatory teaching and learning strategies has been the concern of academics internationally over the past two decades (Swartz *et al.*

2002). Curriculum changes in South African post-apartheid policy documents and those of higher education institutions reflect similar concerns (see e.g. Department of Education 2001, UKZN 2012). The principles of democratic participation and social justice, derived from foundational policies such as the White Paper on Education and Training (Department of Education 1995), the South African Qualifications Act (Act No 58 of 1995) and the National Education Policy Act (Act No 27 of 1996) emphasised the need to move from rote to transformational and emancipatory learning which are skills-based and learner-centred. To this end the core aspiration of academics is the production of human service professionals who may contribute optimally to,

> A prosperous, truly united, democratic and internationally competitive country with literate, creative and critical citizens leading productive, self-fulfilled lives in a country free of violence, discrimination and prejudice (Department of Education 1995:112).

The Global Qualifying Standards for Social Work Education and Training (Sewpaul & Jones 2004) as well as the National Qualifications Framework of the Bachelor of Social Work qualification underline the fundamental value of field practice education in social work education. In KwaZulu-Natal, as elsewhere in the country, a major concern is the need to facilitate students' learning opportunities and to support social work practice in authentic ways, for example, working with vulnerable communities. It is an expectation for university students to not only be given the requisite forms of knowledge, skills and dispositions to succeed in a highly competitive global economy but also to attain the critical consciousness that comes from 'intervening in reality as makers and transformers of communities' (Freire 1993:54). This perspective requires students to engage in transformative action in communities, and more importantly, for critical self-exploration and opportunities to value local strengths and assets while simultaneously, acquiring practical life-skills such as assertiveness, communication, problem-solving and negotiation which are imperative for health and social work professionals (Sewpaul 2003; Sewpaul & Raniga 2005).

Additionally, South Africa's high levels of poverty, HIV and AIDS and unemployment require future social work graduates to value the strengths, diversity, indigenous knowledge systems and local assets available in communities where there are insufficient resources and in which there will

be competing developmental challenges. Simpson and Sathiparsad (2011) acknowledge that historically, agencies across the health and welfare sectors have partnered with higher education institutions through contractual agreements with students, academic supervisors and social work practitioners to provide valuable field practice training for social work students in a structured environment. Providing students with necessary skills and experience in community work practice has always been a challenge for the majority of these agencies (Simpson & Sathiparsad 2011).

I have been actively involved in providing fieldwork supervision to social work students in the Bhambayi community since 2007 as part of the Advanced Social Work Practice Module. It was then that a research partnership was formed with the Bhambayi Reconstruction and Development Forum (BRDF) to investigate the effects of poverty and HIV and AIDS on households in the community. Ethical clearance was obtained in June 2007 from UKZN Research Ethics Committee. Phase one of this larger study comprised a quantitative survey of 351 households, which revealed that 67% of the economically active population were unemployed (Raniga & Simpson 2011). As an outcome of this larger study, 42 residents who formed part of a senior citizens club called Siyazama, invited the researcher and social work students to pilot a local economic development initiative, namely a community garden project using the sustainable livelihood model (SLM). This paper pays particular focus to the field experiences of 10 final year students who were involved in the facilitation, implementation and evaluation of the community garden project. The specific objectives of this study were as follows:

- To examine community work practice learning through students' implementation of a community garden project using the sustainable livelihood model;
- To gain insight into students' reflections of values necessary for community work practice; and
- To improve social work practice education training.

The Mandate for Community Work Practice in South Africa

In South Africa the eradication of mass poverty, unemployment and HIV and AIDS infection as well as addressing the extreme inequalities of the apartheid

are the fundamental development challenges facing many communities. Despite the efforts of government, policy makers, academics and development practitioners, these problems have deepened in the past decade (Ife & Teseriero 2006). It is believed that the implementation of community projects using the SLM has the potential to reduce the impact of poverty, unemployment and HIV and AIDS in communities (Patel 2005).

Community work has traditionally been recognised as a macro intervention strategy where 'people with shared interests come together, work out what their needs are and then jointly take action together to meet those needs, by developing projects which would enable them to gain support to meet the need or by campaigning to ensure that they are met by those responsible' (Payne 1995:165). In social work, community development is therefore appropriate as an intervention strategy most suited for addressing poverty, and social and economic development (Lombard 2008; Gray 1996; Patel 2005). As enshrined in the White Paper on Social Welfare (National Department of Social Development 1997) community development is conceptualized as 'various intervention strategies that combine the efforts of local people with the state to improve socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions in communities' (Patel 2005:45). The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) has challenged social workers to become more involved in the provision of community work services in order to meet social development needs in communities. In response to this concern, Green and Nieman (2003) conducted an in-depth literature study and qualitative research which confirmed that good practice principles such as participation, utilising groups and networks, ensuring that training is available and encouraging innovation that would be valuable to social work practitioners in operationalising social development projects.

Furthermore, the SLM has emerged as a key intervention strategy within the developmental welfare paradigm that communities may adopt in their endeavours to improve their social and economic profile and reduce poverty. Patel (2005:242) notes that the SLM has been widely advocated as a 'means of improving the livelihood outcomes of the poor through increasing income, reducing vulnerability, strengthening of social networks, improving the utilisation of resources and opportunities and promoting a more sustainable environment'. The model attempts to link the micro- and macro-level contexts in which households seek their livelihoods. The approach is structured on the principle of people-centredness, holism and dynamism. It

builds on five sets of livelihood assets essential to their livelihood strategies that all households are viewed as possessing: human capital, natural capital, financial capital, social capital and physical capital (Patel 2005). Utilising these assets, households adjust to their physical, social, economic and political environments through a set of livelihood strategies designed to strengthen their well-being (Ife & Tesoriero 2006). The contexts in which households operate involve a number of threats that render them vulnerable to negative livelihood outcomes. These can include periodic droughts, floods, pest infestations, crop and livestock shocks, economic shocks, conflict and civil unrest, as well as the illness and death of household members. Households are viewed as being sustainable if they can adjust to threats without compromising their future ability to survive shocks to their livelihoods. Smit (2006) makes an important point that in informal settlements, income generating projects and social networks are strategies for poorly resourced households to increase food security, well-being and to reduce vulnerability.

What is valuable about project is the positive networking relationships with the Bhambayi Reconstruction and Development Forum (BRDF). The local civic structure has been nurtured over 16 years of the university's presence in this community. Unlike the structured organisational placements, students in Bhambayi have to deal with many complex challenges such as lack of material resources, space, social service providers, inter-organisational conflict and political tension during their field practice experience (Simpson & Sathiparsad 2011). It is important to note that how students think and feel about their field experiences and the support they receive from both academic and agency supervisors is central to the debate about the quality of practice education training (Wilson *et al.* 2008; Ruch 2002; Simpson & Sathiparsad 2011).

In an endeavour to address a gap between community work theories, practical training and research, this paper provides empirical evidence of final year social work students' perceptions of community work practice learning through the implementation of a community garden project using SLM. A reflective approach to social work practice education is suggested to encourage students to develop a strong sense of critical self awareness and to explore multiple approaches of framing and understanding community work and alternate ways of acting in practice. Further clarity on this conceptual foundation is elaborated below.

The Significance of Reflective Practice and Reflexivity in Social Work Education Training

The concepts of reflection and reflexivity are linked to the conceptual theory of reflective practice which has traditionally been associated with the work of Schön (1983) and has received increasing attention in social work education in the past two decades. Thompson (2000) suggests that the process of reflection is a benign introspection of one's experiences while reflexivity entails using self-reflection to give meaning to one's experiences by synthesising knowledge of the practitioner to similar previous experiences and understanding of one's professional role. For the purposes of this paper the concept of reflexivity is used as a pivotal characteristic of reflective practice.

Schön (1983:241) describes reflective practice as 'on the spot surfacing, criticising, restructuring and testing of intuitive understanding of experienced phenomena; often it takes the form of a reflective conversation with the situation'. Schön's (1983) conceptualisation has much in common with Paulo Friere's (1993) notion of learning from experience through reflection-in-action which leads to more learning and new action. Schön (1983) maintains that a central feature of reflective practice is reflexivity which is about 'paying close attention to one's own thoughts, feelings, actions, values identity and their effect upon others and social structures'. In other words reflexivity goes beyond reliving events as it involves 'becoming aware of the limits of our knowledge and how we shape organisational realities, shared practices and review ethical ways of being and relating' (Schön 1983). Ruch (2002:202) maintains that reflective practice offers an alternative model of knowledge construction associated with positivist thinking and the dominance of modernity which proposed that 'there is one right response to one practice scenario and that the expert practitioner will accurately identify, intervene in and resolve'. A consequence of this technical-rational definition of knowledge has been a marginalising of the self in practice and a total disregard to experiential, intuitive knowledge that espouses the uncertainty and emotional complexity of practice education (Howe 1994).

The essence of reflective practice is a stark contrast to this technical, positivist thinking and instead acknowledges the uniqueness of each practice situation, the complexity of human functioning and emotional/irrational

dimensions of education and practice (Dominelli 1996). Leung (2007) suggests that in a postmodern era social work practitioners need to have knowledge, skills and competence to deal with complex social problems as well as professional sensitivity to make sense of their own subjectivity and bias in practice. Embracing the concept of reflexivity, a pivotal characteristic of reflective practice is its capacity to 'bring together the rational and irrational aspects of human functioning' (Ruch 2002:203). Reflective practice acknowledges the interconnectedness and informative understanding of the 'self' and its role in social work practice. In other words reflective practice encourages intellectual understanding as well as critical awareness of the self which imply that the artificial distinctions of professional and personal identities are dissolved. Ruch (2002:204) adds that it thus becomes possible to understand 'the contribution of personal knowledge to our professional practice and to be alert to professional experiences on our personal wellbeing'.

Bearing in mind these deliberations, Wilson *et al.* (2008:36) indicate that 'how students think and feel about their learning opportunities and support they receive are central to the debate about the quality of their field practice experience'. It is therefore imperative that students receive unconditional care and support from their educators as well as local community members as this facilitates their own investment in the learning process and contributes to what Wilson *et al.* (2008) refers to as 'deep learning'. In the same breath, attempts to promote critical reflexivity of students' own values and identities affect the resources they bring to the teaching, practice and learning context (Rohleder *et al.* 2008). This means that students and educators as well as local community members have to come to realise that each is a co-creator of knowledge and skills acquirer, and that learning is a three-way partnership (Swanepoel & De Beer 2006).

Based on the foregoing discussion, one can infer that emancipatory education which is the nucleus of reflective practice pays particular attention to the concept of 'learning by doing' which is based on the idea that students learn more effectively from actual experience. Furthermore, a component at the core of reflective practice is dialogue, the idea that educators and students interact with one another such that both are partners of learning, speaking and acting. Consistent with the radical humanist school of thought and Habermas' (1973) emancipatory sources of knowledge, the aim of such education, according to Freire (1993), is to develop 'critical consciousness'. Sewpaul

(2003:305) argues further that, 'critical and emancipatory pedagogy raises important issues regarding how we construct our identities within particular historical, cultural and social relations, with the intention of contributing to a more democratic life'. A key feature of this study which entailed active experimentation of community work skills underscores the idea that reflexive, dialogical methods can help students (micro level) use their personal experiences to not just understand their own professional identity but to effectively process, reflect on and respond to the challenges of working with communities. By adopting a more liberatory role through facilitating forums for critical thinking and dialogue, social work educators can encourage students to break through apathy and inaction when working with communities (Vodde & Galant 2002 cited in Rohleder 2008; Ruch 2002). A central part of this process is engaging students' in a process of continuous reflexivity as well as understanding reflection as a collective approach (Thompson 2000) which takes account of the assets and strengths of local community members who contribute in a valuable way to their learning process.

Methodology
Participatory Action Research
Consistent with its objectives, this study was informed by participatory action research (PAR) methodology as it is 'associated with small-scale studies that are practical, hands-on and involve real-world problems and issues' (Sewpaul & Raniga 2005:269). Proponents of critical theory note that PAR endeavours to remedy power differentials by engaging participants in research design, data collection and evaluation (Marlow 1998). This study brought together student social workers, social work educators and community members from the Bhambayi community. Rohleder *et al.* (2008:134) indicates that PAR 'provides researchers with the opportunity to problematise their own roles as educators/researchers and to use this as an initial probe with which to investigate the learning context and to provide solutions to problems encountered'. As such, the research process in this study focused on building the research capacity of all stakeholders (students, community members and academic) and enhancing self-determination, planning and co-ordination of the community garden project in the Bhambayi community.

Six key phases comprised the research process (see Table 1). The research process was guided by Marlow's (1998) organizing framework for conducting participatory action research.

Table 1. *Outline of the research process*

Phase	Intervention	Focus
1. Concrete experience	Monthly training workshops with students placed in Bhambayi	Objectives of the study. Readings on community work process, reflexive practice and community mapping.
2. Reflexive observation	Meetings with stakeholders in community	Sharing purposes of the study with stakeholders. Brainstorming challenges in Bhambayi. Weekly meetings with students.
3. Training	Training workshops with 15 Siyazama members	Planning and implementing two, three-hour training workshops using SLM with community members.
4. Action	Joint implementation of the community garden project	Discussing reflexive responses.
5. Reflexive de-briefing	12 team meetings with students and 3 monthly meetings with Siyazama members	Discussing student experiences of the project. Reflexions on values that enhance community work practice.
6. Evaluation	Evaluation of project	Individual in-depth interviews held with 15 Siyazama members.

Participants

Purposive, availability sampling was used to guide the selection of the participants for this study. Every year final year social work students complete a three-month block placement from beginning of August until the end of October as part of the Advanced Practice Module. For the period August 2009 to October 2009, four students were involved in the project in Bhambayi. For the same duration for the years 2010 and 2011, there were four and two students involved in the study respectively. Thus a total of 10

student social workers were involved in the initiation, implementation and evaluation of the community garden project using the SLM livelihood model. All participants opted to complete their block placement in Bhambayi. Students were expected to spend five days a week for 12 weeks at the site. Key informants comprised 15 community members from the Siyazama support group who opted to be involved in the garden project.

Four qualitative methods were used to collect the data: minutes of team meetings, participant observation, in-depth interviews with students and community members, and focus group sessions held with students and Siyazama members. Permission was sought from participants to tape record interviews and focus group sessions. This was combined with secondary data from literature reviews and policy analyses.

Data Analysis

The weekly sessions held with students, their reports submitted for assessment purposes and the focus group sessions were used as data for analysis for the empirical data presented in this paper. Content analysisof the students' verbal and reflection reports were used to identify the key themes discussed in this article. As an on-going study, and this is the first of a series of articles in which descriptive results are reported. For the purposes of this article, transcribed data from thirty reflection reports from the participants and three focus group sessions (one at the end of the block placement for 2009, 2010 and 2011) were analysed.

Ethical Issues

At the orientation meetings held in August each year (2009-2011), all 10 students were informed about the nature and aims of the study. Even though written, signed consent was given by the students at the onset of their respective placement period, at the end of their field practice they were given the opportunity to decide whether or not they wanted their reports and verbal input in the focus groups to be used for research purposes. They were also informed that any verbal or written data used for research purposes and publication would be treated anonymously. All participants gave consent to use the data for publication purposes.

Results and Significance of Findings

Three themes which could begin to generate a reflective practice culture in community work and emerged from the data analysis are: reflections on self, reflections on team meetings and reflections on working with community members.

Reflections on Self

During the in-depth interviews held with the students, it was evident that they perceived the experiences of implementing the community garden project using the SLM in Bhambayi as positive and that it served to enhance their own awareness of self and the quality and creativity of community work skills. Working in the context of Bhambayi provided the students with the opportunity to engage in a process of continuous professional reflection as they were expected to cope with minimal resources and infrastructure in the community. Some comments shared by the students were:

> This was a meaningful experience for me because for the first time I got exposed to what are the pros and corns of planning a project. It taught me to always stay calm when working with people.
>
> Personally and professionally this was a big learning curve for me. I have grown and experienced the reality and complexities of community work practice. I learnt to keep an open mind and to deal with anxiety in Bhambayi.
>
> This experience gave me an opportunity to practice and translate theory to practice and research. The garden project motivated me and created more love of helping people. I was very happy and felt like I am already a social worker. I was happy that I am practicing what I have learned all these past three years.
>
> Personally I have grown and realised the importance of incorporation of different sectors in this profession such as agriculture, community development and education. What I have seen is that doing community work is not easy. I learnt to be aware of my own strengths and weaknesses.
>
> Starting the community garden project at Bhambayi was very exciting and I was looking forward to networking and working with

the community on daily basis. I had to learn to be humble and accept people for who they are.

This study corroborates Weyers (2011) findings that highly effective community work practitioners need to spend time on reflections on self as this leads to self-renewal. It is clear from the students' comments that such reflection on self and to constantly being aware of their own thoughts, feelings and how this relates to community work practice is crucial. Ruch (2002:203) states that the significance of reflective practice is the centrality of self and eloquently reveals that: 'social work students must perceive the human situation which they confront in their practice and recognize that their perceptions are filtered through their own thinking and knowing processes, through their emotions and feeling processes and through the way they themselves integrate and regulate their own doing and behaving'.

It is widely acknowledged by proponents of critical theory that the positivist-technical orientation of social practice education has led to the marginalisation of the 'self' (Dominelli 1996; Howe 1996; Ruch 2002; Sewpaul & Raniga 2005). In the same time, it is argued, in the postmodern era the centrality of self is a vital source of knowledge production and skills training for professional social work (Sewpaul 2001; Swanepoel & De Beer 2006; Ife & Tesoriero 2006; Weyers 2011). This study supports Ruch's (2002) assertion that reflexivity in practice helps students to make sense of their own subjectivity and biases. Students in this study recognised the need to continually assess their competence in practice and the extent to which they were able to translate the project planning and SLM training into practice. They also identified the team approach through the association with peers and community members as an important strategy to empower themselves in practice. This is elaborated in the discussion of the theme on reflections on team meetings.

Reflections on Team Meetings

In order to facilitate reflective learning for the 10 social work students, it was essential that the team meetings operated at both process and content levels and resisted technocratic approaches to planning the community garden project using SLM. The use of community mapping exercise (Rohleder *et al.* 2008) with students in the initial team sessions proved useful as a tool for

shifting students' thinking from a predominantly technical-rational level to one which encouraged critical and more practical levels of reflection. Rather than allowing me as the researcher to provide answers to all student queries posed during the team meetings, the students were encouraged to tell their peers what they felt about the experiences during the project implementation. I believe that acknowledging the importance of students' personal stories and lived experiences in practice through team meetings helped me to adopt a more liberatory stance and ensured too that an ethos of trust was generated. Many of the students shared this sentiment and revealed that the team meetings served as a safe context to share their problems, cope with difficulties and inspired confidence to work independently.

One group of four students commented:

> … in our team meetings weekly, it was good to talk about our fears of facilitating the garden project with community members who had high expectations of us.

> The weekly meetings were a safe place for us to talk about feelings with the other students and my lecturer. Another student in 2010 commented: I was excited because I enjoy challenges as I learn and grow from them. I also like the idea that our supervisor was not always there with us, this actually gave exposure to lot of things because I was doing the work on the project that the professional social worker does. It also helped me because I had the chance to use my analytical thinking skills and actual convert theory into practise.

> I have also learned to work in teams and how I must not look at the problem but a solution to the problem.

> The experience and knowledge that I have gained is strength as I have been trained and thought about how to plan and organise community projects and how to react to people. I have learned that people won't always help you or do what you want, and that we need each other in the process of development.

In these sessions students were enabled to work independently with minimal structured supervision and, consequently, were able to practice without surveillance. This platform served to help students reflect more holistically on their practical experiences and responses to their peers and community members (Ruch 2002:203). Students were constantly encouraged to be

critically reflexive of the impact of professional experiences on personal well-being. This critical reflexivity helped the students demonstrate their openness to new ways of thinking and to embrace the fundamental value of dialogical reflection. Moreover, as a dialectical approach, it focused on the quality of interpersonal interactions (local community members, social work practitioners, and researcher) in the practice context (Wilson, Walsch & Kirby 2008). An important theme that students identified as enhancing a reflective practice culture was the involvement of the 15 community members from the Siyazama support group in the garden project. This theme is discussed further below.

Reflections on Working with Community Members

Writers such as Swanepoel and De Beer (2006), Ife and Tesoriero (2006), Green and Nieman (2003) and Weyers (2011) agree that a vital component of project management is working in solidarity with the local people of that community. Wilson *et al.* (2008), from their study with masters students on quality standards in practice learning, concluded that while relationships with practice educators are important, the relationships that students develop with other stakeholders in the placement should not undervalued. That students in this study collaborated successfully with the 15 Siyazama support group members can be seen as a positive outcome. Additionally, students stated that they learnt not to impose their own needs as they have come to the realisation that community members are in the best position to inform 'outsiders' of their own needs. What was also significant in this study was that six of the ten students who worked in the community were from rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal and included a student from Lesotho and three from the province of Limpopo. Even though students did feel like 'outsiders' in the community it was clear that they learnt to respect the voices of community members. The benefit for both students and community members was the ethos of trust that developed. The four students who worked with the Siyazama members in 2009 stated, 'it was clear that local people understand the problems, issues, strengths and needs in their community'. Interestingly similar sentiments were shared by the four students who worked with the support group members on the garden project in 2011 as well. They indicated that, 'we valued the guidance and mentorship that we received from older

women in the support group who had been actively involved in community projects for the past 15 year'. The experiences of students of another study (Ife & Tesoriero 2006:129), who learnt it was 'imperative to embrace that local strength, skills and processes are grounded in local expertise', is echoed in the narratives of the participants of the Bhambayi garden project as enunciated hereunder:

> Being introduced to the Bhambayi community for the very first time was interesting to me. Even though the community is completely different from what I have seen comparing it to other communities I know. What I have learned about the people in the Siyazama support group is that they know exactly what they want. Being placed in the community like Bhambayi for me meant I am an outsider who have never seen such a community before considering its structure and the type of life they are living
>
> I really enjoyed working in the Bhambayi community. The community members were very supportive towards us, it felt as if it was my second home because I also come from a similar background and I'm familiar with most things. The people are always looking forward to seeing us every year because they know about the good work that is being produced by the University and the student social workers. Working in a community that is full of warmth and support is good as you get inspired when it time to go the placement as you know that you are not alone. I enjoyed waking up in the morning knowing that I was going to Bhambayi.

Through the facilitation of the community garden project using the SLM the students revealed that they were able to gain insight into how a synergy could be created for successful outcomes. At the outset students were able to see the transparent, empowering and partnership-based approach that is fundamental to participatory action research (Heron 1996). Students also learnt that making personal sacrifices and being flexible are important values when working in communities and that social work is not an eight to four profession. Some of the sentiments shared by students were expressed thus:

> I have learned that if you working with people in communities you need a degree of compromise, for me I was not working on Sunday

but I had to compromise and work on the project on a Sunday.

Planning and working on the project together, I have learnt to be optimistic and positive about people and situations, I have gained knowledge and experience that will be with me forever.

The project was a big learning curve for me because I have never chaired a meeting before. I learned that proper planning in advance is very helpful because I was not shaking at all or blank for a second. I knew what I came for and I did exactly that. This experience has been positive for me. I learned certain things about myself for example the fact that I can work well under pressure and still remain calm, focused and professional.

Ruch (2002) makes the point that since research partnerships are elusive and complex, power imbalances are seldom eradicated. In this study power differentials were neutralised as there was a balance of roles and responsibilities in the facilitation of the community garden project by all stakeholders involved (students, educator and community members). Ruch (2002:211) asserts that such an approach means that the 'risk of researching oppressively is reduced'. She warns that if rational theory is given priority over practice and research without acknowledging the core components of reflective practice, namely open dialogue and centrality of self (what they think, feel and do) then the triad of practice, education and research is at risk (Ruch 2002). Acknowledging these components creates the opportunity for students to recognise the overlaps amongst academic, practice and research experiences. Moreover the benefits of the triadic relationship (educator/ researcher, students and community members) are manifest in the supportive opportunities to enhance students' skills, values and knowledge and therefore 'the potential for them to develop more transparent and less defensive practice and the connectedness to research' (Ruch 2002:208).

Conclusion

This article provides insight into social work student community work practice experiences through the implementation of a community garden project using the SLM. The central premise is that reflective practice can help students to engage in a process of continuous professional reflection and to effectively process and respond to the challenges of community work practice

learning. The adoption of a liberatory approach by a social work educator facilitated forums for critical thinking and dialogue, inspired reflexive practice, and encouraged students to break through the technical-rational dominance of thinking when working with a vulnerable community. The paper also highlights the inextricable and essential partnership between higher education and the wider community in social work practice education. The benefits of the triadic relationship are manifest in creating and supporting learning opportunities, exploring alternative ways of framing and understanding community work practice and 'the potential for [students] to develop more transparent and less defensive practice' (Ruch 2002:209).

It is important for social work educators to consider Finn and Jacobson's important point that 'reflective practice makes power, inequality and transformational possibilities the foci of concern, thus offering a theoretical bridge between social justice and social work' (cited in Rohleder 2008), suggesting that the transferability of reflexive practice could ensure that the quality of social work education and practice training is enhanced.

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