

ALUMNI PERCEPTIONS OF REGISTERED PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELLOR TRAINING AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

In this article the strengths, caveats and suggestions for improvement of a BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology presented at a traditional South African university from the viewpoint of 10 alumni students who were part of the 2016 cohort, are explored. The programme under investigation has been running since 2003 and is aimed at training mid-level psychological counsellors who have to pass the Health Professions Council of South Africa's (HPCSA) board examination for Psychology to formally qualify as registered counsellors. The HPCSA instituted the category of registered counsellor early in the 2000s to provide a route to basic psychological support for the majority of citizens without access to registered psychologists. In order to achieve the aim of this research, qualitative individual telephone interviews were conducted in 2017 to gather data from the counsellor alumni of the 2016 cohort. In total, 10 of a possible 26 participants voluntarily participated in the study. The perceptions of the participants were analysed, and findings suggest that the BEd Hons programme has the following strengths: weekly supervision by experienced lecturers enabled knowledge obtained through theoretical coursework to be applied during the practicum; various professional skills were also gained during the practicum, enabling students to feel competent in the workplace. A very strong focus on clients from disadvantaged communities was also seen as a particular strength. Some caveats were inadequate information about the psychological and job-related implications of the programme. Suggestions indicated that the organisation of the theoretical and practicum components could be reconsidered so as to optimise the programme in future. Furthermore, it was found that transformation in this type of higher education programme is needed on a theoretical and practical level by ensuring broadened access to the programme and listening to the voices of the students regarding the curriculum.

Keywords: registered counsellor, programme evaluation, transformation in African higher education, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Various South African (and international) psychosocial risks – such as unemployment, the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and alcohol and drug abuse – create a need for competent therapists to alleviate the impact of risk in affected persons and communities (John 2012, 1), and ensure a more socially just society. Unfortunately, a scarcity of qualified therapists (such as psychologists) is experienced in developing countries (such as South Africa) because of a multitude of contributing factors. Access to professional psychologists is more readily available in developed countries (and affluent South African communities) because of better economic prospects and uninhibited social structures (Cook, Jimerson, and Begeny 2010, 438). To address this specific challenge of limited access to psychological services in South Africa, the university where this research was undertaken, launched the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology in 2003 for the purpose of training competent registered counsellors to intervene at a primary healthcare level to compensate for the scarcity of psychologists with a mental health focus in the South African context (Hay 2018, 2).

The programme was developed by taking into consideration the goals of the Professional Board for Psychology for the qualification category to provide good quality mid-level psychological care at primary healthcare level (HPCSA 2019, 1). Good quality psychological care in the South African context by registered counsellors can be described as the prevention of psychological ill health and the promotion of psychological health, especially among those from previously disadvantaged contexts. The focus of this category is for short-term intervention and supportive psychological counselling (Abel and Louw 2006, 99). However, conflicting results from the literature show that the ideals of the Professional Board for Psychology to have a mid-level psychological impact on communities are not necessarily reached due to a lack of available jobs and the difficulty in creating financially viable careers as registered counsellors (Abel and Louw 2009, 99).

The rationale of this investigation was, therefore, to gauge the relevance of the selected university's BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology in terms of the socially just vision as set out by the Professional Board for Psychology (HPCSA 2019, 1), but also to illustrate the importance of challenging our current programmes from the perspective of an "African philosophy in Education" (see Waghid 2019, 462).

BACKGROUND ON THE UNIVERSITY'S BED HONS PROGRAMME IN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

This university has been training student registered counsellors at BEd Hons Educational Psychology level since 2003 (Joubert and Hay 2020, 1). The training has seemingly grown in

popularity over the years, with 63 applications received at the end of 2015 and eventually the highest number ever of 26 student counsellors being selected for 2016. Unfortunately, very slow progress had been made in terms of racial equity over the last decade – despite numerous efforts – with only one or two students of colour being part of the cohort per year. The 2016 cohort unfortunately had no person of colour, nor any males.

The requirements for registration as registered counsellor at the HPCSA include the completion of a board-accredited four-year BPsych- or Honours degree in (Educational) Psychology as well as 720 professional practicum hours while registered as a student counsellor. The programme also includes a research project that must be completed in order to graduate. The theoretical part of the programme consists of the following professional training as set out by the Professional Board for Psychology for the training of the category of registered counsellor in the South African context (HPCSA 2019, 1): professional ethics and conduct; interviewing techniques; client observation skills; basic counselling skills; development of preventative and developmental programmes; report writing; conceptualisation skills, biopsychosocial and systems theory as appropriate for community interventions; structured trauma counselling; and community understanding and intervention.

The programme deals with the following psychometric competencies within the scope of practice: cultural beliefs and diversity; language sensitivity; entrepreneurial skills; and psycho-educational skills. Student registered counsellors are also thoroughly trained in the ethics code, Bill of Rights and other relevant legislation that enables qualified counsellors to practise with competence within the legislative framework. Added to the mentioned theoretical component, a practical component (called the practicum) must also be completed. The cohort of 2016 were exposed to a public hospital setting as well as three schools with diverse learners and largely differing socio-economic circumstances where they, under the supervision of an experienced lecturer, engaged in practical sessions with clients to complete the required 720 practicum hours (HPCSA 2019, 1).

The following section engages theoretically with what is expected from a programme to develop confident student registered counsellors with skills to meet the needs of the workplace.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A WELL-STRUCTURED COUNSELLING PROGRAMME

Filling the gap between theory and practice

Even though the theoretical component within a higher education institution's programme is designed with the focus on the workplace environment, a common struggle within higher education training for students is the divide between theory and the reality of the workplace

environment (Compton et al. 2009, 2). Some of the reasons for the disconnect might be that higher education institutions keep to traditional Eurocentric theories and do not keep up with newer methods of intervention strategies and changing workplace environments that are applicable to the African context (Korthagen, Loughian, and Russell 2006, 1020). For this reason, institutions must be vigilant to constantly change and improve their theoretical modules in line with the most recent techniques in therapy to lay the right foundation for student registered counsellors to have a sense of competence in the workplace environment (adapted from Compton et al. 2009, 2).

Furthermore, some elements in the workplace – such as adapting to the workplace environment in terms of relationships with colleagues and conforming to existing practices within a particular workplace environment – might not necessarily be taught by institutions through theoretical modules (Lacey 2012, 8). With counsellor training in mind, this means providing enough and relevant practical exposure through practical hours to equip students with the necessary skills to feel competent and self-assured in the workplace environment (Finlay-Jones, Kane, and Rees 2015, 1).

Developing self-confidence in the profession

Self-confidence is important in any professional work environment to develop professionally and having a feeling of competence, while developing professional skills (Hurt and Prosek 2014, 1). It is also important to develop other professional skills, such as collaborating with team members and being efficient with time management. When student registered counsellors gain such skills, they will also experience a sense of belonging in the workplace environment and a sense of camaraderie within their profession (adapted from Thompson 2009, 30). Furthermore, therapeutic skills – such as empathy for the client and being able to refer – will also benefit student registered counsellors to feel part of their profession and capable of collaborating well with others, albeit clients and/or colleagues (inferred from Van Niekerk and Hay 2009, 67).

The importance of being supervised by experienced mentors

Having faith in your ability as registered counsellor needs to develop during training under the guidance of experienced supervisors/mentors. Mentorship within the training context creates a feeling of support and care, as advocated by the African concept of “Ubuntu” (inferred from Waghid 2019, 462). Supervision and mentorship imply being able to facilitate the psychosocial and career development of student registered counsellors. The foundation of mentoring implies guidance, support, sharing of knowledge, being a role model and providing access to

opportunities within the workplace environment (Buyukgoze-Kavas et al. 2010, 387). For student registered counsellors, this means having access to regular weekly personal consultations with more experienced registered counsellors or psychologists who can effectively guide them in the theory presented within the programme, as well as applying the theory being taught to real-life case studies/client scenarios that the student registered counsellors might face during their practicum (inferred from Thompson 2009, 30). It also implies providing enough information regarding possible work positions in future while training student registered counsellors to competently handle diverse situations and adapting to the ever-changing workplace environment (Coetzee and Roythorne-Jacobs 2007, 54).

Training to deal with diversity

Diversity in the workplace environment is especially a reality in the South African context and entails colleagues and clients from diverse cultures, races, religions, socio-economic classes, disabilities and sexual orientations. These matters require counsellors to be adaptive and flexible (Du Preez and Roos 2008, 699; Pillay 2011, 351). Diversity is especially true for clients who will have diverse experiences, belief systems and needs when going into counselling with a student registered counsellor. Being competent in understanding different multicultural contexts is important to inform the approach needed by student registered counsellors when considering the most appropriate course of action with a client. It surely would be a challenge when student registered counsellors do not understand how to cater for the diverse needs of clients because of a lack of diversity training (Dahir 2009, 3).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The literature discussed above suggests the importance of developing student registered counsellors' professional skills through mentorship and applicable theoretical content that will enable competent practices in the workplace. Deducted from the literature review, the research reported in this article was guided by the following research question: What are the perceived strengths, caveats and suggestions for improvement of a BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology presented at a traditional South African university? This against the background of a more socially just society foreseen by the HPCSA's establishment of the category of *registered counsellor*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework underpinning this investigation is firstly strongly linked to the original theory of Donald Kirkpatrick's model for programme evaluation, which includes the

following four levels: “reaction, learning, behaviour and results” (Kirkpatrick 1959, 3; Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick 2006, 17). “Reaction” implies that alumni’s observations and reactions towards the training programme are evaluated. This evaluation, in turn, is then used to determine how they feel about the training programme (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick 2005, 27). The “learning” that took place within the training programme will modify the “behaviour” that follows. Typically, the researcher evaluating the programme would see what knowledge and skills were acquired during the learning process. Subsequently, the researcher would evaluate whether the knowledge and skills are transferable to the workplace – thus, if the theoretical aspects of the programme effectively meet practice (Finlay-Jones et al. 2015, 1). Thus, in the context of registered counsellors, this means that they were able to effectively use the knowledge and skills gained in the workplace. According to Lee and Pershing (2002, 175), evaluating participating alumni’s “reaction” has been the most effective way to determine the effectiveness of a programme.

Based on the aforementioned, it can be argued that a well-designed programme will lead to positive reactions from students, that they will engage in deep learning regarding the content of the programme and that this will lead to change in their behaviour and their performance in practice. Rouse (2011, 1), however, critique this assumption by stating that, although the student might possess the necessary knowledge, skills and positive attitude, it does not guarantee that the student will be able to apply these in the workplace. Furthermore, if the foundations to cultivate competent and skilful registered counsellors are not solid (as mentioned in the introduction) and if the reactions of alumni are not positive towards the programme (Kirkpatrick 1959, 3; Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick 2006, 19), registered counsellors may definitely be hindered to have the self-confidence to be ready in the workplace.

This article focusses on the *reaction* element from alumni in relation to improving the theoretical as well as practical components of the BEd Hons Educational Psychology programme. The evaluation thus assessed the usefulness and appropriateness of and contribution the programme’s content, methods and resources are making to train student registered counsellors. It is important to fully understand the perceived reaction from the alumni in a (South) African context in terms of the strengths, caveats and suggestions for the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology.

A second theoretical lens relates to Waghid’s African philosophy of Education, where human problems pertinent to Africa are highlighted and interrogated (Waghid 2019, 461). He uses the example of authoritarianism which is to be dissected within an African philosophy of education: in this investigation’s instance the human problem within Education may be described as a lack of access to basic (educational) psychological services, and how higher

education in (South) Africa is addressing this gap.

This investigation utilised both the framework of Kirkpatrick to evaluate a programme and Waghid's challenge within an African philosophy of Education to interrogate this pertinent absence of basic psychological services to most South Africans, to come up with recommendations for improved training of registered counsellors. The perceptions of students were central to support (South) African higher education institutions to "rethink, reframe and reconstruct" the current curriculum offered at these institutions (Heleta 2016, no page numbering).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Aim of the research

The aim of the research was to determine how BEd Hons Educational Psychology alumni of a traditional South African university perceived the strengths and caveats of the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology presented at the specific campus and to elicit their suggestions on how to possibly improve the programme and make it more relevant for the (South) African context.

Research paradigm and design

In order to gauge the perceptions of the alumni of the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology, a qualitative research approach with a basic qualitative design within an interpretivist and transformative paradigm was fitting – this supports social constructivist research (Ciesielska and Jemielniak 2018, 88). This kind of research assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjective epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings) and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures (Creswell 2012, 46).

Furthermore, an interpretivist and transformative paradigm is based on the belief that the systemic context in which people are situated will influence how they make meaning of their situation; that meaning will differ from system to system; and that changes are also effected where necessary (Maree and Van der Westhuizen 2010, 9). The researchers had to choose a research design that was flexible and allowed for deep exploration of participants' meaning-making for the purpose of changing the programme where necessary.

Ethics procedure

This research was a subproject of the encompassing research project approved by the

university's Institutional Ethics Committee (approval number 00244-16-A2). An informed consent letter was signed by each of the participants stating confidentiality and anonymity of the information obtained. Participants willingly participated and could withdraw from the research at any time. However, no participants withdrew. A research assistant of the second author collected data from the 2016 cohort. Trustworthiness of the procedure was enhanced because the research assistant used the same interview schedule for all interviews.

Sampling of participants

To achieve the aim of recruiting participants, a class list was obtained (with effort as the Protection of Personal Information Act of 2013 posed some obstacles) from the university's alumni office of the BEd Hons Educational Psychology class of 2016, after indicating that ethical clearance had been obtained for the research. To be included in the study, participants had to have been part of the graduating alumni of the year 2016. All 26 candidates on the list were emailed and phoned for recruitment purposes as they met the requirements for the study. In total, 10 of the 26 cohort voluntarily participated in the study. The most pertinent reason provided for not participating by a majority of the cohort participants, was that they were too busy. Another factor may have been that some never registered as counsellors and felt embarrassed to participate. Table 1 offers an overview of the 10 participants' particulars; interesting to note that all were white ladies:

Table 1: Personal particulars of participants

Participant	Alumni year	Primary job description	Status regarding Registered counsellor
Participant 1	2016	Teacher	Registered counsellor
Participant 2	2016	Full-time honours student in clinical psychology	Registered counsellor
Participant 3	2016	Teacher	Registered counsellor
Participant 4	2016	Teacher	Registered counsellor
Participant 5	2016	Teacher	Registered counsellor
Participant 6	2016	Teacher	Not registered
Participant 7	2016	Teacher	Registered counsellor
Participant 8	2016	Teacher	Not registered
Participant 9	2016	Full-time honours student in clinical psychology	Not registered
Participant 10	2016	Full-time counsellor at special school	Registered counsellor

From Table 1, it seems that seven of the 10 participants were registered counsellors, while five of the seven participants that were registered counsellors were at the time employed as educators. One of the other registered counsellors was a full-time student and another was a full-time counsellor at a special school. Two of the three participants who were not registered

were employed as teachers and the other one was a full-time student. At first glance, it seemed as if most of the participants' psychosocial contribution in the workplace was related to being teachers who were fulfilling a (secondary) counselling role in the school context.

Data-collection methods

Semi-structured individual telephone interviews were conducted to gather data on the strengths and caveats of the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology presented at the specific university as well as possible suggestions to improve the programme. The researchers felt that this main data-collection method was most appropriate to answer the research question. Semi-structured interviews give structure to ensure that responses to questions direct the aim under investigation (Maree and Van der Westhuizen 2010, 58). Individual interviews were also deemed most suitable as they would ensure that each question comes across clearly and as comprehensible as possible, therefore avoiding the likelihood of any data being lost during communication and/or as a matter of misinterpretation. Telephone interviews were also convenient as some of the participants lived far away from the university campus.

A trained fieldworker used this data-collection method to collect data that focussed on obtaining answers to the strengths and caveats of the programme (Creswell 2012, 124). More specifically, the interview schedule comprised five questions enquiring about the connection between theoretical and practicum elements of the programme and asking for suggestions to improve upon the programme. Table 2 provides a visual overview of the interview schedule.

Table 2: Interview schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR INDIVIDUAL SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS	
1.	What will you describe as the most important gaps in the BEd Hons in Educational Psychology training programme?
2.	What will you describe as the most important strong points in the BEd Hons in Educational Psychology training programme?
3.	What part of the programme would you have definitely changed if you were the programme leader? Please be specific.
4.	According to your judgement, how did the theoretical and practicum parts compare?
5.	In what manner did the programme prepare you for the practice of counselling?

Document analysis via the HPCSA website during 2017 was a second data-collection method utilised to determine the registration status of the alumni. In this way, confirmation was obtained as to whether the 10 participants completed the examination of the Professional Board for Psychology successfully to register as registered counsellors. One blind spot here was that the researchers could not determine whether a female alumna married since 2016 and perhaps had her surname changed. However, the reasoning was that the HPCSA processes to change

surnames on the website would have taken longer than the few months after the 2016 completion of the programme, thus leaving only the slimmest of chances that a participant's registration status was missed.

Data analysis

The semi-structured interviews generated 10 data sets. The data were transcribed and analysed using inductive content analysis (Creswell 2012, 132). The inductive data analysis relied on the constant comparative method to determine themes within the data before comparing the themes across the data sets (Ciesielska and Jemielniak 2018, 75). This method led to a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions of the strengths and caveats of the programme as well as suggestions on improving on the BEd Hons programme. Attention was given to conduct a trustworthy data analysis, and the researchers were satisfied with the validity of the findings that emerged (Maree and Van der Westhuizen 2010, 63).

FINDINGS

Strengths of the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology

This section describes the strengths of the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology. The following main themes emerged from the data: theory prepares for the practicum; gaining professional skills during practicum; mentorship experienced as valuable.

Theme 1: Theory prepares for the practicum

Participants 1 and 10 felt that the theory prepared them well for the practical component of the course, with Participant 1 expressing it as follows: "It prepared me well. When I started with practice, I fetched all my notes and filing from home". Participants 3 and 8 concurred. Participant 3 explained that "everything is discussed ... the content of the programme is really helpful ... it prepares you [sic] well for cases and any case ...". Participants 2 and 4 also felt that it was a plus that they engaged in practice while being taught the theory. Participant 4 explained as follows: "... we do the practice while we study ... then we can get supervision with people [sic] knowing what is happening in the field".

Participant 2 was of the opinion that especially certain coursework prepared her well, such as the legislation discussed in classes and specific therapeutic techniques: "it is good that we do the laws [sic] ... so that you know the legal side of things and know when it is outside the scope of practice. It protects you and the university also if, for example, you are taught to draw a person, then one can go out and practise that on someone." Participant 5 mentioned "we learnt

about different approaches and one could apply it". Participant 6 felt that the theory provided a basis for doing the practicum: "at the end of the day, there was a basis that I could focus upon or a theory, but my focus at the end was on the people". Participant 9 further expressed that both the theory and practicum at the hospital were good: "the modules presented were super good; the programme was a very good programme, and I do appreciate that I could work in the hospital".

Theme 2: Gaining professional skills during the practicum

The findings suggested that various professional skills were developed through the practical exposure of the student registered counsellors.

Subtheme 2.1: Improving self-confidence

Participant 10 expressed how proud she was to have been part of a university that exposed their students to a hospital setting and not just a school setting: "This is the only university that has an educational psychology programme at a hospital, where you are exposed to during your practicum ... if I did not have that exposure, I think I would not today have the post I secured [sic]." Participant 2 said that the resources given to them during the practical exposure helped her to gain professional self-confidence: "If we did not have the practicum as we did, it would have been a lot more daunting for me to step into practice and apply the knowledge."

Subtheme 2.2: Gaining capacity to skilfully deal with diverse situations

Participant 7 felt that the practical experience gained was good exposure to them, as "the things that we were exposed to, is the world's reality. So, I think the experience that we gained is the best experience we could get [sic]." Participant 10 concurred and expressed her gratitude towards being able to find work: "it prepared me well for practice ... to actually being able to find work". Participant 3 also felt that the practical work enabled her to experience all the theories in practice. She felt satisfied with the type of clients she got and content with what she achieved: "fortunately, I received something of everything for each type of counselling technique ... the practicum is very precious. The practical hours ensure that you are prepared for what you can expect [sic], which steps to follow, and the different types of techniques to already have an idea – and all of it in combination to provide better preparation/application for the start of a practice." Participant 8 felt that one of the strengths of the programme was the exposure to different people and gaining an empathetic understanding of the clients' lives: "strong points are definitely the exposure; the hospital setting was great because there you got exposure to different groups of people ... you understood for the first time what is happening in

people's lives ... you can give empathy [sic].”

Subtheme 2.3: Feeling of belonging and working collaboratively

Participant 5 concurred with the variety of professional skills gained: “I have grown in many aspects, such as self-confidence, perseverance, and broadening your [sic] knowledge in all ways, learnt to work in a team at the hospital with the doctors, nurses, dieticians and teachers”. Participant 8 added that communication skills between students were also facilitated through group work and collaborative efforts: “the types of things we did took a lot of collaboration and group work, you learn from one another and you can compare cases with one another”. Furthermore, Participant 6 felt part of the hospital when a counselling centre was provided to the student counsellors on the hospital terrain: “in the beginning, there was no place to sit and to do your admin – you had to sit in the hallway and when we gained the centre, you felt like you belong to the hospital ... you feel more than a counsellor – it feels that you have your own place where you can do your work [sic].”

Subtheme 2.4: Gaining competence in basic therapeutic skills

Participant 7 felt that she gained professional skills throughout this programme to support children emotionally: “the things that I am confronted with are typically the things I am confronted with in life – the death of parents, children that are being abused, and such things. It prepares you well – I know how to speak to them about situations, how to form a connection with someone and to get children to talk to you [sic] about situations.” Other skills enabling better practices included the different professional skills as explained by Participant 5, namely “you must make notes the whole time, must be objective and not put personal feelings in the session, not to tell others about what was said in the sessions; the referral process was very good, it prepared you to be fine with referring a client to other people, such as dietitians, doctors, that you could refer to [sic]”. Important skills in the workplace, such as time management and planning, were viewed by Participant 8 as valuable skills gained: “I learnt to multitask, we had to do a huge amount of work in a very short time period. This was an excellent learning curve in terms of time management and planning.”

Theme 3: Mentorship experienced as valuable

Participant 2 felt that mentorship enabled her to counsel with confidence, as “it is a good thing that we are provided with supervision from people that have experience in psychology and the practice thereof”. Participant 4 explained why she was motivated to prepare before practicum: “it (the theory) comes from experienced psychologists that know what they are talking about,

and thus you ensured that you are prepared before you start working [sic]”. Participant 6 relied on her supervisors as a starting point in deciding on a therapeutic strategy to follow: “I talked to my supervisors about a given situation because you [sic] are still learning”. Participant 7 gained value from the supervision sessions, as “from my own experience, sometimes there were things that I did not understand or wondered about, and by talking to them (supervisors) and reasoning about the situation, without them telling me what to do, added value to me because I could go and apply it”. Participant 8 showed appreciation for the supervision provided: “it helped me a lot that I could ask for advice and ask what I must do. I think we can bring that in further.”

Caveats of the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology

The findings also indicated perceptions regarding some caveats of the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology that can be improved upon. The main themes were: a deficiency of information about implications of the programme; improving on the organisation of the practicum; and improving on the theoretical component of the practicum.

Theme 4: Deficiency of information about implications of the programme

One of the caveats of the programme was that not enough information was provided to potential applicants before starting the programme. More specifically, a lack of communication with regard to future work prospects was mentioned by Participants 4, 6 and 8. Participant 6 articulated this as follows: “it must be communicated to us what the opportunities are that come from this programme; a lot of people I know are just teachers, there is not really work opportunities as counsellor [sic]”. Participant 7 felt that, when students apply for the programme, the psychological implications of the practicum must be communicated to the students before they apply: “the students must early on be better prepared of what will be expected of them; it is not just a physically exhausting course, but also emotionally extremely exhausting – the emotional part was the most difficult part for me. An open day would be nice where you could talk to people from a practical viewpoint and not a theoretical one. Someone telling you what happens, what you see, hear and experience ... not everyone of us is used to suicide and such things like that [sic].”

Theme 5: Improving the organisation of the practicum

The findings suggested that the organisation of the practical component led to some weak dynamics within the student groups, and some suggestions were made in terms of the focus of the practicum sites.

Subtheme 5.1: Dynamics within student groups

Some conflictual dynamics within student groups were experienced as a consequence of various aspects, such as organising the hours of students, that they would be able to complete their hours in time, providing enough opportunities for sessions with clients, more places to do practicum, etcetera. For example, Participant 8 explained that the following was needed: “someone who can help us with the planning of our practical hours to divide our hours such that we know when we should go to the hospital”. Participant 10 further expressed a lack of control and honesty of students as regards hours worked as well as accountability within the division of groups: “I think the control of hours was not what it was supposed to be. I, for instance, worked over 900 hours and the other girls over 400, but they easily could have written down that they worked 800 hours ... the division of groups must also be more fair as well as liability for participation in the groups.”

Starting with a client and not being able to finish the counselling process with a particular client and the feeling that they were thrown into the deep end at the start of their year without adequate theoretical background, were also emphasised. Participant 6 concurred that, “in the first semester, there were too many students in order to divide the work at the hospital, there were not enough work, a patient stay, for example, two weeks at the hospital, so how many sessions can you have with the client? [sic]” Participants 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7 felt that there were too many students in the programme, resulting in a backlog of students not obtaining practical experience via the required hours needed. Participant 4 explained that “there were too many students in the course, resulting in not everyone getting work to complete their hours ... we were about 26 students ... we should at most be 15; you work at the hospital that is not large enough; and there are not clients for everyone”. Participant 7 explained the conflict that resulted from being too many students doing their practicum: “there was not necessarily enough clients that year for the number of sessions that you must do. Now, all the students sit and fight over a client, because everyone wants that client, and it resulted in a lot of conflict amongst yourself and your friends [sic].”

Subtheme 5.2: Shifting the focus of the practicum

Another suggestion was that the focus should not be so much on the hospital setting but also on the school communities that formed part of their practicum. Participant 7 explained: “I experienced that a lot of attention was given to the hospital, they must focus (more) on the schools as well, because the children going to the hospitals go to the schools as well and they must get support at those schools. I feel they must give just as much attention to the schools as

the hospital ... they should not just focus on three schools and one hospital, their facilities must expand so that they can go to more places.” Participant 9 concurred that more schools were needed as most practical hours were gained from the hospital: “I thought we could have obtained a lot more hours from the schools. I was only involved with two schools and the one involvement ended prematurely; thus, technically, I was only at one school.” Her advice was as follows: “I would have approached the schools earlier to get more clients.”

Theme 6: Improving the theoretical component of the programme

The recommendations from the participants proposed the following changes in the theoretical component of the BEd Hons programme.

Subtheme 6.1 Overwhelming amount of theory

Participant 10 expressed her gratitude for the lecturers’ accessibility in terms of academic support, as “the academic support was excellent as well as the approach-ability of the lecturers”. However, Participants 3, 5 and 8 felt that the overwhelming number of theories dealt with detracted from gaining the necessary knowledge to start with the practicum at the beginning of the year. They would have liked to get an overview of the theory at the beginning of the year to have a basic reference as to what existed as resources for their clients and which lecturer could provide help with a particular issue. Participant 3 explained: “for example, at the end of the year, we started with positive psychology. If I would have known something at the beginning of the year about it, I could have applied it to my clients.” The participant’s suggestion to overcome this obstacle was as follows: “Use enough time initially to provide a big overview of the year, what is expected in the assignments given and what aspects will be dealt with and then just one paragraph summary so that you can have that throughout the year and while doing practicum to have the bigger picture.” Participant 5 suggested that when theory is discussed, it should also show the practical side of matters, for example, “before you do practicum, tell us precisely that, if you work [sic] with a patient or a client for the first time, then you do this, and this is how you end”. Participant 8 concurred with the other participants by stating “we did a lot of theory, but I feel that we could focus more [sic] on the practical situations to help the counsellors in that way”. She suggested further that this was needed, “especially in the hospital setting, creating different scenarios and providing help on how you could go about doing it”.

Subtheme 6.2: More scope of practice-specific theory

Some of the theory covered was viewed as outside of the scope of practice of counsellors, and

this overwhelmed Participants 9 and 5. Participant 9 explained: “I did not know why we had to do certain assessments in our assessment modules, as I did not gain anything from that”. Participant 5 suggested replacing that theory with aspects that needed more attention: “more attention could have been given to the scope of practice, because in the things they gave us, it will be stated that you [sic] are not allowed to diagnose, but you may identify, but you do not know to which level it applies to”. Furthermore, not having enough practise in psychometric testing of clients, which formed part of the theoretical element during training, was also considered as a challenge. Participant 1 felt that more variation in testing of clients based on the theory covered would have enabled better skills for the future.

DISCUSSION

These findings seem to confirm that the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology at this particular university prepares student registered counsellors relatively well to engage with diverse client contexts through the mentorship and practical exposure provided within the programme. The diverse contexts of especially the practicum prepared students very well for facilitating a more socially just society, despite the disadvantage that these alumni were all white ladies.

The reaction from the participating alumni was generally positive, and the suggestions made to eradicate possible gaps in the programme can now be addressed by the programme developers, as advocated by Donald Kirkpatrick’s model for programme evaluation (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick 2005, 27). These suggestions include a shift in focus to even more varied practicum sites so as to improve upon the existing strengths of the programme in terms of exposure to different therapeutic cases. Student registered counsellors also seemed to be well-equipped with workplace and therapeutic skills that enabled a sense of competence and belonging within the profession. However, a closer look may be needed to eradicate any unnecessary theoretical elements that may dilute the focus of the programme, and the initial focus of the theory at the start of the programme also needs to be re-evaluated with an improved African focus. It is further recommended that a more thorough investigation be done into work opportunities for student registered counsellors to equip qualified counsellors with information on future job prospects that are primarily relevant to a disadvantaged (South) African context and workplace.

CONCLUSION

The human problem of insufficient access to basic (educational) psychological services within (South) Africa seems to be a pertinent issue to be interrogated within an African philosophy of

Education (inferred from Waghid 2019, 462). This investigation dealt with the voices of students about their registered counsellor programme experiences, and at the same time put forward the socially unjust lack of access of a majority of South Africans to basic (educational) psychological support.

A number of strengths and weaknesses were identified in the programme, but what stands out is that students have been exposed to a diverse client population, with an emphasis on disadvantaged clients in the public hospital and schools. In this sense the programme made a substantial contribution to alleviate the lack of access to basic (educational) psychological services in the particular community. However, it is doubtful whether this contribution is sustained as alumni, as Joubert and Hay (2020, 8) found that these counsellors mainly functioned as teachers – and only engaged in counselling as a secondary role at the schools/in their communities.

A further matter that stands out is that the composition of the alumni suggests that a radical shift is necessary to include students from all cultures and genders to ensure optimal basic (educational) psychological support to especially disadvantaged communities.

NOTE

1. The HPCSA did suspend the BEd Hons programme in Educational Psychology as equivalent to a BPsych qualification while we were busy writing this article.

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