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STUDENTS’ ENGAGEMENT WITH ENGAGEMENT: THE CASE OF TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: Public engagement is one of the three legs which support and underpin a restructured and transformed post-apartheid higher education system in South Africa (along with teaching and research). This third sector role of higher education is widely implemented in South Africa and is described differently by different institutions and entails a diverse range of activities, which include service learning. In the South African context we argue that building our understanding of the meanings of public engagement through engagement is vital. In this paper we explore teacher education students’ engagement with service learning as a form of public engagement in higher education in South Africa.

Keywords: service learning, teacher education, social justice, critical theory, public engagement policy, discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Public engagement is one of the three legs which support and underpin a restructured and transformed post-apartheid higher education system in South Africa (along with teaching and research). This third sector role of higher education is widely implemented in South Africa, is described differently by different institutions and entails different activities. Nongxa (2010) points out that this differentiated approach to engagement should not be surprising, because ‘... South African universities are diverse across many dimensions, in terms of histories, locations, contexts, missions, goals – the national goal is for a differentiated but unitary higher education system’ (2010, p. 58). Public engagement in such a differentiated system takes on a variety of forms and includes community based research, service learning and voluntary outreach activities. For some, this lack of definition and conceptual clarity is problematic because in the absence of a generalisable definition, public engagement becomes a slippery concept that is difficult to practise, to implement and even to measure (Hall, 2010). Still others point out that the lack in definition is not the problem, rather the problem is the absence of case studies of good practice which are needed if public engagement is to stand as an equal partner with teaching and research in higher education institutions. Slamat (2010, p. 108) argues that such a bottom up approach which is supported by a national conversation on public engagement by higher education will take us
closer to understanding what it is and what it is not; going out in search of a shared conception of public engagement in higher education in South Africa should not be the starting point. Rather, building our understanding of the meanings of public engagement through engaging in it and with it should be the focus of our attention. Petersen (2007, p. 101), who works with service learning as a form of public engagement, goes further by pointing out that if research is to make a real contribution to the field then we need studies of good practice which ‘... provide an analysis of the epistemological and methodological framework within which a particular service learning course is conceptualised, practiced and researched’.

As teacher educators working in the field of service learning we have seen little published research in the South African context that engages with service learning within a social justice framework and that deeply interrogates what happens during the process of student engagement, with a few exceptions (see for example Daniels, 2007).

In this paper we explore teacher education students’ engagement with engagement. In particular we report on how these students responded to service learning as a form of public engagement in higher education in South Africa. This form of public engagement is by far the most widely practised and written about in local literature and reported on by institutions of higher education for quality assurance purposes. Its popularity in the South African context is growing in light of its potential for diversifying the social purpose and research agenda of higher education (Subotsky, 1999) making universities more socially responsive to the needs of a transforming society within the context of a developmental state (Hall, 2010).

Impetus for work in the area of service learning as a form of public engagement came to higher education institutions in South Africa in the form of a Ford Foundation Grant to the Joint Education Trust, a non-government organisation. It established the Community Higher Education Partnerships (CHESP) projects to advance service learning in public higher education institutions in South Africa. Between 2001 and 2006 CHESP supported the development of several service learning initiatives in at least half of the 23 institutions of higher learning in South Africa (Lazarus, 2007).

More recently the outcomes of the audits of all public higher education institutions over the period 2007–2009 indicate that most higher education institutions consider themselves to be fulfilling their mandate of public engagement in one or more of the above-mentioned forms.

SA Policy Framework for Public Engagement of Higher Education Institutions

Higher Education in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, is under pressure to reinvent and transform itself. In South Africa the transformation agenda has been particularly strong given the country’s history of legislated discrimination and exclusion.

In higher education policy debates there is consensus that public engagement is about association with the community engagement function of higher education
institutions. In part, community engagement is seen as an overarching strategy for the transformation of higher education. Through their community engagement function universities are encouraged to promote academic programmes that are responsive to social, political, economic and cultural needs. Universities are also encouraged to demonstrate social responsibility and commitment to the public good. These goals seem to indicate that higher education institutions are being pushed away from their ivory tower image towards delivering a tangible return on the investment of public funds into institutions of higher learning. In part this is to be achieved by higher education institutions educating graduates who are able to make a contribution as citizens to nation-building, to developing a more just and humane society, particularly in the aftermath of apartheid, and graduate professionals who are able to apply their knowledge and skills in a way that can uplift society, in a practical, usable sense, or by making a contribution to indigenous knowledge systems.

In South Africa all of these goals are encapsulated in Education White Paper 3 on the transformation of higher education (DoE, 1997). This White Paper articulates both system-level goals and institutional-level goals for higher education and is driven by the desire for higher education to ‘promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes’ (DoE, 1997, p. 10). This document is credited with laying the foundations for public engagement in higher education in South Africa. It lays out the principles for an engaged higher education sector which requires ‘. . . that higher education institutions’ make ‘. . . their expertise and infrastructure available and commit to the idea of common good and social responsibility’.

South Africa’s policy framework also includes the Higher Education Act (Republic of SA, 1997) which led to the establishment of the HEQC (Higher Education Quality Committee) both of which were aimed at giving effect to the goals of the White Paper for public engagement. The HEQC specifically makes mention of academically based community engagement (with particular reference to service learning) as one of the three areas of quality assurance and programme accreditation in higher education. Included within the framework are mechanisms for formalising and integrating engagement with teaching and learning and systems for resourcing and monitoring engagement activities, thereby ensuring that community and public engagement is taken every bit as seriously as teaching and research at higher education institutions. So in effect, the HEQC requires reporting on engagement with communities against particular criteria in institutional audits (CHE, 2004).

While policy on engagement is visionary and framed in the discourse of reciprocity and partnership and tasked with transforming higher education by bringing theory closer to practice and work-based learning closer to academic learning, disputes remain about the social function of engagement, especially in relation to the teaching and research functions of the university. Questions also have to be raised about who learns what from such engagements and how they learn. This paper
is about exploring this reciprocity. It is about an investigation into how student teachers respond to being asked to learn how to become morally interdependent with a selection of communities where they learn to practise service as learning and as learning to give. The paper forwards the view that public engagement for teacher education students is about learning to serve with a conscience, to serve by way of caring pedagogy.

Service Learning as Public Engagement in Higher Education in South Africa

Service learning in the academic literature has been described as a form of engagement in which students receive academic credit for addressing human and community needs. It requires that community service be fully integrated in the academic curriculum (Stanton et al., 1999) and is designed to benefit both the provider and the recipient of service equally. This type of public engagement espouses a reciprocal and dialectical relationship among partners in the relationship.

Morton (1996) distinguishes between two basic forms of service learning, namely service-oriented modules and content-oriented modules. Service-oriented modules are devised to engage students in service while supporting student reflection for their learning from the service activity, thus recognising that through various forms of reflection students can transform their service experiences into usable knowledge. This type of service course draws from a particular epistemological position which recognises the centrality of student experiences in learning and acknowledges and validates students as active contributors to their own learning and thus to the process of knowledge production. A second form of service learning is content-oriented. Such an orientation to service learning is designed to help students reach discipline- and content-specific outcomes. In other words, service learning is used as a means by which students are assisted in reaching the set disciplinary or content outcomes.

We argue against the latter practice in implementing service learning for two reasons. First, if service learning is implemented simply as pedagogy, without clear links with an accompanying epistemology, it risks being downgraded to the level of another method of teaching in higher education. It is then treated simply as another item on a ‘smorgasbord’ of options alongside lecturing, case studies, demonstrations and so forth. Second, staff who are accustomed to a ‘deductive, content-based’ approach may appropriate service learning purely as pedagogy for teaching disciplinary content better, without a clear understanding of service learning as an ‘inductive, process-based’ pedagogy (Morton, 1996, p. 279) in which student experience and voice are central (to the epistemology). We believe that such a conception and practice of service learning encourages both teachers and students to view learning as simply implementing a set of skills or a recipe of ideas in another setting, such as the service learning site. Alternatively, students could be encouraged to extract from the service experience only those aspects which are of value to the study of disciplinary content knowledge, thus
isolating academic learning from the reciprocal connection with wider social, cultural, political and ideological issues in society. Notions of reciprocity in service learning and matters of concern in communities are then at risk of being sidelined or even ignored completely.

In addition, student reflection may be undervalued. The potential for students to learn from their experiences may thus be diminished. In addition the connection of education with wider societal issues is severed and students are prevented from becoming critical, transformative thinkers and agents. Service learning practised and theorised about in this way stops short of becoming a liberating pedagogy in the practice of education and is instead channelled as a sanitised, neutral, value-free pedagogy. For us the transformative potential of engagement through service learning is undermined, diminished and rendered sterile.

The dominant view of learning in the service learning literature places emphasis on individual student learning from reflecting on his/her experiences (Cooks et al., 2004). Critical social theorists within the service learning movement have criticised the prominence placed on individual students’ learning from reflection on experience as an inadequate and one-sided form of learning. They believe that simply focusing on this type of learning constrains, and may even prevent, student critique of the inequitable relationships in the service activity (and by implication in schools and in society).

Critics also claim that such a form of service learning is inherently apolitical and in concentrating on the individual student and how he or she learns through the experience, learning is projected as a solitary, linear, highly-structured process, divorced from the co-operative nature and critical process of learning inherent in service learning. Robinson (2000, p. 147) asserts that a more politicised model of service learning provides transformational learning experiences for students by engaging them in intentionally thinking about others and the conditions of their lives during the course of the service learning relationship.

Concomitantly, such a pedagogical stance promotes the progress of students’ learning through reflection on experience toward a contextual level and eventually to a dialectical level (Taggart and Wilson, 1998). On a contextual level reflection from experience involves much more than simple reports and an emphasis on issues of content and skills in the service situation. Students instead begin to view the service relationship differently and are more able to confront their personal prejudices and world views, examine the full circumstances of situations and question pedagogical practices (Taggart and Wilson, 1998). To our minds it is vital that students be encouraged and supported to move to the dialectical mode of reflection on experience. At a dialectical level they are prompted to take cognisance of issues of ‘equality, emancipation, caring and justice’ (Taggart and Wilson, 1998, p. 5) with respect to planning and implementing/enacting educational curricula and service activities. More importantly, students reflecting on experience at a dialectical level are able to explore and question the value of various knowledge systems in relation to one another, consider moral and ethical issues in teaching, learning (and service) and interrogate their own taken-for-granted assumptions.
about these issues (Taggart and Wilson, 1998). Such an orientation is vital if policy is to deliver on its espoused goals of transformation through engagement in higher education in South Africa.

**Foray into Public Engagement through Service Learning**

In this section we turn our attention to a service learning course designed and implemented by the second author for final year pre-service teachers (n = 128) in a Bachelor of Education degree. Students in the course came from various racial, social and linguistic backgrounds. In particular, we apply our minds to understand what it took for students to engage with a service learning module. Prior to the introduction of the service learning course, community service had flourished at the institution and had been largely conceptualised either as a form of philanthropic outreach conducted voluntarily by students or as a form of experiential learning in a mode similar to that of an internship or apprenticeship. In this sense the community was regarded largely as a resource for student charity and/or student learning. In later revisions this community service focus was substantially revised to include service learning with a critical theory framework. The new course was aimed at helping students to understand and explore their role as agents of change in the community, a role which extends beyond formal schooling. The theoretical component of the course, dealt with among other things, various perspectives on service learning; service learning in the community, care theory, critical theory, the teacher as a professional and the teacher as a change agent in society. The practical component of the course required that students complete thirty to fifty hours’ service in a community organisation approved by the course coordinator or chosen by the students themselves. In essence, the foci shifted from a mission-oriented, university-based course, to a more service-oriented, community-based course.

In examining student data collected during the service learning course for evidence of engagement with these foci we posed a number of key issues in this regard. While higher education policy is visionary about the possibilities of engagement and community engagement how did this translate in practice for teacher education students at one university in South Africa? How did students experience service learning as a form of public engagement in higher education in South Africa? What were the primary discourses students drew on in their engagement and what do the discourses reveal about their meaning-making when engaged publicly with communities outside the university? Was it difficult for students to relocate – epistemically? Could students find their footing in the transformative discourses of new policies?

2. **OUR ENGAGEMENT WITH ENGAGEMENT**

The discourses we introduced to students in the service learning course reported on in this paper were designed to bring into question the legitimacy of the
knowledge and power claims of traditional views of education. We subscribe to the view of Butin (2005, p. 1) that service learning theorised and practised in this way is ‘politically dangerous’ as it may go against the grain of accepted practices in higher education. Such a pedagogy operates in opposition to many prevailing pedagogical practices and may dispel the view of higher education teachers as the only ones who are knowledgeable about what students need to learn. It also creates the conditions for students to learn from each other and members of the community in which they offer service. Most importantly it moves students from the position of operating mainly as users of knowledge and instead establishes them as creators and co-creators of knowledge in conjunction with others (Dewey, 1924; Moore, 1990; Shor, 1992). It prompts students to become ‘active agents in constructing new kinds of knowledge and relationships’ (Hayes and Cuban, 1997, p. 78). It thus allows participants (teachers, students and community members) the leverage to define and produce knowledge according to the social, historical and cultural contexts in which they find themselves (Tierney, 1996).

Secondly, a form of service learning informed by critical theories is ‘pedagogically [our emphasis] dangerous because it is a pragmatic example of a destabilizing and decentred mode of teaching’ (Butin, 2005, p. 2). At the level of pedagogy and classroom practice it brings into question the prevailing discourses and practices in the classroom. It removes the limits and boundaries that traditionally define the powerful and the powerless, the knowledgeable and the knowledge-less in the educational relationship. It challenges the routine of dominant teacher talk and control over students, and how knowledge is portrayed in the prescribed syllabus.

We reasoned that service learning framed by critical theories especially confronts the teaching of social justice issues in the curriculum and it also counters the absence of educator voice and the passivity of students in this regard. Such a form of service learning breaks the ‘routine’ of uncontested acceptance of traditionally assigned roles for teachers and students. It also breaks the ‘routine’ of the traditionally accepted curriculum and affords students (and the communities in which students offer service) greater autonomy in helping to set the curriculum. Higher education students in interaction with community members and agencies via service learning are encouraged to view their peers, members of society and those accepting student services as ‘teachers’ in their education. They are also encouraged to regard issues of social injustice manifest in community concerns as legitimate subject matter in the curriculum. This perspective thus suggests that service learning is a ‘site of identity construction, destruction and reconstruction with profound consequences of how we view the definitions and boundaries of the teaching process’ (Butin, 2005, p. 9).

Methodology to Support an Investigation of Student Engagement

We had readily available for analysis a corpus of data on students’ experiences during the service learning course in the form of students’ end-of-course portfolios.
of evidence (as a composite learning artefact). The portfolios contained amongst other things reflective journal extracts, photographs students took at the service sites and collages and educational artefacts they constructed for curriculum purposes. We were guided in the analysis of this data by our key foci with respect to public engagement through service learning mentioned earlier. This includes distinguishing power relations between the ‘server’ and the ‘served’ in service learning, and examining how university-based discourses and practices connected with those of service learning. In addition, we reasoned that conceptualising and practising service learning without due regard for its caring component does not allow for an adequate questioning of power and hegemony in the service exchange or for an interrogation of issues of social injustice manifest in community concerns. These foci meant that we had to find ways of examining the data that relied on more than just the content of what students reported and what was observable in their activities.

A critical discourse analysis technique (Fairclough, 2003), along with content analysis and a hybrid form of ethnomethodological analysis (EA), was used to explore the data. We reasoned that critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) would enable us to examine the data for the discourses students drew on in reflecting on their service learning experiences, thus revealing their systems of meaning making. We also reasoned that their discourses would reveal how they perceived and possibly expressed (often hidden) notions of power and privilege. This line of reasoning was applicable to the collages and educational artefacts as well, since these could also be considered ‘constructed texts’. The ethnomethodology (Goffman, 1981) was specifically employed to examine how students positioned themselves in relation to the service learning and what language they used to reveal this ‘positioning’ (De Fina et al., 2006, p. 8; Ribiero, 2006). Combined with the discourse analysis it would be possible to discern how students adjusted their positioning in their planned actions. In addition, the narratives of the student journals captured in sufficient detail their individually distinctive use of personal language both in terms of the descriptions of experiences and events and the expressions students used to describe these. It could thus be regarded as a source of data of each student’s stance in the service learning experience, both from a curricula perspective as well as a practical perspective in the community organisation.

Any inferences from the analysis were also supported by the insights provided from examining students’ photographs taken in the course of the service learning experience. The photographs provided evidence of students overarching realities and often unexamined theorising about the world and thus served as both the conceptual and the material ‘lenses’ of this world, indexing what was of primary importance to them.

Students’ Engagement with Engagement

What emerged once data had been analysed and the results collated was a disheartening picture: students’ overwhelmingly seemed to misunderstand the
nature of service learning, and focused on their fear and shock, responding by ‘othering’ and pathologising those they came into contact with in their service learning experiences; they also separated themselves physically and emotionally from the participants within the world of service learning and there were few students who were able to identify with a discourse of care in their service experiences.

The majority of students tapped into personal discourses of service as charity that they were familiar with – either from previous charitable backgrounds or due to religious or family orientations – and entered service learning from the privileged, controlled position of volunteer in which they seemed to ignore unequal power relationships (Butin, 2003, p. 8). Most students could not rise above this view of service, despite the prominent framework of social justice and care in the service learning course. They could thus not identify with the discourse of this framework or use it to make meaning of their experiences and so were unable to interrogate or highlight clear underlying power issues, finding it easier to invoke charitable discourses in their descriptions. In keeping with this thrust students thus focused on ‘giving’ service, by for instance detailing the routines and administrative aspects of their service activities, much as ‘technicians’ would provide a service. This is very evident in the example of a student who draws on a personal bias about the Black informal traders to whom he is assigned for his service learning as uneducated and ignorant of business matters. He adopts the role of philanthropist-rescuer and focuses on drawing on his superior business knowledge to construct a business model to ‘save’ the failing business. In his haste to make a contribution, he disregards the inherent power relations and his own position of privilege and adopts the attitude of one who is more knowledgeable than those being served. This type of paternalistic attitude in service learning was very prevalent in the group and blocked many students from understanding the reciprocity dimension inherent and necessary in service learning practice and policy for that matter. As a result such students often did not recognise and therefore failed to interrogate hegemonic practices in their service and could not enter an authentic relational ethic with members of the community.

On another level many students adopted the role of observer of the ‘other’ in a world that was very different to their own. Students’ entries reveal a discourse of pathologising, coupled with ‘othering’ in their identification of the ‘other’ as dissimilar to themselves who are therefore to be feared. This is particularly so for certain groupings of ‘others’: the ‘diseased other’; the ‘racial other’ and also the ‘economically disadvantaged other’. Many of these students appeared to ‘other’ as a way of making sense of their experiences and struggle to find their position in relation to this ‘other’. In the process they resorted to a discourse rife with a sense of superiority and practised a form of objectified caring for those who needed help. As a result they focused on aspects such as their fear and shock at what they encountered, especially with respect to the diseases they were faced with in the course of their service (such as TB and AIDS) and the conditions (poverty, inadequate facilities).
In the South African context, where there are indications that one in eight people are HIV positive and where there is such great social and economic deprevation, students’ responses were to ignore the social injustice of those affected by HIV and AIDS and instead classify the two worlds, by according normative status to each, and then locating themselves in the morally and materially superior of the two. For instance in cases where students worked with people affected by HIV and AIDS, they concentrated primarily on the actual disease they were able to observe and attributed the disempowerment and marginalisation of the served to personal deficiencies, such as a lack of exercising control over their lives and sexual promiscuity. They thus sought safety and distance in a discourse of pathology of the marginalised and disempowered in society. In claiming the position of subject in the service learning experience, the students chose not to understand the situations of those they offered service to and focused their attention instead on the problem/s in the service learning community. This allowed them to view the lives of the service recipients as the effects of a social disease and in turn attribute their disempowerment, marginalisation and poverty to personal deficiencies, such as laziness and a lack of ambition. Students then excused themselves from the commitment ‘to be present’ in their interactions with the ‘cared-for’ (the service recipients) (Noddings, 1984, pp. 25, 26) and positioned themselves as observers of a troubled world more than as caregivers in a troubled world, in their practice of service learning. In the South African context it is possible to ascribe in part the students’ predominant discourse of ‘othering’ to their history as children of a segregated past which still lingers in many personal and family contexts. This discourse gave them for the time that they were involved in the community a safe position, but deprived them of the facilities through which they could find voice as service-learning teacher education students.

Overall, though, students’ data revealed that most focused on themselves and their own life worlds, and they took up a position far removed from the troubled world of service learning. A micro-analysis of the introductions to student journals provided evidence of their inability to ‘gain a voice’ (Ribiero, 2006, p. 52) within a discourse of social justice and care and in the process they revealed their struggle to find focus and positioning. The appropriation of a new discourse, and the strength of student voice within it, requires careful and sustained nurturing by higher education teachers if it is to become part of the established knowledge framework of students. The social context (which includes the classroom relationships and context) is the primary landscape in which users of a particular discourse do or do not become users of other discourses in the process of change. The danger is that if the conditions of the students’ social context do not promote sustained and encompassing change then it is likely that the discourse of social justice, which accompanies such change, will also diminish. Thus when students leave the milieu where social justice is emphasised, they are likely to revert to their entrenched ways of thinking and doing. The data we have gathered from this course support this. Without a firm foundation in the students’ interpretive frameworks and discoursal patterns, social justice and working towards creating a more just and
The caring society may eventually disappear altogether. Issues of power and privilege in service learning and in broader society are also in danger of being sidelined. The challenge lies in ensuring that the discourses we are advocating for and the practices associated with them become more entrenched in the students’ frames of reference, so that they do not revert to established ways of thinking when the difficulties of life as a teacher in a harsh world overwhelm them. While policy has been visionary in its directives about the role of service learning as engagement for social change, our experience in studying students’ engagement with engagements suggests otherwise. Students have had tremendous difficulty in finding their footing in the transformative discourse associated with public engagement and service learning. The have found it difficult to relocate epistemically.

3. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The aim of this paper was to report on a study which investigated teacher education students’ engagement with engagement – i.e. with service learning as a form of engagement. Specifically, we were interested in discerning what students identified with and how this found expression in their discourses. In addition, we also wanted to discover how students positioned themselves in this process of engagement and how this influenced their ability to find their voices in a discourse of critical theory. A large portion of research in teacher education attests to the difficulties in transforming pre-service teacher education students’ deeply held beliefs and knowledge frameworks (Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005). With this in mind we anticipated that the unfamiliarity of the social justice framework and critical nature of service learning would be challenging for the majority of students and, as this study has shown, the majority of students struggled to find their footing in a discourse of caring and social justice which did not resonate with their existing frames of reference. The pervasive influence of the students’ socio-cultural, historical and educational histories was evident in their discursive utterances and their positioning that reflected the dominance of personal discourses. They had few social, and thus also discursive, tools with which to communicate their search for footing and positioning and were effectively rendered voiceless in this discourse.

Our investigation of student engagement has made us more aware of a number of issues to be considered in promoting a critical form of public engagement. The first of these is how teachers’ identity-construction intersects with the implementation of education policy and therefore influences the roles they construct for themselves as professional teachers. We are mindful of the danger of teachers having to adopt a role or roles prescribed for them by policy, and thus risk not being responsive to the real needs in schools and in broader society. This aspect is also alluded to in the research by Mattson and Harley (2003, p. 284), who make reference to teachers’ ‘mimicry’ of policy in the South African teacher education context. Under these circumstances, the role of policy for directing teachers in crafting a more just and humane society (through public engagement) becomes no more than rhetoric.
In addition, as our students have shown, even when a transformative, liberating discourse and practice is introduced in a component of the service learning programme, it is improbable that it will bring about changes in students’ deeply held beliefs over the course of one module. We would assert that for this to happen such discourses also need to be part of the overall discourse in whole teacher education programmes.

Most importantly, we have come to the conclusion that including service learning in a fragmented teacher education programme probably serves as a mechanism to entrench further prejudicial and discriminatory ideas and beliefs. More coherence and alignment with a transformative agenda (and accompanying discourse) in whole programmes are required so that these discourses are infused throughout the students’ period of education and training. In this process, teacher educators are more likely to address the deeply-held beliefs of students and create a corps of teachers who are able to fulfill the transformative agenda espoused by public engagement policy.

4. REFERENCES


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