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**Title** 'Coming to Jo'burg is like I'm in a foreign country': Researching rural students' lived experiences of transition and participation in higher education in South Africa

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## **'Coming to Jo'burg is like I'm in a foreign country': Researching rural students' lived experiences of transition and participation in higher education in South Africa**

### **Background**

The South African government's *Innovation towards a knowledge based economy: Ten Year Plan for Africa 2008-18* recognises the crucial role of higher education in building modern South African society and as a key driver of 'equity, social justice and democracy' in the vision for 2030 (Dept. of Science and Technology, 2007). There continues to be a significant lack of academic achievement of students from historically under-represented backgrounds (Cooper, 2015) but one of the most marginalised social categories, affected by historical inadequacies, is rurality, especially as it interrelates with race, ethnicity, class and gender (Bob, 2001). The concept of rurality is demographic, geographic, cultural and contextual (Roberts and Green, 2013). In South Africa, rurality remains a deeply political matter due to the displacement effects of apartheid, which Gordon (2015) refers to as a 'geography of race'. Rural students are one of the most marginalised groups, yet they have attracted little attention in widening participation research to date (Author2 et al, 2015, Mqquwashu, 2016).

Jones and colleagues (2008) highlight a multiplicity of factors affecting transitions from rural areas, including geography, financial resources, schooling, and language. They suggest that it is not only students who are disadvantaged, but that institutions are not prepared to support their needs. Yet, their study does not consider the many strengths that those students may bring to university, or focus on the curriculum and modes of teaching delivery. Furthermore, in an increasingly digital world, technology plays a powerful role in maintaining social connections and opening up possibilities for new knowledge and modes of learning, which 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. In addition, we are exploring the challenges for students from rural contexts when faced with curricula that remain imbued with colonialism in order to propose inclusive alternatives using Connell's (2017) notion of 'curricular justice'.

### **Theoretical Framing**

A sociocultural perspective on learning recognises that 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 take this further, examining how students’ historic and current practices have contributed to the negotiation of transitions from rural contexts into and through higher education as they encounter different ‘figured worlds’ (Holland et al, 1998). This perspective, based on 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.

Connell (2017) argues that curriculum change in relation to southern and post colonial theory is underdeveloped and needs to address the effects of colonisation on space, personal and social violence and the marginalisation or discrediting of cultural, religious and linguistic traditions. We use the term ‘curricular justice’ to help frame the preliminary data analysis because, rather than reflecting the ‘*culture* of the least advantaged’ (Connell, 2017:11, original emphasis), it proposes a critique of culture, creating space for dialogue and for reframing learning as conversation.

## **Methodology**

The fieldwork is being conducted by student and academic co-researchers at three sites: the University of Johannesburg (an urban ‘comprehensive’ university with a balanced focus on research, teaching and technology), Rhodes University (a rural, research-led and ‘previously advantaged’ university) and Fort Hare University (a rural, teaching-led, ‘previously disadvantaged’ university). Rurality is a very complex and contested category. This complexity and contestation form part of the focus of the study, which employs a participatory methodology. We argue this as a ‘decolonising’ mode (Bozalek and Biersteker, 2011), as it avoids a deficit positioning of under-represented students. Second year undergraduates from rural backgrounds in each partner university (20 - 24 per institution, with a balance between STEM and Humanities programmes) have been recruited as co-researchers. The majority were born in South Africa but some were born in neighbouring Southern African countries. The student co-researchers have collected accounts of everyday practices in the form of digital documentaries including diary entries, drawings, photographs and other artefacts, using an iPad, and participated in monthly discussion groups. Co-researchers received initial training and have been supported throughout the data collection period by a series of workshops, social events and regular communications in an online safe space. They will also be invited to contribute to data analysis, presentations and writing both on the website and in print. This methodology draws on previous work by author 1 (Author1 et al, 2016) conducted in the UK. For this methodology to be successful, however, special attention needs to be paid to ensure that co-researchers can develop a sense of community and belonging and have a good understanding of the research aims and how they can contribute to shaping these as the project progresses (Author1 & Williams, 2013).

We will share our critical reflections on the methodological challenges of this approach. Specifically, we consider the complexities of adapting the co-researcher methodology to a South African context where higher education is experiencing such rapid changes and where access to technological infrastructure can be limited.

## **Preliminary Findings**

The paper shares the preliminary findings from the first phase of the research (March – September 2017) focusing on the prior experiences of students from rural backgrounds. Data analysis will be conducted in several stages. The initial findings are based on a thematic analysis of transcripts and multimodal narrative accounts contained in Evernote diary entries and framed by research questions and theoretical concepts. Findings include the importance of extended family, ritual and folklore and interactions with the natural environment in rural life. The role of school and church in supporting students in orienting towards higher education is also highlighted. We then show how issues such as geography, gender and colonised curricula of school shape the choices and practices of students from rural backgrounds participating in higher education in South Africa and negotiations of curricular justice.

999 words

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