

Indigenous Research and Sustainable Learning

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ABSTRACT In this paper the researcher demonstrates how participatory, indigenous research capitalises on the community of learners, their teachers and parents' community cultural wealth to improve the quality and sustainability of learning. To achieve this aim, the above mentioned stakeholders organise themselves into learning communities of practice to draw and implement strategies aimed at improving the quality of learning at their respective schools. Data is collected from all activities in implementing the plan. The findings reveal that when all support one another, using their tacit knowledge on how best to solve their real life problems, they succeed. Even parents with little school education emerge informed and empowered.

INTRODUCTION

To foster good learner performance in all the schools where the researchers are conducting research they have constituted themselves into a research team under the theme of *Sustainable Learning Environments* (SuLE), in line with the learning environments school of thought which believes that all learners are capable of very high levels of performance beyond expectations, providing they are afforded the requisite and proper support (Mahlomaholo 2004, 2009). This support implies that the environment has to be reorganised and rearranged such that it provides the holding contexts in which learners can recreate and reconstruct their performances afresh (Hoppers 2008). The learning environments school of thought places high value on education and learning as mechanisms for change and transformation (Hoppers 2008; Mahlomaholo 2004, 2009). According to this perspective, performance is non-essentialised, which means that it is not innate but rather a competency which people create and recreate for themselves in interaction with their environments (Mahlomaholo 2009; Meko 2011). The main point is that even those highly cognitive and intra-psychic faculties depend on the concrete materiality of the context within which the individual learner operates. The learning environment is thus important in the creation of one's identity and hence heightened levels of performance. The interesting point for the researcher is that in that environment there are other people, such as parents, teachers and peers who play a significant role in organising and reorganising the environment for the benefit of the learner. These

people bring with them the 'collectivised memories' of their communities in the form of culture to enrich the experiences of learning, being and 'becoming' (Chilisa 2011; Kemmis 2003, 2004). The environment as conceptualised from this perspective also includes the objects, plants, animals and other human beings who have to be respected so that life can be supported (Mahlomaholo 2009). For the researcher, this constitutes the real connection with the SuLE project, namely that the envisaged sustainable learning environment is one in which there is respect for the other, and a clear focus on creating a more equitable society, guided by the principles of social justice, freedom, peace and hope. Given the above, therefore, creating SuLE in schools means that they have to become places in which such an agenda is pursued with vigour and clear focus (Mahlomaholo and Netshandama 2012). The above mentioned ideals of democratic citizenship, as has been proven, are the best safeguards of continued and sustainable existence of (human) life beyond strife, oppression, injustices and inequities. When schools are sustainable learning environments, learners perform beyond their imagined levels of mastery because they are motivated to do their best. They perform better because they see their performance in the context of social transformation and empowerment. There is caring for all and the learning environments are organised such that there is mutual validation, respect among all learners, teachers and the parent community.

Indigenous Research Towards SuLE

The researcher is part of a team supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and

it is made up of 12 academics from both the QwaQwa and the Bloemfontein Campuses of the University of the Free State. Collectively, they supervise 18 PhD and 12 MEd students whose research work is within the abovementioned theme. Beyond the university they collaborate very closely with the Free State (FSED) and the North West (NWED) provincial education departments, acquiring practical knowledge in terms of policy, curriculum and governance implementation strategies. From the academics, the Education Department officials learn strategies for conducting respectful research. The team meets, discusses, plans, implements, monitors and reflects on its work at least once a month.

All the 30 students in the team research matters in their respective schools, where they are employed on full time bases as either teachers, principals of schools, School Management and Governance Developers (SMGDs), Chief Education Specialists or Chief Directors. They are thus not occasional visitors who would go to the research sites to collect data for a few minutes and leave but rather are there every day to take full responsibility for their research and its outcomes, in the same way the academics are with them for most of the time at their sites of research and in reflective meetings. A critical condition for the success of this team's work is that all participants negotiate and interact meaningfully and know each other well. They share their innermost experiences, fears, vulnerabilities and aspirations and a sense of trust is the centrepiece of the project, in which all have a stake. There is constant reciprocal and mutually beneficial communication among the researchers and the participants on an equal basis, because all stand to benefit equally in the achievement of the objectives of the study.

On the one hand, the researchers are brought together by their resolve to contribute meaningfully through respectful, empowering and transformational research to the enhancement of learning in all institutions (Chilisa et al. 1993). They have become aware of the privileged position they occupy, with easy access to resources, including intellectual capital, and are thus motivated to link these rich resources with the need experienced in their schools and communities (Mahlomaholo and Netshandama 2012). The researchers regard themselves as emerging organic intellectuals, true to the

Gramscian (1977) idea. As members of school communities (both researchers and participants) where the researchers are currently conducting research and working, they have become aware of the challenges facing their schools in terms of teacher curriculum and subject content as well teaching, as pedagogy, to mention a few. They have also become aware of the problems of learning, especially in literacy and mathematics.

These challenges are many and the researchers have thus taken a conscious decision to address and resolve them in collaboration with the participants (Kemmis 2004). The assumption is that the participants are experts in their own fields, and so able to address the challenges of learning, providing the researchers can provide appropriate space in which to reflect intensively on them (Chilisa 2011). The researchers agree that the problems which they together with the participants are investigating are unknown to all, but through a careful diagnosis of the situation an "understanding of the situation [will emerge, albeit] slowly" (Weber-Pillwax 2004).

Given the above, when the researchers initiate their investigation they invite as many people as possible into the context of the respective school who can and will contribute to the formulation of the solution. These participants usually include the learners, teachers, school management teams, parents, school governing bodies, political formations in the community, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, community based organisations, business community, local municipality, Department of Education officials, police, social workers and nurses.

The stance taken by the researchers is that it takes a whole nation to educate a child. Once these people have voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and after their permission granted, including assurance of confidentiality, arrangements for brainstorming sessions at each of the respective research sites are made, with a thorough interactive programme lasting say six hours (with necessary breaks, catering, security and transport to and from the site) on a Saturday. Together with the participants, the researchers work in small groups to understand the problems being investigated (Chilisa et al. 1993; Chilisa 2011). The researchers and participants take turns to share information regarding the purpose of the study. They also take turns to read the literature, to make short presenta-

tions on aspects regarding the matter under investigation, such as educational legislative imperatives, to look at students' tests and examination scripts, and to analyse respectfully all these in a language and mode of interaction which is accessible to all (Chilisa et al. 1993; Chilisa 2011; Weber-Pillwax 2004). Sometimes one group among the researchers and participants will organise a short drama to highlight the issues, whilst at other times all participants ask to tell individual and collective stories about the matter, sometimes presenting pictures or diagrams which depict their views and positions (Weber-Pillwax 2004). These multidimensional media and voices have enabled the researchers and participants to reach and touch each other as human beings in the study. Titles and topics for investigation emerged and were refined out of these processes, and are now co-owned by researchers and participants equally. It is no longer easy to draw a distinction between researcher and participant, as even the participants are now co-researching the solutions with everybody else. Discussions by researchers and participants as co-researchers at each of the sites have produced varied emphases and different topics for investigation, according to their respective needs.

Two weeks after this first meeting the researchers and the participants meet again on a Saturday for another six hours at the respective sites. They interrogate themselves in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis), both individually and/or collectively, with regard to the aim of their investigation. The ultimate outcome of these deliberations is a list of priorities which are collapsed into the five most important. The collective of participants and researchers then binds itself to work towards implementing them as they create SuLE at the respective schools.

These priorities are further unpacked into about at least five activities per priority, in line with the aim and objectives of the project. Each activity is linked to a specific person and/or team who ensure(s) that the activity does take place and that resources and timeframes are clearly mapped out for it. These priorities include capacitating teachers, school management teams, and school governing bodies towards the creation of SuLE at the respective school. Finally, the collective reflects on what would constitute

the most effective processes to monitor progress towards the identified objectives. In many instances the research team has agreed to meet on the last Saturday of every month. During these meetings the collective analyses progress on each site in terms of learner performance based on formal continuous assessment tasks, reflections by learners, teachers, school governing body members and all participants individually and collectively. These monthly meetings also serve as opportunities to reflect on how well the plan to create SuLE is unfolding and how to effect the necessary adjustments and improvements for the activities during the subsequent month(s).

This approach is couched within the participatory action research mode, which is understood to be implementing principles of indigenous research. This approach has alerted the research team to the immense cultural wealth and immeasurable funds of knowledge, experience and expertise possessed by schools and communities (Yosso 2005). This discovery has confirmed for the team the power of local and indigenous knowledge as bases for the creation of SuLE in schools (Mokgatle 2012). This participatory action research (PAR) has also enabled the team to realise the value of indigenous research (IR) in bringing these forms of knowledge to the surface, and how PAR actually operationalises all IR's principles. In this paper the researcher therefore shows how PAR and IR are complementary in terms of how they conceptualise and operationalise their respective objectives and the researchers disempower both themselves and their status as they empower the participants, thus all operating on a similar level, and with the latter ultimately becoming co-researchers. Both are based on the idea that knowledge is the instrument of power and control and emphasise that problem solving using local solutions to local problem(s) is most effective. They both enhance democratic participation, hence citizenship, and their use of storytelling constitutes an effective methodological strategy. The navigational, aspirational, familial, social, linguistic as well as resistance capitals (Yosso 2005) of the indigenous communities are validated by both approaches to research and all these enable PAR and IR to contribute significantly to the creation of SuLE in schools.

Participatory Action Research as Indigenous Research in SuLE

Creating SuLE in schools through research that recognises and validates knowledge held tacitly by the local participants elevates this study to the status of indigenous research (IR). The indigenous part of our study is not exotic, foreign or strange, as earlier anthropologists considered it to be (Kemmis and Kemmis 2003), rather the term 'indigenous' for the research team refers to that which is local and which has been created in response to the immediate challenges for survival (Kemmis and Kemmis 2003; Kemmis 2004; Mahlomaholo 2004). The indigenous is not the reserve of African and rural communities but rather the practical and meaningful interaction of all local communities with their concrete material world. Communities the research team work with have been split asunder by the distorted history of apartheid (Mahlomaholo 2004, 2009), with schools have been set apart from local communities divested of any knowledge that can be useful to enhance learning at school. Through repeated instances of marginalisation, these communities have learnt of the inferiority of the cultural knowledge they hold in relation to the so-called western oriented knowledge dispensed at schools (Mekoa 2011). Parents and all other instances of civil society have relinquished their responsibility to schools and their children learning therein (Mekoa 2011). Through PAR as IR the research team brings the community back to their schools and creates opportunities for the cultural wealth (Yosso 2005) of these communities to reinforce what is going on in schools. PAR as IR brings back a lost respect for community knowledge to inform the research from beginning to end. In conceptualising the objectives of the study, the background of a dehumanising apartheid discourse serves as the backdrop. The research team realises that the creation of SuLE in schools is about reclaiming and reappropriating knowledge and schools to the indigenous communities around it.

The above mentioned approach to research recognises local communities as custodians of what is indigenous and has to be valorised and validated. This research is also openly non-positivist (Chilisa 2011), regarding the participants as dynamic human beings who are knowledgeable, capable of sophisticated forms of inter-

pretations and having experiences, fears and aspirations that anchor the study. This research does not require them to be static so that they can be controlled. Researchers are always mindful of the close relationship between research and the political interests (Chilisa 2011), and this kind of research problematises issues of objectivity, reliability, generalisability, predictability and consistency as criteria of quality. In their place focus is on advancement of equity, social justice, freedom, hope, and peace as the objectives of research and criteria of quality.

Data thus collected do not consist of transcripts of one-dimensional interviews and/or of contrived focus groups discussions. These kinds of data represent multiplicity of texts of real life conversations and of activities (Hoppers 2008) which engage in the creation of SuLE. As Van Dijk (2007, 2009) writes, they are captured in the symbolic order emanating from the meaningful actions of humans on the concrete material world. Based on the above the researcher therefore argues in agreement with Chilisa (2011) that IR involves using the body of indigenous knowledge of the colonised, as they are doing in the study, to counter the theories and the body of knowledge that cause humiliation to the participants. Apartheid has done many a disservice and PAR as IR attempts to serve as an antidote to its continued deleterious impact. Through this kind of research the researchers demand of the participants that they reclaim agency and recreate their own world and that of their children in schools.

This PAR as IR enables the researchers and participants to learn to be free and become citizens of a democracy who can initiate and transcend the oppression and marginalisation of the distorted theories and colonial research (Kemmis 2004). Participants as co-researchers in this study are constructing knowledge together with researchers as equals. They are not the colonised who are held constant while the researcher describes them from the outside as though they were objects in a natural science laboratory. All researchers and participants recognise that creating SuLE on their terms is an act of struggle and re-humanisation advocated for by IR (Chilisa et al. 1993; Chilisa 2011). On the whole, PAR as IR challenges the notion that our schools and communities lack knowledge, instead demonstrating that they do have valuable knowledge that can be utilised to resolve problems in their own contexts.

Community Cultural Wealth as Central to PAR as IR

Because the data in the SuLE study consists of stories from the participants' perspectives and world views, the researchers have discovered much cultural wealth embedded in them, and wisdom about how these participants manage to navigate (Yosso 2005) around a myriad of problems and challenges so rife in their contexts, which are invariably very poor and marginalised. The researchers discovered from these stories the template which they collectively use to create SuLE based on tried and tested strategies from their indigenous knowledge. From this knowledge form the researchers realise how the communities have remained resilient (Yosso 2005) and were able to improvise to achieve their objectives in spite of the odds against them. It was also discovered how the communities used their social, linguistic, familial and social capital to reinforce each other's individual's strength (Yosso 2005). Their stories in many instances are not about individual efforts but in many instances tell of how as families (which may not even be biological) and as communities they came together to resist and stand firm in pursuance of their collective objectives.

CONCLUSION

To make sense of the data collected from the study the researchers use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which has been one of the most powerful techniques to use in PAR as IR. This enables the study to use the spoken word as evidence of the knowledge claims which researchers and participants were making. The spoken word was in the form of transcripts of meetings and of various activities in which learners, teachers, and school governing bodies were being capacitated. These are very rich in indigenous knowledge, which all the researchers and participants brought to bear in the creation of SuLE. The research team analysed all these at a deeper discursive practices level to unearth those very tacit knowledges which participants had generated out of necessity in response to the challenges in their contexts. This for the team was the most respectful act of research as it revealed the strengths of the communities, buried beneath the surface, sometimes

because they had been undermined and excluded and thus removed from their consciousness and repertoires of meaning construction.

The climax of this study was reached when the researchers were able to relate those discursive practices to the social structural arrangements Analysis at this level enabled the researchers to show how many seemingly simple acts of underperformance of learners, teachers and SGBs are informed by a society still socio-economically and otherwise stratified to the exclusion of the formerly colonised majority. The study makes the research team even more resolved to craft alternative ways to show how powerful they and the participants have been, in spite of the many centuries of exclusion and marginalisation. This research is an act of healing. The study gave the researchers and the participants alike the vocabulary to talk meaningfully about their cultural traditions and experiences in relation to SuLE. They are able to use their norms, language metaphors, legends and folktales and still know that they are doing legitimate research without having to sacrifice who they are.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the above discussion it becomes clear that research has to be respectful of the community cultural wealth of the community. This means that research should not impose any meaning on the participants but has to be conducted with them on their own terms. They should determine its agenda from the beginning to the end. If research is conducted in this way the strength and wealth of the participants' community cultural wealth will be validated, exposed and used for further enhancement of learning. Research that undermines the participants is bound to fail as it will be ignoring a very important resource, namely, the tacit knowledge of the people. Furthermore, research should be about change and transformation of people's lives. It should not only remain abstract but should address the real life experience of the people. Research should add to the intellectual capital to enable them to find ways of naming, hence transcending their otherwise contingent situation. In short, research should bring the researchers and the participants together on an equal basis. The former should be made aware that their role is merely to interpret other

people's interpretation and thus be humbled by that realisation.

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