

# INFORMING EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY TRAINING WITH STUDENTS' COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

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*The purpose of this article was to describe students' experiences of community engagement in an Educational Psychology practicum in order to inform relevant educational psychology training literature with experiences of students' community engagement. Experiential learning served as our theoretical framework and we employed an instrumental case study design, purposefully selecting eight students in the MEd Educational Psychology programme to participate in a focus group. Other data sources included reflective journals and visual data. The following themes emerged from the thematic analysis: students gained insight into themselves as prospective educational psychologists, the curricular community engagement benefited students' professional development and the practicum supported students in integrating theory with practice.*

**Keywords:** community, curricular, educational psychology, engagement, experiential learning, practicum

## Introduction

As a result of recent developments in higher education institutions, Pillay (2003) indicates that psychologists in the South African context need to be trained and supervised to work in communities. According to Pretorius-Heuchert and Ahmed (2001), reasons for this need include an abundance of people with psychological problems and too few people to help, a lack of financial and physical resources, and the fact that, traditionally, mental health services provide inefficient, ineffective and inappropriate services. In addition, societal factors, such as apartheid, poverty and oppression, have resulted in psychological problems and stressors, followed by a need for intervention within the larger system (Pillay, 2003; Pillay, 2006).

Consequently, the training of educational psychologists has to prepare these professionals to function within an ecosystemic paradigm, which focuses on prevention and mass intervention, while developing theory and research, especially in the context of oppressed and disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, training should address the requirement that educational psychologists fulfil different roles and get closer to communities and community organisations in order to focus on prevention and expand interventions (Pillay, 2003). In addition, by working in communities and non-urban areas, students are exposed to the need to be critical of existing methods of psychology and are encouraged to make adjustments to their techniques, or to learn more appropriate intervention methods (Pillay & Kometsi, 2007).

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In this article, we contemplate the way in which one group of educational psychology students experienced community engagement in their training as a means of providing relevant learning opportunities. Therefore, the question guiding the article is: What are students' experiences of an Educational Psychology practicum relating to community engagement in a module of a MEd Educational Psychology programme? The aim of the inquiry is to inform knowledge and practices related to educational psychology training.

Pillay (2003) states that, in order to make the training of educational psychologists relevant in the South African context, training should be integrated in all modules in a cohesive and holistic manner and should be more practically orientated. Within the South African context, it has become increasingly evident that the traditional role of the educational psychologist in rendering an individually based service, whether in private practice consulting with schools or based at a school or similar agency, is not effective and does not make a sustainable impact on the children (Pillay, 2007; Lubbe & Eloff, 2004). Lubbe and Eloff (2004) state that the only way to address vast socio-economic and socio-psychological disparities and inequalities in terms of the needs of the people of South Africa is for educational psychologists to focus more on communities, on establishing networks and partnerships, and to collaborate with the relevant stakeholders. Therefore, educational psychologists should not only be exposed to theories but also gain experience working directly with communities through practicum, fieldwork and case studies (Pillay, 2003).

Pillay (2003) has identified several reasons why the training and supervision of psychologists should be more community orientated. These reasons include the following: educational psychologists should test theory in practical situations and have cross-cultural training within a South African context; a paradigm shift needs to occur from individual to collective practice and students should engage in action research. In addition, action research should be directed at action and intervention in terms of meeting the needs of communities. Educational psychologists should implement an ecosystemic approach in training and trainees should acquire skills to empower and mobilise people in the community to deal with social issues in the South African context. Educational psychologists should collaborate with stakeholders and also acquire a repertoire of generic skills for working with communities, as, if they wish to be of value to their clients and communities, they should be able to deal with a variety of problems and implement a diverse range of interventions. Psychologists should also focus on preventative, rather than curative, interventions (Pillay, 2006; Pillay, 2003).

These strategies are being implemented in the Educational Psychology curricula of several universities in South Africa, such as the University of Pretoria, the University of Johannesburg and Stellenbosch University, which reflect the changing scope of the educational psychologist (Pillay, 2003). One approach to training that is relevant to educational psychology students is community engagement. In recent years the pressure on universities worldwide, including universities in South Africa, to bridge the gap between higher education and society, and to become active partners with communities, has increased. *The White Paper 3* (Department of Education (DoE), 1997) has laid the foundation for making community service, or, rather, community engagement, an integral part of higher education in South Africa. *The White Paper* (DoE, 1997) states that one of the goals of higher education should be to promote and develop an awareness of social responsibility among students, both socially and economically, by integrating community engagement in the curriculum of academic programmes (Bender, 2007; Bender, Daniels, Lazarus, Naude & Sattar, 2006). The University of Pretoria has, as have the other universities in South Africa, developed an appreciative understanding of the potential that community engagement holds for transforming higher education in relation to societal needs and, consequently, for producing graduates with a sense of civic responsibility and an ability to apply the theory of their disciplines to local developmental issues (Bender, 2007).

## Conceptualisation

### Community engagement and curricular community engagement

The Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education (Higher Education Quality Committee, 2004:24), cited in Bender (2008a), provides the following definition of community engagement (CE), which is used

as a basic reference in most institutions of higher education in South Africa: Community engagement can be defined as the initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the higher education institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community. Community engagement finds expression in a variety of forms, ranging from informal and relatively unstructured activities to formal and structured academic programmes addressed as particular community needs.

At the University of Pretoria, the concept of curricular community engagement is used as a framework for academic programmes. Curricular community engagement is a credit-bearing, educational experience which encompasses a curriculum (learning content), teaching, learning, research and scholarship activity that engages academic staff, students and community service agencies/organisations and community members in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration. Their interactions address needs and assets that have been identified by the community, deepen students' civic and academic learning, and enrich the University's scholarship. At the University of Pretoria, curricular community engagement can be divided into various types of community activities, such as community-based learning, academic service-learning (an example of best practice), community service, internships, clinical practicals, practicums, work-based learning, experiential education, community-based education, cooperative education, community-based projects and community outreach (Bender, 2007; Bender, 2008a; Bender, 2008b).

## Educational Psychology practicum

Several modules in the MEd (Educational Psychology) programme in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Pretoria make use of community engagement in their training of future educational psychologists. One example of how training of educational psychologists at the University of Pretoria has been adjusted to accommodate changes in their scope of practice is seen in the changes that have already been made to the practicum in one of the modules, namely, Career assessment and counselling, of the MEd Educational Psychology Programme (Ebersöhn, 2007) since 2006. This collaboration flowed from an existing partnership between a lecturer and educators in a rural Mpumalanga secondary school. The training purpose of the ongoing collaboration is to create opportunities for students to develop practical experience of the (i) asset-based approach and (ii) principles of positive psychology (Ebersöhn, 2007) and to provide Educational Psychology students with an opportunity to work in a community situated in a secondary school in a rural area. In terms of the collaboration with the school and the learners, the purpose was for the Educational Psychology students to form partnerships and to create learning and research opportunities. This particular partnership was formed with the Grade 9 learners and educators in order to obtain educational psychology practice experience. In addition, the partnership involves working closely with the school and the educators to help address career and learning challenges that the learners may have, and to assist those learners to gain skills in their learning at school, so that they can be better equipped to support themselves during their further education and after leaving school (Ebersöhn, 2009).

The practicum is administered twice a year. The first visit entailed implementing planned group-based activities with Grade 9 learners in terms of assessment. The purpose of the assessment is to (i) establish rapport, (ii) get to know the learners in the group, (iii) and to determine an intervention focus for the group. The outcome of the assessment is to acquire information on the strengths and barriers of each learner in order to plan an educational psychology intervention for that group. The second visit focused on implementing planned group-based intervention activities. The intervention focused on areas identified during the assessment that took place after the first visit (Ebersöhn, 2009). Students developed their assessment and intervention strategy individually. Subsequently, the students travelled to the school and worked with groups of Grade 9 learners for one-and-a-half to two hours each day during the two-day visits.

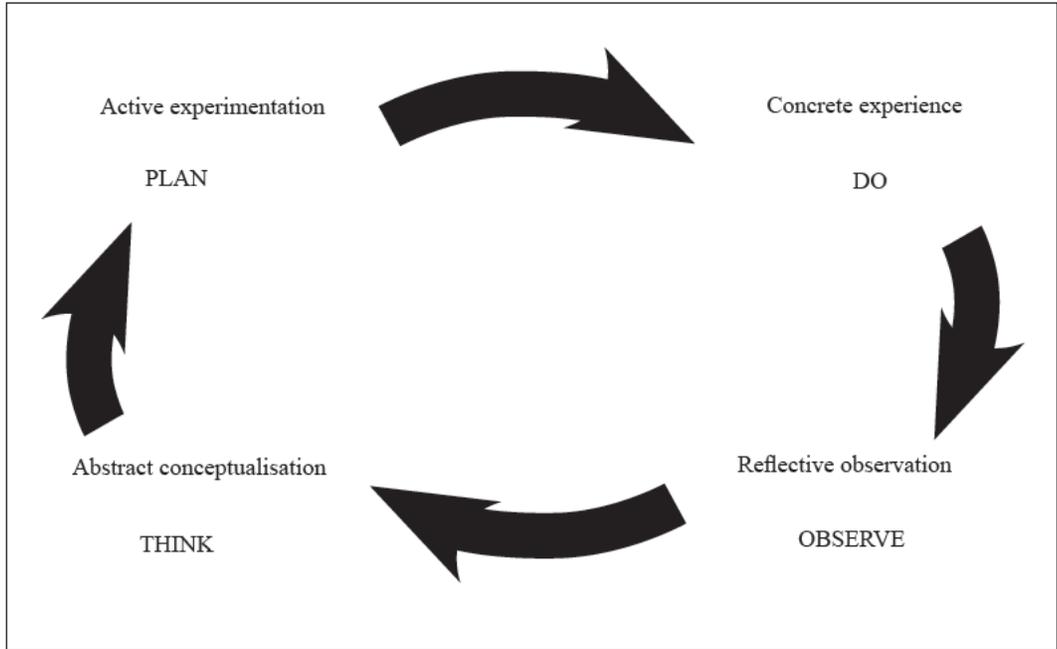
In the relevant module, the students were assessed on their ability to act as educational-psychologists-in-training in a new and different environment containing diversity and language differences. Each student's ability to plan and facilitate the activities and her subsequent reflection was also evaluated (Ebersöhn, 2007). Lecturers from the Department of Educational Psychology of the University of Pretoria supervised the practicum at the secondary school. Prior to the two implementation phases, each student discussed her planning for both the assessment and the intervention phases of the project with her supervisor. The lecturers

observed the students during their interactions with the Grade 9 learners and other significant people at the school. They also guided the students during the assessment and intervention processes as well as in the reflective dialogue, which was conducted away from the school after each session (Ebersöhn, 2009).

## Experiential learning as theoretical framework

When defined from an experiential learning perspective, learning is understood to be “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, 38). Therefore, the effectiveness of such learning depends on the student’s ability to learn from the experience (Le Roux, 2007). Experiential learning provides a holistic model of the learning process, as it helps individuals to learn, grow and develop (Kolb, Baker & Jensen, 2002). Kolb’s experiential learning model (1984) portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping experience, namely, apprehension (concrete experience) and comprehension (abstract conceptualisation), as well as two dialectically related modes of transforming experience, namely, intension (reflective observation) and extension (active experimentation). Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes that is responsive to contextual demands. This process of constructing knowledge is portrayed as an idealised learning cycle during which the learner comes into contact with all the bases, namely, experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, in a recursive process (see Figure 1) that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learnt (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb *et al.*, 2002). *Concrete experiences* entail direct practical experience, thus the learner actively experiences an activity. *Reflective observation* focuses on the learner consciously reflecting back on the experience, which requires the individual to observe, examine, analyse and interpret the impact of a specific concrete experience. *Abstract conceptualisation* gives meaning to discoveries by relating them to other discoveries and other forms of knowledge. This usually results in the learner trying to conceptualise a theory or model of what is being observed. Finally, *active experimentation* is when the learner plans how to test a theory or model for a forthcoming experience. Learning in this cycle (see figure 1) is flexible, as learning can begin at any stage of the cycle (Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Bender *et al.*, 2006). In this study, Kolb’s experiential learning cycle was used as a framework for curricular community engagement in academic programmes and learning methodology with practical work in the community.

In summary, experiential learning includes the active involvement of the learners in their environment. The importance of reflection on activities both during and after an experiential learning activity or experience is emphasised. In addition, the context and environment in which the experiential learning activity occurs plays a significant role in the learner’s experience (Benecke, 2004). Kolb’s theory is recognised as underpinning the concept of community engagement, as it recognises that experience is important for enhancing learning. Experiential learning affirms the importance of experiential activities and techniques, such as practicum, internships, service learning, on-the-job training and work-based learning. Experiential activities are creative and varied and their application will depend on a number of variables, such as the support structures available within higher education (Benecke, 2004).



**Figure 1:** Schematic presentation of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (Brockbank & McGill, 2006:33)

## Research methodology

The researchers purposefully (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) selected a group of eight female students of Educational Psychology from the Department of Educational Psychology of the University of Pretoria (constituting all students enrolled in the module for a specific year). The participants were chosen with the following criteria (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) in mind: (a) each participant had been a student of the Masters in Educational Psychology course and (b) had participated in the Educational Psychology practicum. All the participants were female and all but one of the students (African) were white.

**Table 1:** Particulars of participants in the focus group

Participants	Age	Race	Language	Gender
Participant 1	23	African	IsiXhosa	Female
Participant 2	32	Caucasian	Afrikaans	Female
Participant 3	30	Caucasian	English	Female
Participant 4	26	Caucasian	Afrikaans	Female
Participant 5	32	Caucasian	Afrikaans	Female
Participant 6	26	Caucasian	Afrikaans	Female
Participant 7	29	Caucasian	Afrikaans	Female
Participant 8	24	Caucasian	Afrikaans	Female

We employed multiple qualitative data generation methods, including: (i) focus groups interviews, (ii) reflective journals and (iii) visual data (photographs), as strategies to add depth and richness to this study.

We conducted a focus group interview (Morgan, 1997; Greeff, 2005, Nieuwenhuis 2007a; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003) with the eight participants regarding their experiences of the Educational Psychology practicum. We chose focus groups as a method in order to create a social environment in which

participants were stimulated by one another's perceptions, opinions and ideas, to increase the richness of the data. In addition, focus groups provide a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The focus group interview was held in a secure, quiet room and the chairs for the participants were arranged in a circle with the audiotape recorder in the middle. The focus group data was later transcribed and analysed. During the practicum, after each session at the secondary school in Mpumalanga, the students made notes in reflective journals of their daily experiences (Babbie & Mouton, 2001) in order to document their personal expressions and views on the practicum. These reflective journals were later submitted to the lecturer as a part of their portfolio of evidence. After obtaining verbal and written consent, we accessed the reflective journals for data collection and analysis. As a further source of data, we used photographs taken by the students and lecturers during the course of their practicum. The analysis of the photographs contributed a further perspective from which to explore the experiences of the Educational Psychology students of their community engagement practicum.

In order to analyse data from all data sources, we used thematic analysis, which enabled us to evaluate key words, meanings, themes, messages and meanings obtained from the data collected (Cohen *et al.*, 2003) with the aim of establishing what students experienced during the practicum. We also studied the transcripts, reflective journals of the participants and photographs in order to become familiar with the content of the data sources. We then reduced the data to themes using a process of coding, condensed those codes and, finally, represented the data in tables and discussions (Creswell, 2007). In analysing the photographs, meaningful and symbolic content from the visual data was sought (Nieuwenhuis, 2007b). As stated by Viljoen (2004), cited in Ebersöhn and Eloff (2007), the photographs provided an opportunity for the researchers to work with a visual, concrete medium and not just field notes that might be subjective in nature. For the purpose of member checking (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), we emailed themes that emerged, after the data analysis of all data sources, to each participant.

## Rigour and ethical considerations

The trustworthiness of this study was monitored by using different methods of data collection to determine whether there were any discrepancies in our research findings (Maree, 2007; Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Schwandt, 2007). To find regularities in the data, various sources and methods were employed to observe whether the same patterns continued to recur. Credibility was enhanced by using different methods of data generation (Maree, 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001), as well as member checking to assess the intentionality of the participants, to correct obvious errors, and to have them provide additional volunteer information (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

As researchers, we obtained written informed consent from the Dean of the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria to conduct this research with the Masters students from the Educational Psychology Department and obtained written informed consent from the students themselves. In the consent forms, the students were made fully aware that all the activities that they would participate in would remain confidential, and that the findings of the study would be published. In addition, all participants involved in the research were informed both verbally and in the letter of consent that their participation in the interviews and the analysis of their reflective journals and photographs were voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research study at any time. This implies that the research participants knew they had a right to choose whether to participate in the research process after being informed of the facts that could influence their decisions (Cohen *et al.*, 2003).

## Research findings

Three main themes relevant to the focus of our article emerged as the result of thematic analysis and interpretation. The following section illustrates each of the identified themes by including examples from the raw data. The raw data comprises the direct quotes used from the focus group interviews and from the participants' reflective journals, and visual data from the photographs. The raw data is numbered according to the specific participant who made a comment (each participant was assigned a number, e.g. P2 or P8).

### *Theme 1: Students gain insights into themselves as educational psychologists in South Africa*

Firstly, during the focus group interview, the students conversed about how they gained insight into themselves as educational psychologists in South Africa. The educational psychologists-in-training expressed the opinion that the practicum had given them the opportunity to work with diverse cultures, races and ethnicities and stated that the experience assisted them in developing respect for diversity.

Pillay (2007) states that trainee psychologists should be exposed to and equipped to work with different racial and ethnic individuals and communities. He mentions that students should acquire knowledge and skills to work in different contexts with different people. The opportunity to work with diverse cultures was expressed by several of the students: *“It was an opportunity to work with diverse cultures, foreign languages”* (extract from reflective journal of P2, ); *“The opportunity to work with such rich diversity has enriched my learning experience”* (P3) and *“It made me respect diversity more, just in the fact that, you know, we are all different but we can all work together so well”* (P3).

Many of the students experienced language as having been a communication barrier during the practicum. Pillay and Kometsi (2007) state that language is often a challenge for practitioners in non-urban settings, as the vast majority of psychologists in South Africa speak no indigenous language, apart from Afrikaans. Students expressed the opinion that the language barrier may have affected their abilities to assess the learners and to implement their interventions: *“I knew the learners were second language speakers but I was not prepared for the fact that very few of them really understood English at a level to be able to communicate”* (extract from reflective journal of P6); *“It was also difficult to communicate, as most of the learners are SiSwati speaking”* (P2) and *“So especially language wise, that for me was a big thing because, how should you prepare your stuff and your forms, what language? Can you just make it in English, should you make it really simple or are you then going to sort of insult them”* (P5).

Students expressed the need to engage in future community engagement activities; *“I would really like to do this kind of work in underprivileged areas when I have completed my studies”* (P4) and *“Yeah, it just opened up my eyes to things where or possibilities where I could work one day, what I could do, what’s really more, sort of satisfying and fulfilling and you can make a difference everywhere not just in an office or in a school or in a little private practice”* (P3). Having engaged in the practicum they realised that by engaging in community engagement activities in the future they could offer their services to those who could not easily access their services and, at the same time, they would touch more people’s lives. An awareness of both civic and social responsibility was conveyed by students stating that their engagement in the practicum had made them aware of societal issues prevalent in the South African context. That experience had made them realise the importance of offering their services to society at large, so that they could work towards resolving problems in society: *“You actually get to reach a lot of children who cannot afford to come to you”* (P1) and *“I think this is also a more practical approach in South Africa because you can reach more people that have limited resources”* (P7).

According to Pillay (2007), psychologists should rather focus on working with groups than only working with individuals. This is especially important in the South African context so that more people can be reached in terms of psychological interventions. Students maintained that they had gained experience in working with groups, different genders and adolescents. The students expressed this as follows: *“It is also an opportunity to expand our experience regarding group assessment and intervention. It is important as the need for group counselling has increased over the last few years”* (P7); *“I feel more confident in working with groups”* (P4); *“I also found it quite positive, I feel I only had a group of boys and it was really nice to see how they engaged in each and every activity that I gave them”* (P4) and *“I see this as an opportunity to expand my experience with teenagers. I would like to work with the whole spectrum of age groups one day and this is just another opportunity to prepare me for that”* (P7).



**Plate 1:** Students learning to work with groups during the practicum

In the above photograph, one of the students is working with a group of learners from the secondary school in Mpumalanga. Students expressed the opinion that the practicum had given them an opportunity to acquire skills in working with groups.

### *Theme 2: Experiences of professional development*

Secondly, the students also experienced professional development as a result of their experiences from the Educational Psychology community engagement practicum. This included experiencing themselves as being more confident, able to adapt to new situations and having deeper insight into their role as a professional. This was expressed in the following extracts: “*When I got there I actually realised, I got more self-confidence*” (P6); “*Today was a positive experience and I feel that I have more confidence in myself*” (P7); “*It challenged me because I am a very structured person, so the personal growth is to go into a situation and see what you get and be flexible with what you get and just to calm down and be flexible*” (P2); “*I was able to think on my feet, how I was adaptable*” (P3) and; “*I think the personal growth was when I realised for the first time, really realised, that educational psychologist is more than just an office practice*” (P5).

Engelbrecht (2004) notes that the scope of educational psychology requires a shift from the traditional child-deficit, medical approach towards an ecological and multilevel systems approach. Educational psychologists must now not only be prepared to intervene on an individual level but also on a systems level by implementing and evaluating preventative programmes. In those efforts they should conduct ecologically and systemically valid assessments and interventions to promote positive learning environments within which learners and educators from diverse backgrounds have equal access to effective educational psychological support. The realisation of their changing scope of practice was expressed by the students as follows: “*I think the personal growth was when I realised for the first time, really realised, that educational psychologist is more than just an office practice*” (P5); “*I think community engagement should definitely be in our scopes, I think it is important for especially... in the South African context. As we said, there is so much need and so little resources in terms of professionals*” (P8) and “*I have realised during our visit that the field of psychology is far more than assessments, therapy and writing reports. Our services are not only for clients who can afford our service*” (P 5).

### *Theme 3: Integration of theory and practice*

Thirdly, the students discussed experiences related to the integration of theory and practice. Their ability to understand theories, such as the asset-based approach and positive psychology, was enhanced as a result of putting them into practice. Students stated that they developed academically and that they had an

increased ability to put theories into practice, as well as an increased ability to apply skills that were learnt in the classroom environment to a real-life setting.

Pillay (2007) notes that community projects and fieldwork give trainee psychologists the skills they need in order to work with communities, as they give them the opportunity to reach out to people in those communities, while simultaneously gaining experience in testing what they have learnt. This also provides them with the opportunity to test theory in practical situations. The students were given opportunities to test theories during the practicum: *“I planned an activity without really linking it theoretically and then later on, it might be days later when the activities are actually done and you are discussing it with someone, then it finally clicks that oh! I’ve been working from this standpoint all the time but I just never got to a point where I’ve integrated the two, so theoretically and in terms of application of all the theories that we have learnt I think it’s been great. Because you actually get a chance to see the theory in action”* (P1) and *“I felt only asset-based and positive psychology I was able to put in practice”* (P2).



**Plate 2:** Students and learners implementing the asset-based approach

In the above photograph, learners are making asset-maps of themselves as individuals, which assists the students in implementing the theory of the asset-based approach in real-life settings.

Pillay and Kometsi (2007) discuss how important it is for students working in communities to be critical of existing methods of psychology and many of the traditional approaches to psychological care. Such students should mindfully adjust their techniques or learn more appropriate intervention methods. These authors stress that it is vital for students to understand the need to tailor approaches to suit the needs of their clients. Whilst implementing their assessments and intervention strategies in the practicum, the students realised that the standardised assessments and theories in current use by the University are not indigenous to the South African context. They, therefore, realised how important it is to adjust theories and assessments to make them more suited to the South African context: *“But we actually need to go in there and actually take our psychology and make it South African as well, because what is the point of learning about all these western instruments and everything else if you can’t apply it to your own context”* (P1) and *“The assessment tools that I used to gather information were different from the traditional psychometric instruments that I would use while in Pretoria. I had to think outside the box, I had to be more creative, and make sure that the activities I had planned were going to be culturally friendly, so that during the course of the visit the learners would feel as ease with themselves and their abilities”* (P1).

## Discussion

Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning was evident during the practicum. The four learning modes of experiential learning were shown through different activities undertaken during the practicum. *The students acquiring direct practical experience during the practicum as educational psychologists-in-*

*training demonstrated concrete experience*. This was evident in the students engaging with the learners through various activities, engaging with their peers and forming partnerships with the educators at the school. Indicators of *active experimentation* were evident in the following: students accumulated knowledge on how to implement future community engagement activities, such as the importance of having the collaboration of educators and community members in future community engagement activities, the importance of creating sustainable community engagement activities, and ensuring that the community engagement activities are evaluated in the future so that improved interventions can be planned. In addition, the practicum made them aware of what their role as educational psychologists would be in the future and the students also realised the importance of getting involved in future community engagement activities. *Abstract conceptualisation* was shown through the ability of the students to relate theories and previously acquired knowledge learnt in the classroom situation to the practicum. This involved students being able to apply theories, such as the asset-based approach and positive psychology, to their planned assessments and interventions, the use of the theories in their interactions with others and practising skills learnt in the classroom within the school community. Finally, students engaging with reflective dialogue and writing in their reflective journals indicate that *reflective observation* did indeed occur during the practicum.

The results of this study contribute to and extend existing literature on curricular community engagement by informing literature on students' experiences of community engagement in an Educational Psychology practicum. Similarly, the emerged insights give information on the facilitation of community engagement activities using experiential learning theory and reflective learning theory as the theoretical framework. In addition, the study contributed to an expanding body of literature that mirrors a changed scope of practice for the training and practice of educational psychologists in South Africa.

This study indicated that students were interested in and benefited from taking part in community engagement activities. This finding therefore indicates the need for educational psychologists to be trained in community educational psychology and to practise within different communities. The practicum gave the students opportunities to integrate theories from other MEd Educational Psychology modules, for example systems theory. Therefore, theories on educational psychology are applied across the programme and not just in the Career Assessment and Counselling (BOP 804) module.

It is shown that professionals working in communities could benefit from an understanding of community psychology, community engagement theories, experiential learning, reflective learning and community-engaged learning. It is therefore recommended that students be trained in modules that include service learning in order to practise community psychology theories and to add experiential, reflective and community-engaged learning theories to relevant curricula. The students seemed to have benefitted from an understanding of the prevalent needs, assets and issues in the communities they plan to work with. It is thus recommended that the asset-based approach and positive psychology be integrated into Educational Psychology modules with community engagement activities. In addition, the ecosystemic approach could also be added to the curriculum as it is in this way that students learn the importance of looking at the whole system when working with and in communities. There is a need for institutions of higher education to encourage and support students of Educational Psychology in terms of their professional development by providing curriculum-related opportunities for active participation in communities. In every community engagement activity, experiential and reflective learning and service learning can be used as tools to facilitate well-organised and structured curricular community engagement activities.

## Conclusion

It was established that students seem to have benefitted by acquiring greater intercultural competence. As a result of their experience, some students reportedly acquired the competence to communicate in a different cultural context. To be culturally competent, a student must cultivate a *mindset* (analytical framework for understanding culture), a *skillset* (interpersonal and group skill for bridging differences) and a *heartset* (motivation and curiosity to explore cultural variables) (Reitenauer, Cress & Bennett, 2005). The students expressed the desire to work with people throughout the country in the South African context. This specific module trained students to work in a context with people of diverse cultures, race and ethnicity.

In terms of community engagement, students acquired group work competence, such as facilitating the development of a group (which entails forming the group, storming, norming and performing), group cohesion (factors that encourage members to remain united and be committed to a group) and communication in groups (ensuring contributions from all members of the group) (Collier & Voegelé, 2005). In addition, students were exposed to a broader range of diversity than was the case at the training centre at the university. In this regard, students worked with children from different age groups, different race groups and of different genders. The students stated that they had enjoyed the practicum as they realised they could reach more people through it. Reportedly, acquiring group work competence meant that students have the capacity to reach out to people in rural community settings.

In conclusion, community engagement practicum provides an avenue for experiential learning in Educational Psychology. Educational Psychology training provides students with a forum for personal and professional development and helps students in integrating theory and practice.

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