University of the Western Cape
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

RPL and Support: Are the learning needs
of RPL first year students different?

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A place of quality, a place to grow, from hope to action through knowledge

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PREAMBLE:
This presentation is about researching the kinds of support that RPL students need as opposed to what traditional access students learning needs are.

My interest was evoked by my teaching on 1st year level and my involvement in the assessment and selection of both access groups for the social work department.

My preconception (or bias) was that RPL students would require additional support because of their educational background as opposed to the "better" educational exposure of the traditional access students.

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this presentation is to address the following:
- ✓ What are the prior learning experiences and skills of both access groups?
- ✓ What are the support required and experienced in their first year of study?
- ✓ Are the learning and support needs of RPL social work students different to those students accessing university with a matric exemption?

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OUTLINE

1. Motivation and rationale
2. Literature Review
3. Methodology
4. Summary of Findings
5. Discussion

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1. MOTIVATION AND RATIONALE

(i) The origins and ethos of Recognition of Prior Learning
- First established in the US in the 1960s in higher education and training
- In SA through trade union movement (COSATU) and the ANC in the 1980s – to recognise the knowledge & skills of millions of people to gain access to HEIs
- Seen as a redress mechanism in socio-political context

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CRITICAL ISSUES:
*RPL as "fast-tracking, boundary-crossing and boundary-jumping mechanism" (Harris, 2000)
* Bias of conservative academia and gatekeeping (Dyson & Keating, 2005; Ralphs & Buchler, 1998)
* Restricting number of RPL learners (UWC)

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(ii) Educational policy

* White Paper on Education & Training 1995 – "Transforming the legacy of the past" emphasising the redress of educational inequalities to those whose access have been blocked.

* SA Higher Education Act 101 /1997 – Admission policies must redress past inequalities.

• SA Qualifications Authority Act 1995
- gazetted the development / implementation of RPL being is vital to the development of education in SA

(iii) Retention and throughput of RPL social work students

Statistics from 2003 – 2008:

Students in programme currently	Graduated students	Did not continue	Total Number approved	Total Number applied	Limit per year
12	3	4	19	43	5

• In terms of statistical data, 50% completed their degree within the allotted time period (two students out of four). **One student = summa cum laude.**

• One student dropped out in the first year. The other cited finances and illness as reasons for having to repeat a year level but graduated a year later. **(B-aggregate)**

• Of the 12 students currently in the programme, three (3) RPL students had to repeat a year level.

• From the quantitative data, a particular position regarding academic support for social work RPL students can be inferred.

• However, the experiences or opinions of RPL students were not elicited to provide qualitative data of their learning and supportive needs, if any.

(iv) Social Work as a scarce skill

* Social work as a profession was included in the **National Master Scarce Skills List for South Africa (2007)** by the Minister of Labour.

* In publishing this List, the Minister declared a range of scarce and critical skills that hamper socio-economic activity in South Africa.

* A 5000 shortage was calculated.

* Although Earle (2007) has calculated that an additional 7631 social workers would be needed to undertake the transformation of social service delivery.

• Yet the Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya, stated that 16000 social workers were needed in order to implement the requirements of the new Children's Act 38 of 2005

In terms of these figures, RPL can be one mechanism that can also be used to increase the numbers of social workers needed.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 RPL LEARNING THEORIES

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

• Based on the work of David Kolb (1984)
• Simply means learning from experience
• Resonance both for the adult learners in the class the way they learn and the RPL students for what they also bring to the class
• Students have vast prior knowledge and learning from informal and non-formal sources eg family, work, community life, recreation, sport, religious / traditional life.

*Implementation of a particular learning theory or approach is also dependent on the learning style of learners in the classroom.

Learning style is defined as the different ways that individuals perceive and process information

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Cycle of Learning:	Adult Learning Styles:
Concrete Experience (apprehension) – learning springs from a practical experience	**Concrete perceivors** learn through direct experience by doing, sensing and feelings;
Reflective Observation – learner thinks about what the experience means	**Reflective processors** learn by reflecting and thinking about the experience;

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Abstract Conceptualisation (comprehension) – the learner transforms the experiences into learning by creating ideas around it or applies theory to it	Abstract perceivors learn through analysis, observation and thinking;
Active Experimentation – transforms the theory and ideas into learning by testing it in practice	**Active processors** learn by immediately making use of the new material to see if they work or make sense.

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2.2 LEARNING HISTORIES:
* Lifelong learning is an approach to re-attach the link between learning and real life (Evans, 2006).
* The focus is on the kinds of abilities and knowledge gained throughout the lifespan of the person and valuing the many forms of learning, eg. through family, community, and work.
* It is not life experiences that is the focus of assessment but the learning that has taken place as a result of undergoing these life experiences (Ralphs and Buchler, 1998: 10).

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2.3 LEARNING NEEDS AND SUPPORT
Key features of effective student support:
(i) Integrating students into institutional cultures ie appropriate administrative processes, academic counseling / guidance
(ii) Institutions changing to meet the diverse needs of students ie. non-discriminatory processes and structures
Morrow's (1993/1994) barriers to learning:
Physical Access – students' personal life eg work and home responsibilities
Epistemological Access – the fit between prior knowledge and academic dominant knowledge

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3. METHODOLOGY:

This study positions itself within qualitative research in that it will "seek answers to questions that stress how the social experience is created and given meaning" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 13).

The focus is on obtaining the insider's (or emic) perspective on particular social experiences (Babbie and Mouton, 2007: 53).

In so doing first year social work students from both access groups will be asked to voice their perspectives in a focus group on their prior learning experiences and definition of support required.

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4. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research findings are presented in terms of the two research questions posed.

4.1 What are the prior learning experiences and skills of both groups?

- Students could identify 5 knowledge sources from where they had received valuable knowledge and skills.

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1. FAMILY, NOTABLE MOTHER
Lifeskills (how to cope with life) / Sense of responsibility / Acceptance of yourself and others
2. PREVIOUS WORK EXPERIENCE
Team work / Organising / Being critical and non-accepting of what people tell you / Handling yourself and gossip of others

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3. SCHOOL	
To listen / To communicate with other learners, teachers /	
Peer counselling / Confidence	Participating in extra-curricula activities such as drama, peer counselling, being prefect.
4. PREVIOUS COURSES	
Presentation skills	
5. OTHER PEOPLE AS MOTIVATORS	
Inspired to achieve, to take leadership by observing others (Allan Boesak mentioned)	

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* We can see that the students could discern what skills they had entered the university with.

* The students not only identified **skills**, for example, presentation and organising skills, but also **emotions and attitudes**, for example, confidence, acceptance of yourself and others, and being inspired to do something out of the ordinary and routine of their lives.

* The challenge is to provide opportunity for active experimentation to complete the learning cycle now that they are at university. The curriculum and resultant content of the course do not, firstly, elicit prior knowledge, and consequently do not make space *for these skills and knowledge to be the springboard for further learning*.

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- In the non-valuing and non-acknowledgment of the students' prior knowledge, we negate the importance thereof.
- Therefore we are not increasing students' confidence and self-worth because we are inadvertently keeping it hidden.
- If we want more from RPL then it must inform curriculum and learning outcomes otherwise it will remain on the margin and not fulfilling its redress and equity claims.

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4.2 What are the support required and experienced in their first year of study?

- The students negatively evaluated the university's processes, and in the focus group discussion, they could not transcend the negative impact of these on their lives as students.

"It is 8 months and we are still running around asking questions, getting the run around"

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The following are certain of the administrative processes that the students would have wanted in response to the converse (with the exception of the last one):

✓Application and registration process must be efficient (very time consuming) and transparent (give reasons for accepting and rejecting).
✓Competent and informed staff to assist with information and advice
✓Efficient bursary application and payout
✓Residency must be allocated prior to arrival
✗ Disorganised elective courses, eg: class clashes, little feedback on assignments, expensive prescribed textbooks only used for 2 weeks (felt this was wasteful),

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A factor identified to encourage student integration was that teachers should have positive attitudes (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2005) and the discussion echoed this.
* One student stated that a lecturer (in a certain elective course) was insulting and demotivating to students.
* **"Lecturers who break you down",** he said. Accordingly students no longer attend regularly.
* Students also felt disrespected when certain lecturers came to class unprepared. "Have a plan B if technology fails".

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To promote **institutional adaptation**, students should be treated respectfully and equitably through the processes and structures within the institution (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2005).

Here one student particularly stressed that placement at student residences must be free of favouritism because he distinctly felt that he was discriminated against but he did not have proof of it.

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Students had different notions of what support they required.
* It would appear to directly link with their personal circumstances.
* Guidance with studying and reading to learn (particular from one RPL student but did not receive support from other students).
* Support from social work class only in specific cases. Learning still individualised.
* Support for emotional needs. **"Somebody to talk to".**

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*Overloading in 3rd term that impact on family life and ability to do well.

"There was a time I felt this is too much for me. I have to cook, work, do assignments and I just have to do everything!"

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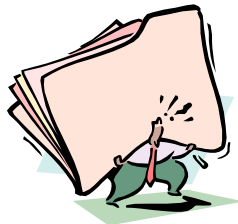
The students felt the weight of their responsibilities to themselves and significant others in their lives.

This would point to Morrow's **barriers of physical access** arising from the students' personal lives with their responsibilities in their home and outside work (Osman & Castle, 2006).

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7. DISCUSSION

- Students' description of their first day at university may not necessarily be out of the ordinary. It is a new experience and so a measure of anxiety and trepidation is expected.
- The role that the university however can play in alleviating some of the confusion as experienced by the students, which can be related to the university's administrative processes and procedures.

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•Students' opinions and feelings reflected an environment less than supportive for their integration and adaptation in the institution to ensure throughput and success (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2005).

•Students were then compelled to use the kinds of knowledge and skills that they had developed prior to entering university to push through these barriers and to survive.

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* They questioned, they observed, they found out, and they accessed what they needed to in order to break especially epistemological barriers (Osman & Castle, 2006).

* Cantwell & Scevak (2004) had noted the success of mature entry students and the social work RPL students can be deemed to be successful in terms of retention, persistence, completion, and graduation (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2005).

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•There was a high degree of commonality amongst participants in terms of their experiences at university and the support that they needed.
* There was one RPL student who had expressed an individual need for practical guidance on appropriate reading and studying which was not shared by the other participants.
* This may well point to a learning and support plan that suits individual's needs and not necessarily "one size fit all".

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It may also point to further study involving these participants in their more senior year as to whether their views have changed in terms of what they may have needed.

It may also point to a wider study involving more participants.

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*Thank you
for your attention !*

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