Editorial

Rural education and rural realities: The politics and possibilities of rural research in Southern Africa

"We consider land as our strength. We have life because of our fields" (Emerging Voices Report, 2005:26)

Rurality studies and research emerged from established disciplines such as agricultural sciences (Maat, 2001), agricultural education (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer & Ball, 2007) and human geography (Cloke, Crang & Goodwin, 2004). With regards to the latter, human geography and urbanisation studies (Reader, 2004) developed almost bifocally with the realisation that the sustainability of conurbations and cities needed to be premised on an understanding of sustainable rural livelihoods, beyond the mass agricultural production associated with intensive industrialised agricultural planning, clearing, and planting. Agricultural sciences do not conventionally focus on rural life as a social activity in which the fabric of human relations and community enable (and sometimes disable) sustainable economic agricultural development. In more recent times, food and nutrition security have also shifted in focus from the phenomenon of the urban poor to a realisation that, without richly textured and empowered rural communities, the connection between small- and large-scale agricultural production and food security becomes more attenuated and dispersed. In all of this, education, as a means for developing environmental awareness, addressing societal challenges, and enabling individual and communal aspirations to social mobility and transformation, remains a critical and yet underexplored dimension of rural life, whether based on agricultural or other social activity. As with most issues, there is a history to this.

In South Africa successive mass migrations, for example, the Mfecane (*circa* 1779-1840), and colonial wars (not least of which was the First South African War 1880-1881 and the Second South African War 1899-1902) resulted in what might be termed the progressive destabilisation of rural livelihoods in South Africa. Features of this destabilisation included the collapse of subsistence farming, the dispossession of indigenous black groups of their land, the economic marginalisation and near-genocide of white and black settler groups (achieving notoriety in the concentration camps established by the colonial British, and not excluding the many wars of colonial 'pacification' practised by both Dutch and British settler populations on colonised peoples, let alone those internecine wars practised by various black groups on each other) (Thompson, 2001).

Briefly, by 1932 the consolidation of colonial control in South Africa had had the effect of causing mass starvation and the near collapse of rural life, for both the black and white population. Framed within our colonial history, it is thus not surprising that the first considered perspective on rural livelihoods, the Carnegie Commission of 1932, considered the problem of dispossessed peoples as a 'white' and, in particular, a 'white Afrikaner' problem in relation to the challenges associated with unplanned urbanisation. That the majority of the population was similarly dispossessed, even less enfranchised, and almost invisible in colonial accounts of this period, was hardly noted. The shift of black people into townships was a necessary part of sustaining the mining economies of the Witwatersrand. And, if rural community life continued to exist, then the labour required for sugar and cash crops in the former colonies of Natal and the (Eastern) Cape necessitated the development of what came to be termed 'Bantustans'. History appears to have occluded the rural poor. Rural education, as part of any consideration, remained accessible to the few who could access missionary stations. It is only after 2000 that the second considered perspective on rurality and rural livelihoods is to be found in the form of the *Emerging Voices Report* (2005). In this report, when compared to the *Carnegie Report* (1932), the shifts are multiple. Rather than focus on one ethnic group, the report focuses on rural communities and schools, and the role of community

and education in the development of rural livelihoods that are sustainable. Furthermore, while both reports were occasioned by social crises (unemployment, on the one hand, and rural deprivation in the age of HIV and AIDS, on the other), the *Emerging Voices Report* (2005) is the first to address education as a focus, thus raising the awareness of the role education should play in both poverty alleviation and the development of sustainable rural livelihoods. The collection of articles in this special issue of *Perspectives in Education* seeks to further deepen the scholarship and quality of reflection in relation to education and rural communities. Rural education and rurality research has also shifted as scholarship developed in relation to areas such as environmental education where the emphasis has shifted from conservation to sustainable development. The need for citizens to conserve and indeed develop the environment is well known and popularly accessible through films such as Al Gore's *An inconvenient truth* and at policy level well described in the *Kyoto Protocol* (2005) in which carbon emission level targets have been set and areas of the world identified as priorities for further conservation efforts. But, almost in contrary terms, discourses of the late 20th century, while acknowledging the critical role the environment (the rural) must play in our collective survival, tend still to characterise rural communities as socially backward and reactionary.

This double-face constitutes a fantasy whereby the innocence of the rural exists in binaries as a foil to the corruption of the urban; the naivety of the rural contrasts to the sophistication of the urban; the ignorance of the rural and the knowing of the urban. It is certain that these binaries have long histories dating back to the enlightenment and beyond. The fantasy also has consequences, not least of which are consequences for rural schools and communities. For example, in South Africa it was possible in the 1960s to conceive of the Bantustans as rural 'homelands' that could sustain forced relocation. However, in reality such areas were often semi-desert unable to sustain even subsistence farming. The fantasy had consequences in 1996 when the curriculum statements for language, for example, presuppose multilingual and urban classrooms, adequately trained teachers and well-resourced schools. One continuity between the complexities of then and now can be simplified: almost all policy generated by the middle class in South Africa has served a mainly urban elite; the *Emerging Voices Report* (2005:139) terms policy frameworks as "insufficiently sensitive". No intervention has succeeded in shifting an outrage such as the fact that in rural areas, domestic and other labour is undertaken by children in South Africa (*Emerging Voices Report*, 2005:26). Paradoxically while unemployment is high in rural areas, such areas are both aged and juvenile.

In considering the notion of rurality, Marsden (2006) construes rurality as a signifier which is transformative, capable of changing behaviour and affecting the motivation of teachers, community workers, and learners. Research from projects located in rural areas and from projects focusing on the challenges associated with rurality demonstrates that the very generative and transformative nature of rurality serves both to inform and to delimit the effectiveness of intervention programmes designed, often with the best of intentions in mind, for education, health care, job creation, and poverty alleviation. However, it remains a startling and disturbing fact that seventeen years after South Africa's first democratic elections, very little has changed in rural areas. As has been noted in the *Emerging Voices Report* (2005:141): "[…] there is a nagging feeling that unless the real differences between urban and rural areas are appreciated and given special attention, inequalities will persist and come to haunt future generations". This suggests that initiatives in teacher education remain mostly ineffective since they do not address systemic challenges. The fact is that 'ruralities' are core to the identity of many rural community-based professionals. It is perhaps not surprising, given the urban-focused, middle-class teacher education curricula of the past two decades (in which OBE and other participatory pedagogies are endorsed), that education in South Africa's rural areas remains beset with problems and challenges simply not considered within policy, theoretical, and pragmatic initiatives.

This special issue, *Rural education and rural realities: The politics and possibilities of rural research in Southern Africa,* originates from an International Symposium, *Every voice counts: Critical partnerships for teacher education and rural communities,* held in Durban, at the Killie Campbell Collections, on 26-27 February 2009. The symposium was envisaged around the work done in the NRF-funded *Every*

voice counts: Teacher development in rural communities in the age of AIDS,[1] a research niche area in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Faculty of Education, bringing together both national and international academics to share their work and to debate issues on rural education in the context of HIV and AIDS. In order to contextualise the work at the symposium, a video documentary, *Our photos, our videos, our stories* (Mak, Mitchell & Stuart, 2005) provided a glimpse of the rural community where the work of the project is undertaken, but also clearly allowing the community voices to be heard on the challenges they face in the context of HIV and AIDS. This provided the backdrop for the delivery and robust discussion of more than 20 papers – by experienced researchers, emerging researchers and postgraduate students – to an audience of over 45 delegates. The presenters were invited to submit their papers for publication in an edited book or a special issue. The edited book *School-University partnerships for educational change in rural South Africa: Particular Challenges and Practical Cases* has been published, and this Special Issue contains some of the papers presented at the international symposium as well as other solicited papers we as editors thought useful in furthering debates on rural education and rurality.

This special issue therefore seeks to interrogate, disrupt, and recast assumptions and perceptions concerning rurality and rural education, in particular. We believe that rurality studies is an area of research deserving and in need of its own focus, given the paucity of research which describes sustainable and successful interventions located in rural areas. We argue that rurality is not a static-passive, the 'background' for teaching, community work, and research. We suggest that rurality is an active agent and central, both as lived experience and as a social and transformative agent in which teachers and community workers are changed. What emerges further from such reflections is that education as received by learners and educators is a "placed resource" (Blommaert, 2002:20) where "resources that are functional in one particular place […] become dysfunctional as soon as they are moved into other places". Understanding how such resources are received and made effective by student-teachers across a variety of education contexts (urban, rural, middle class, working class) is the key issue affecting the quality of teaching and learning in 21st century-South Africa.

The first article by Moletsane is a position paper, *Repositioning educational research on rurality and rural education in South Africa: Beyond deficit paradigms*. She offers critical reflections on the nature of rurality and rural realities, goes on to highlight some limitations of dominant research paradigms in relation to social change, and puts forward an argument for using participatory visual methods for conducting research and simultaneously making a difference in the lives of participants and those around them.

The collection of three articles, by Balfour, Islam, and Ebersöhn and Ferreira respectively, speak to both pre-service and in-service teacher development in a rural context. Balfour's article, *Rurality research and rural education: exploratory and explanatory power*, illustrates how data generated through focus group discussions, individual interviews, as well as drawings in a rural teacher education project could be used to develop theory, in this instance, a generative theory of rurality, and how it might be used to understand, interrogate and advance the quality of both teacher development and education in rural communities. Ebersöhn and Ferreira in their article, *Rurality and resilience in education: Place-based partnerships and agency to moderate time and space constraints,* draw on the generative theory developed by Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) to make sense of observation and visual data on how forces, agencies and resources act, move, pull and push when adversity and resilience are present in a rural school context. Their explication of place-based partnerships provides a lead in for Islam's article, *Understanding pre-service teacher education discourses in Communities of Practice*: *A reflection from an intervention in rural South Africa,* which draws on an evaluation experience of a teacher education professional development project, and concludes that the concept of a Community of Practice is powerful in providing spaces for self-reflection to pre-service teachers and challenging the dominant urban-based teacher education discourses in relation to rural schools.

The next collection of four articles addresses the experiences of teachers within rural classrooms across a variety of disciplines. The first two articles examine teachers' identity construction in rural schools and how such constructions shape their teaching practice. The other two articles address teachers' experiences of teaching specific subjects within rural classrooms and how they handle the challenges

faced. In *Revisiting rurality and schooling: A teacher's story*, Pillay and Saloojee use life history and collage to offer some insight into what it means to be a teacher in a rural school and the mechanisms a teacher may employ to survive the challenges of working in a rural context. D'Amant's article, *Within and between the old and the new: Teachers becoming inclusive practitioners*, continues the debate by using narratives of teachers' experiences of inclusive education within rural classrooms in post-apartheid South Africa in order to provide an understanding of the influence of the historic principle of exclusion on how teachers construct their teaching identities. The third article in this collection, Khau's "*Our culture does not allow that": Exploring the challenges of sexuality education in rural communities*, speaks to the lack of fit between traditional ways of teaching about sexuality and modern sexuality education. The article uses focus group discussions to explore teachers' experiences of sexuality education in rural classrooms and how they negotiate the slippery ground between a rural lifestyle steeped in traditional cultures, and formal education. Lastly, the article by Mentz *et al., The diverse educational needs and challenges of Information Technology teachers in two black rural schools,* investigates the unique challenges and needs of Information Technology teachers within black rural schools. Their paper highlights some of the contextual issues that inhibit effective teaching of IT and provides some suggestions on how these can be met in order to empower the teachers.

The fourth collection of articles draws attention to the children living in rural areas. De Lange, Olivier, Geldenhuys and Mitchell, in their article *Rural school children picturing family life*, offer some views on the everyday lives of the children who live and grow up on a farm, positioning rurality as an active agent and central to the lived experiences of these children attending a farm school. Through the use of drawings the children provide an insider local perspective on growing up on a farm in a rural environment. Morojele and Muthukrishna, in their article *The journey to school: Space, geography and experiences of rural children,* use participatory methodologies to focus on how children express their agency in their negotiation of the school journey, and represent rural children as heterogeneous with the capacity to navigate their localities in complex and autonomous ways. Mahlomaholo's article, *Early school leavers and sustainable learning environments in rural contexts*, draws attention to the similarities and differences between rural and urban contexts, and argues that curriculum practices be customised to the needs and conditions in the rural settings. The purpose of this is to create sustainable learning environments in order to stem the high rates of learner attrition.

The final article in the special issue, Hlalele's *Social justice and rural education in South Africa*, rounds off the special issue with another theoretical paper. Hlalele works from a distributive social justice paradigm pointing to a proper distribution of social benefits and burdens among members of society. Accordingly, rural education needs to embrace difference, shape demands and model social benefits in accordance with the realities of a particular rural setting, and in this way contribute to social justice as a humanising process.

As the scholarship concerning rural education grows in South Africa, we anticipate an ever more critical engagement with place as a facet of professional identity, and the extent to which professional development needs to account for place as part of the teacher education curriculum. We know that teacher burn-out, learner disaffection and underperformance have been noted as problems especially evident in rural schools. Without a strong professional identity, characterised by professional competence, high levels of academic specialisation, and sustained by communities of practice and support, the role of the teacher is compromised in contexts already compromised. Appiah (2005) suggests that in a globalised world (of which rural areas are part) there exists the danger that education and social mobility enable a kind of 'disconnect' between people and the "special obligations" (Appiah, 2005:225) to place and community. In rural education, as opposed to education in rural areas, there is an opportunity to affirm community, to attend with special focus to the challenges that place poses to rural education, and thus also to the quality and sustainability of rural (and ultimately also urban) life.

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