

Repositioning educational research on rurality and rural education in South Africa: Beyond deficit paradigms

RELEBOHILE MOLETSANE

University KwaZulu-Natal

Almost two decades after the demise of apartheid, rural communities in South Africa are still plagued by seemingly insurmountable challenges, with no change in sight for those who need it most. In spite of the many interventions that have been implemented, real transformation remains elusive. This position paper is premised on the notion that this lack of social change is due, in large part, to the dominance of research paradigms that ignore the voices of those most affected and those who are the intended beneficiaries of the interventions informed by the scholarship. Thus, the paper aims to critically reflect on the nature of rurality and to map the issues that face rural communities as well as the limitations of dominant research paradigms and their impact on social change (or lack thereof). It concludes with an exploration of the possibilities for using participatory visual methods for conducting research that makes a difference in the lives of participants and those around them.

Keywords: Rurality, rural education, deficit paradigms, participatory visual methods.

Introduction

Critical theory, if nothing else, is a moral construct designed to reduce human suffering in the world. In the critical theoretical context, every individual is granted dignity regardless of his or her location in the web of reality. Thus, the continuation of human suffering by conscious human decision is a morally unacceptable behaviour that must be analysed, interpreted and changed (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010:140).

Why is it that, 17 years after the demise of apartheid, South Africa and its education system in particular are still plagued by seemingly insurmountable challenges, with no change in sight for those who need it most, especially those who live, work and learn in rural, informal and other marginalised communities? Why and how is it that “initiatives meant to bring about social change in these areas, including those concerned with teacher education and curriculum implementation, have not addressed the systemic challenges” (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008:99), making real transformation difficult?

This position paper is premised on the notion that the lack of (desirable) social and educational change is due, in large part, to the dominance of deficit paradigms in South African scholarship, in general, and in education research and development, in particular. Unless we change the paradigms we use and adopt more strength-based epistemologies, such change will remain elusive. New paradigms must, while acknowledging the challenges these communities face, also recognise that individuals and groups also have strengths, skills, knowledge and resources that can be used to develop and implement interventions for social change (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Thus, in re-imagining the research (and development) endeavour, the purpose of the paper is two-fold. First, it aims to critically reflect on the dominance of deficit paradigms in South African scholarship, in general, and in rural education research and development, in particular; and its impact on social change (or lack thereof). Second, it explores possibilities for repositioning educational research and interventions focusing on rural contexts in strength-based paradigms.

Mapping the issues

People living in marginalised contexts, especially in rural and peri-urban contexts and, to a lesser extent, in township contexts, continue to be denied access to basic human right, including the right to basic education, health and nutrition. This is in spite of South Africa's signatory status to the Millennium Development Goals and a plethora of interventions being implemented to move the country towards achieving these by 2015, as well as having a constitution that is informed by the Bill of Rights. Reasons for this include the research (and development) paradigms that scholars adopt in doing research on/about/for them as well as in the teaching and learning situation in basic and tertiary institutions.

Several examples illustrate this point: First, current processes of globalisation, regionalisation and transnationalisation have seen a plethora of scholars and institutions from the academic 'north' (particularly Europe and North America) honing in on Africa as a research focus and site (e.g. Adams, King & Hook, 2010). On the one hand, the globalisation of research in and of itself is not necessarily problematic, and the studies are undoubtedly important and useful in knowledge generation and for informing interventions. On the other hand, the analyses of issues and the underpinning debates are often, and understandably so, informed by the scholars' Western epistemologies and ontologies. Furthermore, even though such publications might be presenting legitimate and even useful arguments, African voices (while growing, albeit slowly) tend to be muted within the global arena with its power imbalances regarding access to funding and knowledge generation (publishing). Noting this inequality in access to knowledge generation and dissemination, research conducted by ESE:O (a Chilean research NGO) has concluded that researchers from the 'south' face at least three main barriers to publication in leading international journals. These include the pre-eminence of academic English, and isolation from discursive communities (conceptualised and dominated by scholars from the 'north') and the marginalisation of locally produced knowledge as non-academic (Luco, Missana, Marilef & Maurizi, 2009:1). The ESE:O study also found an under-representation of scholars from the academic south in editorial boards of the various international journals which were sampled.

This not only skews the debates and the knowledge produced on these issues, it also frames African people and contexts as problematic, deficient and in need of external assistance. On the one hand, development scholars are beginning to understand and respond to the need for the advancement of authentic knowledge and, in particular, of context-specific and place-based understandings of issues and interventions (see Gruenewald, 2003; Budge, 2005; HSRC-EPC, 2005). On the other hand, with a few exceptions, such scholarship seems to be based on fleeting explorations of local knowledge and resources, and the discourses and assets that could be harnessed to develop interventions for creating social change in these contexts are often ignored or marginalised.

Second, whose voices are often heard in our analysis of issues that have an impact on communities and schools? A response to this question is best illustrated by Jan Egeland (2005:1) who, in the foreword to *Broken bodies, broken dreams: Violence against women exposed* writes:

When images of the world's disasters flash across television screens, more often than not, we are presented with a rough sketch of the humanitarian crisis. Rarely do the cameras venture beneath the surface to look at the hidden impact of a humanitarian crisis on affected communities. If they did they would find that virtually without exception, it is women and children who are the most vulnerable.

Even more rarely would the cameras, which do venture beneath the surface, be controlled by the people who are most affected such as rural people, the poor, women and girls, and other marginalised groups (Moletsane, Mitchell, Stuart, Walsh & Taylor, 2008). For example, in education, the negative impacts of poverty in rural communities, including poor educational outcomes, in general (HSRC-EPC, 2005), and poor achievement in Grade 12 examinations, in particular (Reddy, 2006; Perry & Fleisch, 2006), are often spoken and written about by outsiders (journalists, education officials, researchers, members of the public), and interventions are developed *for* rather than *with* or *by* the affected communities.

Wrigley (2006:277) critiques the "strong centralised determination of valued outcomes, particularly test results" that are pre-determined at national government level, where those who fall short are appropriately sanctioned, punished and/or identified as underperforming and needing special intervention.

In line with this, a plethora of studies which measure some aspect of educational attainment of schools and learners have been implemented and published (e.g. Hallman & Grant, 2004; Perry & Fleisch, 2006; Mthiyane, 2007). While these studies are undoubtedly essential, they fail to ask the following questions: What is the role of schools as defined by particular communities and what do the communities themselves expect of educational institutions in their midst? Beyond test results, what other indicators of success do communities and learners value most? This paper calls for more research that privileges these questions and the voices of those most impacted, namely the community members themselves.

Particularly pertinent to the focus of this paper are studies that examine rurality and rural contexts. As some scholars have observed, with a few exceptions, research on rurality is mostly concerned with “... space, isolation, community, poverty, disease, neglect, backwardness, marginalization, depopulation, conservatism, tribalism, racism, resettlement, corruption, entropy, and exclusion” (Balfour *et al.*, 2008:101). However, such research tends to utilise these only as *contexts* for measuring under-performance in some aspect of development, for example, poverty, education, food security and other social ills (see Baro & Deubel, 2006; Schroeder & Nichola, 2006). Research seldom focuses on the dynamic interactions of the people who live, learn and work in these communities, nor on the ways in which they engage with and shape their lives in their environments. In this regard, Odora-Hoppers (2004) writes that the theoretical constructs we use to study rurality tend to focus on the space rather than the people, and tend to treat the space as homogenous, ignoring and simplifying the variations and complexities in identity, behaviour and nuance. Rurality is also understood in its relation to and in comparison with urbanity and urban contexts, ignoring the fact that rurality is dynamic, and that it has value and strength independent of urbanity and urban influences (Balfour *et al.*, 2008). In other words, studies on rurality and the interventions intended to address the many ‘deficiencies’ identified tend to disregard the peculiarities of the local (see Budge, 2005) and fail to develop place-conscious and context-specific strategies (Gallagher, 1993; Gruenewald, 2003) for addressing the educational (and social) needs of these communities. These studies also ignore the agency of rural communities and people, as well as the assets that are available therein and that can be harnessed in developing and implementing relevant and effective interventions.

What are deficit and strength paradigms in education research?

The above examples illustrate and critique a disturbingly common trend in international academic research, including South African educational scholarship. Informed by deficit paradigms, the discourses running through research reports and publications, especially those focusing on the ‘other’ (including rural schools and communities) too often tend to betray or suggest some deep-seated unequal power relations between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Such needs-based scholarship often focuses on what the target community is lacking and/or what its problems are (Turner & Pinkett, n.d.; Beeson, 2001; Kallaway, 2001; Balfour *et al.*, 2008). It positions researchers (often outsiders to the community) as always the more knowledgeable, the more skilled, the more resourced and the more powerful benefactors, and the researched as deficient beneficiaries of ‘development’ or ‘empowerment’ efforts and, as such, the *objects* of our research gaze.

To illustrate, using the deficit paradigms, scholars and practitioners have come up with various explanations for the poor performance of learners in schools (and other education institutions). Weiner (2006:46) aptly summarises these into two contradictory forms. One variation “casts student and family deficits as the cause of poor achievement. Teachers often find this version seductive because it locates responsibility outside their classrooms”. Often, these explanations are informed by human capital theory, which posits that deficiencies in the skills and aptitudes required for success in education and the knowledge economy, in particular, have a major impact on the educational attainment of individuals and groups (see Ponting & Voyageur, 2001). The learner’s home background, particularly if it is rural and characterised by poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and other social ills, is used to explain poor performance in assessment in these schools. Seldom do analyses informed by this variation investigate the role of the school in the learner’s failure.

In contrast, the second variation puts the blame solely on the school and the teachers, presenting:

teacher characteristics and deficits as the only factor that really counts in undermining student learning. Legislators and parents often find this explanation persuasive because it implies an uncomplicated solution: Fix the teachers we have or hire new and better individuals (Weiner, 2006:46).

Reasons for poor learner performance are complex and can be found in the home, the community, the school, and the society and its various institutions. Thus, interventions must address those systemic challenges that complicate real transformation (Balfour *et al.*, 2008:99). The challenges faced by many learners and their teachers in most rural contexts cannot and should not be denied and, indeed, need to be studied and understood. However, in order to address these challenges, studies should identify existing resources and assets in these communities and schools and indicate how we might harness them to effect the desired social change (see Khanare, 2009). More importantly, such analyses need to be informed by the perspectives of the people most impacted by these conditions: rural people themselves (learners, parents and other community members and stakeholders). Borrowing from Ponting and Voyageur (2001:283), who were writing on the conditions of First Nations in Canada:

Let us remember that even among those persons subjected to the trauma and hardships of [among others, apartheid oppression, gender-based violence, poverty, inferior education and HIV and AIDS, and others] ... many have derived strength and not [only] vulnerability from the experiences.

It is these strengths (or assets) that need to be harnessed in understanding the human condition and in developing interventions to effect social change in these communities. With a few exceptions, this is largely lacking. Instead, explanations for the poor performance of rural (and other) schools view these as autonomous from the communities in which they are located. Such explanations tend to ignore the context (family background, social class, etc.), regarding it as “noise” which must be controlled for and then stripped away so that the researcher can concentrate on the important domain of school factors” (Angus, 1993:361, in Wrigley, 2006:277). Furthermore, within this context:

Parents are viewed as consumers rather than partners; they are seen instrumentally, as a vehicle for ensuring that pupils arrive at the school gate homework in hand, without much sense that they also have significant lives, opportunities (and strengths) and troubles (Wrigley, 2006:277).

Thus, this paper calls for the utilisation of strength paradigms and the harnessing of the social, physical, educational and cultural resources and assets residing in both the home (and community) and the school in addressing the social and educational needs of learners in rural contexts. This is based on the understanding that the disregard of the socio-political context of schooling is detrimental to social change, in general, and to widening educational access and success, in particular. In order to address this issue, initiatives who are meant to bring about social change, including those concerned with teacher education and curriculum implementation, need to attend to these systemic challenges as they stand in the way of true transformation (Balfour *et al.*, 2008).

Towards repositioning educational research in rural contexts

In 1975 Stenhouse maintained that it is not adequate for researchers, who are often outsiders, to study teachers and their work. Instead, teachers themselves should study their own practice. Similarly, writing about research on children, sociologist Ann Oakley (1994:25) asked: What would it really mean to study the world from the standpoint of children both as knowers and as actors? As identified in the previous sections, following in the footsteps of these scholars, this position paper adds: What would it mean to study the often marginalised rural contexts, particularly schools, from the perspectives of those who live, work and learn in them? From this perspective, the question can be raised as to how our research can take a different view of the issues and the spaces and people (learners, teachers and others)? The participation of those directly affected (e.g. women, teachers and learners) in mapping out issues of importance to them, is critical, and their positioning “as protagonists in taking action in their everyday lives cannot be underestimated” (Moletsane, Mitchell, de Lange, Stuart, Buthelezi & Taylor, 2009:5).

Arriving at this understanding requires what has now almost become a cliché, namely a paradigm shift, from deficit perspectives of these people, their schools and communities, to strength-based paradigms and asset-based epistemologies. The latter originated in the field of positive psychology, which “focuses on intrinsic strengths, assets and resources … and plays a decisive role in mental health and wellbeing” (Ryan, 2008:4). Their use tends to cut across areas such as disability studies, poverty eradication, care (in the context of HIV/AIDS), rurality and social change, and social justice, in general. These paradigms view research (and development) as social change (Schratz & Walker, 1995), and participants (e.g. learners and teachers in the classrooms) as protagonists in their own development, capable of understanding their lives and of identifying, developing (or informing), implementing and (partially) resourcing interventions that address the challenges they face. As Maclure (1990:2) observes:

For marginal groups to improve their positions in society, the struggle is not restricted to economic and political spheres, but encompasses as well the realm of ideas. This ideational dimension has produced a novel responsibility for social scientists: that is, if their research is to contribute to the social and economic advancement of marginal people, they must attempt to develop new paradigms of inquiry and explanation. But they cannot do so within the circumscribed parameters of professional positivist science. Instead, the insights and aptitudes of local people must be enlisted and brought to bear on the research process itself.

Steinberg and Kinchoele (2010:149) refer to the above as a reconceptualised critical theory, which “demands an engagement with the suffering of the people of the lived world, with the moral dilemmas that face us in the complexity of everyday life … [but] aims to disrupt, challenge and to promote moral action”. Strength paradigms offer the opportunity to engage in this kind of intervention in rural contexts. In order to achieve this, approaches to research and development should privilege the voices of those most affected and view them as capable of understanding their own situations and contributing to interventions aimed at addressing them.

Two examples illustrate this point. First, resilience theory offers a lens through which the strengths and assets of rural communities, including rural schools, can be harnessed in developing responses that address the challenges they face. Kaplan, Turner, Norman and Stillson (1996, in van Breda, 2001:2) define resilience as the capacity to remain competent in the midst of major adversity, while Garmezy (1994, in van Breda, 2001:2) views it as “the skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight that accumulate over time as people struggle to surmount adversity and meet challenges”. These scholars distinguish between individual and community resilience. In this regard, Theron and Theron (2010:6) conclude in their review of research on youth resilience in South Africa that resilience, or the ability to ‘bounce back’ from adversity “is nurtured by everyday resources, common to individuals, families, communities and culture”. The authors argue for a stronger focus on the cultural and contextual sources of resilience that are common to all communities, including rural contexts.

Therefore, research in rural schools might ask: How do resilient rural schools identify and utilise the strengths and resources available in their communities to triumph over the challenges they face? For example, why and how are some rural schools able to succeed while others in the same situation continue to fail? Addressing this question, Pam Christie and others illustrate how schools in difficult circumstances, among them rural schools, are able to harness available resources and succeed against the odds (see Christie, Potterton & Butler, 2007). In her 2009 dissertation, Khanare worked with members of the school management teams (SMTs) to identify rural school assets and strengths for supporting orphaned and vulnerable children. It is from these stories of success and the reasons behind them that we might develop strategies that are able to work for social and educational change in these contexts.

The second example is participatory visual methodologies (e.g. writing, drawing, visual mapping, participatory video and photography). These methodologies with their built-in orientation of research as a social change (Schratz & Walker, 1995) and their intention to engage participants as active agents of change in their own lives also provide opportunities for research and interventions informed by strength paradigms. These methods help to engage and mobilise people at grassroots level during the research process itself (de Lange, Mitchell, Moletsane, Balfour, Wedekind, Pillay & Buthelezi, 2010). They tend to

democratise the research process, particularly for participants who often find themselves on the margins of society and research (Mitchell, 2008). Furthermore, such methods have the potential to be transformative due to their built-in orientation of research as social change (Schratz & Walker, 1995) and can assist participants not only to understand their own situation, but also to develop strategies for addressing community challenges.

One example of such a method is photovoice. The use of photovoice as a research and development methodology is informed by the feminist visual project pioneered by Caroline Wang with Chinese peasant women (see Wang, Burris & Xiang, 1996). Wang involved the women in taking pictures of areas and issues that had a negative impact on their lives and in selecting the photographs that best represented their issues. These photos were then shared with those who could address these problems in their communities (e.g. policy-makers). A South African example is the work of, among others, Sonke Gender Justice in investigating and intervening in the context of gender-based violence and the AIDS pandemic.

A second example involves the use of video-making as participatory (and collaborative) research and intervention, where participants construct their own video texts, from storyboarding to the production of the video with only minimal assistance from the research team, mainly for technical assistance (see Moletsane *et al.*, 2009). Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002:15) assert that the “politically sensitive research [style] and fieldwork relationships” used in participatory video-making enable the researchers to qualitatively document the voices and experiences of the participants from their own perspectives and to identify, together with the participants, potential interventions in order to address the issues that they have pointed out.

Conclusion

Studies that aim to understand problems and the required solutions are significant. However, if we are to make a difference in the lives of those who live, work and learn in rural contexts, we urgently need studies with a focus on identifying existing resources and assets in communities and schools, and among individuals and groups, as well as on how we might harness them to effect the desired social change. The paradigms for these studies require the acknowledgement and utilisation of authentic knowledge and context-based assets and resources in creating interventions. In order to develop this authentic knowledge, we are required to ask questions with a focus shifting from the deficits in the participants and their communities, to the possibilities for social change even in the midst of adversity. When the most marginalised participants in rural contexts, for example, act as protagonists in their own lives and are engaged in identifying the issues that affect them as well as possible solutions, the resulting interventions stand a better chance of succeeding than when outside ‘experts’ are at the forefront of community and school development (Mitchell, Stuart, Moletsane & Nkwanyana, 2006). As Moletsane *et al.* (2009:34) purport:

Since it is these [rural teachers, parents and learners] who tend to bear the brunt of marginalization and the negative impact of social crises, turning their gaze on the challenges affecting them and working with them to address these is likely to yield more positive fruit than ... doing research [about and] on them.

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