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Getting to University: Experiences of Students from Rural Areas in South Africa

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: This paper provides evidence from the ESRC/NRF funded SARiHE (Southern African Rurality in Higher Education) project that investigates how students from rural backgrounds in South Africa negotiate the transition to university. We explore the experiences and challenges of students from rural backgrounds of getting to university, how they learned about higher education, made applications and ultimately gained a place at university. We draw on the work of Holland et al (1998), who framed the idea of transitions between different worlds and trajectories through life worlds and the relationship these have with identity making and agency. The project employed a participatory methodology where students were co-researchers who generated data about their lives and their experiences at university. Findings focus on ideas about the value of higher education, access to information for applying to university, the importance of role models such as teachers, church elders, graduates and family and access to technology.

Paper: Context and Theoretical Framing
This paper provides evidence from the ESRC/NRF funded SARiHE (Southern African Rurality in Higher Education) project that investigates how students from rural backgrounds in South Africa negotiate the transition to university. We explore the experiences and challenges of students from rural backgrounds of getting to university and the ways in which they were able to learn about higher education, make applications and ultimately gain a place at university. Students from rural backgrounds are often positioned as marginalised, however, marginalisation is not necessarily a fixed state but through subjective agency having also the potential for change. Holland et al (1998) framed the idea of transitions between different worlds and trajectories through life worlds and the relationship these have with identity making and agency. Holland et al (1998) posits the theoretical construct of figured world, which can be understood as social encounters in which the positions of those taking part matter, they are socially organised and located at particular times and places. They are also cultural worlds where significance is assigned to certain acts and particular value positions are held. We also drew upon understandings of rurality as multidimensional and generative (Roberts and Green, 2013; Balfour et al. 2008). The focus of this paper is on the period of transition when students from rural contexts are applying to higher education and explores their experiences while considering the conditions of possibility both structural and cultural in the figured world of their rural

home communities that can enable and enhance their trajectories into higher education.

Methodology

A participatory methodology was employed (Timmis et al. 2019), where student co-researchers were engaged in researching their own lives as co-producers of knowledge. This approach aspires to work towards a 'decolonizing' mode (Bozalek and Biersteker 2010), by aiming to avoid a deficit positioning of students as participants or subjects within the study and instead of researching on them, to research with them. Second year undergraduates from rural backgrounds were recruited as co-researchers, developing a model based on previous research in the UK (Timmis et al. 2016) and in South Africa (Rohleder and Thesen 2012; Leibowitz et al. 2012). Fieldwork was conducted at three universities. These were 'Urban', a 'comprehensive' university with a balanced focus on research, teaching and technology, 'Town', a rural, research-led and 'previously advantaged' university, and 'Local' (a rural, teaching-led, 'previously disadvantaged' university). These institutions were chosen to represent different types of universities where students from rural contexts are strongly represented and are in different geographical parts of South Africa. There were 24 co-researchers from each of the three institutions, with a balanced number recruited from both STEM and Humanities programmes. The majority were born in South Africa with one from Lesotho. Data were generated by the student co-researchers who participated in seven face-to-face workshops over approximately nine months. The qualitative data set produced includes over 72 discussion workshop transcripts, digital documentaries (collections of artefacts) and composite narratives created by student co-researchers. A systematic thematic and multimodal analysis of all data types was conducted by members across the project team.

Findings

The paper focuses on student co-researcher ideas about the value of higher education, access to information for applying to university, the importance of role models (which include teachers, church elders, university graduates and community and family members) and access to technology. Furthermore, it addresses how student co-researchers from rural contexts come to know about studying at university, get access to information, and the role of the schools as well as outreach programmes and community organisations. This paper illustrates the challenges that student co-researchers face in getting to university but also explores the ways in which they were supported and enabled to see university as a possibility for them and to be able to make an application. The complexities of how student co-researchers navigate cultural and structural shifts in order to transition into higher education are important in understanding how these students despite being amongst the most marginalized, are able to exercise agency and draw on relationships and community networks to access higher education. Whilst, student co-researchers' experiences demonstrate the challenges of navigating different cultural values within the figured world of their rural communities and that of higher education, we also show how students drew upon their place-based histories and significant rural literacies (Green, 2013) to negotiate transitions more successfully. Their experiences also demonstrate the crucial role that schools can play in helping to develop the skills and confidence needed to take the required steps in successfully gaining access to higher   education.

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