

Higher education uses community engagement-partnership as a research space to build knowledge

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Abstract

The purpose of the current article was to compare the retrospective experiences of community partners with higher education (HE) qualifications, in community engagement (CE) in order to inform global citizenship as a HE agenda. Qualitative methodology was appropriate in this study as we were interested in gaining in-depth insight into the understanding of partners of HE-rural school CE-partnership. We conveniently selected an existing Flourishing Learning Youth intervention for the purpose of secondary data analysis of the retrospective experiences of several participant-groups. Researchers confirm that HE should promote social justice in development interventions. Insight generated by this study is the fact that community challenges are not confined to a lack of assets, but also include ignorance about the invaluable local resources.

Keywords: Community partners; Decolonisation; Global citizenship; Rural school; Social justice

1 Introduction

International debates about the role of higher education institutions' commitment to the common good have strengthened in the past decade. Much of this debate is taken up in understandings of engaged scholarship and community engagement. This article contributes to this debate by presenting a case study from South Africa that provides a localised framing of community engagement for social justice within a global context. For the purpose of this article, we intend to frame the higher education (HE) agenda in the context of linking universities with the South African national development plan (Németh 2010). We argue that HE should be about understanding the world with the aim of co-generating new knowledge with communities and bringing about social justice (Sandy and Holland 2006; Erasmus 2014). In the South African context, global citizenship and cognitive justice have a strong presence in the HE agenda as they are reinforced by the Education White Paper 3 (Republic of South Africa [RSA] Department of Education [DoE] 1997) (Thomson et al. 2010; Erasmus 2014; Kaars and Kaars 2014). Turnbull (2014) 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" (p. 97). In this study, social justice is *inter alia* considered in terms of the distribution of power (Turnbull 2014).

It is acknowledged that HE's agenda includes serving the community and economy through education, research and innovation (Doyle 2010; Németh 2010; Albertyn and Erasmus 2014). Knowledge creation is critical for supporting regional economic, cultural and social development (Doyle 2010). Owing to current international HE agendas of engagement, universities in South Africa and beyond are encouraged to act as partners in society to address local needs through an exchange of ideas and sharing responsibilities (Németh 2010; Kajner 2015). We agree with Németh (2010) that HE is a key partner in the creation and dissemination of regional knowledge (research and innovation) aimed at building human and social capital (Németh 2010). Doyle (2010) further emphasises that the expertise and resourcefulness of HE distinguish it as a key partner in pursuing economic development and social justice. Clearly, HE institutions do not always make this role a priority and are more intent on roles in a knowledge economy and the commercialisation and marketisation of knowledge. Thus, universities are challenged to recognise their intellectual assets and strengths and make them accessible to communities (Doyle 2010). Although in this context we advocate for research, we are aware of the criticism against research due to its association with European imperialism and colonialism (Smith 1999). Research has the potential of being used as a form of power against indigenous communities as history has shown.

1.1 The research context to the current study

Our study of global citizenship took place in the context of the Flourishing Learning Youth (FLY) community engagement (CE)-partnership intervention. FLY is an intervention that builds on a collaborative CE-partnership and was established in 2005 between the University of Pretoria (Centre for the Study of Resilience) and a remote South African secondary school located in the Enhlanzeni District Municipality in Mpumalanga Province (Ebersöhn 2010a; Machimana 2017).

The main research purpose of FLY is to build knowledge of risk and resilience in rural schools by leveraging on HE and school partnership. Mr Henry Fakude, former Deputy Principal of the partner school, initiated first contact by inviting Liesel Ebersöhn to partner with a rural school as a way to address educational needs. An initial intervention study focused on teachers' role in promoting resilience in a high-risk school (Ebersöhn 2010b; Loots 2011; Mbongwe 2012). Ebersöhn thereafter initiated a parallel intervention study, which included Academic Service-Learning (ASL) to address the educational psychological needs of the participating rural school (Malekane 2009; Cherrington 2010; Malan 2011).

Additional intervention research with teachers in this rural secondary school and neighbouring primary schools focused on teaching reading (Ebersöhn et al. 2014; Joubert et al. 2014; Edwards 2017; Machimana 2017). In the current National Research Foundation (NRF)-funded FLY intervention phase, a HE-CE partnership with a rural school was investigated retrospectively. Table 1 gives an outline of the FLY processes.

Studies that include the perspective of a range of CE-partners, as well as non-researcher partners, are limited (Taylor 2009; Trahair 2013). The following studies report on CE from the perspective of diverse community partners (Minkler 2005; Camino 2000; O'Brien 2009; Carlisle 2010; Vargas et al. 2012), teachers (Rubio-Cortés 2010; Du Plessis 2012; Loots 2012; Mbongwe 2012; Coetzee et al. 2015), students (Burnett et al. 2004; Krause 2005; Rohleder et al. 2008; Ebersöhn et al. 2010; Osman and Petersen 2010; Maistry and Thakrar 2012; Falk 2013), students and community (Simons and Cleary 2005), and researchers (Cairney 2000; Brown et al. 2003; Bond and Paterson 2005; Power et al. 2005; Moseley

Table 1 Summary of research process

| Time frame | Partner cohorts | Data generation techniques | Data documentation techniques | Student | Our role |
|------------|---------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| 2013–2014 | Teachers ($n = 18$) | PRA-directed group sessions | Audio-visual recordings Visual data (photographs) Field notes Research journal | Mrs Marli Edwards PhD Educational Psychology | Co-generator of knowledge Assist with facilitating PRA-directed group sessions Document field notes Transcribe audio-visual recordings Observe member checking and keep research journal |
| 2014–2015 | ASL students ($n = 20$) | <i>Survey</i> Face-to-face interviews Post Online Telephonic | Audio-visual recordings Respective reflective journals of ASL students | Ms Ina-Mari du Toit MEd Educational Psychology | Collaborate as co-researcher |
| 2014–2015 | Researchers ($n = 12$) | <i>Survey</i> Face-to-face interviews Post, online and telephonic | Visual data (photographs) Audio-visual recordings Respective journals of researchers | Ms Alicia Adams MEd Educational Psychology | Collaborate as co-researcher |

2007; Bender 2008). We collaborated in the data generation of each of the above-mentioned Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) and qualitative survey studies. In this study, we compared these secondary datasets as a means to understand varied partner-cases regarding HE–CE.

The three CE-partners with HE qualifications (HE-rural school partners), in the current study, specifically refer to (a) teachers from the partner school ($n = 18$), (b) ASL students in HE ($n = 20$) and (c) researchers in HE ($n = 12$) (total $n = 50$). Some of the forms of CE activities employed in global citizenship education include distance education, community-based research, participatory action research, professional community service and ASL (Bender et al. 2006). In the FLY partnership, CE also includes research and ASL.

This article explores, highlights and harmonises epistemic balances in knowledge production from the perspectives of the global North and the global South. The central tenet emerges through recognising knowledge creation as playing a critical role in promoting indigenous knowledge systems and rural economies. The discussion is benchmarked on developing pedagogy of possibilities (Leibowitz 2009) between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the communities. The article opens up the question of how higher education uses CE-partnership as a research space could build knowledge. The results in this article equally point to pedagogic possibilities such as interventions to enable the marginalised communities, mobilisation of local resources and enablement in rural settings. The proposition of the pedagogy of possibilities triggers a proposition of a political vision to be embraced under the rubric of HE–CE partnership (Peirce 1989).

2 Literature review

2.1 Global citizenship in HE

One of the major trends emerging from literature on the HE agenda is the role of HE in developing global citizens. HE plays a role in society by equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills to become global citizens, who participate in democracy (Bringle and Hatcher 2007; Al-Zuaibir 2011; Morton and Enos 2002; Shultz and Viczko 2016). Society is increasingly relying on technology, hence the need for HE to play a crucial role in the development of students, who could join the workforce later (Taylor et al. 2008; Al-Zuaibir 2011). In a recent study related to this issue, Taylor et al. (2008) found that there is a gap in HE engaging and sustaining partnerships that are aimed at developing students to actively participate in socio-economic issues. This study was conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) through policy review and telephonic interviews with 47 HE-community members (Taylor et al. 2008).

In continuing with the discussion concerning the HE agenda, Ashcroft and Rayner (2011) named three categories as the purpose of HE, namely: (a) questioning, and so the protection of democracy (b) insight generation and transfer of new knowledge and practice and (c) producing today's and tomorrow's ideas of professionalism. For the purpose of our line of reasoning in this paper, we use Ashcroft and Rayner's (2011) views to argue that the purpose of HE in the global South is to generate contextual knowledge aimed at addressing social and economic challenges. Literature suggests that HE ensures development at grassroots levels, thus contributing to poverty alleviation (Ashcroft and Rayner 2011; Pitso 2014). Although it is about two decades since the new South African government drafted the Education White

Paper 3 (RSA DoE 1997) to guide the process (Erasmus 2014), the role of HE in society is still a subject of debate (Erasmus 2014).

2.2 Community engagement in HE

Another argument that presents the HE agenda as transformational is that, universities may use non-traditional methods, such as community engagement (CE)-partnerships, in engaging with communities in knowledge creation and economic transformation (Doyle 2010). Literature suggests that when HE partners with communities there is a radical shift of attitude and practice in CE (Bringle and Hatcher 2007; Thomson et al. 2010; Albertyn and Erasmus 2014). Kajner (2015) adds that CE is invaluable to the communities as it can be used to practically address the needs that they have identified as priorities. Referring to South Africa, Albertyn and Erasmus (2014) argue that there are still huge gaps in collaborative CE. This conclusion is based on literature review highlighting a gap in collaborative research relating to knowledge generation among the following partners: local communities, organised civil society, HE, the public and private sectors. Albertyn and Erasmus (2014) further emphasise that little is known of the contributions by civil society, and that therefore a closer and deeper engagement of civil society is necessary in South Africa. Linked to the idea of knowledge is the complexity of related power sharing in CE-partnership. Within this context, we argue that knowledge enablement between partners is crucial in HE–CE landscape (Albertyn and Erasmus 2014). It is reasoned that when HE-community partners focus on the common mission of all partners involved this results in positive energy (the knowledge spillovers) (Albertyn and Erasmus 2014).

Manifestations of global citizenship and social justice in South Africa HE are undergoing rapid and dynamic change to align contextual environment as it relates to national priorities and global pressure (Thomson et al. 2010; Erasmus 2014). Scholars provide useful insight about CE being a core function of HE along with teaching, learning and research. In the South African case, CE serves social justice, equity and transformation purposes (Petersen 2007; Albertyn and Erasmus 2014). However, the majority of South African citizens are still experiencing the harsh realities of inequality, yet contradictions and contestations about the idea of CE are raging. As alluded, this is an interesting phenomenon given that CE is enforced by policy directives for HE transformation drafted in the Education White Paper 3 (RSA DoE 1997) (Thomson et al. 2010). We infer that this relates to what Erasmus (2014) refers to as “offering a service as socially symbolic acts aimed at disguising social contradictions by offering imaginary resolutions for repressed contradictions without actually affecting any real social change” (p. 104).

The basic function of global citizenship education is to create a just and sustainable society by providing information, knowledge and skills (Cortese 2003). This calls for a paradigm shift towards collaboration and cooperation between the partners of the North and South (Cortese 2003; Sporre 2012). Therefore, we argue that conceptualising critical global citizenship education within a political framework opens up spaces of critical inquiry and engagement with diverse theoretical approaches, epistemologies and pedagogies and also facilitates decolonising of global citizenship (Sporre 2012; Chovanec et al. 2015; Shultz 2013, 2015). CE brings a paradigm shift within the geopolitical relations and allows students and communities to construct knowledge in the global space (Mignolo 2000, 2002; Bringle and Hatcher 2007; Sporre 2012; Chovanec et al. 2015).

2.3 Cognitive justice

Recent developments in academic discourse align with the idea that imposing Eurocentric realities of global citizenship education to the South should be challenged (Mignolo 2000, 2002; Sporre 2012; Odora-Hoppers 2013; Abdi 2015; Chovanec et al. 2015; Masemula 2015). Global citizenship that perpetuates inequality through hidden agendas only serves the interest of minority groups that want to maintain dominance (Swanson 2015). Abdi (2015) critiques Kant for his “negative global citizenship education” (p. 15) of attempting to teach his European compatriots about Africans, about whom he knows little. According to Abdi (2015), Kant is called “philosopher of colonialism” (p. 15), because of his philosophy of presuming that non-Europeans, people with darker pigmentation, were inferior in brain capacity. His colonial philosophy, which prevailed globally over hundreds of years, had the “unintended” consequence of the decitizenisation of Africans. As a result, delinking from colonial systems and structures opens up space for the grammar of decoloniality (Mignolo 2000; Chovanec et al. 2015; Shultz 2015). This refers to the notion of the global North engaging with previously silenced voices from the global South.

Moreover, both the Northern and Southern global countries are advocating indigenisation, which refers to HE agenda designed by Africans for the global South (Odora-Hoppers 2004; Leibowitz 2010; Cossa 2013; Masemula 2015; Swanson 2015). It is inadequate to decolonise global citizenship without emancipating the mind (Smith 1999), hence the need for HE systems to be designed by Africans (Cossa 2013). In a UK-based study, Swanson (2015) identified a gap in the literature whereby global citizenship can be indigenised through creating spaces for previously silenced voices from the non-Western world to effect democratic change. Swanson (2015) observes in the literature that the contributions entailing African indigenous thought to social ecological wellbeing of rural communities are ignored. Sandy and Holland (2006) echo the sentiments by indicating that there are scarce publications from the standpoint of community partners in collaboration with HE. This study would potentially make a contribution to scientific knowledge by re-voicing the often silenced voices. Unilateral foreign funding arrangements render Africa as recipient prone to all kinds of influences, including African educational policies (Cossa 2013). We argue that decolonisation should give space to the previously colonised to design their own HE agenda, as they continually engage with European imperialism and colonialism (Smith 1999). All nations should participate in dialogue on an equal footing in the process of designing education that is intended for global citizenship (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC] 2013; Pitso 2014; Masemula 2015).

We postulate that Eurocentric views were elevated in global thinking and analysis to the detriment of multiple epistemologies (Mignolo 2000, 2002; Sporre 2012; Abdi 2015). The Southern voices were particularly suppressed in the construction and dissemination of knowledge. J. Ernst Renan is another philosopher who erroneously equates knowledge construction with Europeans (Abdi 2015). He claimed that African and Asian natives had limited brain capacity, which meant that they were only good for manual labour (Abdi 2015). Such a view created a gap in the literature, consequently there are few authentic attempts to alleviate global injustices which are built upon the historical foundations of colonialism (Chovanec et al. 2015). Renan’s views were echoed in South Africa by Hendrik Verwoerd, who is quoted as saying, “There is no place for the Bantu in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour...” (South African History Online 2017). It is against this background that we argue that African knowledge and values should be promoted through global citizenship education that values African epistemologies (Masemula 2015). Such

global citizenship could bring transformative change by connecting the head, heart and hand (Cortese 2003).

3 Research methodology

3.1 Qualitative research

In the current study, we utilised the qualitative research methodology (Machimana et al. 2018). According to Lankshear and Knobel (2004), qualitative research is the multifaceted collection of perspectives and methods that have developed from different theories and disciplines. Lankshear and Knobel (2004, p. 68) further note that the ontologies of qualitative studies originate from “interpretive sociology”. The utilisation of the qualitative methodology was appropriate in the current study (Babbie and Mouton 2001; Creswell 2013) as we were interested in gaining in-depth insight into the understanding (phenomenology) of partners of HE-rural school CE-partnership (Ivankova et al. 2007; De Vos et al. 2011; Neuman 2014). Nieuwenhuis (2007) argues that qualitative research emphasises studying human actions within their natural environment. We did not manipulate the phenomenon under study in order to get a real-world perspective of HE-rural school CE-partnership (Machimana et al. 2018).

3.2 Research design: secondary data analysis (comparative and qualitative)

In the current study, comparative cases refer to specific cases involving the experiences of a long-term HE-rural school CE-partnership in Oshoek, Mpumalanga Province (Blaxter et al. 2010; Machimana et al. 2018). We conveniently selected an existing FLY intervention for the purpose of secondary data analysis of the retrospective experiences of several participant-groups in an existing intervention, namely FLY (Machimana 2017). Via secondary analysis, we want to produce in-depth descriptions and interpretations of the contemporary phenomenon^{Footnote 1} (Babbie and Mouton 2001; Creswell 2014) for purposes of illumination and understanding of the partnership (Hays 2004; De Vos et al. 2011).

Our approach of comparing and contrasting qualitative secondary data to establish emerging themes draws mainly from the inductive thematic analysis approach (Creswell 2003; Babbie 2013). Other researchers like Jones and Coffey (2012) and Jackson et al. (2013) have used thematic analysis in their secondary analysis. Jackson et al. (2013) conducted their study in Australia focusing on the health service (participants $n = 44$). Jones and Coffey’s (2012) study was conducted in the United Kingdom (UK), also focusing on health matters (participants $n = 20$). By utilising comparative secondary data analysis, we were able to study the FLY partners’ retrospective experiential meanings in great depth (Flick 2004; Finlay 2012). A social phenomenon, in this case the FLY intervention, is understood better when comparing the experiences of different cohort partners to identify similarities and differences (Bryman 2004).

3.3 Ethical considerations

Researchers report on the significant development in archiving (Irwin 2013) and sharing qualitative data for reuse and secondary analysis (Jones and Coffey 2012; Jackson et al. 2013). The development of archiving and sharing qualitative data evokes critical discussion about several ethics concerns such as the ethics of data protection, reuse of data, secondary analysis, epistemological issues, anonymity of participants and researchers (Irwin 2013). We

followed the ethics procedures of the University of Pretoria to obtain qualitative secondary data (Bickman and Rog 2009; Jones and Coffey 2012; Jackson et al. 2013).

As in the FLY intervention, qualitative data are generated through interaction between the researcher and the participants (Irwin 2013). Critics of qualitative secondary data analysis highlight the risk for the participants as they had given their informed consent for the data to be used, entrusting it to the co-researchers (Irwin 2013). Although the participants in the FLY intervention have given informed consent for their data to be used for research and teaching purposes, the question of how the confidentiality of the records would be protected (Bouma and Ling 2004; Bickman and Rog 2009) still requiring an answer by the secondary analyst. The PRA and qualitative survey transcripts were anonymised by the co-researchers although we have access to participant's names (Jones and Coffey 2012; Machimana 2017). We abided by the agreement between co-researchers and the partners with regard to sensitive information that is to be kept confidential.

4 Results: HE uses CE-partnership as research space to build knowledge

4.1 Intervention to enable the marginalised community

The results of the current study reveal one broad theme namely that of intervention to enable the marginalised community. This theme is supported by the following three subthemes: (a) mobilisation of local resources, (b) enablement in a rural setting and (c) social justice approach. The identified subthemes are discussed in the order highlighted above.

In this first subtheme of this study, we report the data related to the development of the marginalised rural community. It appears that the FLY intervention is not just about theoretical research without a purpose. Participants in this study report that FLY is aimed at action research for development purposes. The following section presents the results of this study.

4.2 Mobilisation of local resources

Teachers reported that the FLY partnership assisted the community to mobilise local resources. Against the background of the limitations of rural environment, it seems that there is an awareness of the richness in using local resources for the purpose of development. During a PRA-directed group discussion teachers expressed gratitude for the role played by the university in mobilising local assets:

The partnership is an eye opener for the educators to help the community to use the available resources to map the area, as teachers, having a partnership with the university (Group 1, Participant 3). Apparently the assets were not again mobilised for individuals, but for the development of a rural school and the community at large: The partnership would benefit schools in terms of the mobilisation of resources. So with the partnership, you know, that we have with the University of Pretoria [we] want to believe that there [are] a lot of resources that can be mobilised (Group 13).

An ASL student shared about how the university promotes mobilisation of local assets: *It enhances knowledge about social justice and it promotes reliance on available community resources (Participant 18, Online).* It appears that some of the challenges in rural communities may not relate to a lack of assets, but ignorance about

the invaluable local resources, thus the university's raising: *awareness of [local] environmental resources and assets* (Participant 20, Online). This sentiment is echoed by a researcher who participated in a qualitative survey: *The strengths lie in trusting that higher education does not come in as consultants, thereby being regarded as having the capacity and all knowledge in solving problems, but rather, the power to identify one's problems and address them accordingly lies with the local school. Local schools are regarded as equal partners who have the knowledge, resources and knowhow of building their community and bringing in the change that they desire to see happening in their communities* (Participant 2, Questionnaire).

Teachers participating in the FLY intervention seemingly had increased levels of insight and awareness of how they could assist the community to develop. Participating teachers revealed that through this CE-partnership they gained insight into assisting the community to alleviate poverty. Teachers also believed that this CE-partnership would increase students' levels of insight and awareness. Expressions that attest to this statement are encapsulated in the following PRA-directed group discussions:

So it means that this partnership to us as educators, it was an eye-opener so that we are going to think of projects that were going to assist the community so that their poverty is going to be alleviated (Group 1, Participant 2).

But we believe that the partnership with the university, it will open eyes of those learners so that they understand before they complete matric ... [clears throat] ... they, they will be advised as to what they [are] supposed to do (Group 4, Participant 17).

ASL students seconded the point that students' levels of insight and awareness have increased. One ASL student positively affirmed that the FLY partnership was: *Developing youth (emotionally, socially and scholastically) and enhance learners' insight and understanding of themselves* (Participant 6, Questionnaire). During a telephonic interview, an ASL student also highlighted that experiences of increased insight in FLY were not only limited to students. Participants gained crucial reflection skills, which are associated with being global citizens. The following verbatim quotation is an example of increased levels of insight and awareness among ASL students: *This experience helped me to develop insight into how to be a psychologist – learning how to step back and reflect often!* (Participant 17, Telephonic). The researcher concludes this section by pointing out the role of HE in providing insight to various community partners: *Then lastly, we as a team of researchers provide new insights and create knowledge that could be valuable for other academics, stakeholders, teachers and communities with regard to training, practice and future research opportunities* (Participant 6, Questionnaire).

4.3 Enablement in a rural setting

Participants apparently understood the role of HE as that of facilitating rural development by using the PRA approach. HE facilitates development through research in collaboration with the community, as is evident in the following verbatim extract:

Then we also mentioned that the university; if the university collaborates with the schools. We have indicated that schools are an extension of the community, they are

within the community and that learners and its governing body members that teachers are all members of the community. So if there is that collaboration then the university is able to influence, you know, the community in a positive way (Group 13, Participant 7).

ASL student reported that HE uses PRA to facilitate development in a rural community: *UP is providing support and is conducting research primarily on promoting resilience in schools in deep rural communities. The emphasis is on participatory action research and support (Participant 17, Telephonic).*

A researcher further explained her understanding of the methodology used in the FLY partnership: *FLY is theoretically underpinned by the asset-based approach and uses Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) as methodology (Participant 6, Questionnaire).*

During a face-to-face interview, another researcher confirmed that the community also plays a key role in this collaborative effort: *I like that the community also gets to share and participate. They [participants] also get the information [research results] (Participant 12, Face-to-face).*

4.4 Social justice approach

Comments made by participants give the impression that it is clear to FLY partners that this partnership is underpinned by a social justice framework. FLY partners seem to be advancing the social justice agenda in order to contribute positively to the community. The following verbatim extracts provide evidence of an increased awareness about the social justice approach that was adopted in the FLY partnership:

You know there is no university that is less than 300 km from where we are. So if the university is reaching out, you know, to the rural communities then the gap is breached and you know the transit is very easy. You know it will be easy that learners will go to university and then begin to obtaining information ... [pause] ... knowledge actually then will come and then—then [they can] contribute positively to their communities (Group 13, Participant 7).

In highlighting our observation about a social justice approach, a participant stated that: *What I like about it [FLY partnership], is that if you think about it, it takes on a social justice approach. So what I really liked is that when there were challenges that the teachers brought to Liesel or Ronél, they themselves came up with the solutions and that's something very nice. I think we learn a lot about community engagement, but we always have this perspective that we are the ones who are coming to help them and to save them and what I liked about this project in particular, that was not the case, is that we were there. We were facilitators. We were mediators of the whole process (Participant 1, Face-to-face).*

Two ASL students who participated through online interviews indicated that they learned about social justice in FLY experiences.

So I was learning a lot during that work exposure about issues of social justice and the needs of learners at a rural school (Participant 11, Online).

I learnt about the importance of social justice, teamwork and professionalism in all settings (Participant 13, Online).

There is resounding support for the above-mentioned statements by a researcher, who said that: *Social justice is also served by this partnership (Participant 8, Online).*

Teachers, ASL students and researchers share similar thoughts about the role of the university in promoting the recognition of local knowledge. Although HE is perceived as a facilitator of knowledge generation, the local community is not reduced into a laboratory experiment for research (or passive recipient of this knowledge). Academic researchers and non-researchers participating in the FLY intervention are viewed as co-generators of knowledge. All partners have knowledge to contribute and are mutual beneficiaries of new knowledge that is generated in this study. This analysis is evident in the remarks of participants who contributed through PRA-directed discussions, online and face-to-face interviews:

This partnership has brought knowledge, both parties obtained knowledge here, the partnership from the university, they were able to get knowledge from us also, and also we were able to obtain knowledge from them (Group 1, Participant 2).

Provides opportunity for research and knowledge generation (Participant 7, Online).

The amount of knowledge that participating students acquire during that time is of inestimable value (Participant 19, Online).

As a researcher, having the confidence of knowing you can go back to a particular place and knowing that you are not there to exploit them [participants] and that you are not there to just use them but rather to co-generate knowledge (Participant 12, Face-to-face).

So there is a world of knowledge in this partnership and that's not easy to come by (Participant 12, Face-to-face).

5 Discussion

In line with the results of this study, Nair (2003) agrees that universities have resources to meet the local needs, thus serving regional and national interests. Literature confirms that schools are an integral part of democracy and they contribute to developing students, who have a sense of responsibility as global citizens (Rubio-Cortés 2010; Larkin 2015). As the current study confirms, Rubio-Cortés (2010) points out that CE-partnership facilitates identification and mobilisation of community resources for school development. Teachers, ASL students and researchers who participated in this study agreed that the resources are not mobilised for individual gain, but rather for school and community development. In an online survey conducted in the USA, McNall et al. (2009) found that shared resources create effective partnerships.

The results of the current study validates the findings of Driscoll (2009), who indicates that the exchange of knowledge and resources in a collaborative partnership are crucial for development. Furthermore, in correlation with the results of this study, Kilpatrick (2009) also reports about the value of local knowledge. In a study conducted in a rural community in Australia, Kilpatrick (2009) mentions that HE should draw from community's resources in

terms of local knowledge and understanding. Participants regard the FLY partnership as a “world of knowledge” with “inestimable value”. In relation to knowledge generation, all participants’ contributions are equally valued.

The results of this study show similar findings as in existing literature, that PRA is a structured investigation with the involvement of the local community affected by the problem and for the purpose of education and bringing social change (Minkler 2005; Power et al. 2005; Malm et al. 2013). Minkler (2005) indicates that CE-partnership is a systematic endeavour for developing local capacity in the community.

In support of the current study’s results, researchers confirm that HE should promote social justice in development interventions (Power et al. 2005; Sandy and Holland 2006; Strier 2011). Through a qualitative study with six faculty members, Malm et al. (2013) confirmed that HE that is committed to transformation uses a social justice paradigm to facilitate development together with the community. Another survey study conducted among 77 students in the USA correlates with the current study by indicating that CE has a range of educational benefits, including raising awareness about social justice issues (Falk 2013). HE–CE partnerships can be sustained if community partners notice benefits for the involvement (Sandy and Holland 2006). Likewise, the participants in the current study were aware of social justice issues that required attention during the engagement process. Participants’ understanding that FLY is underpinned by PRA methodology for facilitating development is consistent with the findings in literature, as highlighted above.

In many countries, HE collaborates with communities to enrich students’ academic experience in the context of research (Albertyn and Erasmus 2014). Similar to existing literature in the global South, CE serves social justice, equity and transformation in South Africa (Albertyn and Erasmus 2014; Van Rensburg 2014). Van Rensburg (2014) highlights that CE is mandated by government to transform South Africa’s HE and society, largely characterised by inequality and division. Participants in this study indicated that transformation is promoted through social justice paradigms for development purposes (Van Rensburg 2014).

Furthermore, after conducting critical discourse analysis, Petersen (2007) states that social justice is a distinctive characteristic of CE in South Africa. These findings are consistent with the current study, because participants agreed that university-community partnership is not only a powerful instrument for the construction of shared meanings, but equally instrumental in addressing poverty issues in rural communities (Petersen 2007; Kajner 2015).

In support of the current study, Ashcroft and Rayner (2011) revealed that HE facilitates insight generation and the transfer of new knowledge and practice in the community. In addition, participants in CE develop personal and interpersonal skills that equip them to facilitate development in the community (Simons and Cleary 2005). In South Africa, HE promotes student’s awareness of global citizenship by partnering with communities in new ways of teaching, learning and research and knowledge transmission (Kruss 2012). Further support of this study is provided by Simons and Cleary (2005) and Hartman and Kiely (2004), who found that students engaged in CE have increased self-awareness of the notion of global citizenship and its opportunities. Therefore, participating students are better than non-participating students. Participants in this study showed increased levels of insight and awareness, enabling them to assist the rural community in alleviating poverty. The skills acquired by the participants are in line with the attributes of global citizenship.

This article contributes to the existing literature and debate about building knowledge with the bricks of indigenous knowledge systems that could be gleaned from engagement with communities. Hlalele (2019) encourages indigenous knowledge systems that promote local content and forms of knowing such as the current article. One strategy to build knowledge is through using rural learning ecologies as bases of higher education community engagement collaborations (Mapesela et al. 2012).

6 Conclusion

Existing international literature on HE–CE highlights that the strength of partnerships is based on mutual enablement and authentic dialogue, where the voices of both partners are acknowledged and valued. This study showed that from the perspective of CE-partners with HE qualifications, partners view HE as an agent that facilitates knowledge generation. These CE-partners indicated that both academic researchers and non-researchers should be valued as equal knowledge co-generator partners. In addition, existing literature documents that a lack of resources limit individuals in participating in community initiatives. Another insight could be that of highlighting the fact that community challenges are not confined to a lack of assets, but also includes ignorance about the invaluable local resources (world of knowledge) that may be used to contribute new knowledge to the global platform. Therefore HE plays a crucial role of using CE-partnerships as a research space for new knowledge generation. In the context of decolonisation, knowledge is created with community partners for a just and sustainable society.

Notes

¹FLY intervention.

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