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An introduction to the Southern African Rurality in Higher Education (SARiHE) project: aim, research questions, methodology, theoretical framing (0357)

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Background

Despite increased participation in South African higher education by students who have been, historically, under-represented, the lack of academic achievement of students from those backgrounds continues to be significant (Cooper, 2015) with 32.1% of black students leaving university in their first year and many taking up to 10 years to complete their degrees. One of the most marginalised social categories, affected by historical injustices and the displacement effects of apartheid, a ‘geography of race’ (Gordon, 2015), is rurality, especially as it interrelates with race, ethnicity, class and gender (Bob, 2001). Significantly, rural students have attracted little attention in research to date in South Africa (Mgqwashu, 2016).

Several factors affect transitions to higher education from rural areas, including geography, financial resources, schooling, and language (Jones et al, 2008). Their research suggests that not only are students disadvantaged, but institutions are not prepared to support their needs. The study does not, however, consider the many strengths that rural students bring to university or focus on the curriculum and teaching delivery. Furthermore, in an increasingly digital world, technology’s powerful role in maintaining social connections and opening up possibilities for new knowledge and modes of learning can challenge institutional forms of learning (Säljö, 2010). Our research foregrounds these additional dimensions, by focusing on the conceptual complexities of rurality. We are examining the practices that shape approaches to learning of university students from rural areas including in relation to digital technologies and the challenges encountered when faced with curricula that remain imbued with colonialism. In addition, we are investigating the perceptions/attitudes that academics and senior administrators hold towards students from rural areas and towards a decolonised curriculum.

Research Questions

The research aims to address how students from rural areas in South Africa negotiate the transition to higher education foregrounding the social and cultural capital they bring and how their home, school and community shape them. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How can the complexities of rurality be conceptualised in relation to higher education?
2. What are the dimensions of rurality as experienced by students transitioning from home to university in the global south?
3. How and in what ways do students negotiate the transitions from rural home, school and community and how does this influence their trajectories through higher education in Southern Africa?
 - a. What are the challenges for students from rural areas facing higher education curricula, which remain imbued with colonialism?

- b. What are the practices that shape approaches to learning of students from rural areas in universities in Southern Africa?
 - c. How and in what ways do social media and mobile communications influence rural students' higher education trajectories?
4. How and in what forms might inclusive and living curricula be developed that build on the experiences of all students, including those from rural contexts in South Africa?

Theoretical Framing

The research is framed within a sociocultural perspective on learning, which recognises human actions are mediated by physical, social, cultural, historical and material means (Daniels, 2015). Schatzki (2001:11) highlights that *practices* are 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organised around shared practical understanding'. We extend this definition by examining how rural students' historic and current practices have contributed to the negotiation of transitions from their contexts into and through higher education as they encounter different 'figured worlds' (Holland et al, 1998). This perspective, from the work of Vygotsky, Bakhtin and Bourdieu, enables us to explore the influences of rural figured worlds upon the new worlds of higher education and the adaptations students make in relation to participation and studying. In addition, it enables us to consider the myriad skills and strengths that rural students bring to university and to focus on their possible contribution to decolonising the curriculum and to decoloniality, important global concerns.

Decolonisation is a political term referring to the removal of the former colonisers. Decoloniality focuses on the vestiges of colonialism in, for example, education curricula, calling for local knowledges or indigenous knowledge systems to be implemented into curricula in schools and universities, 'sites for reproduction of coloniality' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015:489). Similarly, Connell (2017) argues that curriculum change is necessary in order to address the effects of colonisation on space and the marginalisation or discrediting of cultural, religious and linguistic traditions. We use her term 'curricular justice' which proposes a critique of culture, creating space for dialogue and for reframing learning as conversation.

Methodology

Academic co-researchers at three sites: one urban 'comprehensive' university with a balanced focus on research, teaching and technology, one rural, research-led and 'previously advantaged' university and one rural, teaching-led, 'previously disadvantaged' university have been conducting the Phase 1 fieldwork with students. The complexity and contestation of rurality as a category are intrinsic to the study, which employs a participatory methodology i.e. student participants are co-researchers. We argue this as a 'decolonising' mode (Bozalek and Biersteker, 2011), avoiding a deficit positioning of under-represented students. Second year undergraduates from rural backgrounds in each university (20 - 24 per institution, with a balance between STEM and Humanities programmes) were recruited. They have been involved in collecting accounts of everyday practices in the form of digital documentaries, using an iPad, and contributing to discussion groups. Co-researchers received initial training and have been supported by workshops, social events and regular communications. They have also contributed to data analysis, given presentations on their experiences as rural students and their involvement in the project and are participating in writing workshops to support them to publish.

In Phase 2, Deputy Vice Chancellors for learning and teaching and the Deans of Students (or equivalents), academics and academic developers from the 3 sites participated in interviews and focus groups, facilitated by the UK team. Interviews and focus groups explored issues of rurality, how institutions manage access, support under-represented students, inclusivity within the curriculum and pedagogic practices and tensions. Our paper will offer a brief overview of the emerging findings from co-researchers and academic participants. A more in-depth account of student co-researchers' experiences will be discussed in the third Symposium paper. (1001 words)

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