

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the value of a fieldwork practicum project at flood relief shelters in KwaZulu-Natal: Reflections of child and youth care students

Ukuhlola ukubaluleka komsebenzi wesu lokuzicija ezikhungweni zokukhoselisa ababandanyeka nezikhukhula esifundazweni saKwa-Zulu Natal: Imibono yabafundi kumkhakha wokunakekela abantwana netsha

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ABSTRACT

This article captures data related to a community-based outreach program that was initiated to assist displaced families affected by the floods in the eThekweni district of KwaZulu-Natal. Guided by qualitative research methodology, eleven child and youth care students, from a university of technology were placed at two shelters to offer psychosocial support to those who had lost their homes and loved ones. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The study found that these community members benefitted immensely from the services offered by students placed at the shelters and that exposure to the physical and emotional hardships of these families created opportunities for the students to utilise their disciplinary knowledge to offer psychosocial support. The study concluded that the university could play a significant role in empowering and supporting disadvantaged community members.

KEYWORDS

Natural disasters, community outreach, child and youth care

ISIFINYEZO

Lesi sihloko siqukethe ulwazi oluphathelele nohlelo lokufinyelela emphakathini olaqalwa ngenhloso yokusiza imindeni eyasuswa ezindaweni zayo ngenxa yezikhukhula ezenzeka esifundazweni saseThekweni KwaZulu-Natal. Ngaphansi kwendlela yocwaningo lwekhwalithi, abafundi abayishumi nanye abafunda ngokunakekela izingane nentsha, abavela enyuvesi yezobuchwepheshe, babekwa ezikhungweni zokukhosela ezimbili ukuze banikeze ukwesekwa ngokwengqondo nangokomphakathi kulabo abalahlekelwe izindlu zabo nabathandekayo babo. Ulwazi lwaqoqwa kusetshenziswa izingxoxo ezihleleke ngokwengxenywe futhi lwahlaziywa kusetshenziswa ukuhlaziywa kwezigaba. Ucwango luthole ukuthi amalungu omphakathi ahlomula kakhulu ngezinsizakalo ezinikezwa ngabafundi ababekwa ezikhungweni zokukhosela, futhi abafundi bathola ulwazi ngezimo ezinzima zomnqondo nobudlelwane ezibhekene nale mindeni, okuvule amathuba okusebenzisa ulwazi lwabo lobuchwepheshe ukunikeza ukwesekwa ngokwengqondo nangokomphakathi. Ucwango luphethe

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ngokuthi inyuvesi ingaba nendima ebalulekile ekunikezeni amandla nasekusekeleni amalungu omphakathi asengozini.

AMAGAMA ABALULEKILE

Izinhlekelele zemvelo, uhlelo lokusiza umphakathi, ukunakekela izingane nentsha

Introduction

Community–university outreach partnerships introduce university disciplinary departments, and their students, to a broader universe of epistemic communities outside the university (Bivens et al., 2015). Such collaborative initiatives have the potential to optimise teaching and service and expose students to a range of community issues in their midst, whilst simultaneously improving quality of life for those in greatest need (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). In this way university students and academics become social change agents who begin to address such problems through scholarly processes (Bhagwan, 2020b). Community engagement has been defined as a partnership of university knowledge and resources with that of the community

to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.
(Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015, p. 2)

There are several forms of student community engagement, which include community outreach, volunteerism and service learning. The most common form is service-learning, which reflects a course-based educational experience wherein students engage in activities that meet the needs of communities, whilst engaged in student learning and development (Natarajathinam et al., 2021). Whilst the current study is aligned with the nature of a community outreach initiative, students' learning was tied to their fieldwork practicum placement requirements, which can be seen as service-learning.

Menon and Suresh (2020) argue that community engagement benefits students as it allows academics to synergise their teaching and learning with contemporary societal issues. Students acquire important skills, through community-based learning and outreach programs, such as critical thinking, the ability to apply course concepts to new situations, civic responsibility, increased self-confidence, a better sense of self, improved career readiness, and a better understanding of the problems communities face (Brand et al., 2019). This article reflects on an opportunity given to child and youth care students to engage in a community outreach program, which focused on providing services to children and their families at two flood relief shelters in the eThekweni district. These students, who otherwise would have been placed at a traditional child and youth care centre for their fieldwork placement, were placed at two shelters, for families who were displaced during the floods. Therefore, this placement not only enabled them to meet traditional fieldwork placement requirements, but also to use the opportunity to engage in a community outreach program. In essence this became a service-learning project.

The frequency of natural disasters has grown consequently affecting many vulnerable communities, not only causing the loss of their homes, but also affecting their psychosocial well-being (Makwana, 2019). Stanke et al. (2021) posit that flooding challenges the psychosocial resilience of the hardiest of people, especially those who lose their loved ones and homes during such disasters (Stanke et al., 2021). In April 2022 torrential rain, caused huge devastation across many parts of KwaZulu-Natal leaving hundreds of families destitute. Due to this many were sheltered at community halls, with little psychosocial support. Whilst faith-based organisations, rallied around to provision them with material aid such as food and clothing, little was available to offer them the mental health support required to navigate their losses and adapt to living in a shelter. The objectives of the study then were to explore how students from a university in eThekweni supported flood victims through a community outreach project.

Literature review

Over the past two decades engagement has been recognised as an indivisible aspect of the two core functions of teaching and research at higher education institutions (Salam et al., 2019). Engaged universities conduct relevant research to prepare students for meaningful roles in the modern world. These aims are realised by maintaining high standards of scholarship, as well as extensive partnerships and collaborations with stakeholders and organisations beyond the walls of higher education institutions (Johnson & Hlatwayo, 2025). The involvement of students in community engagement focuses on their collaboration with communities to “achieve mutually agreed goals that build capacity, improve wellbeing and produce just and sustainable outcomes in the interest of people, communities, and the university” (Bernado et al., 2012, p. 189).

Welch (2023) suggests that higher education institutions should entrench themselves within local communities, in order to have a long-term impact on society. Moreover, to ensure successful collaboration, local communities must establish a constant and persistent network with higher education institutions. Hence when the university was approached to provide psychosocial support at these long-term shelters the child and youth care department opted to use the flood shelters as a site for fieldwork training. Hence the traditional fieldwork placement was changed from a child and youth care setting to a community-based setting, where students could have the opportunity to serve affected families.

The South African Higher Education Quality Committee’s Framework for Institutional Audits (HEQC, 2004, p. 15) described community engagement as “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 assumes several forms, which range “from informal and relatively unstructured activities,” such as volunteerism, to more structured and formal academic programs such as service-learning and action research, that are designed to focus on community needs (HEQC, 2004, p. 15). International scholars also support student volunteerism, community outreach programs, service learning and action research as important pathways for higher education institutions to engage

with communities (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). To some extent, whilst the program under discussion mirrored a community outreach project, the fact that students were placed there for their fieldwork practicum placement made this a service-learning activity as well.

Viewed holistically, engaged scholarship refers to “scholarly outreach and engagement activities that reflect a knowledge-based approach to teaching, research, and service for the direct benefit of external audiences” (Hart et al., 2023, p. 234). Community engagement projects create opportunities for students to strengthen their skills, apply theoretical knowledge to practice, and reflect on their knowledge (Yamamura & Koth, 2023). It is therefore important to create opportunities for students to share their experiences and skills and enhance their social responsiveness to social ills. These strategies aim to nurture better research skills and knowledge for active citizenship, as well as chances for collaboration with community partners and universities (Wabike, 2023). In the current study a community–university partnership was forged to enable a mutually beneficial relationship to occur between the child and youth care department and two flood shelters.

Community-engaged collaborative initiatives optimise teaching and service to deal with community-defined issues as they have the potential to improve quality of life for those in greatest need (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Kwenani and Yu (2018) argue that community engagement benefits students and has innumerable positive outcomes for both the individual and the community at large. Students who have higher levels of contact with their local communities have been found to perform better academically and socially, display lower stress levels and report increased satisfaction. The core benefit of such engagement is the reciprocal reward, as service-learning opportunities are designed to enhance the student’s classroom learning, by connecting the theoretical with the practical, while also addressing community needs. Additional benefits for students include skill development, résumé-building, gaining knowledge about community organisations, and meeting other students with similar interests (Kwenani & Yu, 2018). In this case child and youth care students were given the opportunity to engage in a community outreach project, to meet their fieldwork placement requirements, whilst placed at two flood relief shelters in eThekweni district.

The benefits of community engagement for students and community partners have been well documented by several scholars (e.g. Ellenbogen, 2017; Salam et al., 2019; Tyndall et al., 2020). Cress et al. (2023) assert that through community outreach and service-learning, community partners gain access to disciplinary expertise and additional resources, that can help them in their pursuit of solutions to community issues. The benefits for students are immeasurable and include better disciplinary understanding, and the opportunity to cement their own personal values and beliefs (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). More importantly they are exposed to social justice issues and learn to become agents of social change especially when confronted by issues of injustice amongst disadvantaged communities (Bhagwan, 2020a).

Studies by Langhout and Gordon (2021) found that service-learning courses enable students to develop greater understanding of social issues which is linked to positive

academic outcomes, personal insights and greater levels of civic responsibility. Moreover, as in the current study service-learning can become a salient pedagogical mechanism that allows students to connect their academic knowledge to practical issues within their communities (Sterk Barrett & Jenkins, 2018). Community engagement creates rich opportunities for students to develop stronger bonds with their communities and develop relationships with the most vulnerable (Schlesinger et al., 2019). Through this process engagement can enhance awareness of notions of social injustice, privilege, social disparities and inequities (Langhout & Gordon, 2021), which are prevalent within the South African context. The current research study findings contribute to the knowledge gap in student community engagement within the local context.

Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was used to guide this study. Qualitative approaches are used to address questions regarding participant experiences, meanings, and perspectives (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of child and youth care students who were placed at two flood relief shelters in eThekweni. Whilst this began as an outreach project, it was used to meet the fieldwork practicum requirements, as students were placed there for an entire year. This mirrors the nature of service-learning, as students' assessments were tied to their placement. However, the placement at the flood shelter was temporary, geared towards meeting the needs of displaced families as these families were provisioned with other housing after their stay at the shelter. It was therefore not an ongoing placement, due to the crisis conditions of the project. Hence when the university was asked to assist, these community shelters were considered as a context for both outreach and learning as part of fieldwork practicum requirements. Students were therefore also asked to reflect on how this experience differed from traditional fieldwork practicum placements and how this opportunity enabled them to use their disciplinary expertise to support flood victims at these shelters.

The study population consisted of 55 second-year students from the Bachelor of Child and Youth Care degree at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Out of this group, eleven students were placed at two flood relief shelters. Those who voluntarily opted to undertake their placements at the shelter were recruited to be part of the sample. Non-probability purposive sampling, which is suitable for qualitative studies, was used to guide the selection of the participants (de Vos et al., 2011). According to Mason (2017), purposive sampling involves directly selecting groups or categories that are relevant to the study, based on the meaningfulness of the sample. In this case, those who undertook their placements at the shelter were best positioned to reflect on their experiences within this collaborative project. All eleven students voluntarily participated in the study and data saturation was reached.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, with each interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The study was approved by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) (Ethics number, IREC 228/22). The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which entails a systematic

approach to analysing the data by finding themes, coding the data according to those themes and then interpreting the data through discovering patterns, similarities and relationships between them (Terry et al., 2017).

Given that qualitative research explores human behaviour, attitudes, and experiences, ensuring trustworthiness was crucial. Credibility was achieved through checking with participants that the interpretation and analysis of the data were consistent and cohered with their experiences (Ahmed, 2024). Transferability was achieved through providing a detailed and rich description of the sample and the context within which the study was conducted. In terms of dependability, an independent co-coder was used to analyse the data which ensured that the research conclusions were derived mutually. Confirmability occurred through peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling.

Analysis and discussion

Following an analysis of the data, five themes were uncovered. They are presented in the sub-sections that follow.

Theme 1: Students experience of being placed at a flood shelter

In the first theme, students reflected on the experience of being placed at a flood shelter. Of this they shared as follows:

This placement was obviously a different placement as opposed to a structured child and youth care centre where you'd have the supervision or mentorship of a senior child and youth care worker. (P2)

Was not very pleasant to watch or be around in an environment like that. I would have preferred to be placed in a centre with just kids, but then at the same time I'm glad that I got the opportunity to see what people are going through like to explore what's happening around us like to see people who are really affected by the flood. (P3)

It was a valuable, learning experience. I wouldn't have wanted to be put in a different placement ... I think that kind of set up, it changes you as a person ... I think I've had a very closed view of the world, but being there has opened my eyes to different, you know, people's harsh realities. Like it's really opened my eyes, I'm grateful for the opportunity. (P3)

It really opened my eyes. Seeing things like that you'd only see on the news, because I couldn't believe that this was somebody's reality so, I learned from this also. (P3)

I was thrown in the deep end, ... because I actually had to come back to residence and I had to go through my notes and you know just make sure I knew what I was doing because there's no supervision the social worker that is there she doesn't come in very regularly so we are really by ourselves. (P3)

It was very emotional. I have never been in such a very sad situation like that. (P3)

These narratives capture the stark contrast between a traditional placement at a child and youth care setting, where students are normally placed, which have both staff and

organisational infrastructure, as opposed to their placement at the community shelter. This constituted a great challenge for students. As shared, the students' placement at the shelter created awareness of hardship within a real-world community space. Whilst students acknowledged that it may have been easier to be placed with vulnerable children at a child care centre, this experience exposed them to the distress experienced by displaced families who had lost their homes and their belongings. They described it as a valuable learning experience that was transformative as it exposed them to poverty and social injustice. This was because most of those at the shelter were from lower socio-economic areas and had nowhere to go to when their homes were destroyed.

Moreover, students had to work within an environment with minimal mentorship and supervision, which otherwise would have been in place in a traditional child care setting. This constituted a further challenge. As such they had to turn to the theory taught in class to offer counselling and support to children and parents. Moreover, having to be within an overcrowded space with families was also strenuous and distressing. Inevitably, they were affected by the high levels of emotional distress amongst the displaced families and the lack of immediate access to a supervisor for debriefing made the placement more challenging than usual. However, students had access to their university supervisor who helped them manage their emotional distress, whilst providing support in terms of difficult clinical cases. Students also had to share an office within these community halls as a private space for counselling. Despite these structural and personal difficulties, they recognised the benefits of being in the direct life-space of these families, which enabled them to understand their lived realities within the shelter. As one student said, *"I could not believe this one person's reality,"* which reflects the deep personal transformation and awareness of issues affecting families outside the university milieu. They supported one of the student's views, that they would not have wanted to be at an alternative setting for their fieldwork placement.

As such Bhagwan (2020a) argues that engaged activities, such as volunteerism and social activism, catalyse opportunities for personal transformation amongst students, creating awareness of the plight of marginalised groups in society. Community outreach and service-learning opportunities encourage students to become more socially responsible, more committed to serving their communities, more empowered and more committed to education (Body & Hogg, 2019; Brady et al., 2020), making it important for disciplinary departments to tap into potential opportunities within community spaces, where students can gain exposure to the real-world realities of communities. It further highlights the need for curricula to be relevant to the contextual realities of the local context.

Theme 2: Effects of the floods on families

The first sub-theme to emerge under theme two, focused on the effects of the floods on community members.

Sub-theme 1: Effects of the flood and living at the shelter

Students shared the distress and hardship experienced by families:

I would say that they were experiencing a lot of trauma. Most of them were traumatized. (P3)

Older people, they were crying ... they no longer have places, some of them owned the sites that were flooded ... they don't have a place to build a new house or money to rent ... others were hurt and still got wounds. (P5)

They lost their belongings and properties. They do not have like enough resources, just like stoves, kettles. Others didn't have any clothes, anything to sleep on. (P7)

These narratives reflect the huge psychological distress experienced by families who had to endure the loss of their homes. Many were from vulnerable households and were living in informal settlements, near rivers which had become flooded. As such it was no longer possible to return to these areas to rebuild their homes. Many were already from impoverished backgrounds and lacked the resources to rent alternative accommodation. This forced them to seek refuge within the shelters. The floods also caused them to lose their belongings and the fact that they had to endure displacement without clothing or bedding increased their anguish. In addition to these immediate effects of the floods, those affected still had to consider the long-term effects, such as lack of finance to build new homes, displacement and a lack of access to immediate healthcare. In addition to the psychological trauma, several flood-affected survivors were also injured and could not access healthcare. Moreover, despite individuals being housed in the shelter, they were still faced with hardship as many resources were not immediately available in the shelter.

Other studies also found that people experience severe trauma due to loss of their homes and possessions during flooding and consequently develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety (Liang, 2019). Shelton (2016) argues that community engagement projects, such as the current project, provide multi-disciplinary assistance to communities and organisations on real projects that improve their economic, social and physical environments, as they help meet unmet community needs and establish access and connections to other resources available at the college or university. In the current study, whilst those displaced had their physical needs met, many had endured trauma and required counselling and support to navigate their losses, whilst coming to terms with having to live at the shelter for an extended period. This is discussed further under sub-theme two, which follows.

Sub-theme 2: Difficulties with living in a flood shelter

Students shared the myriad difficulties faced by the displaced:

The young people they don't have time to study or do their homework. It was crowded in the hall during the day people are making noise. Even when they are doing their homework they don't have anyone to assist. (P1)

They were promised, they were going to be built houses ... every day you can see it when you when you walk in there you can just see that they don't want to be there anymore. It is heavy. The emotion there is really heavy. (P3)

They were crowded, they don't have privacy ... they do everything in front of everyone ... they even eat in front of the crowd. Even when you are taking a bath, someone will just come in the bathroom ... so they didn't have any privacy at all. (P2)

These narratives reflect the difficult living circumstances that those who were displaced had to endure. Both children and adults were deeply affected by the lack of space and privacy, leaving children unable to study and others unable to eat or take a bath. Undeniably this environment was fertile for abuse and sexual harassment. Moreover, the overcrowding made it challenging for those affected to work through the trauma of their losses and their displacement. One participant described the atmosphere as being heavily emotionally charged and the prolonged length of living at the shelter caused great disappointment as they had been promised new homes.

Their experiences cohere with reports from the UNHCR (2024), which indicates that flooding events destroy homes, affect clean water sources, and disrupt essential services such as healthcare provision. Moreover, other researchers have noted that those displaced endure mental health distress and present with feelings of helplessness about their future (Roslim et al., 2021; Davies, 2023).

The theme that follows, focuses on the support offered to displaced families, by the students.

Theme 3: Support offered by students

Sub-theme 1: Developmental support

Students engaged in several developmental activities, with the children at the shelter, as follows:

The children were missing school ... we did try to incorporate educational activities in our daily engagement with the children. (P3)

We would do storytelling, so we'd read them stories both in English and in Zulu, and we would teach them how to write their names and then we did numeracy as well. (P6)

My contribution was more especially to the kids. We were doing activities with them to keep them relaxed and try and make them forget what has happened. (P7)

We play games with the children to make them forget what they were facing. (P9)

Providing them with resources because they did give us quite a lot of stuff. You know the tennis balls, crayons and the story books. (P10)

Child and youth care students did their best to engage the children in a range of educational and developmental activities during their placement. Their disciplinary background made it easier to implement early childhood educational activities, which

focused on reading and other developmental tasks. This was positive, especially given that there were those who could not access schools near the shelters. Students were also able to engage the children in therapeutic activities, thereby helping them process the trauma they had endured. This was a critical form of support, particularly in the absence of mental health services and given that children had to flee from their homes due to torrential flood waters. This form of outreach through therapeutic and developmental services reflects the potential for higher education institutions to serve vulnerable communities. Those beset by social ills can benefit tremendously from university collaborations, as disciplinary departments lend their expertise to work on problems and develop solutions to address the complex issues facing communities (Cunningham, 2020).

Sub-theme 2: Spiritual activities

Students also engaged in other spiritual and philanthropic activities with those affected:

My family and I decided to donate. We donated food and clothes. (P1)

We were able to form a sort of like a church for them at the community hall. (P4)

They lost hope. So, ... we are there to encourage hope in their faith. We used to have a church service behind the bathrooms so then every Sunday there will be a service which will then guide them and encourage them to put hope in God. (P9)

They were very happy with the recent religious addition to the community hall. (P11)

Some students engaged in philanthropic activities by securing and donating essential items such as food and clothing, whilst other students considered it important to initiate spiritual activities at the shelter. They did this by setting up a church service, so that those affected could receive spiritual support, through prayer and scripture reading. This inevitably helped lift the affected community's spirits, as religious support is known to improve mental health wellness (Koenig & Al Shohaib, 2023). In another study participants who were survivors of a flood event, and who were provisioned with social support, developed a sense of belonging and coped better through such support (Sipon et al., 2015). Initiatives undertaken by the child and youth care students reflect the huge potential for university students not only to engage in humanitarian work, but also fill a void in the absence of spiritual and mental health support. Research undertaken by Rinaldo et al. (2015, p. 120), found that the most powerful stories told by community partners describe the value of engagement in helping their organisations achieve their missions. The students in their study were described as invaluable resources that facilitated "life-changing experience[s]" for community members.

Sub-theme 3: Psychological support

Students also provided psychological support as part of their outreach initiative:

We offered bereavement counselling ... and giving advice to whatever the mothers asked me. (P2)

I think even though we're not really like qualified or anything like that, but sending us here I think was a very good step in the right direction because we did a whole lot of good for their children. (P4)

The students were able to offer much-needed psychological support to both children and their families. Counselling was offered to those who had lost loved ones to the floods and through providing mental health support to the children. They shared that although they were not qualified, they were still able to achieve much “good,” through their presence at the shelter and through the support they provided participants, thereby reflecting the powerful contribution engagement can make towards underserved communities. Akhir et al. (2021) opine that such support is invaluable in facilitating resilience within the individuals, families and communities that live through disasters. Their study found emotional support to be important to flood victims, as it helped them move on with their lives. Hence the impact of the students within the current study cannot be underscored as they were able to actively use the values of empathy and compassion, which underpin the childcare profession, to offer therapeutic support to families at the shelter.

Sub-theme 4: Physical well-being and nutrition

The third sub-theme reflected how students contributed to the physical well-being of community members. They shared:

I was also assisting in the feeding program whereby we will cook ... then we went to the hall to feed the victims. (P1)

They don't really have any meals in place. Their mothers are not there half of the time and we had to really step in and make [sure] that they were fed. The mothers go and drink ... nearby, wherever they can get alcohol and then they come back drunk. (P2)

They do not have enough food like when they come back from school, they are hungry. The parents did not cook because of the food supplier, it did not supply. (P2)

Community-engaged service and outreach differs from teaching and research in that the engagement of students and staff in community-based activities is intentionally designed to provide a genuine service to the community (Bhagwan 2020a). In this case, when they became aware of a food shortage at the shelters, students also became actively involved in the provisioning of food and meals to the flood victims. Engaging in this way heightens students' empathy and sensitivity towards issues of poverty and hardship in disadvantaged communities (Jones et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Knowledge and experience derived through engagement

Overall, students thought that they benefitted from being placed at the shelters:

What I learnt is that a child and youth care worker is not limited to anything ... it's more than going an extra mile with a smile. You can be a teacher today[,] tomorrow [you] can be a nurse ... It works in every corner of children. (P8)

This demonstrates that students were able to adapt their child care roles at the shelter, moving from a therapeutic role to an educational one, to serve the children at the shelter. Child and youth care work occurs within the life-space of families and communities. Life-space work has been described as

the conscious use of the everyday opportunities that present themselves in residential work, to engage meaningfully with children and young people about what is happening in their lives. It requires that workers connect immediate behaviour with the overall situations in which they are involved. (Amero et al., 2024)

Another student went on to share:

I have worked with different [kinds] of families through this ... I was able to interact with different kinds of people; some did not want to talk[,] some they seemed traumatized.
(P1)

More importantly, the engagement initiative exposed the students to different types of families, enabling them to better understand families with diverse dynamics. The opportunity to engage in a real-world context was also enhanced, enabling students to provide child and youth care services to those affected. Had they not become involved in the engagement initiative, then their exposure to working within the context of a natural disaster would have been limited. Engagement therefore has the advantage of preparing students to work within the contextual realities of communities. Engagement presents an opportunity for students to work with disadvantaged individuals and to be exposed to societal problems that they ordinarily would not have encountered. The valuable learning space of the shelter is evidenced in the following account:

We were not actually prepared to deal with certain type of stuff. We were all expecting to be around kids, play with kids, assist them in doing their school homework. We were not ready to become counsellors and bring hope to people. We were not ready for that. But it was a valuable learning space. (P5)

Most child and youth care placements create opportunities for students to work with children. This project, however, expanded the boundaries of such placements and the students' usual experiences. Through direct immersion in a community space, students were able to enhance the practice of their counselling skills. Whilst in traditional childcare placements their opportunity to engage in child and youth care work may have been restricted to play and simple care activities in relation to children at the institution, placement at the shelters enabled them to offer support and counsel flood-affected families.

Through this project, the community was transformed into a "valuable learning space" for students. Community engagement can therefore enhance learning in profound ways, by legitimising community spaces as crucial places where students can acquire real-world knowledge and learn about social issues from community members (Bickford & Wright, 2024).

Theme 5: Role of the university in helping communities

Most of the participants believed that the university has a role to play in society. This is evident in the following contributions:

Universities do have a role like everyone else in society. (P2)

I think [it] would be very important that other departments, students and lecturers should go out there and help communities. I think it would be important for the university to just organize something for the people. (P2)

Following the immersion experience, students supported the need for universities to become engaged with problems confronting society or give back to the community.

I think all university students should go and volunteer and do something to assist people who are needy or have problems. It is a good thing for students to be involved, giving back to the community. (P3)

The University ... Child and Youth Care Department should participate and engage in helping those people, to bring change ... bring hope to them, so they will not feel left out as they felt. To learn more empathy skills. (P3)

Their experiences within the community led the students to urge other students to become more engaged. They felt that, in terms of disciplinary expertise, child and youth care students were ideally positioned to offer empathy and therapeutic support to those affected by natural disasters or other social problems. These reflections cohere with the philosophy of *ubuntu*, which is intertwined with common human identity, a collective oneness where there is social responsiveness to all and the values of kindness and service (Rajah, 2019). An engaged university has been described as a university that harnesses its intellectual, disciplined-based resources to deal with community issues and concerns and as an institution where community issues and concerns are incorporated as a legitimate part of the scholarly, academic work of all departments, academics and students (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). A fully engaged university therefore serves the community and provides outreach to society by considering its social problems in a way that provides mutual benefit to both university and community through its engagement. This mutually beneficial partnership, as with the current project, enriches and expands “the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity” (Bridger & Alter, 2006, p. 170).

Limitations of the study

The study was limited as a small number (11) of students were included in the study. This was because the outreach initiative was restricted to two flood shelters, which also could not accommodate a greater number of students. This limits the generalisability of findings in terms of the impact of engagement within community-based settings and how students themselves would have benefitted from it. Moreover, considering the perspectives of the family-member beneficiaries of the students’ interventions would have supported the findings made. Despite this, the study highlighted important

aspects of community-based learning and engagement. These initial findings highlight the potential to use community-based settings as spaces wherein students can practise their disciplinary skills whilst learning from and about real-world issues, such as the experience of the floods. Whilst the potential for researcher bias exists, this was offset through investigator triangulation, where two researchers were involved and an independent co-coder in the analysis of the data. Reflexivity through the use of a journal throughout the study further helped the researchers to become aware of her own perspectives, values and biases.

Conclusion

This article opened interesting pathways for the consideration of community engagement through outreach and service-learning opportunities. The immersion of a group of students within the context of a fieldwork practicum placement highlighted the potential to tap into community spaces, wherein students can serve and from which they can simultaneously learn. The study exposed students to the lived realities of displaced families, an opportunity which was invaluable in terms of learning of the impact to displaced families, whilst simultaneously strengthening their crisis intervention skills.

Hence whilst traditional fieldwork placements may expose students to important discipline-specific issues at certain community centres, transcending these spaces to consider learning about real-world problems as they emerge can only strengthen the preparedness of students for such local contextual realities. It is therefore crucial that universities start to earnestly value the importance of community engagement and seek to intertwine engagement with teaching and research, through service-learning, outreach and volunteerism.

Ethics statement

The study was approved by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) (Ethics number: IREC 228/22).

Potential conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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