

IMPLEMENTING ABCD TOOLS AND PROCESSES IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENT PRACTICE

Natalie Mansvelt

Social workers tend to be apprehensive about macro-level work and community development, despite community development being a key strategy in developmental social welfare. All student social workers in South Africa are required to develop knowledge, skills and field practice experience in community development. This article explores the application of asset-based community-driven development (ABCD) in the context of field education. The learning diaries of second-year social work students were analysed in order to gain an understanding of students' views and experiences of ABCD. The findings reveal that students respond positively to ABCD and start to appreciate the value of community development.

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INTRODUCTION

Community development as an approach is well aligned to the purpose and principles of developmental social welfare (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997) and has been taught at South African universities since the 1990s, when the developmental social welfare paradigm was first introduced. However there are many challenges with the application of community development in the field education of social work students. The nature of the process is such that it requires flexible long-term involvement from development workers, while social work field education is short-term, structured and time bound. Because of students' time-bound and temporary involvement, the process is often experienced as overwhelming and demotivating for them. It was these challenges that prompted one university to explore other approaches that could be taught to students in working developmentally with communities.

Community development is an integral part of South African social work, yet it is not the method of choice for many social workers. According to the Bachelor of Social Work Draft Standards Statement (Council for Higher Education, 2015:5), the purpose of the Bachelor of Social Work degree is "to provide a well-grounded, generic, professional education that prepares reflexive graduates who are able to engage with people from micro to macro levels of social work, within a dynamic socio-political and economic context". The standards are underpinned by the developmental social welfare paradigm that was adopted for South Africa in the White Paper for Social Welfare (Department of Social Development, 1997). According to this paradigm, individuals, groups, families and communities must be empowered to actively participate in their own development (Department of Social Development, 2013:13). Thus when institutions of higher education embark on training of social work students, the developmental social welfare paradigm must form the foundation of all teaching and learning activities.

A number of different approaches have emerged in the literature under the umbrella term 'community development'. One of these is asset-based community-driven development (ABCD) which moves from a problem- and needs-based approach to a strength- and asset-based view of communities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993:5). Although much literature and research on ABCD can be found, little has been written on the use of this approach within social work field education. While Nel (2006:248) recommended the implementation of ABCD with postgraduate students, this article explores the application of ABCD in the undergraduate context. It is argued that such application is not only feasible, but effective in teaching students to work within a developmental social welfare paradigm.

ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Even though community development has been an important part of community work since the early 1900s (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2013:34), there is no generally accepted definition of the concept. Over the years several debates regarding the nature and process of this development have taken place. Increased insight into and understanding of the meaning of community participation have led authors to advocate for less practitioner-driven and more community-owned programmes (Korten, 1990:67; Henderson & Thomas, 2013:10). Community development can thus be viewed as an evolving concept with new approaches and different focus points emerging continuously.

The asset-based approach to community development (ABCD) was developed by Kretzman and McKnight in 1993. In reaction to the needs and problem focus in community development theory, they argued that it is not only more positive for development workers and community members to be driven by assets and strengths, but also that the cycle of dependence often emanating from community development could be prevented (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993:4).

Although ABCD was developed and originally tested in the United States of America and Western countries, a number of research projects have been undertaken on the implementation of the approach in third world countries like South Africa (Eloff & Ebersohn, 2001), Zimbabwe (Chirisa, 2009) and Ethiopia (Yeneabat & Butterfield, 2012; Mengesha, Meshelemiah & Chuffa, 2015) over the past twenty years. And the indirect conclusion from all the projects referenced here was that there is a lot of promise and potential in applying ABCD to the African development context.

More than a methodology or a strategy, ABCD is an approach to community work – one where the glass is always viewed as half-full instead of half-empty (McDonald, 1997:115). Within the approach a broad process and a range of tools have been developed that could be used flexibly by practitioners and community members. Below is a short summary of the process and selected tools.

Similar to the general community development process, ABCD also starts with an orientation to what is currently in the community (Eloff & Ebersohn, 2001:151), the context. But where analysing needs is a key task of the community development process (Swanepoel & De Beer, 2013:169), the ABCD process starts with identifying the strengths, capabilities and assets within the community.

Appreciative inquiry was originally developed in organisation management (Schenck, Nel & Louw, 2010:65) and can be utilised as a tool of ABCD. When practitioners inquire about communities in an appreciative manner during the contextual orientation, it stimulates positive empowerment thinking from the beginning and establishes the ‘expert-in-his-own-environment’ role of community members (Schenck, Louw & Nel, 2010:66). This tool is also referred to as appreciative interviewing, since inquiry takes place by interviewing individual community members in an informal manner, with semi-structured asset-framed questions (Pretorius & Nel, 2012:12).

Once the practitioner has a fair understanding of the community context, asset assessment takes place (Eloff & Ebersohn, 2001:151). The use of asset maps is a helpful tool in documenting and analysing capabilities and strengths. Kretzman and McKnight (1993) developed a number of inventories that could be utilised or adapted when mapping communities. To ensure participation and community ownership, maps are completed by community members in group settings (Schenck, Louw & Nel, 2010:160) and it is an inductive process (Mathie and Cunningham, 2005:180).

In the next phase a broadly representative community group is convened. According to Yeneabat and Butterfield (2012:136), the task of the group is to build a community vision and plan. Schenck, Nel and Louw Nel (2010:174) advise the practitioner to facilitate the development of such a group from the individuals and loosely formed groups who participated in the contextual orientation and asset assessment phases, and who seem interested and ready to formalise their group identity.

Once the group has a clear vision, community assets are mobilised for taking action in order to work towards the envisioned community. The practitioner's role is to support the community group in the development of internal and external relationships and remove systemic barriers (Mokwena, 1997:68).

The asset-based approach to community development has not been without criticism. The fact that ABCD originated in first world countries has resulted in many third world countries being sceptical about its applicability (Nel, 2006:240). Furthermore, MacLeod and Emejulu (2014) highlight the alignment between the outcomes of some ABCD projects and neoliberalism, and lament the sidelining of structural inequalities and the responsibility of the state (MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014:446). In 2002 Mathie and Cunningham had already shared their concerns about the ABCD process's ignorance of unequal power relations in communities.

SOCIAL WORKERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Before 1994 South Africa followed a residual approach to welfare, according to which welfare has a safety-net function, coming into effect only when people have exhausted their own resources (Midgley, 1996:59). The nature of social work was curative and rehabilitative and social workers used methods such as casework and therapy to support client systems (Department of Social Development, 1997). In the post-apartheid dispensation the country was in need of an alternative welfare approach that would address poverty and inequality on a larger scale (Holscher, 2008:114). The developmental social welfare paradigm was introduced in the White Paper for Social Welfare in 1997. The nature of social work was now supposed to be developmental and preventative and the main vehicle to be used to achieve this was and is community development.

Social workers have been very slow to change from casework to community development. Community work (or macro-level work, which development is part of) has never been the preferred method of work of social workers. Internationally Aviram and Katan (1991) found that social work students in Israel prefer casework and counselling

to community work and most aspire to opening private practices after they have graduated. More than ten years later Weiss, Gal and Cnaan (2004) studied the preferences of social work students in Israel and the United States of America, and the results similarly indicated that students least preferred working with vulnerable groups such as the unemployed. The situation in South Africa is not very different. Mamphiswana and Noyoo (2000:26) refer to the apathy among professional social workers about doing community work, while Poswa (2004:92) concluded that community work is utilised at a minimum level within the Department of Social Development. She found that social workers prefer to use casework because of a lack of clear guidelines with regard to community work. Such guidelines should be formulated by social work organisations (Poswa, 2004:95), but the foundation needs to be laid during the training of social work students at institutions of higher learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

The context of the study is a social work higher education qualification at one university in South Africa. Twelve institutions of higher learning in South Africa offer an accredited four-year bachelor degree in social work (BSW). By the end of the four years of study, 27 exit-level outcomes should have been reached, as prescribed by the South African Qualifications Authority. The exit-level outcomes are reached through a mixture of theoretical and field practice components (South African Qualifications Authority, 2003). The field practice component is compulsory from the second year of study and is continued in the third and fourth years (South African Qualifications Authority, 2015:12). All social work students have to be exposed to and show competence in applying the helping process on the macro level. According to the exit-level outcomes, the macro level includes communities and societies (South African Qualifications Authority, 2003).

Since 2015 ABCD has gradually been incorporated into the curriculum for BSW students at the relevant university as an approach to macro-level or community work. In 2016 second-year students embarked on the introduction of ABCD tools and processes in three communities. The procedure that was followed in the field practice module is summarised below.

- The student group started off the field practice module by attending a day workshop presented by a grant-maker organisation that is the leading advocate for ABCD in the relevant province. The workshop provided students with a combination of theory, skills and practice examples of ABCD fundamentals.
- The workshop was followed up by a shorter workshop facilitated with groups of 25 students. Here tools such as asset mapping and appreciative interviewing were taught in experiential learning style.
- Students were assigned to three different community settings. One of the geographical communities has an existing relationship with the relevant university's social work department. The action group that represents this community attended ABCD training (from the same grant-maker organisation as the students) before the

students entered the community. The management of the non-governmental organisation that runs a centre for the second (functional) community had also attended ABCD training before. The third (functional) community had no prior contact with ABCD processes or tools.

- During the students' first visit to the assigned communities, they met with and were orientated by the action groups and/or community representatives, and familiarised themselves with the physical community environment.
- The next three community visits were spent on appreciative inquiries. Students randomly interviewed community members, using five appreciative questions.
- The next phase consisted of asset mapping. Students were tasked with convening small community engagement meetings and facilitating the completion and analysis of maps that assess different sets of assets.
- The planned process was ended off with a community engagement meeting during which the students assisted community members to start linking assets to opportunities and develop a community vision.
- Throughout the module students receive weekly group supervision where experiences are shared, educational input is provided and future visits are planned.
- Students will be continuing with the same communities in their third year of study, when they continue the ABCD process in their field practice module.

The aim of the study reported in this article was to describe the views and experiences of students who participated in the second-year module.

Qualitative research with an exploratory, descriptive and contextual design was chosen (Babbie, 2010:92). The population was 75 second-year social work students. Volunteer sampling was applied (Teddlie & Yu, 2007:78). The plan was to have a minimum sample size of 12. However, as a result of the fee-related disruptions to higher education training in 2016, the participant recruitment process was interrupted and 6 students volunteered to participate. Because the data from the 6 participants was still considered rich, the study continued. It must be noted that the disruptions also affected the planned procedure for the module. Students could not attempt any community engagement meetings as the university was shut down during that time.

Data were collected from students' submitted learning diaries. Diaries are written by all students registered for the module for assessment purposes and are guided by specific questions formulated by the module coordinator. Students are expected to reflect on their experiences, views and learning when answering the guiding questions in the learning diaries. Diaries were completed after each workshop and community visit. The questions were not prepared directly for this study, but indirectly students' views and experiences were documented. Examples of diary questions are:

- How did this workshop with the grant-maker organisation impact the way you think/feel about communities in South Africa?

- How would you describe your experience of conducting appreciative interviews for the first time?

Ethical clearance was received from the appropriate university structures. Content analysis was done according to Tesch's model (Creswell, 2009:86), and coding was inductive (Babbie, 2010:339).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study are discussed thematically and organised according to students' views and students' experiences.

Theme 1: Student views on community work and ABCD

Although students were exposed to and taught the community work process for the first time in the module that is referred to in the study, they reported many negative thoughts about working on the macro level prior to engaging with communities. An example is the reflection of participant 3: *"... I had negative feelings and thoughts about the community to which I was assigned. These thoughts were derived from the articles on social media as well as word of mouth from people."* The apprehensiveness about entering a community is echoed by participant 1 who stated: *"I was dreading and afraid of going to (community name) because of all the negative things I have heard about the place."* Even though the views shared above are about specific communities and not community work in general, they could point to an idea or even belief that communities do not have the potential to change. A quote from participant 3 illustrates this finding: *"I always thought communities who had been labelled negatively was just that and nothing more to it."*

Students' perspectives about communities and approaches to engaging with them changed during the course of the module. Many of the changes took place after the workshops facilitated by the grant-maker organisation.

"I now know that even in the dangerous communities there are always strengths within them and that it's important to look for these strengths and to appreciate and respect that community's way of living."(Participant 3)

"But after the workshop, I now realise that every community has a good and bad side..." (Participant 1)

"It has made me realise that communities in South Africa have been robbed of an opportunity to do things for themselves. It has been a common expectation in communities that social workers are there to provide solutions. This has made people to be spectators most of the time and not participants; however, it is not too late to focus on the positive attributes in a community rather than inadequacies." (Participant 6)

Contrary to the postgraduate students who participated in the study by Nel (2006:246), who were initially sceptical about the asset-based approach, the second-year students in this study embraced the concept of ABCD from the start of the module. This could be attributed to the fact that these students had not been formally trained in a problem-

based approach to macro-level work before. It is thus seen as an advantage to expose undergraduate students to ABCD, as it could make the shift from problem-based to asset-based development easier.

Some students became aware of the subtle impact of their own attitudes towards community members on ABCD, as is illustrated by the comment from Participant 1:

“...and that it is my duty to help the community members identify and see the positive side and that my attitude will affect how the community members receive me and how they interpret my reasons for coming to their community.”

This awareness stimulated further thought from the students’ side on the difficulties for social workers to shift from the needs-based to the asset-based approach. When students were asked in their diaries to reflect on their concerns about implementing ABCD, some of the concerns were:

“As social workers will we be able to see the positives in the communities, when we are so focused on seeing the negatives in the communities?”(Participant 5)

“...how do I remove the negative preconceived ideas about the community so that I can see the ‘gifts’ or the strengths in that community?” (Participant 6)

Even though students have not been formally trained in a problem-based approach to macro-level work, they were already aware of such a focus in social work, as well as in their own views of people and communities. Such awareness in their second year of study is perceived as an advantage, since it could provide a critical lens through which students can view the rest of the social work training.

The final finding that emerged regarding students’ views on community work and ABCD relates to ownership. Swanepoel and De Beer (2013:53) emphasise ownership as one of the key principles of community development that remind us that the practitioner should never be the main role-player. The community belongs to its members. Sadly, social workers in South Africa have a history of paternalism (Patel, Schmid & Hochfeld, 2012:215), of taking charge and taking on the responsibility of finding solutions for client systems. From the students’ reflections in their diaries, it became clear that after just one year of studying social work – a year where they are introduced to the social work professions and taught the general helping process – the students accepted this responsibility and are even weighed down by it. This supports Nel and Pretorius’ claim (2012:19) that the traditional approach to social work can be overwhelming. But then learning about and engaging with ABCD releases students from this responsibility.

“The ABCD is about giving communities space to create their own development so instead of the professionals finding solutions for the community members, they encourage self-determination”. (Participant 6)

“The ABCD training ... offering me a process where I will be working alongside the community members, instead of doing it for them or just telling them what needs to be done.” (Participant 4)

The findings from the students' reflections could be seen as indicative of social workers' apprehension towards macro-level work. Fearing unsafe communities and perceiving themselves as the ones responsible for providing solutions to problems shapes the negative views. Yet macro-level work, specifically community development, is singled out as a key strategy to the developmental social welfare paradigm (Department of Social Development, 1997). And this paradigm is supposed to be the foundation for social work in South Africa (Lombard, 2008:155). Introducing ABCD at second-year level sparks a more positive view of macro-level work, which changes the role of the social worker from provider to facilitator of development – a role that is embedded in the developmental social welfare paradigm (Department of Social Development, 1997).

Theme 2: Student experiences of an ABCD field practice

Once students started engaging with the communities they were assigned to – after attending workshops with the grant-maker organisation – the reflections in their learning diaries revolved mostly around their experience of applying ABCD for the first time.

Students were able to identify different types of assets. As Participant 3 commented:

“...we had the opportunity of being able to see the strengths of the community whilst walking through the streets.”

Community activities that could be viewed by some as common day-to-day pastimes were viewed through an asset lens. For example:

“The children are artistic and creative in the sense that they draw in the road with stones and play hop scotch.” (Participant 3)

This illustrates that students understood the ABCD paradigm and were able to apply it in a real-world setting.

Students had mixed experiences of conducting the appreciative inquiries by means of interviewing community members. One student reported on community members who already had a vision for their community and ideas to turn assets into opportunities.

“Many of the community members had ideas of what could be done with what the community has. One Oom [informal Afrikaans word for a man, lit. ‘uncle’] has an idea of relaying some of the water from the stream and starting a car wash at his house where he is the local mechanic.” (Participant 4)

Other students reported on community members who focused on problems and needs, even though they were asked appreciative questions:

“... the feedback I received from those questions, even though most of the feedback was negative, there was a few members who gave some positive feedback.” (Participant 2)

“Theory states that the appreciative inquiry helps to release the positive energies that have been hidden ... however, not present as the members had a demotivated ‘fed up’ tone while responding to certain questions. It seems evident that the members in the community have not yet experienced the release

of the positive energies and lack in viewing themselves in an empowering manner.” (Participant 3)

The mixed experiences of appreciative interviewing could be attributed to two factors. First, students were confronted with community members who themselves have been socialised in a deficit mindset. According to Russell and Smeaton (2010, cited in Nel & Pretorius, 2012:8) this happens when social workers have caused external dependence. Secondly, students were novices to ABCD and therefore still learning how to guide and facilitate community members to shift from problem-based to asset-based thinking. From these findings it can be deduced that ABCD is not a quick fix and that it would be naive to think that all communities would immediately embrace the approach. ABCD requires skill and experience. And it would therefore be advantageous to both students and communities if the approach can be utilised over more than one module.

Despite the challenges with community members responding to appreciative interviewing from a deficit approach, overall students reported on positive experiences and feelings in their learning diaries. Working from an ABCD approach unlocked energy and excitement.

“I feel excited to start implementing the tools in the community, because I saw that there are a lot of assets that the community has.” (Participant 6)

“I honestly thought that the practical would be difficult and that I wouldn’t enjoy it, but when time came for me to do the practical my feelings were the complete opposite. I really enjoyed working in the area.” (Participant 5)

The reported positive experiences support Nel and Pretorius’ finding (2012) that the ABCD approach revitalises both communities and practitioners. Although the process was short and introductory, students’ apprehensive views before commencement of the module changed into positive experiences.

CONCLUSION

Social work students are required to do field practicum on the macro level as part of their training. Although community development as a macro-level strategy is aligned to developmental social welfare, social workers in general are reluctant to work on the macro level. The article explored the application of the ABCD process in social work field education. The findings revealed that before commencement of the module students were apprehensive about engaging with communities. Their view was that communities do not have the ability to change and expect social workers to take responsibility for developing them. Students’ views became considerably more positive once they were introduced to the concept of ABCD. Although they realised it would be difficult to do, the students were eager to move from a deficit approach to an asset-based approach on the macro level – where the role of the social worker is to facilitate development.

Once students started engaging directly with community members, they were able to identify obvious as well as hidden assets. While some community members responded

positively to appreciative interviewing, others answered in terms of a deficit or needs-based paradigm. Yet students were still convinced of the value of ABCD.

The fee-related disruptions at institutions of higher learning in 2016 had an impact on the completion of the planned ABCD procedures as well as the size of the research sample. These were the limitations of the study. It is thus recommended that a similar study be undertaken with the same participants at the end of their third year of study after they have continued for another year in the same communities. Research on the views and experiences of the community members who participated in the ABCD process would also be valuable in understanding how communities benefit from ABCD applied in the training of social work students.

It would be premature to make deductions about students' preferences for, and interest in, working with communities in the future once they have graduated, but the findings of this study indicate that the foundation for a positive attitude towards macro-level work (and specifically community development) has been laid through the application of ABCD.

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