RESEARCH ARTICLE

Relational Student Engagement in Co-curricular Spaces: Evidence from a South African University

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Abstract

Student engagement is a widely researched and utilized concept to enhance student experiences and outcomes. Most research on student engagement, however, focuses on curricular engagement with relatively little emphasis placed on the co-curriculum. This study utilizes Case's theory of relational engagement to analyse findings from three focus groups conducted at a university in South Africa to better understand how relational engagement is instantiated in the co-curriculum and how the co-curriculum differs from the standard academic curriculum in terms of engagement. In particular, we show relational engagement is just as important in the co-curriculum, highlighting student relations to broader university life, to fellow students, and to communities beyond the campus.

Keywords

student engagement, relational engagement, student affairs, co-curricular, sense of belonging, focus group

Introduction

Over the last decade, universities in South Africa have focused greater attention on student engagement and co-curricular learning to increase retention rates and encourage learning beyond the classroom. Generally, much of this focus remains on academic student engagement using the South Africa Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) (Schreiber & Yu, 2016; Strydom et al. 2017; Strydom & Mentz, 2010), with a growing body of work exploring the experiences and perceptions of students and co-curricular learning in South Africa (Garton & Wawrzynski, 2021; Naik & Wawrzynski, 2018; Wawrzynski et al., 2012; Wawrzynski & Naik, 2021).

The differing social, economic, and educational contexts in which South African students are embedded necessitate new ways of theorizing about engagement and

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co-curricular learning, grounded in prior South African research. Using a theoretical approach to engagement that explicitly foregrounds relational contexts (Case, 2007, 2008), we conducted focus group interviews at a comprehensive South African university (SAU, a pseudonym) in the Eastern Cape province to examine how students perceive and benefit from student engagement in co-curricular experiences. Along with validating aspects of Case's (2007) theory of relational engagement, we identified new types of relations students hold pertinent to their sense of belonging from co-curricular experiences.

Literature Review

In one of the most widely used definitions of student engagement, Kuh (2003) described engagement as both the individual effort students put in toward their education and the organisational structures facilitating student experiences. Considered holistically, these educational activities and efforts can involve classroom as well as out-of-classroom experiences. Although aspects of student engagement can certainly transcend geographical boundaries, Kuh's student engagement concepts were primarily developed based on traditional-aged students in United States higher education.

Others, however, have sought to develop more culturally relevant student engagement frameworks. More specifically, Case (2007) discussed student engagement in the South African context as a form of relationship students develop with different aspects of their university and broader ecological context. Whereas Kuh's (2003) definition focused on inputs from individual students and the university, Case (2007) emphasised the connections between students as well as between students and their educational contexts. That said, inputs are still an important factor for Case (2007), especially in the form of students' motivations and efficacies.

Student engagement is a key component of the social justice mission of student affairs in South Africa because it combines academic and relational contexts, reducing the barriers to knowledge. Integrating academic and relational contexts broadens epistemological access by creating spaces for co-constructed knowledge and personal capacity building (Schreiber, 2014), which influences sense of belonging. Moreover, connecting engagement and sense of belonging has great educational value in the South African context, particularly for non-traditional students (Wisker & Masika, 2017), who can be defined as "mostly black students from disadvantaged family and school backgrounds" (Jama et al., 2008, p. 998). A strong sense of belonging to the university community generates opportunities for personal sharing and growth that may be repressed if individuals do not feel welcome or safe (Wisker & Masika, 2017). Furthermore, achieving social and academic integration, which is connected to sense of belonging for many students, tends to be more challenging for non-traditional students than for their traditional counterparts because of limitations in resources, such as finances, commuting, and coming from families without educational backgrounds (Jama et al., 2008).

Engagement is structured by student motivations, university characteristics, and socio-political histories and economies (Agherdien & Petersen, 2016; Case, 2007; Ivala & Kioko, 2013). Indeed, cultural, and hegemonic conditions shape organisational practices and

environments, such as poor residence hall conditions or inequitable divisions of labour (Agherdien & Petersen, 2016). Within these structures, specific influential figures, like teachers, can have an impact on the form of engagement (Bezuidenhout et al., 2011). Authentic engagement also presupposes students' own self-awareness, so supportive external factors are still dependent to some degree upon the capacity of the individual student (Agherdien & Petersen, 2016).

Sense of belonging

Given the importance of interpersonal relations for student engagement in South Africa (Case, 2007; Wisker & Masika, 2017), sense of belonging to the university is a key component of collegiate experiences, which may be framed by historical legacies and artefacts of colleges and universities (Sartorius & Sartorius, 2013). For example, one study found when racial histories interacted with symbols associated with Afrikaans heritage in the built environment, on-campus black students reported a reduced sense of belonging (Wawrzynski et al., 2012). Yet, once such artefacts were removed from parts of campus, black students reported a higher sense of belonging overall than their white counterparts (Naik & Wawrzynski, 2018). Gaps and convergences between students' expectations and actual experiences also determine sense of belonging, with large gaps decreasing sense of belonging and convergences increasing sense of belonging (Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). For example, if new university students expect certain outcomes or experiences from their new student orientation, orientations that meet those expectations will enhance sense of belonging, while orientations that differ from expectations will decrease sense of belonging.

The antithesis of sense of belonging is alienation, or "a disconnection in the context of a desired or expected relationship" (Case, 2007, p. 120). Again, Case (2007) focused on relationships as the building blocks of the collegiate experience which was supported and expanded by Bezuidenhout et al. (2011) to include distances between expectations and realities as a source of alienation. University support for either meeting student expectations or providing strategies for dealing with new environments is essential for reducing feelings of alienation and increasing sense of belonging (Bezuidenhout et al., 2011), but institutionalised power dynamics tend to perpetuate alienation rather than challenge it (Agherdien & Petersen, 2016).

Co-curricular involvement

Student engagement in South Africa is therefore relational and dependent upon university support. One of the strategies universities utilize to foster engagement is to create spaces for peer-led experiences, such as co-curricular involvement through student societies (Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017). These societies serve as social learning spaces that institutionalise opportunities for relational interactions and experiences (Agherdien & Petersen, 2016). Other programmatic elements of the co-curriculum also centre social learning spaces. Peer tutoring, community service or outreach, and residential events are examples of particularly

high-impact practices built on social learning spaces (Agherdien & Petersen, 2016; Faroa, 2017; Harrop-Allin, 2017).

Co-curricular involvement is related to desirable learning outcomes (Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017; Naik & Wawrzynski, 2018; Naik et al., 2017). Specifically, increases in academic achievement and academic skills like studying and time management are associated with co-curricular involvement (Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017; Makala, 2017; Wawrzynski et al., 2012). Beyond academia, career skills and employability (Frade & Tiroyabone, 2017; Koen & Ebrahim, 2013) and a commitment to social change (Harrop-Allin, 2017) are learning outcomes also related to co-curricular involvement. The relationship between the co-curriculum and learning is possibly due to out-of-classroom experiences disrupting students' implicit assumptions and changing their mental models of society (Koen & Ebrahim, 2013) all while providing peer relational support (Case, 2007).

Facilitating student engagement is not as easy as creating opportunities for involvement, however. Numerous barriers exist that bar students from participating in out-of-classroom experiences. Financial obstacles stratify participation along class lines, providing potentially transformational experiences only to students who can afford to devote the requisite time and energy (Naik & Wawrzynski, 2018; Naik et al., 2017). Scheduling conflicts, information asymmetries, and language also pose barriers that prevent students from participating in co-curricular activities (Schreiber, 2014; Wawrzynski et al., 2012).

Conceptual Framework

Many studies exploring student engagement, including some in South Africa, have relied on Kuh's (2009) functionalist approach (Naik & Wawrzynski, 2018; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018; Wawrzynski et al., 2012), which suggests a connection between desired outcomes for college and the effort students devote to educational activities employed through an institution's processes, policies, and practices. However, other scholars (Harper & Quaye, 2015; Jama et al., 2008) note this concept is more applicable to traditional students and less so for underserved populations. Because of the non-traditional nature of many students in South Africa (Garton & Wawrzynski, 2021; Jama et al., 2008), a more culturally relevant framework warrants exploration.

Many cultural and organisational institutions in South Africa embrace the philosophy of *ubuntu*, translated as *humanity*, which values collectivism and mutual dependence rather than individual needs as core components of human existence (Ncube, 2010). Certainly, in the South African context, student engagement is relational because of the personal connections students develop with different aspects of their university, educational structures and activities, and broader ecology (Case, 2007). Relational engagement is the opposite of alienation from the norms and mores of higher education organisations, instantiated across the university experience for students (Case, 2008). Similarly, engagement is connected to sense of belonging, which generates opportunities for sharing and growth (Wisker & Masika, 2017), but may be repressed if students do not feel welcome or safe – which often is the case for those historically excluded from higher education.

Case (2007) identified six forms of relations that can be spaces of either engagement or alienation, contributing to learning and feelings of validation or isolation and exclusion: "to one's studies; to the broader university life; to home; to the career; to one's classmates; and to the lecturer" (p. 123). Although Case's (2007) empirical work focused largely on engagement in the classroom, our study advances the theory and applies it to co-curricular involvement. Much of what Case argued for, namely positive and validating relationships to other students and different aspects of the university, are evident in the co-curriculum. Indeed, co-curricular involvement is associated with students' sense of belonging in the South African university context (Wawrzynski et al., 2012; Naik & Wawrzynski, 2018).

Methods

This study took a qualitative approach grounded in focus group interviews with students at SAU to better understand their attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of co-curricular engagement. Focus groups are a popular means of data collection in higher education because of their ability to bring together students with varying characteristics, relationships, and experiences, ultimately strengthening the reliability of the gathered information (Cohen et al., 2011). Moreover, given the centrality of relationships and collectivism in much of South African cultural values, focus groups engage participants in discussions about issues relevant to their own experiences (Romm et al., 2013). Focus group data sourced from personal, group, and relational contexts also aligned with our conceptual framework by seeking to understand all spaces of student engagement. As a result, focus groups provided a more comprehensive and culturally competent approach to understanding students' perspectives of co-curricular engagement.

Setting and source of data collection

The qualitative data for this study were collected as part of a larger research project focused on student co-curricular engagement at SAU. Located in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, the six campuses of SAU are a product of a merger of two universities and a Technikon during the post-apartheid restructuring of South African higher education. SAU is a predominantly black, comprehensive university where students pursue study in a range of graduate and undergraduate fields including Business, Engineering and Technology, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Law, and Natural Sciences. Just over half of the SAU student body are self-funded, while the rest are recipients of some form of state appropriations or financial aid to assist with university tuition and living expenses. A majority of students live off-campus and commute to and from campus. SAU is unique in that the co-curriculum is heavily emphasised as a space for learning, formalized in a co-curricular record.

Administrators at SAU invited students from a co-curricular leadership and diversity course to attend one of three focus groups to share their insights regarding their co-curricular involvement at SAU. In May 2017, 18 SAU students agreed to participate in the focus groups at convenient locations on three of the six SAU campuses. On average,

six students attended each focus group session facilitated in English by two of the study's authors, who identify as non-black and are from the United States. All participants were black Africans from various provinces in South Africa or a neighbouring country. A majority of participants identified as female and were undergraduates in their second or third year of university study. Participants represented different faculties including Business, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences. The students cited a wide range of involvement on campus including community service organisations, intramural athletics, and residence life. Semi-structured focus groups lasting 40-60 minutes prompted students to reflect and engage in dialogue about their overall engagement, co-curricular experiences, motivations for involvement, learning outcomes, and barriers to involvement. The focus groups were digitally recorded with voluntary consent from participants and transcribed verbatim. In an effort to establish trustworthiness, transcripts were sent to participants to review, expand upon, and address any concerns.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using the constant comparative method and categorized into patterns or themes emerging from the interview transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Three of the researchers independently open-coded the transcripts looking for patterns, then came together to group preliminary codes and refine them into broader categories. Next, three themes were developed from the categories that resonated meaningfully with the relevant literature and the purpose of the study. Finally, an inquiry auditor offered feedback on our themes and the coding analysis to verify their consistency with the generated data. Pseudonyms are used throughout to maintain confidentiality of participants.

Findings

From the data analysis, we constructed three themes of relational engagement: (a) a strengthened sense of belonging on campus, (b) intercultural competence gained through student involvement, and (c) community engagement and stewardship from involvement.

Sense of belonging

Students across all focus groups discussed how co-curricular involvement and engagement writ large enhanced their sense of belonging in SAU. Specifically, participants described co-curricular structures that facilitated finding new friends and expanding social networks, as well as an overall openness to meeting and learning about others, emphasising the relational aspect of engagement. Rethabile used the language of family to describe her connections at SAU, referring to the "sisters" she found. Karabo echoed the use of family terms in describing how custodial staff cared for students. Particular environments within SAU, such as residence halls or student societies, fostered a sense of community within the larger campus community. As stated by Bokamoso, "Being part of a residence when you have to do stuff with people you live with, whether it's your flatmate or … other res students, you learn sense of care about the person who lives next door." Amogelang spoke

to the value of student societies, saying, "I think the opportunities they offer to students … make you feel welcome because you have places where … obviously you don't know anyone. People are strangers to you, but the things like societies and events they organise actually make you feel welcome, that's where you meet friends".

Students reported building a sense of belonging through co-curricular activities. Previous literature emphasised how sense of belonging or alienation were results of differences between expectations and experiences (Bezuidenhout et al., 2011; Pather & Dorasamy, 2018). Rather than discussing expectations, however, students focused solely on their experiences, particularly relational experiences. Moreover, co-curricular spaces seemed to structure the relations and facilitate student engagement.

Inter-cultural competence

Along with sense of belonging, participants reported learning related to inter-cultural competency. Several students reflected on the transition from relatively homogenous provinces outside of the Eastern Cape to SAU where students from across South Africa and the world interacted on a daily basis. According to the students, SAU created an open and welcoming environment for these types of interactions through events such as Diversity Week where students showcased their home cultures. Dolinde felt the residence halls and orientation also facilitated inter-cultural interactions and created spaces for students to feel welcome: "One of the pulling factors for my coming to SAU is how they are accepting of different cultures and people from outside … Even in our student res, how they try to integrate and make sure, even during orientation, they try to accommodate everyone, with the games and the interactions." From these interactions, students learned about their own cultures in addition to others. As stated by Kungawo, "When I came to SAU, Xhosa people are about their culture and they believe about where they come from. They make you realise it's important to know who you are."

Community engagement

Regarding the final theme, community engagement and stewardship, students expressed a desire to work with communities for positive change as a motivation for involvement in co-curricular societies. Amogelang spoke about community engagement as a motivation for her decision to join a student society, saying, "… to me it was helping and giving back to the community because I come from a disadvantaged background, so I know the struggles from the township …" Even for students who joined societies to boost their CV, giving back became an added benefit. Participants emphasised a passion to continue doing volunteer work and engaging with their various communities beyond graduation. For example, Siyabonga said, "Involvement in [a non-credit bearing leadership class] taught us to do community work … They actually gave me a passion to continue." This stewardship extended to environmental care as well as social justice, often articulating the connections between social justice and the environment. As stated by Minenhle, "You want to be a good person through helping other people, through caring for the environment." Students'

experiences and involvement thus extended beyond the campus to the larger environment in which SAU is embedded.

Participants discussed community engagement and stewardship both as a motivation to become involved and as a learning outcome of involvement. Moreover, they cited societal problems, such as the racial segregation and poverty in townships and environmental degradation, as motivations for becoming involved in community engagement. Furthermore, this finding linked to motivations supports previous literature that explored the value of co-curricular involvement in developing a commitment to social change (Harrop-Allin, 2017; Garton & Wawrzynski, 2021).

Interestingly, despite literature arguing that co-curricular experiences disrupt assumptions and mental models (Koen & Ebrahim, 2013), the non-traditional students in our study did not generally discuss how their assumptions changed. Perhaps due to the nature of our participants (i.e. being from disadvantaged backgrounds), they are already familiar with the historical inequities of the differential development and racist policies of apartheid (Sartorius & Sartorius, 2013). If this indeed were the case, then many non-traditional students probably have already faced these experiences and do not engage in co-curricular experiences to learn about inequities. Instead, involvement is an avenue for students to learn how to navigate these inequitable systems by taking action and learning strategies for effective change.

Relational student engagement

Although several different forms of relationships were cited within Case's (2007) relational framework, given our study's emphasis on co-curricular involvement, we note those generated from our focus groups, the most resonant being participants' relationship with broader university life. SAU structured these relationships through formal and informal co-curricular involvement. For example, Kungawo recounted experiences prior to becoming involved, saying "I only went to school and came home and slept. That was my life". SAU-sponsored programmes provided a way for Kungawo to form a relationship to SAU beyond the classroom. Positive relationships formed through unstructured paths as well, as evidenced by the connections between students and custodial staff. Referring to "cleaners and gardening staff," Karabo said, "… they treat us as their children and they mother us", a sentiment echoed in informal conversations by students and staff members outside of the focus groups. These cases support Wisker and Masika's (2017) claim that relationships built from community engagement help students feel safe and supported by developing a greater sense of belonging to the university.

Though Case (2007) focused on relationships formed between students specifically within classrooms, we found the framework can also extend to inter-student relations in co-curricular spaces. These spaces open opportunities for forming new relationships that contribute to learning and engagement. Amogelang spoke to this, saying "… getting involved helps you have a different mind. I know when I first came I had my own attitudes against some people … but when I decided to get involved … you find something different

about the person than the thing you came with. Getting involved helps a lot in changing your perspective about people." As demonstrated here, interpersonal interactions are valuable for students to combat alienation by learning across differences, thus connecting them to a broader support system (Case, 2007).

In our analysis, a new theme of relational student engagement extending beyond Case's (2007) framework became evident, namely students' relationships to communities beyond the SAU campus. These relationships took two main forms: volunteerism and living in a larger community. First, participants volunteered to "give back to" their communities. As noted above, Amogelang gave back to the community because she came from a "disadvantaged background," whereas Iminathi, who volunteered at a hospice in the city witnessed poverty and "learned to appreciate more of what I have." Bokamoso and Karabo also volunteered at different organisations to see more of the city, with Karabo adding, "… it becomes part of your university life," indicating volunteerism was integrated into their studies. Second, participants discussed the experience of living in the city where SAU is located. Some participants noted the diversity in the city. Bokamoso particularly noted how the Eastern Cape as a whole seemed "more open in diversity" than her home province and how this facilitated classroom spaces in which students "learn … about us, our differences as students in the class." Bokamoso further explained, in terms of care for the environment, "it's about more than being a student and getting through your studies and being an A student. It's about being part of a community and knowing you are accountable." These types of experiences reinforced a sense of belonging for non-traditional students who feel more empowered as a result of their engagement in campus-related environments that promote an appreciation for diversity (Wisker & Masika, 2017).

Relational engagement was the most salient finding and overarching theme across all the focus groups. Whereas Case (2007) focused on relational engagement in curricular settings, we show evidence relational engagement is equally as prevalent in co-curricular spaces. Akin to Case's (2007) findings in which students had relations to their studies, university life, home, career, classmates, and lecturers, our participants also identified two of these relations in the co-curriculum. The focus groups discussed three forms of relational engagement within co-curricular involvement, two of which are also curricular relations. For the first two forms, students described their relationships with broader university life and other students in co-curricular spaces. These relations are shared with curricular relational engagement as argued by Case (2007). For the third form, students also described in detail their relations with the city and communities beyond the campus, extending Case's relational framework to larger settings. Relational engagement in the co-curriculum therefore encompasses the university as well as broader communities.

Implications

There are several implications for practice and research as a result of this study. First, student affairs staff should recognize the relational characteristics of engagement in co-curricular involvement, namely the relationship to the university and to their community, such that they are then able to identify the benefits of becoming involved (e.g. sense of belonging for

students), which then is more likely to translate into success for students. Second, student affairs staff can assist students in making meaning of their involvement in co-curricular activities by reflecting on the relational nature of engagement and connecting this to aspirational goals. In doing so, students may be better positioned to understand how these outcomes may help shape their future careers.

In terms of research, our study provides further support for the importance of using culturally relevant frameworks to understand student engagement in different national contexts. Further exploration of other components of Case's (2007) culturally relevant framework should be considered in other aspects of South African university spaces. Future research should include a more racially diverse group to better understand relational engagement dynamics, since our study only included black African participants from South Africa and neighbouring countries.

Conclusion

Studies of student engagement generally emphasise high-impact practices and strategies to engage individual students in these types of activities (Harper & Quaye, 2015; Kerr & Luescher, 2018). This paper provides evidence supporting Case's (2007) framework that student engagement in the South African context is also relational, encompassing interactions and strong connections between other students, faculty, and staff. These relationships often cultivate a sense of belonging for students both within and beyond a campus community. Analysis relying solely on US-based theories applied to other contexts may miss, overwrite, or erase experiences unique to different social, cultural, and political frameworks. By incorporating theories of engagement developed explicitly for South African students, analysis is more accurate and less ethnocentric. The relational characteristics of engagement as described by the study participants highlights a valuable component of engagement not only in South Africa but perhaps in the United States or elsewhere. Future studies on co-curricular activities in South Africa and perhaps the rest of the world should consider the importance of relational aspects, acknowledging the importance of close relationships and sense of belonging.

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