

## **C4.4** Caldicot Wednesday 5 December 14.15-16.15

### ***The SARIHE project: Negotiating the transitions from rural contexts into and trajectories through higher education in South Africa (0399)***

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#### **Abstract**

Research on educational inequalities and students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds emphasises issues and contexts affecting successful transitions into and through university including gender, ethnicity, economic background, previous learning and home location. However, little work concentrates on students from rural backgrounds. The SARIHE project focuses on challenges and strategies for successful transition into and through Higher Education (HE) for students from rural backgrounds in South Africa, the majority of whom are first generation. This paper focuses on data generated by student co-researchers highlighting in particular (i) what students bring with them to university: cultural capital, previous learning behaviours and practices affected by family, religion, community and work and living competences, and (ii) improvisations and adaptations students make to address the challenges of transitioning from one context to another. A number of personal and HE contextual changes are surfaced and indicated as important to enable their successful transition, including curriculum decolonisation. (150 words)

#### **Background**

Student transitions are discussed broadly by, for example, Bangeni and Pym (2017); Briggs et al., (2012); Clark, (2005); Coertjens et al., (2017a); Finn, (2017); Kahu and Nelson, (2018); McGhie, (2017), and related to transition phases 'into', 'through or within' and 'from' HE (Kyndt et al., 2017). However, the experiences of rural students have been less extensively researched and theorised. In South Africa, Moletsane (2012) argues for moving beyond deficit paradigms in researching rurality and education. Balfour et al (2012, p. vii) suggest that 'rurality is an active agent and central, both as lived experience and as a social and transformative agent' and make the case (2008) for a generative theory of rurality and education considering sociological and post-colonial accounts of identity and environment.

Looker and Dwyer's study (1998) of Australian and Canadian students suggests rural transition patterns are qualitatively different from those of urban youth particularly regarding decision processes and costs. In South Africa, access and retention remain difficult for students from rural areas, exacerbated by financial and academic preparedness (Jones et al 2008), and distance where social networks revolve around local communities, family and church. Students leaving for university lose that support. Finally – and importantly - students from WP, rural and 'historically disadvantaged' backgrounds might find their learning practices and knowledges unrecognised and unrewarded, in HE.

#### **Researching transitions and trajectories**

Universities of Bristol and Brighton in the UK, Johannesburg, Rhodes and Fort Hare in South Africa, are working together in the SARIHE project with three groups of 24 student co-researchers at three distinct institutions. Johannesburg is a large urban university, Rhodes is a traditional, (previously advantaged university) in a rural area and Fort Hare is a previously disadvantaged university in a rural area. Co-researchers documented their prior learning in rural areas through the creation of digital

documentaries representing influences on their learning and transitions into and through university. The methodology will be fully discussed in papers 1 and 2 of this symposium.

Moving from one context to another and negotiating transitions and trajectories to and through higher education is a matter of becoming, changing identities and subjectivities. We employ Holland's concept of a *figured world* (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). Figured worlds are social encounters in which the positions of those taking part matter, and are socially organised and located at particular times and places, giving rise to an interplay of positional and figurative identities. Improvisations are the mechanisms for employing our agency through actions that resist or overcome the cultural and historical constraints that powerful structures and positions embody (ibid). We combine this with sociocultural and social practice theories (Schatzki, 2012; Daniels, 2015) focusing on practices to interrogate the historical, cultural, relational, material and embodied (and also diverse or conflicting) understandings of learning, knowing and identities within and across contexts and communities. Drawing on these frameworks, we highlight some of the main findings.

### **Findings**

Ways in which the student co-researchers identify challenges to their sense of learner identities and learning practices were emphasised as they worked towards university entry and transition into university learning. These were often 'victory narratives' which are inspirational for other current and potential rural and widening participation students yet, at the same time, there are poignant stories told that run counter to this narrative. There are practical indicators of positive transferable practices and improvisations building on their rural learning backgrounds and supportive developments in the university collectively or self-originated. Overall, we identify an emerging set of attitudinal and practice strategies, aiding their successful transitions and trajectories through HE.

Co-researcher documentary accounts and discussions demonstrated how family and community including religious groups, initiation schools, study and self-help groups influenced their transitions into university including settling in and establishing good habits, and their journeys through university. Rural practices had supported them to learn respect, work hard, collaborate, and be responsible and motivated. School was a stepping stone for new ideas together with learning from friends during class, breaks and lunch, and on the way home. Co-researchers also attested to the encouragement from teachers who were mentors, care-givers, and role models. The church also played a significant role, positive and enabling for some, less so for others. Different university cultures and structures helped and hindered co-researchers, reinforcing for some their difficulty in questioning authority or questioning academics because of established behaviours from family, community and religion.

Learning also took place during cultural activities (enabling co-researchers to develop a range of skills. Such activities, identified as sources of both productive and unproductive learning helped students relate to different people at university; how to deal with pain (from initiation schools), negotiate with others and the importance of passing on customs and beliefs to future generations. Several co-researchers gave detailed accounts of family life and responsibilities, including herding cattle, and how the skills developed from these activities were valuable in negotiating their university learning. Living in resource-constrained environments helped to manage resource constraints in university life but the majority of co-researchers experienced significant financial challenges. Technology was also a major issue in applying to and entering university as many had not seen or used a computer and were overwhelmed by digital expectations. The lack of familiarity with English as the medium of communication was problematic and several commented on the

inappropriateness or limitations of the curriculum, which they considered to continue to be imbued with colonialism.

## Conclusions

The paper discusses transitions from the rural worlds of home, improvisational practices that have helped transitions into the new world of university and how these influenced students' trajectories in and through university, within the theoretical frameworks articulated. Some aspects of rural learning may conflict with what is expected at university, however much of the data suggest that experiences and learning in the rural areas support elements of university life and study. The knowledges and practices that students bring to university may not always be recognised as valuable, however, and their educational needs as rural students underplayed. We argue that this recognition is crucial and relates significantly to decolonisation of curricula. (1000 words)

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