Students - A Vital Agent and Voice Towards Curriculum Transformation

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The aim of this study is to highlight the indispensability of students in effective and efficient curriculum transformation towards academic and professional emancipation. Students are the pivotal agent for curriculum transformation to enable efficient and effective development of inclusive curriculum for educational and intellectual propagation. However, students enrolling into the higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa come from different diverse backgrounds with regards to their prior education, language, economic, social as well as cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in order for the students to navigate around the hurdles towards achieving success in the higher education institutions, there is every need for students to have a voice in curriculum transformation. Qualitative research method was employed using purposive sampling techniques to identify post graduate students within the higher institution. The study data was analysed using thematic analysis and findings shows that active students' participation in curriculum transformation and in educational process enhances their learning experiences with improved pedagogy and contribute to the implementation of curricula that meets students' needs and interests, relevance, inclusiveness, as well as engaging. The study recommends that higher educational institutions should embrace student voice and agency as a fundamental principle in curriculum transformation.

Keywords: Students, Voice, Transformation, Academic, Curriculum, Emancipation |

Introduction

In recent times, student voice has evolved, emanating the need to be involved in curriculum design, development, management and transformation. Curriculum can be viewed as a bedrock of education. Historically, the comments made by students was usually influenced by their parents but in recent times, the advent of 'student voice' has paved the way for new possibilities (Leat and Reid, 2012). Haupt and Erasmus (2018) stated that the university is a space where students assimilate new knowledge, unlock the knowledge and harnessed it in order to meet the high-level skills demand that is required in the labour market. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report of (2018) stresses on the need for higher institutions to develop and equip students with the twenty-first century learning skills required to navigate the uncertain future of world of work, hence the need for integrated curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation towards making the vision of future education to become a reality. These developments can only be achieved through the enhancement of student voice and agency in curriculum transformation.

With the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and the evolving landscape of education, students voice has transcended beyond the traditional boundaries. Students are now taking charge of their learning and seen as agents of change. According to Bishop (2018), the engagement of students in the curriculum development is currently one of the most important issues in higher education. The author claimed that attempts have been made to involve students in enhancing the quality of education. For example, in South Africa institutions, students are being involved only when the Council on Higher Education (CHE) are coming for institutional audit to promote quality assurance, this is because it is stipulated that students must participate. It is argued

that if students can be involved in quality assurance, it then means that students can offer unique insights that can lead to more effective and engaging educational practices. The aim of this study is to investigate the role of students in curriculum transformation and how their voices can contribute to the creation of inclusive and relevant curricula.

Literature review

Curriculum can be viewed from different perspectives; it can be defined as the entire experiences acquired by students in the educational process (Shakhnoza and Nargiza, 2022). According to Udel (2024), curriculum refers to "an interactive system of instruction used for learning with specific goals, contents, strategies, measurement, and resources". In the South Africa context, the department of basic education defined curriculum as the series of guidelines with the aim of ensuring that learners acquire and apply the required knowledge and skills that will prepare them for future career. Rajurkar et al. (2019) indicated that there are three types of curriculums namely, explicit curriculum, implicit curriculum and null curriculum. Explicit curriculum is the popular curriculum used in schools - it encompasses a well-designed master plan which includes the learning objectives, topics to be taught under different subjects, qualities of the teachers who would teach each subject, materials to be used and how the curriculum will be verified for effectiveness. Implicit curriculum is the curriculums that are constructed mostly by the teachers based on the geo-political and socioeconomical location where it is being implemented. Lastly is the null curriculum, which is the curriculum that is not taught in schools. For example, there are some topics that are not covered or taught as a result of reasons best known to the teacher or school, hence they fall under the null curriculum (Rajurkar et al., 2019). In all, the main outcome of curriculum is the successful transfer of knowledge as well as the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to learners.

According to Shakhnoza and Nargiza (2022), curriculum design comprises of the planning, formation, the production processes as well as teaching activities involved within a class or course. Curriculum design focuses on the subject, the learner and the problems (real life issues) that will assist learners develop skills that are transferable to the real world (Schweitzer, 2024). The objective of curriculum design is to improve and enhance students learning.

Curriculum development and transformation are different in the sense that curriculum development is the dynamic relationship between the objectives, content, teaching and learning process as well as the evaluation elements of the educational program (Duran and Mertol, 2020) while curriculum transformation involves the continuous reorganizing and reassessing of the teaching and learning process (Haupt and Erasmus, 2018). In other words, curriculum transformation is a vital process that reflects the dynamic needs of society, responsiveness to new pedagogical approaches within disciplines and technology, taking into consideration diverse learner populations. Haupt and Erasmus (2018) highlighted that there are four drivers of curriculum transformation in the institution namely, responsiveness to social context; epistemological diversity; renewal of pedagogy; and institutional culture of openness and critical reflection. The role of students' voice in this transformation cannot be overemphasized.

Students' Voice

Voice can be viewed from different perspectives. According to McLeod (2011), voice can mean identity, agency, power, capacity, aspirations. It can also be referred to as a coded word that is used to represent difference, participation and inclusion, or be the expression of an essentialized group identity for the purpose of policy reform and action. However, student voice in the context of higher education is used to describe a range of activities used to gather evaluations and feedback from students in order to improve the curriculum as well as to broaden the participatory and inclusive research which is designed to affect transformational outcomes (Younga and Jerome, 2020). In this study, student voice is considered as students' systematic inclusion to be partners with policy makers on discussions and decisions that affects their life such as curriculum, instruction, scheduling, organization as well as operations (Klaver, 2022). Researchers such as Zhu, Zhu and Hua (2024) posit that incorporating student voices in curriculum design and transformation have a significant impact on students' motivation and commitment in the learning process and leads to greater empowerment and engagement because students feel belonged and have control over their learning process.

Further, recent calls have refocused attention on the importance of students' voice in relation to rights, democratic and future education (OECD 2018; UNESCO 2021; UNICEF 2019). O'Reilly and O'Grady (2024) acknowledge that students are actively shaping their education and building on their insights, by voicing out their unique and valuable perspectives on how teaching and learning can be improved. The obvious question remains how students can be involved in curriculum transformation?

However, the Lundy model of participation provides answers to the question, Lundy assert that learners can transform and participate by airing their views and experiences using four key elements namely, space, voice, audience and influence. In other words, the model posit that students must be given a safe space to express their views, and their voice must be heard and given due weight to influence the decisions that will be acted

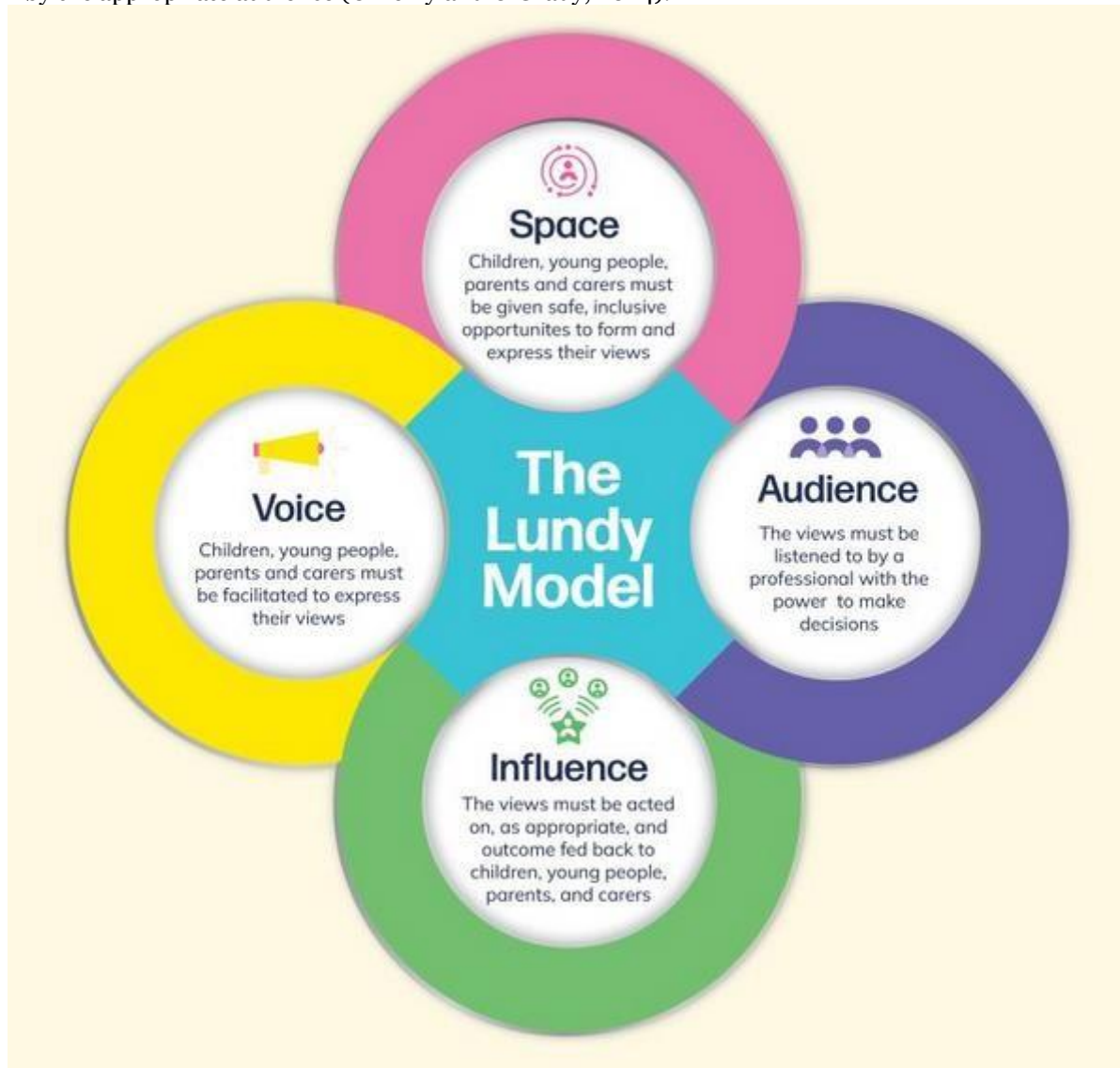upon by the appropriate audience (O'Reilly and O'Grady, 2024).

Figure 1: The Lundy Model of Participation

Source: Freud (2024)

Factually, students need to be included in decisions that impact their lives, Klaver (2022) cited that most times teachers and educational leaders are engrossed on keeping the classrooms safe for students and improving the pedagogy taking out the involvement of students in the decision plan. Educators must effectively manage this process for successful outcomes. Bishop (2018) posits that for successful outcomes students voice can be enacted through the use of formal mechanisms such as module evaluations, reports, feedback, student/staff committee meetings, workshops, institutional surveys and student representatives.

This research was built on the constructivist learning theory which emphasizes on the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through their experiences and reflections. It is the view of the constructivists that learning is affected by students' beliefs and attitudes and how they are being taught. Moreover, according to Mcleod (2024), constructivism is a learning approach whereby learners construct knowledge actively and reality is determined by the experiences of the learner. Bada (2015:66) assert that constructivism is "an approach to teaching and learning based on the premise that cognition (learning) is the result of mental construction". In other words, learners are the active creators of their own knowledge. For example, when learners come across new information, they interpret the information based on the context of their own experiences and thereafter conclude by either changing their belief or neglect the new information.

Bada (2015) posits that the constructivist view of learning can be carried out in the classroom by using different pedagogies so as to encourage learners to actively participate by asking questions, exploring and assessing what they already know. Walden University (2024) highlighted the six key principles of constructivist learning theory to include:

- Learners bring unique prior knowledge, experience, and beliefs to a learning situation.
- Knowledge is constructed uniquely and individually in multiple ways, through a variety of authentic tools, resources, experiences, and contexts.
- Learning is both an active and reflective process.
- Learning is a developmental process of accommodation, assimilation, or rejection to construct new conceptual structures, meaningful representations, or new mental models. Social interaction introduces multiple perspectives through reflection, collaboration, negotiation, and shared meaning.
- Learning is internally controlled and mediated by the learner.

This theory supports the notion that when students are involved, they are more likely to engage deeply with the study materials and take ownership of their learning experiences. Therefore, it can be deduced that involving students voice in curriculum development and transformation aligns with the constructivist principles, with the aim of promoting deeper learning, understanding, engagement and ownership of learning.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing interviews to gather insights from post graduate students. Qualitative research is a process of realistic inquiry that seeks towards an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon within its natural setting (Ahmad et al., 2019). It depends on the direct experiences of people's everyday lives. This study seeks an in-depth understanding of 17 postgraduate students' views and experiences regarding their involvement in curriculum transformation within the higher education institutions therefore, thematic analysis was employed. According to Dawadi (2020), thematic analysis is a method employed by researchers to analyse qualitative data in order to identify themes through careful reading and re-reading of the recorded data captured from the participants. The aim of thematic analysis is to understand the viewpoints, experiences or thoughts across a data set. The analysis focused on identifying themes related to student involvement on curriculum transformation. Firstly, code was used to describe student's views towards curriculum transformation, secondly, categories was produced to enhance the interpretation of data for better understanding and lastly, the researcher used phrases that represents students' opinions and coded them in themes.

Data Analysis

Seventeen (17) postgraduate students participated in the research of which 15 students perceived that there is need for students' voice to be heard towards curriculum transformation because the current generation of student are tech savvy and need to take ownership of their learning. In essence, two students stated that there is no need because students will always be students – who know nothing about curriculum transformation and should depend upon the lecturer's input for their learning outcomes. Majority are of the view that students are not to make the final decision, but their opinion should have some sort of influence towards the final decisions. However, four themes emerged from their responses; students' needs and interest, student engagement and personalized learning, improved pedagogy, sense of belonging. Below is the word-cloud from the responses.
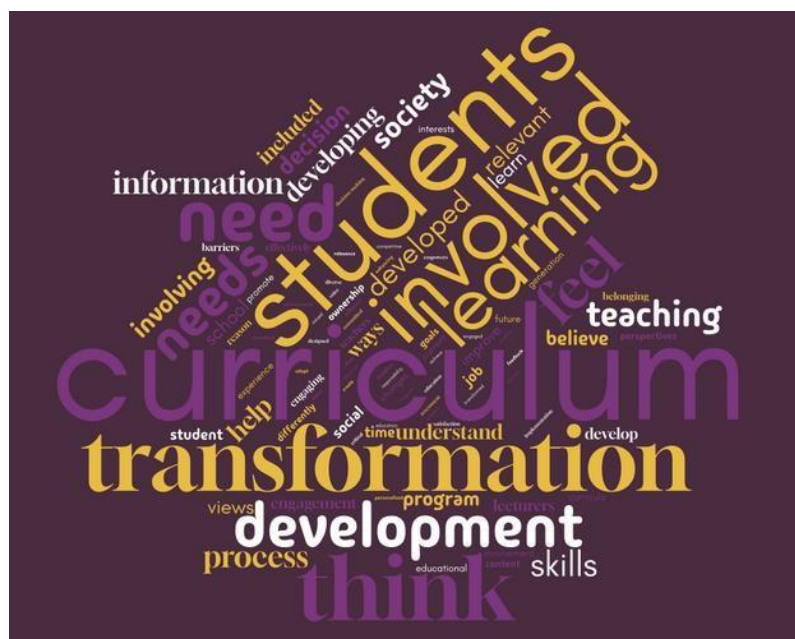
Students' needs and interest

Students feel that most of the topics on the modules do not capture their needs and interest as most of the topics are outdated. They believe that involving students empowers students to obtain certain skills and shape their future. One of the participants stated that she enrolled in a particular program with prior certain goals therefore it is important for consultations on how the program should be transformed in order to cater for students' needs, so that the curriculum that needs to be taught depends on me. P1 pointed out that curriculum transformation "ensures that the contents and skills taught are relevant to the current needs of the society". P10 added that;

"Students should be involved in curriculum transformation as certain information may be outdated or lack relevance in current times. This will also ensure that the curriculum is relevant to the students' needs and interests" P10

Reiterating the need to consider the interest of students Strydom and Loots (2020:2) stated that "South Africa has an oversupply of low-skilled workers, the country is in need of producing higher-skilled workers, particularly in current and future fields of education, healthcare, information and communication technologies, agriculture, and fields that would contribute to a green economy". Most students recognize that there are shortage of skills and have looked at their communities to identify the skills that are needed before choosing a course of study. Now getting to the classrooms and the modules did not reflect their needs and expectations, they will be devastated and disappointed, for instance;

"a student who chose to study chemistry with the intention of learning how to produce paints, perfumes, and some household products but doesn't get to learn any of these while in school" P17

This scenario is the case of most students, and this boils down to the fact that the students are not involved in the transformation of the curriculum to meet the present and the future demands of the industry as well as understanding leaners' learning needs and development of their social skills. Another participant added that;

"Students involvement in curriculum transformation can help them to respond to societal issues more, and can also assist in keeping the curriculum up to date and not stagnant for instance today we are in the digital age so the curriculum should be also aligned to the times we are living in because that is the true reflection of what is on the ground" P14

On the other hand, P7 argued that students will be biased when involved because they do not like to read, hence broader educational goals may not be reached. Again, P16 argued that students need to understand the standard outcome before being involved in the curriculum transformation.

Student engagement and personalized learning

Student engagement is the collaborative effort between the students and their institutions for the purpose of optimising student experience while enhancing the learning outcomes as well as the reputation of the institution (Perters et al., 2019). HE students are diverse not only in terms of socio-economic class and ethnicity, but also in terms of 'lifestyle' preferences and cultural identities. Partington (2020) asserts that the curriculum has largely failed to drive innovation in learning and teaching therefore, the need for the development of a new approach that will lead to student engagement and personalised learning. This new approach calls for the listening to the unique knowledge students possess as well as seeking their perspectives which will increase learner engagement, learner autonomy and positive effect on their academic performances. This is reflected in the participant's view below;

"It will lead to greater motivation and ownership of their education for fostering more personalized learning experience" P5

According to Ngussa and Makewa (2014), the implementation of personalized learning has strong links with constructivist learning theory as the theory highlighted that students have right to determine what they learn and take control of their learning (student autonomy). Some of the responses given by the participants are the following;

"Involving students encourages students to take ownership of their learning" P10

"It ensures that the curriculum is relevant and engaging" P5

"Being part of curriculum transformation actually allows to tap into our unique perspectives and experiences which actually help us to foster a more engagement relevant to learning environment" P8

"I think involving the students will be more valuable and for them to what they will be able to do and how committed they will be in terms of content, assessment and instruction during the process of teaching and learning" P9.

Improved Pedagogy

Curriculum transformation involves responsiveness to and training in new pedagogical methodologies and approaches within disciplines. Partington (2020) asserts that some curriculum raises lots of questions about student participation because it uses a culturally specific pedagogy which benefits some students while disadvantaging other students. This stresses the need for students' participation in order to accommodate all students. P16 highlighted that students need to be more involved in the learning styles that the lecturers use and how they disseminate information because different generation learn differently and absolve information differently.

Student scholar (2024) establish that learners have crucial role to play in identifying their own strengths and weaknesses, this will enable them to provide valuable insights into what they know, what they can do, and identifying the areas where improvement is required. This exercise will enable students to take ownership of their learning, set realistic goals, and inform educators about the effectiveness of the curriculum in meeting their needs. Below are responses from the participants in that regard;

"I think students should be involved so that you know their strength and weaknesses and what should be focused on when you are teaching the subject" P2

"It can help educators understand diverse perspectives and adopt teaching method accordingly ultimately enhancing overall group" P5

"I think they should be involved because they will be able to address their barriers on teaching and learning" P9

"Students can vocalize what teaching methods and content which best resonates with them, leading to more effective educational experiences" P10.

As time changes, the traditional way of teaching and learning should also change. The generation of students in classrooms use different learning platforms to study, and they gather learning material from different online platforms such as social media platform and ChatGPT and so on. Therefore, it is very important to include the stakeholders (students) of the curriculum during the transformation process to add their unique knowledge, perspectives and experiences. Student scholar (2024) admits that it is crucial that students take the responsibility of evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods, this can be achieved by providing valuable feedback on the delivery of instruction, and by doing so, students can help educators identify the teaching methods that are engaging and relevant.

Sense of belonging

The involvement and participation of students in curriculum transformation will transform the students into exhibiting a greater sense of responsibility, belonging and commitment towards their academic welfare. Sense of belonging as students is a feeling of connectedness, the experience of feeling cared-for, accepted, respected, valued, and important to the institution (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017). This makes students feel that they are part of their learning, and they will do much better. Mitra (2018) established that active participation in the learning process is related to a consequent sense of control and educational success. Some of the views expressed by the participants in this regard are;

"One of the advantages is that students will be willing to learn because they are now involved in the decision-making, and they will be more interested, more willing and put more efforts in their studies" P4

"Allowing us as students to have a voice, will bring the sense of belonging and also have a feeling of taking responsibility not that we only come to class to receive information from the teacher but will also have the purpose of why we are coming to class" P6

"They feel more involved, and they feel like they are part of the process, and they will do much better" P15.

Kapoor (2024) acknowledges that the future of education lies in amplifying student's voice, the department of higher education has the responsibility to ensure that students voices are heard and that their perspectives build a more inclusive and responsive educational system.

Conclusion

The role of students as agents and voices in curriculum transformation is not only essential but also transformative. This study explores the position of students as agents and voices in curriculum transformation. The findings of this study proves that by students actively participating in the educational process, it enhances their learning experiences with enhanced pedagogy and contribute to the implementation of curricula that meets their needs and interests, relevance, inclusive, as well as engaging. It is recommended that educational institutions should embrace student agency as a fundamental principle in curriculum transformation as this is essential in fostering an educational environment that prepares students for the complexities of the future.

As education continues to evolve, prioritizing students' participation will be vital for achieving transformative and equitable outcomes. Educational policies should establish formal mechanisms through which all students' voices will be heard, feedback and encouraging collaborative practices between students and educators. By harnessing the unique perspectives of students' voices, the educational practices implemented will cater for the diverse needs of the students, while instilling a sense of belonging and ownership. Further research should explore the long-term effects of students' voices on academic achievement and develop the framework to best integrate student perspectives across diverse educational contexts. The future of education lies in empowering voices of students, ensuring that their perspectives shape a more inclusive and responsive educational system.

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