

Symposium Title: Rural Students' transitions and trajectories to and through higher education in South Africa: geographies, intercultural relationships and ecologies of knowledges

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Methodological Conversations: Reflections on Using Participatory Methodology Across the Three Data Collection Sites in the SARIHE Project (0340)

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Abstract

The focus of this symposium is on excellence and inclusion in relation to the transition of rural students to and through higher education in South Africa. The Southern African Rurality in Higher Education (SARIHE) project aims to contribute to the development of inclusive teaching and learning practices, as well as support structures and mechanisms to enhance the learning experiences and outcomes for students at universities. The overall aim of this paper is to share insights on the participatory methodological approach and experiences of data collection in the three research sites. It highlights the importance of participatory research as a decolonising mode, the challenges of conducting research across multiple sites and the importance of context. Adopting a conversational approach, the three co-investigators will foreground the differences between their institutions that necessitated flexibility in the application of the methodology, adding to the richness of experiences and data. (145 words)

Key words: Participatory methodologies, Multi-site research, Context, student co-research

Rurality and Participatory Methodologies

Rurality is a complex concept, which is demographic, geographic, cultural and contextual (Roberts and Green, 2013). In the South African context, researching rurality involves working with people who are amongst the most marginalised as the displacement effects of apartheid, which relocated more than three million people to rural homelands between 1960 and 1980, contributed to the creation of economically impoverished rural spaces. The effects of this legacy are still prevalent. Rurality as a spatial concept is, therefore, deeply political (Mqgwashu 2016) and, in researching rurality, an approach that is ethical, takes an activist stance and engages participants (White and Corbett, 2014) is crucial.

Leibowitz (2017) cautions against conceptualising marginalised people as necessarily lacking in agency. Our study is mindful of this and using participatory methodology and, in particular, the approach of engaging students as co-researchers, is key to providing a valuable basis to explore students' transition into higher education, while acknowledging their agency. Participatory research is also a decolonising mode in that it avoids a 'deficit positioning of under-represented students and appreciates people's own knowledge and ways of knowing' (Bozalek and Biersteker 2010: 553).

This approach of engaging students as co-researchers who work alongside academic researchers in the inquiry team draws on previous work by one of the primary investigators on the project (see Timmis and Williams, 2013). In this study, conducted in the UK, student researchers consistently reported on the positive benefits they found in being co-researchers, particularly in supporting their own learning and academic experiences. Preliminary findings of the SARIHE project echo these benefits. Participatory research is particularly useful in helping academic and student researchers develop a rich, situated and nuanced understanding of rural learning. Academic and student co-

researchers shared their experiences in-group discussions and could use English or any local language that others could understand, engendering trust.

This paper draws on the first data collection phase of the project where second year undergraduates from rural backgrounds in each partner university (20 - 24 per institution, with a balance between STEM and Humanities programmes) were recruited as co-researchers. They were involved in a number of ways - collecting accounts of everyday practices in the form of digital documentaries, including Evernote diary entries, drawings, photographs and other artefacts using an iPad and contributing to discussions and focus groups. The use of multimodal methods is important as they can reduce students' reliance on writing and language, particularly when the dominant language is a second language (Rohleder and Thesen, 2012). Student co-researchers are also contributing to data analysis and in presentations and academic writing; one of the first written projects on which co-researchers are embarking is to produce a handbook as a resource for future students from rural areas to help them to access higher education.

Data Collection Across Multiple Sites

While conducting research across multiple sites results in rich and interesting findings, one of the challenges facing the research team on the SARIHE project related to the complexity of doing research in very diverse institutions. In order to address this and to ensure that the data collection methods could be replicated as closely as possible across all three sites, a detailed data collection handbook was developed for each of the data collection phases. Research, however, is contextual and reflections by academic researchers on the first phase of data collection attest to the importance of context. In this presentation, three of the researchers, drawing on experiences of being part of the research team at each of the three sites, engage in conversation on the similarities and differences, and provide some explanatory accounts for these. Even though this research focuses on the South African context, the experience shared will resonate with other researchers who are engaged in rurality research across diverse settings.

It is important to point out that there are very different social and material conditions at the three university settings where data were collected. The University of Johannesburg is an urban 'comprehensive' university with a balanced focus on research, teaching and technology, Rhodes University, is a rural, research-intense and 'previously advantaged' university and Fort Hare University is a rural, teaching-led, 'previously disadvantaged' university. Furthermore, the social and educational background of the researchers on the SARIHE project differs, and this informed the positions taken when implementing the collectively designed research methods and in interpreting the data. For example, at Rhodes University, students participated actively in the #feesmustfall protests. This resulted in both student and academic researchers taking a more political stance during the data collection sessions. Similarly, researchers at Fort Hare adopted an activist stance in recruiting student co-researchers. At the University of Johannesburg (UJ), where there had been less student activism, there was not a strongly political slant. There were also differences in facilitation style. The facilitators at Rhodes were somewhat more directive than those at UJ, anxious that co-researchers should not construct homogeneous accounts of rural experience. At Fort Hare, the co-investigator leading the project indicated that she was interested in hearing from those who, like herself, were from "ezilaleni" (villages) so that success stories and challenges could be shared.

There were challenges relating to the use of technology and availability of Wi-Fi at all three sites. Such challenges, in combination with other institutional factors, resulted in several difficulties at Fort Hare, necessitating adjustments. For example, university staff took industrial action when data collection was scheduled to begin, delaying the process. The lack of Wi-Fi meant that configuring the iPads and downloading Evernote was extremely problematic. Such persistent technological

challenges meant that PowerPoint, where participants combined text, audio and video clips, had to be used.

Conclusion

The use of participatory methodologies acknowledges different forms of cultural and social ways of learning on which students rely when transitioning to higher education. Engaging student co-researchers promoted inclusivity and gave them a voice because it provided an opportunity to research themselves, to reflect and discuss findings, which in turn is contributing to scholarship. Importantly, the study also reveals the challenges of undertaking research in multiple sites. (1000 words)

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