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WRITING CENTRES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: STUDENTS' VOICES IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Informed by a social justice lens, this study aimed at exploring students' experiences of the Writing Centre (WC) at a higher education institution in Johannesburg, South Africa. The WC is a division of the Academic Development Centre (ADC) in this institution. Post-1994, access to higher education (HE) has been at the centre of building an inclusive society, with an aim of widening access for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. While physical access into HE has improved for these students, their dropout rate has remained relatively high. This study adopted a qualitative approach and an exploratory design. Using purposive sampling, the study selected 12 participants from the second-year social work class. Divided into two equal groups, the study conducted a focus group discussion with each group. Data was analysed using thematic content analysis leading to broad themes. Findings show that, while all the participants appreciated the usefulness of the WC, others shared experiences of being treated harshly by some staff at the centre while some were stigmatised by their peers for utilising the services. The authors recommend flexible consultation times and creating awareness about the centre and investing in building solidarity in wise support of the at-risk students.

KEY TERMS: *social justice, higher education, throughput, student-dropout, South Africa*

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INTRODUCTION

The new political dispensation in 1994 ushered much hope for the socially and economically fragmented South Africa. Social policies of the colonial and apartheid governments had segregated other racial groups from accessing quality education and economic opportunities. The newly elected African National Congress (ANC)-led government committed itself to ensuring that all deserving students had access to higher education (HE). This was a strategy of redressing the historical injustices in HE and broadly in the economy. The commitment towards social justice was underscored in the 1996 Constitution which stressed ".... the achievement of equality....non-racialism and non-sexism" (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996). As a result of these efforts, the number of Black students in higher education institutions (HEIs) grew from 191,000 to 404,000 between 1993 and 2002 (Badat and Yusuf, 2014). Physical access however did not beget improved throughput ratios (Badat and Yusuf, 2014; Cross, 2018; Seehole and Adeyemo, 2016). To address this, HEIs and government then focused on assisting struggling students through academic development centres (ADCs). The focus of this paper will be on the Writing Centre which is a division of the ADC. This paper first gives the background information, followed by discussing social justice as a lens and thereafter reviews literature. The methodology, findings and discussions, conclusion of the study and the implications of for social work are also given before the concluding remarks.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The problem

Any discussion on equal access to education needs to be premised on the reality that education is a right that is enshrined in the country's Constitution. It should be acknowledged that in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC)-led government inherited an unjust society characterised by racially unequal access to HE (Cross, 2018). Invariably, the majority of Black individuals and families have been relegated to the lowest echelons of the economy because of unequal access to HE and economic participation (RSA, 2011). It is for these reasons that issues of access to HE and throughput relating to students from previously disadvantaged families have been at the centre of the discourses of redistribution and social justice in South Africa and Africa (Nelson, Creag and Clarke, 2009). To track back, the ANC in 1955 envisioned a South African society in which "the doors of learning and culture shall be open to all" (African National Congress [ANC], 1955). With its pivotal role in social mobility, HE in the country is shaped by and yet also informed by the discourses of democracy and social justice.

The period 1970 to 1993 in South Africa witnessed heightened social discontent against the unfair racial representation in HE (Badat and Yusuf, 2014). Between 1993 and 2002, there was a sharp increase of Black African students in HE; from 191,000 to 404,000 respectively (Badat and Yusuf, 2014). While these increases were progressive, more problematic was the accompanying lower throughput rates for this racial group. The Department of Education (RSA) (2004) found out that while 70 percent of these Black students managed to complete their studies, the rate was 84 per cent for White students. The Department of Higher Education and Training revealed that 50 percent of Black African students dropped out within the first three years of HE studies (RSA, 2015). This means that physical access did not serve the government's purpose of redistributing social and economic opportunities to the previously disadvantaged groups. This means that most Black families would be condemned into generational unemployment and poverty and (Patel, 2005).

It was imperative to shift the debate from just physical access to epistemic access in order to improve students' academic performance and throughput. Struggling students, mostly Blacks were categorised as at-risk, requiring particular attention by lecturers, tutors and departments. ADCs were created to offer specialised attention to these students. Writing Centres are part of the ADCs assisting at-risks students with academic writing in a non-judgmental environment (Lesteka and Maile, 2008; Nyamapfene and Letseka, 1995). For the ADCs to be effective, a universal culture of commitment towards nation-building and building inclusive environment in HEIs is requisite. This is because "racism and cultural oppression" are systemic and stubborn to decipate (Nelson, Creagh and Clarke, 2009:4). The challenges of inequality and racism in HEIs in South Africa informed the 2015 #FeesMustFall.

Today, dropout rates are still high for Black African students (Henning, Manalo and Tuagalu, 2012; Nkala, 2019) and more Black Africans are unemployed (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2020). It is import to gather grassroots voices of students from previously disadvantaged families for further interventions. Bottom-up voices resonate with the pillar of democracy and participation as articulated in the 1997 White Paper for Social Welfare. It is hoped that this study will contribute towards bottom-up evidence-based initiatives of enhancing pass rates and improved social and economic reconstruction of the country.

Theoretical lens and higher education

This study was informed by a social justice lens, which has dominated the post-apartheid discourses of reconciliation, access, nation-building, equity, human dignity and economic reconstruction for all South Africans. This section discusses the concept of social justice and its application and interpretation in post-apartheid South Africa. The authors are aware of the different schools of thought on social justice. Simply, this papers adopts Sturman's (1997:1) understanding of social justice as a synonym for equal opportunities, emphasising equity; which Rawls (1999:53) in Nelson et al. (2009:4) describes as "rearrangement of social and economic goods...guided by considerations of opportunity and ... differences ...from individual circumstances." This understanding dovetails with the post-1994 government's project of redistribution through opening the doors of HE opportunities especially to those who were previously disadvantaged by colonialism and apartheid. In view of the Bantu Education that relegated Black African students to inferior primary education and restricted them from pursuing HE, some element of equity and recognitive justice is necessary to fast track social and economic reconstruction.

The democratic dispensation, post-1994 and the attendant reconciliatory and inclusive policies should be appreciated for having given an impetus for creating just social structures in HE. This was based on the hope that the institutions and their staff will enact socially just structures based on human rights and non-racialism. Thus, Nelson et al. (2009:6) emphasise recognitive perspective of social justice which "also considers the centrality of socially democratic processes in working towards the attainment of social justice" in HE. This means that, while there is a clear HE-related policy directive to create "an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations and benefits" (National Association of Social Workers, 2012:242), poor implementation may undermine this intent. It is critical to continue investigating the labyrinth of complex factors that perpetuate high student dropout even after ADCs have been put in place. The important lesson from the 2015 #FeesMustFall is that students' voices matter in any transformational endeavours. Because the 'youth are the future', it is important to foreground social justice in issues of access and throughput in HE.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adams (2006:92) posits that ADCs are vital structures, specifically designed to support students to perform better, especially those from poor backgrounds. They are not exclusively South African and African but have a global footprint. HEIs in New Zealand, Japan and the United States of America offer good examples of how ADCs are implemented to facilitate participation and boost throughput. This is because structural inequalities exist universally; along gender, race and other lines and these require transformational measures to make HEIs more inclusive and create economic opportunities for all. However, Morrow (1993), cautions that ADCs should not generate a culture of entitlement and foreshadow meritocracy and quality studentship. Boughey (2007) also implores that ADCs should be accompanied by a genuine collective motive – not as patch-up services to 'fit in poor Black African struggling students'.

The demand for racial and cultural reforms in HEIs in South Africa dominated calls to abolish apartheid in the 1970s (Cross, 2018). The call became more solid, valid and unanimous in the 1990s, leading to the first democratic elections in 1994. From then, the number of Black African students shot up from 191,000 in 1993 to 404,000 in 2002 (Ross, 2018). These increases were however impaired by high failure and dropout rates for this population group, prompting for the establishment of centres offering academic development and psychosocial support (van Rooyen, 2001). The ADCs quickly became popular appendages in HEIs offering critical services in line with the Constitutional and the Bill of Rights principles of inclusion, citizenship, equality and human dignity (RSA, 1996).

Worth noting is that, at exactly the same time in the 1990s, the New Zealand government instructed its Academic Advisory Services to introduce ADCs. The move was to target were at-risk students, most of whom were from Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vunau (Henning at al. 2012:142). These students received academic counselling, group-based study skills programmes, reading and writing programmes (Nakhid, 2003). In a similar vein, Japan's HEIs in April 2012, strengthened their academic support programmes to help foreign students integrate and perform better in HEIs (Kanagwa University, 2018). The USA's HEIs, faced with a similar problem of high student-drop-out and their subsequent disposition to low-grade jobs intensified offering ADCs (Ford and Harris, 1996). The University of York even introduced a tracking system to monitor at-risk students and provide them with customised requisite support (Aguilar, Lonn and Teasley, 2014).

Consonant with international perspectives and guided by a range of local HE and social and economic policies and programmes, South African HEIs continued to embrace ADCs. Ntakana (2011) commended the role of the structures in providing academic and psychosocial support to struggling first year students at Walter Sisulu University. Through the tracking system, the University of KwaZulu Natal even began monitoring the at-risk students and further proposing the steps that students need to take to get help (Mngomezulu and Ramrathan, 2015).

The challenge in South Africa has been the very low utilisation of these structures by students (Nkala, 2019; Ntakana, 2011; van Breda, 2011) and this is probably the reason why dropout rates remain persistently high. Perhaps a shift towards hearing students' empirical voices pertaining these services will provide basis for evidence-based interventions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach and an exploratory design to explore the experiences of second-year social work students of the Writing Centre at HEI in Johannesburg, South Africa. According to Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey (2016) qualitative methods are used to answer questions like "experience, meaning and perspective" from the participant's viewpoint. This approach is well-suited for this study, which seeks to elicit the subjective experiences of students of the Writing Centre. The approach was useful in gaining a deeper insight into students' subjective experiences and meanings of the Writing Centre (Fouche and Schurinck, 2011). In view of the persistent low throughout rates for Black African student, an exploratory design was thus relevant in getting bottom-up, students' voices of the centre so as to inform evidence-based interventions. Participants were drawn from the second-year social work theory class of 2017 at the institution. Second-year students were chosen as it was assumed that they had fresh first-year experiences of their transition and of the services they had received from the centre. Social work students were a convenient population as both authors are affiliated with the Department of Social Work in this institution. The institution serves the majority of Black students, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds – funded by government in their tuition (De Villiers and Steyn, 2009). Only one student in this class was White.

Purposive volunteer sampling was employed to select willing participants. This ensured that the sample was "composed of typical attributes of the population that serve the purpose of the study" (Strydom and Delport, 2011:392). The selection criteria were that participants must have been 1) willing to participate, 2) utilised at least one of the services of the Writing Centre, 3) males or females. From this process, 12 students (8 females, 4 males) registered their interest to participate. In collecting data, participants were divided into two equal groups of six members of mixed gender. Each group participated in a focus group discussion to allow participants to "present their own views and experience… [and perceptions] ... also hear from other people" (Greef, (2011:360). Each focus group discussion lasted about 45-60 minutes, was conducted in English and tape recorded to capture the discussions accurately (Legard, Keegan and Ward, 2003) with note-taking done to capture the non-verbal cues. The discussions covered broad themes such as; how the services had assisted them, which ones they had found useful, the challenges encountered and their recommendations for the centre. All discussions were transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis.

This study was granted ethical clearance by the institution's Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee. The clearance number is REC 02-055-2017. Additionally, the Head of the Department of Social Work issued a permission letter allowing the researchers to participants and conduct focus group discussions with them. No-one was "coerced into participating in [this] research project (Strydom (2011:117). All participants signed consent forms for participation and to have the discussions recorded. Consonant with the values of social work (Rubin and Babbie, 2011), confidentiality was maintained to "guard jealously" (Strydom, 2011: 120) – making sure that data was not confided to unnecessary individuals. Pseudonyms were used instead of participants' real names to achieve anonymity (Strydom, 2011). The participants were informed that their responses would form part of an academic research report whose findings could be converted into academic articles and published. Thus, member checking was done in between and immediately after each discussion to ensure that the study "accurately recorded the phenomena under scrutiny" (Shenton, 2004:64). Such a process enhances the "ethical principles of beneficence...respecting autonomy...and non-maleficence" (Ferris and Sass-Kortsak, 2011 in Hintz and Dean, 2020:39). Papers from this study will be shared through the institution repository by the library. This is part of reporting back the findings to the Department of Social Work, the student body and the institution. Such reporting is as important as getting consent for participation (Ferris and Sass-Kortsak, 2011 in Hintz and Dean. 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The key themes arising from this study were adapted to the social justice lens. The participants illustrated that while the Writing Centre played a positive role in their transitioning process, a web of complex issues still negatively impacted their experiences. In line with the social justice lens, the findings that constitute the discussions are:

- Developmental experiences
- The negative experiences

Developmental experiences

From this study, participants shared that that the Writing Centre had positively contributed towards improving their academic performance and thus enhancing their self-esteem. What all participants appreciated, first was that they had been accepted into institution and were further given an opportunity to improve their performance through the Writing Centre. To the participants, the foregoing demonstrated that their institution was committed to realising a racially and culturally inclusive student body. This is an important recipe for social justice in in HE in South Africa (Hill, Baxen, Craig, Namakula and Sayed, 2012; Sehoole and Adeyemo, 2016).

From the findings, only two percent of the participants self-referred themselves to the centre. One of them shared that "*I wasn't satisfied because I wanted to know why I was getting 60s...Let me see what I am doing wrong, let me go to the Writing Centre"* (Macy). 98 percent of the participants indicated that they had been encouraged by either their tutors, facilitators, supervisors or lecturers to utilise one or more services that are offered by the centre. For example, Nkosi shared that *"my tutor was really pushing us, he was saying that our submissions were poor, we must go to the Writing Centre in order to improve."* Similarly, Misiwe added that "*I also received feedback first year when we wrote an assignment. The lecturer commented that 'Go to the Writing Centre'."* Lisa also shared that *"My facilitator kept on stressing that I need to go to the centre for help with writing, referencing and theory integration. I also knew that I was bad in all this."* From the foregoing excerpts, it is clear that identifying struggling students and referring them to the centre was an institutional culture. Directly, the teaching staff contributed to the students' epistemological participant and "promotion of democratic values and the building of a [socially] just society" in HE (Sehoole et al. 2016:3). Further to enacting ADCs, the staff ensured that these structures were utilised accordingly.

At first and second-year levels, some of the participants shared that they struggled with reading and expressing themselves verbally and in writing primarily because the language of instruction is English. In line with Ntakana (2011), Ngesi (2018) and Nkala (2019), they further indicated they struggled with academic writing, styling, referencing and theory integration. They expressed their appreciation for the assistance they had received from the centre on these areas. While these areas may appear indirectly related to epistemological participation, they form the basis for professionalism especially in social work. If students do not get quick assistance, those affected are highly likely to suffer low self-esteem with a high possibility of dropping; thereby undermining inclusive social and economic transformation. Understanding the role of education as "an allocator of life-chances and important vehicle of achieving equity in distributing opportunity" (Sehoole et al., 2016:4) exerts so much pressure for HEIs to be informed by recognitive perspectives of social justice (Morrow, 1993).

Having been referred to the centre, participants shared positive experiences such as *"I can now write an essay which flows, not just mixing all ideas...proper structured essay"* (Nkosi). Mary shared that through the centre services, she can assist fellow students. She elaborated that "*I told them that we have not done a good job in writing the assignment, because it was missing a lot of elements, I then edited the assignment with what I had learned at the Writing Centre and then we submitted the assignment."* Furthermore, Thato indicated that her marks had greatly improved. She shared that *"I would get 40s and 50s, and a 60 was very rare, and after the assistance I received at the Writing Centre I now I get 70s, 80s and 90s.*" These are substantial positive experiences by any measure. As seen in the excerpts, they build a positive sense of self-worth amongst students, 1) enabling them to confront relics of racial discrimination and more importantly 2) improve their performance through graduation and 3) multiply their social and economic life chances. These positive outcomes illustrate that social justice in HE is a collaborative endeavour; with HEIs, students and all staff committed to opening learning opportunities for all.

Disempowering encounters

While the study found that students appreciated their institution's unquestionable dedication to the inclusion and social-justice, they shared that they equally encountered some systemic and administrative challenges. For example, Thato revealed that one consultant treated him in a rather harsh manner that was tantamount to humiliation. He expanded saying:

> *...the writing programme which I attended was useful as it has improved my writing. I was at first unhappy with my first experience because I needed help. Then I got there, there was this lady who negatively criticised me...saying...here you didn't do this, here you didn't do that' (shouting). The receptionist saw that I was very angry after that consultation and she called me and asked 'Did they help you?' I said 'No'(angrily). Then she said 'Book another appointment. You will find somebody different.*

Bonga and Misiwe disclosed similar disempowering experiences, which may explain why Writing Centres are under-utilised, as found by Adams (2006) and van Breda (2011) allude that the services are. These negative need for continued advocacy for the philosophies of social justice not only by management, but every system and individual staff member that intersects with students. Otherwise, most previously disadvantaged students will

continue to suffer secondary forms of exclusion with the propensity of sustaining racial segregation, poverty and inequality in the country.

The second challenge that was shared by all the participants related to time constraints. They indicated that, even though they had very positive perceptions of the centre and its services, they however had huge workloads and hence very little time or none at all to consult at the centre. Related to the foregoing, Mercy revealed that "*when I eventually get a few minutes for consulting...it is fully booked...tomorrow and they say they are fully booked..."* Compounding these challenges was the attendant shorter consultations as elaborated by Sindi who said *"...30 minutes is very short for consultation...you won't even get to the half of the assignment or issues you need covered."* Asked what they thought was the reason for the aforementioned challenge, Bonga thought *"...it could be that most of us go there when we have assignments or before exams and they can't cope. Or it's simply because of their poor planning."* What is obvious in the last two responses is the requirement for specific research that will look into the reasons why the staff is inundated yet Nkala (2019), Ntakana (2011) and van Breda (2019) report lack of utilisation of the centres' services. Poor planning by these management and lack of staff result in capacity challenges (Pavlich, Orkin and Richardson, 1995) which hampers transformation efforts in HEIs.

What also posed as a challenge for the participants was the stigmatisation that they experienced from their peers. This was reflected in Andrew's responses; *"We need help but as students we think 'what will others say?"...so it means I'm dumb and a failure"* while Macy added that *"there is a stigma because the Writing Centre is for people who can't write or perform badly...it is embarrassment to others...ashamed of yourself."* Such kind of stigma undermines the institutional and government efforts to cultivate epistemological participation and engender inclusiveness in HE. In fact, it is contrary to Biko's (2005:15) emphasis that Blacks need to establish "a solid identity...to ensure that students are always treated with dignity and respect they deserve." This reveals the need for wider conscientisation, even amongst previously disadvantaged students themselves regarding the need for collective consensus in order to realise inclusive HE.

STUDY CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the second-year experiences and their perceptions of the Writing Centre form a social justice perspective. The study concludes that:

- Writing Centre services play a central role in government's plans of promoting nation-building and enhancing redistribution and social justice in South Africa.
- Writing Centre services promote epistemological participation, improve pass rates and thus preventing dropout rates.
- Writing Centre services help boost students' confidence which has immediate- to long-term effects of promoting their participation in the economy.
- HEIs still need to promote a universal culture of understanding, care, genuineness rather than judgmental attitudes towards at-risk students.
- Even amongst students, conscientisation is imperative to promote unanimity among themselves in support of at-risk students – instead of stigmatisation.
- To boost the utilisation of the Writing Centre services, HEIs may consider providing more flexible consultation times or even integrating services into the timetables so that students do not miss classes while seeking assistance.
- Students' meaningful experiences of the Writing Centre depends on a collaborative effort between government, HEIs, staff and students.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Firstly, the authors reiterate that social justice has been an organising value of social work since the Progressive era (Reisch, 2002) and is more relevant in South Africa and Africa where structural challenges continue to exclude the majority from social and economic participation. Because of the centrality of HE in facilitating especially economic mobility, issues of access and throughput of Black students are the heart of social work in South Africa and Africa. Thus the study helps social workers conceptualise the essence of intervening at micro level in order to facilitate the social mobility of individuals, enabling them access to the macro level of the economy. While the participants acknowledged the positive role that the centre plays in their epistemological access, there exist structural impediments which are of interest to social work whose mandate is to promote social change and social justice through advocating equal social and economic rights for all (Morgaine, 2014). The judgmental attitudes still lingering in the Writing Centre necessitates the services of social workers in HEIs and their role will be to inculcate the dialogue and the practice of social justice amongst students, educators, and management. This is consistent with the ambitions of the Constitution of South Africa and its Bill of Rights and the principles of the

2014 International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Work (IFSW).

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported on the findings of the students' experiences of the Writing Centre in a HEI in Johannesburg, South Africa. As a relic of colonial and apartheid education policies, throughput among largely Black students has been very low. This has led government to promulgate social and economic transformation policies to focus on both physical acess, participation and academic success of students, with a slant on the previously disadvantaged individuals. While there has been earnest adoption and implementation of Writing Centres, concerted efforts are still required to infuse the culture of acceptance, genuineness and inclusiveness by all stakeholders. Judgmental attitudes against at-risk students by staff and stigmatisation of those utilising academic services frustrate endeavours of fostering social justice in HEIs. This calls for more all stakeholders to imbue dialogues of social justice amongst themselves and in interacting with others.

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