Higher education community engagement as a pathway to developing global citizenship practices in young people: South African perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to discuss how South African higher education (HE) is a mechanism to enable global citizenship. This qualitative secondary analysis study draws on retrospective qualitative case study data generated by multiple partners (parents, teachers, young people, HE students, researchers) in a long-term community engagement (CE) study in a remote high school. Thematic analysis of data sources (verbatim transcriptions of participatory reflection and action discussions, and visual data) enabled in-depth multi-partner descriptions on the utility of CE to address social and cognitive injustices given extreme structural disparity and social disadvantage. It was evident that, across CE partner groups, HE involvement was viewed as a mechanism to promote the positive social development of young people. In particular, when young people were included in CE, their social development was supported as they were afforded opportunities to develop capacity as future leaders and in terms of language development in multilingual spaces. We argue that CE can support progress towards social and cognitive justice by offering alternate views and beliefs to young people that promote their global citizenship practices.

Keywords: capacity development; cognitive justice; community engagement; global citizenship; language and literacy; multilingual; rural schools; social justice

INTRODUCTION

> There is no global justice without global cognitive justice.
> (Santos 2007: 63)

In our view, the quotation above encapsulates the type of justice that higher education (HE) could promote through community engagement (CE) partnership. HE–CE partnership is proposed as a pathway to promote justice given its transformation agenda. The research question that this article aims to address is: why does global citizenship have a strong presence in South African HE agenda, which aims to address social and cognitive injustices? The concepts of social and cognitive justice may be interpreted in various ways as they are complex phenomena. Turnbull (2014) broadly defines social justice 'in terms of distribution of wealth and tangible goods, acknowledging that the promotion of social justice requires the recognition of equitable provision for the most needy' (2014: 97). In this study, social justice is *inter alia* considered in terms of the distribution of power between HE and the community through CE partnership (Turnbull 2014). Cognitive justice is an ethical principle

that endeavours to critique the dominant paradigm of modern science and promotes the recognition of paradigms or science studies that are alternative to the democratic imagination (Visvanathan 2002; Veintie 2013). In the context of this article, cognitive justice means that local knowledges from community partners are of equal value to knowledge traditionally referred as scientific.

Cognitive justice presents the potential to expand the space of the world by recognizing the plurality of knowledges (Santos 2016). While critiquing the dominating epistemology, Santos (2007) calls western paradigms 'abyssal thinking'. He defines abyssal thinking as the classification of visible and invisible distinctions that divide social reality into two realms, referred to as 'this side of the line' and the 'other side of the line' (Santos 2007: 1). In abyssal thinking, things that are on the other side of the line are non-existent. Alternative thinking relevant to alternatives is required to break the divide between the dominant western epistemology and existing indigenous knowledge systems (Santos 2007; Veintie 2013). It is therefore crucial to link social and cognitive justice whilst pursuing global justice for marginalized communities (Visvanathan 2002; Carlisle 2010). Critical theory that reinforces the idea of anticipation of a better world assists in dismantling social lies, which never hold for ever in any event. As informed by Santos' (2016) ideology, we believe that oppressive social lies have limited scope and duration, although while they are in force, they appear to be the ultimate truth and source of hope for a nation.

SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE JUSTICE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION AGENDA

Marginalized communities still live in oppressive conditions that are exacerbated by growing extreme wealth and inequality, which threaten the attainment of the agreed development goals (United Nations 2020). If global progress continues slowly and income poverty is not addressed, this will create a vicious cycle of inequality, frustration and discontent across generations (United Nations 2020). For example, South Africa is under a government that was greatly invested in the liberation struggle. However, the South African educational system is failing the youth as it is marred by inequalities and chronic underperformance (Amnesty International 2020). The current government appears to be struggling to effectively tackle the deep roots of the apartheid legacy and to facilitate social justice for the oppressed (Amnesty International 2020).

Although South Africans have been living in a democratic state for over two decades, Subreenduth (2013) claims that the experiences of the majority remain similar to those under the apartheid system. Professor Adam Habib, prominent South African scholar, is quoted as saying: 'Black professionals and entrepreneurs have benefitted from the new democratic dispensation as opposed to struggling poor and marginalized people in South Africa' (Chipkin and Ngqulunga 2008: 66). Consequently, violent crime and theft have increased astronomically in South Africa between 1994 and 1995, contributing to eroding the traditional cohesive ties of community such as shared space, close kinship and moral values (Forrest and Kearns 2001; Chipkin and Ngqulunga 2008).

The landscape of social and cognitive justice changes because of factors such as context, history, globalization and global social movement (Cossa 2013; Subreenduth 2013). We argue that HE can make an impact in marginalized communities if it were to view social justice as an ideal that must continually be re-visioned in theory, policy and practice, just

like democracy (Subreenduth 2013). In the current study, we attempt to understand how the voices of HE community partners could influence HE–CE practice (Andrews 2011). We note that little research has been conducted into CE in South Africa (Bender 2008); however lately there is a growing interest and publications in the field of CE (Bobo and Akhurst 2019; Machimana et al. 2020; Thuketana 2020).

In light of the goal of global citizenship education for developing global citizens, we reason that it is important for HE to move from service-learning as charity to global citizenship as social justice for developmental purposes (Shultz 2010; Bowen 2013). Burnett et al. (2004) refer to this paradigm shift as moving away from the 'missionary ideology' of working 'for' the community to working 'with' the community (2004: 181). The goal of academic service-learning (ASL) within the social justice framework is to develop global citizens who are equipped with knowledge, skills, values and the will to engage in their communities and to develop a better world (Oxfam 2006; Al-Zuaibir 2011; Machimana et al. 2018). In this study, it remains to be seen whether HE student engagement with communities produces the expected and desired results (Caputo 2005).

Traditionally, the epistemic dominance of the Euro-Western world has divided social reality into two realms, namely subjective and objective knowledge (Charmaz 2011; Veintie 2013). Western epistemology, which undermines indigenous knowledge, produces cognitive injustice, thus suppressing pluralism or forms of knowledges and knowers (Odora-Hoppers 2004; Santos 2007; Visvanathan 2009). Essentially, cognitive justice 'recognizes the right of different forms of knowledge to co-exist but adds that this plurality needs to go beyond tolerance or liberalism to an active recognition of the need for diversity' (Visvanathan 2009: 6).

Science, which promotes the objectivity of knowledge, grapples with the idea that different forms of knowledge or their knowers could be treated as equals (Odora-Hoppers 2013; Veintie 2013; Abdi 2015). Traditional science upholds the notion that knowledge is true or false, independent of the researchers' or participants' perception (Van der Velden 2006). Van der Velden (2003: 2) argues that cognitive justice is by no means promoting 'junk science', because it calls for a critical democratic, pluralist understanding of science. From this perspective, a global citizen must be seen not only as a consumer or voter but also as a person of knowledge (Visvanathan 2002).

The global citizen is an important trustee of local, defeated and marginalized types of knowledge (Visvanathan 2002; Odora-Hoppers 2013). We believe that the cognitive process cannot be separated from one's learning locations and readings of the world, although the global West might project the contrary (Abdi 2015). Without being overcritical of the global West, we acknowledge that there are voices and representation of the Southern scholars in global citizenship, but sometimes also by North-based scholars who originated from the South, like Abdi (2015). Odora-Hoppers (2013) affirms that knowledge is plural and knowledge largely rests in people rather than databases or services. Therefore, we pursue cognitive justice with the understanding that it is not about whether colonized people have history or philosophy, but about the right of different forms of knowledges to survive creatively and sustainably (Odora-Hoppers 2013). We seek to address the gap between

hearing and heeding these voices and global citizenship as perceived by local communities (Abdi 2015).

In addition, cognitive justice advocates plural frameworks of knowledge within the global world that is faced with social injustice (Visvanathan 2002, 2009). We support the criticisms levelled against science that seeks to relegate indigenous knowledge to archaic artefacts due to dominating western knowledge (Van der Velden 2006). However, we also note that Visvanathan (1999) (as cited in Van der Velden 2006) argues that it is unrealistic to attempt to return to indigenous and traditional knowledge and solutions given the advancing political and economic modern global world that we live in (Van der Velden 2006). According to Van der Velden (2006), cognitive justice, democracy, social justice and the ethics of freedom form the building blocks of a framework for an alternative conception of science.

Manifestation of social and cognitive justice in HE–CE

Our argument for a social justice framework rests on the understanding that universities should advance community interest instead of elitist interest (Odora-Hoppers 2013). Advancing the western global citizenship agenda has seen the unprecedented evacuation of millions of Africa's population (mostly rural) from the space of knowledge production (Odora-Hoppers 2013) to knowledge consumers. This gap evokes the question of the terms and conditions on which the non-western countries can be fully integrated in the knowledge production process. We propose that non-western communities should be accepted on the same footing in the global space of knowledge production and dissemination through CE partnership.

Fundamentally, universities are established to improve the lives of people by making pertinent contributions to society (Bringle and Hatcher 2009). John Dewey, Jane Addams, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire are some of the forebearers of progressive education (global citizenship education) that integrates partnerships between universities and communities for creating a democratic and just society (Weiner 2003; Wagner and Alexander 2013). Historically, research-intensive universities made great contributions by producing new knowledge, but they were limited in driving transformation for changing social conditions (Creighton et al. 2010; Bailey 2014).

In the 1990s, Boyer (1990: 32) called on HE to participate in the agenda for social change by calling for 'scholarship of engagement', known as 'global citizenship' in this research (Boyer 1996; Creighton et al. 2010). The current study was conducted at a research-intensive university that is equally interested in improving local socio-economic conditions and influencing regional and global development (Creighton et al. 2010; University of Pretoria 2011). Literature reveals the need to progress beyond the social responsibility of teaching and research, to address local, regional, national and global problems (Benneworth and Sanderson 2009; Németh 2010).

Three case studies conducted in Australia discovered that CE partnership (in teacher education) is important to prepare teachers for a difficult and challenging world (Butcher et al. 2003). We believe that structural injustices can be addressed through constructive CE partnership that benefits both the 'helper' and the 'helped'. Global citizenship education

should address social justice and diversity or what Butcher et al. (2003: 111) termed ‘teaching against the grain’. The results of the three case studies show that CE partnership has benefits for all partners involved. However, literature shows that there is still resistance on the part of student teachers.

Similarly, another study conducted in South Africa has shown that some HE students have the attitude of being more knowledgeable than those they serve, because they are unfamiliar with the social justice framework (Osman and Petersen 2010). This paternalistic attitude results in HE students ‘othering’ the community (Osman and Petersen 2010: 415). The authors analysed HE student portfolios to arrive at this conclusion. The students disregarded the fact that some social problems are caused by the disablement and marginalization of communities.

In addition, critical learning theorists criticize the prominence placed on individual HE student learning reflection in favour of principles of cognitive justice that recognize plural epistemologies (Osman and Petersen 2010). In our view, HE students could rather perceive their role as being co-creators of knowledge in conjunction with the community as opposed to creators (HE students) and recipients (community) of knowledge (Osman and Petersen 2010; Odora-Hoppers 2013). We adhere to the idea of pluralism, which is the goal of research in critical theory (Bhana and Kanjee 2001). In addition, we are of the opinion that if communities understand the causes of powerlessness and recognize the oppressive forces behind marginalization, then their ability to change social conditions is enhanced (May and Powell 2008). In essence, critical research should involve praxis. In the context of our study, it implies informed and committed action for social change (Bhana and Kanjee 2001; May and Powell 2008).

Although we advocate critical theory, we are aware of its shortcomings. One of the major criticisms against this perspective is its commitment to the transformative approach in social life. Bhana and Kanjee (2001) note that this theory is criticized for the fact that conducting research in and for communities does not necessarily translate into communities wanting to emancipate themselves. Another shortcoming is that a researcher who utilizes critical theory should have a thorough understanding of the social, economic and political realities of the community in which research is conducted in order to prevent negative consequences (Bhana and Kanjee 2001).

Scholars agree that HE has the potential to drive steady and sustainable economic growth (Boyer 1996; Bobo and Akhurst 2019; Glover et al. 2013). Creighton et al. (2010) affirm that HE offers ‘multidimensional community benefits such as social and human capital, creativity, culture and arts, and numerous other resources that substantiate a higher quality of living’ (2010: 3). Innovative collaborations between HE and the community have the potential to stimulate economic growth and promote job creation, which is critical for cohesive society (Chipkin and Ngqulunga 2008; Andrews 2011). Partnerships that have mutual benefits stimulate economic prosperity and improve quality of life, especially in the knowledge-based economy (Miller 2001; Creighton et al. 2010; Butcher et al. 2011). The role of the university within the knowledge-based economy is to produce new knowledge and disseminate it to fuel economic growth (Stephenson 2011). Therefore, universities that are genuinely integrated with the community are powerful agents for transformation, for

facilitating social stability and creating community wealth in the globalized world (Forrest and Kearns 2001; Vargas et al. 2012).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative secondary data analysis

This qualitative secondary data analysis study drew on extant over-time case study data from the Flourishing Learning Youth (FLY) study. FLY is a ten-year study investigating resilience-enabling strategies in severely socio-economically challenged schools (Ebersöhn 2010, 2019). The FLY study comprises CE by a higher education institution in remote schools. FLY includes ASL students providing annual educational psychology services to young people in Grade 9. The FLY co-researchers (UP) acknowledged the participants (rural school) as expert knowers, equal partners and co-generators of knowledge during the data collection process (Burnett et al. 2004; Strier 2011; Ebersöhn 2013).

One of the key components in secondary data analysis is to select data that are comparable in terms of data collection methods (Bryman 2004). FLY cohort partners included non-researcher partners (parents, teachers and young people), as well as researcher partners (ASL students and university researchers). Data were generated through participatory reflection and action (PRA)-directed group discussions (Chambers 1994). Partners generated data in groups to answer the following retrospective questions: (1) What do you know about the FLY partnership? (2) What are the strengths of the FLY partnership? (3) What are the limitations of the FLY partnership? (4) What do you think is required for future planning in FLY? (5) Please reflect on your retrospective experiences as researcher in the FLY project. The PRA group discussions were both audio-recorded and translated verbatim, and products of the PRA discussions (group posters) were photographed as visual data. Credibility was enhanced by multiple coders performing the thematic in-case and cross case analysis of these textual and visual data sources.

To strengthen the credibility of the data prolonged engagement (March 2013 to February 2015) by multiple researchers was documented as persistent observations of the remote school context, as well as PRA data generation processes in researcher journals. Dependability of data was thus also enhanced due to engagement by multiple investigators and the centrality of reflexivity. Although we focused on the embodied meanings that were generated in one setting, the diverse partners nevertheless provided rich explanations for the similarities and differences in partnership experiences (Bryman 2004). Credibility was enhanced by using member validation to verify analysis results with participants. By focusing on one setting, we paid more attention to the context in which the FLY partnership existed instead of focusing on contrasting two or more settings (Bryman 2004). In doing so, we were in line with the qualitative strategy by retaining contextual insight for in-depth understanding (Bryman 2004).

A major advantage of qualitative secondary data is that it presents a very large amount of data to be analysed for generating new knowledge (Jones and Coffey 2012; Fraenkel et al. 2012). Using such data presented the additional advantage of not re-interviewing the same cohort partners, who may be over-researched (Bryman and Teevan 2005). Comparative qualitative secondary data analysis enabled us to tap into the large amount of data collected by co-researchers in PRA and qualitative survey studies; otherwise, this enterprise would

have been beyond the resources of an individual researcher (Robson 2002; Bickman and Rog 2009). Many researchers explain that the analysis of secondary qualitative surveys is useful for researchers with limited time and funds (Babbie and Benaquisto 2002; Bryman and Teevan 2005).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Copyright

Copyright allows the generator of the original data the exclusive right to use and distribute. In the FLY intervention, all researchers signed an agreement to share data in order to maximize the benefit of collaborative research. The retrospective data generated was added to the existing FLY database allowing researchers opportunities for secondary data analysis. However, each co-researcher should give appropriate credit to the principal investigator and colleagues (Leedy and Ormrod 2005).

As secondary analysts, we acknowledged the sources of the secondary data in this study (Jackson 1999). The materials that we received from the co-researchers were acknowledged, including some visual data in the form of photographs (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). If we were to present the co-researchers' data as if it were our own, it would have resulted in committing an act of plagiarism (Mitchell and Jolley 2007).

Maximizing potential benefit and avoiding bias

Another ethical aspect we had to consider is the beneficiation of humanity based on the research questions (Mitchell and Jolley 2007). Like any other research, no one can determine the value of the research before it is conducted. Research may be paradoxical in that one might find the study very important and the other not (Mitchell and Jolley 2007). Our assumption was that the study would benefit humanity, although we did not know what this study would discover (Mitchell and Jolley 2007). We were aware of potential bias; thus we attempted to report results fairly (Jackson 1999). We conducted secondary data analysis with care and strived for the best outcome (Jackson 1999). We reported literature accurately and acknowledged sources.

RESULTS: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS PATHWAY FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

It was evident that, across CE partner groups, HE involvement was viewed as a mechanism to promote the positive social development of young people in accordance with the tenets of global citizenship. In particular, when young people were included in CE, their social development was supported as they were afforded opportunities to develop capacity as future leaders and in terms of language development in multilingual spaces.

Developing capacity to be future global citizenship leaders

The way people think about the world and their role in it is central to enacting such beliefs and values in practice. Young people especially are a font of agency to drive a global citizenship agenda. It was evident that participants thought that CE provided opportunities for young people to develop values and beliefs that enable global citizenship practices. Participants viewed CE as a pathway to develop global citizenship capacity in young people in the following ways: sharing global citizenship values and beliefs, strengthening understanding of responsibility to the local community and leadership development.

Participants shared that CE provided young people with opportunities to develop their sociocultural base of values and beliefs.

‘They can now show us how to contribute in our community because of the University of Pretoria. They now show respect to the community and they can learn’ (Participant, lines 4–5). Participants conveyed the wish that CE be expanded to beyond one Grade:

> They say they would appreciate it if you could be here during the term so that they can get more information. They are asking you to come to Grade 12s and tell them why education is important.
> (Interpreter for Participants, lines 8–10)

Participants expressed that young people changed the way in which they showed pride in their school after engaging in creative arts sessions during the CE study. Young people used stones to build sculptures in the school, painted unused tyres to line a path in the school and added a painting to the outside of the school hall. Participants were hopeful that young people would extend this practice to the school community: use their capacity to strengthen their community after they complete their tertiary studies. These ideas are encapsulated in the following verbatim quotations from the PRA-directed session that took place in 2013:

> They say their children must go and learn to come back and improve the place that they come from. They are asking that it will be better if you come and explain why it is that [unclear] important to Grade 12 (Participants, lines 4–6). They are able to take care of the school and use paintings to be creative.
> (Participant, lines 15–16)

Figures 1 and 2 provide visual images of the way that art was used to enrich the environment at the school. The message written on the tyres in Figure 1 reads: ‘Keep the school clean’. These tyres are at the main gate of the school as a reminder to people entering the school grounds of the importance of keeping the environment clean. Figure 2 is a visual representation of students participating in art activities.

Figure 1: Art: environmental enrichment. Message: Keep the school clean.

Figure 2: Art: environmental enrichment. Students engaged in drawing.

Participants understood global citizenship to be about participating in local activities and developing leadership skills. Participants reported that students are showing signs of developing maturity and leadership as they engage in local issues and communicate about life. The verbatim extract below provides evidence of leadership qualities as reported by the participants:

> Their children now attend meetings and hope that they learn how to behave and to be leaders. They are able to converse around subjects that are difficult for them and to communicate about life.
> (Participants, lines 12–15)

Language development in a multilingual context

Participants valued the language development opportunities a CE project afforded young people in a rural space. Global citizenship requires people to navigate multilingual spaces with confidence. Rural spaces are far-removed from spaces where young people are able to interact with others who do not share their home language and often mono-cultural world-views.

It was evident that participants valued the contribution HE could make to the language development of young people in rural spaces. Participants thought that, because of the CE study, young people felt more confident to converse in English an additional language. English, not the home language of the young people, is the language of teaching and learning in the high school. Participants shared that an increase in confidence to use English promoted the academic progress of young people. Similarly, confidence to use English promoted the ease with which young people could navigate a multilingual spaces and cross-cultural world – synonymous with traits required for global citizenship.

Parents acknowledged that CE promoted the academic development of young people:

> Their children will be able to speak English. You have interested the children in these subjects.
> (Interpreter for Unidentified Female Speaker, lines 3–4)

Actual improvement in language acquisition was evident in this verbatim extract: ‘Nowadays our children are able to talk English, which was difficult in our days’ (Participant, line 16).

Participants shared that CE supported young people to be able to interact beyond the boundaries of a rural community with the 'outside' world as global citizens. CE, for example, provided exposure to cross-cultural relationships. For example, young people and university students and researchers engaged with one another. In the words of parents, the change is significant as students also interact with white people in their own school setting:

> There is a big change in that the children are not afraid of you white people coming over here; they now know you as brothers and sisters. There is a relationship between the University of Pretoria and the children.
> (Interpreter for Unidentified Female Speaker, lines 10–12)

A student seems to have confirmed this observation by stating that: 'They helped us; improved communication skills, [for] example, how to communicate with someone from a different culture' (Group 1, Participant 3, lines 23–24).

DISCUSSION

In our review of existing literature, we found that CE participants develop leadership skills, as reported in the current study (Schutz 2011; Vargas et al. 2012). Other studies similarly indicate that leadership skills are developed to advance the community's goals of building a more just and caring society (Holland 2009; Vargas et al. 2012). In line with the qualities of global citizenship, the study by Taylor et al. (2008) supports the current study as they found that HE has the responsibility to develop future generations that will be engaged in the market place. They further indicated that this task needs support from all key stakeholders, such as government and business (Taylor et al. 2008). Simons and Cleary (2005) confirm that students learn in unconventional ways when they participate in CE, therefore enhancing leadership qualities. Parents and teachers who participated in this study affirmed that students' behaviour shows signs of maturity. They clearly linked this behaviour to the FLY intervention, as alluded to in the results that emerged from this study.

Previous research documented the benefits of CE when institutions share information (Thornton and Zuiches 2009). Strier (2011) and Swanson (2015) agree that HE–CE plays a pivotal role in developing moral values among the students, as highlighted in this study. Regan's (2012) study aligns with the current study in confirming that students and lecturers have moral obligations to one another. Likewise, Morton and Enos (2002) add that CE is a method of engaging students in civic responsibilities. Existing knowledge correlates with this study as it indicates that global citizenship should be about spaces, possible practices and accepting responsibility (Németh 2010; Abdi 2015).

As in other studies, the results of this study indicate that CE exposes young people to different cultural groups (Burnett et al. 2004). The findings of a case study by Burge (2012) (in Australia) support the results of this study by indicating that students who participate in CE adapt well in a multicultural and multi-linguistic environment. In addition, Burge (2012) states that CE participants who are exposed to cross-cultural settings have enhanced chances of getting jobs. Consequently, local communities benefit from CE (Doyle 2010).

In this article, we discussed the importance of developing future leaders from the perspective of the participants, yet no mention is made of the effects of leadership continuity in HE. Sandmann and Plater (2009) highlight that leadership continuity affects the transformation role of HE. In the results of the current study, we did not find data that question whether new leaders could enhance or destroy HE–CE (Holland 2009). Holland (2009) raises the query whether new leadership in HE would embrace and promote CE or whether it would die with the activists. We believe this silence is linked to the fact that participants placed a greater focus on developing global citizens for the benefit of the community, in so doing overlooking the question of HE succession.

CONCLUSION

The results of the current study show that CE is a pathway to promote youth development in accordance with global citizenship tenets. HE–CE brings resources to young people in isolated rural spaces who are excluded from everyday lived experiences that mirror multilingual spaces, cross-cultural life space. When young people participate in HE–CE, they are exposed to diversity beyond that which is familiar in their rural community. This study supports views that when HE includes CE in their mandate, they enable global citizenship.

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