EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

October 2023
Vol. 12 No. 2

ISSN: 2221-4070

Educational Research for Social Change

An online academic journal
ISSN 2221-4070
Vol. 12 No. 2 October 2023

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ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

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ISSN: 2221-4070

Editorial October 2023

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Throughout the history of the human race, we have had to learn to adapt to change in the face of a range of catastrophes and maladies that have threatened our very existence on earth. The Covid-19 period represented one such debilitating era that destabilised communities, societies, and countries and led to trauma, pain, and feelings of inadequacy. However, despite the havoc that it wreaked, we persevered in the face of adversity and learnt to rise above our circumstances. This is indicative of the indomitable spirit of humankind.

In the same vein, higher education institutions were confronted with myriads of challenges during this period as they struggled to adapt to changing circumstances in a locked-down world. However, the onset of the 2023 academic year signalled the return to some form of normality as higher education institutions scurried to explore the implementation of new modes of delivery such as a hybrid model in its various manifestations.

Initially, when lecturers and students had to adapt to online modes of delivery during the extended lock-down periods, which lasted for almost three years, there was an outcry as they waited in anticipation for face-to-face classes to resume. However, as they gradually learnt to navigate the transformed spaces and became comfortable with the new modes of delivery, they settled down to the demands of teaching and learning in changing times. During this period, colleagues in higher education institutions realised that working remotely, despite contributing to disconnectedness from their students, created opportunities for them to reflect on their own praxis, to embrace new ways of learning and knowing, and to become more resilient in the face of adversity. Students also eventually learnt how to adapt and became comfortable with the online form of delivery.

During the return to some form of normality, however, when academics and students from some higher education institutions were informed that contact classes would resume, there was an outcry. While in some instances, academics had to be coerced into returning to work, in others, students staged protests, demanding that online classes be resumed. Eventually, however, there was some semblance of normality as all students and staff returned to their respective institutions for contact classes. These varying reactions during periods of transition are reminiscent of how human beings react when confronted with change, and how they eventually transcend their discomfort to adapt and adjust to changing times.

Despite the onerous journey that academics had to traverse, however, they demonstrated their ability to embrace change, and continued to pursue research focusing on their praxis, insights, and experiences so that they could contribute to research for social change—as is highlighted in the articles in this edition of our journal. An important lesson that we have learnt as academics throughout this

period of self-discovery is that, ultimately, reflective practice is key to understanding how to transform our pedagogy and ways of knowing.

This focus on reflecting on their experiences is clearly articulated by Wood, Kahts-Kramer, Waddington, and Neethling in the first article in this edition, titled, "Lessons Learnt From Facilitating Action Learning With Youth Facing Multiple Adversities." In their article, they present a case of a participatory action learning and action research project that they deemed a failure after employing social cohesion and collaboration as guiding principles to support vulnerable youth over a period of eight months. Through critically reflecting on why the project had failed and the lessons learnt, they provide invaluable insights to others working with similar groups so that they can avoid the mistakes they made—especially in terms of their assumptions about certain vulnerable groups, and the application of PALAR without a thorough understanding of the participants' backgrounds, contexts, and challenges.

In reflecting on how they learnt to adapt to change, Msiza, Ndlovu, and Mbatha in their article titled "Transitioning Between Spaces: An Intersectional Account of how We are Becoming Academics," provide a self-reflective account of their road to becoming academics. In their article, they share insights into how their identities and transitioning between spaces contributed to their becoming as early career academics. Through engaging with storyboarding, an arts-based approach, they provide insights into how "transition between the liminal and dominant spaces have influenced our identity construction and shaped our becoming." An important lesson that they share is that all our identities are in a state of constant construction and that the academic spaces that we transition are significant to our becoming as academics.

Continuing the conversation of reflecting on one's practice for the creation of novel learning opportunities, Petersen sheds light on her pedagogical becoming in her article, "My Pedagogical Becoming as a Stellenbosch University Residential Educator During the Covid-19 Pandemic." In her article, she provides an overview of how she co-created a residential education and support programme with nine women students who remained with her in a university residence during a Covid-19 lock-down. Through the application of an autoethnographic approach focusing on the use of narrated prose, and the application of emotional recall, she provides insights into how an institutional care-based response to the pandemic enacted at one residence, contributed to inclusive transformation at an institution with a previous history of separate education. Furthermore, in this autoethnographic account she demonstrates how through the adoption of a pedagogy of care, relationships can be built, and a sense of community fostered.

This focus on the value of self-reflection on their pedagogy during the Covid-19 period is further explored by Kortjass and Mkhize-Mthembu in their article, titled, "Reflecting on Teaching in the Higher Education Context During the Covid-19 Era: A Collaborative Self-Study Project." In their article, they reflect on how they explored the use of digital platforms as part of their pedagogical approach during the Covid-19 period. Through the creation of collages, concept maps, and a pantoum poem, they reflect on their teacher educator practices during the initial and ensuing levels of the Covid-19 lockdown period. Their article provides insights into how, through collaboration, they were able to support their students and to enable them to embrace learning during periods of uncertainty. In reflecting on their own praxis during this period of adapting to change, they gained invaluable insights into who they are and who they have become. Their study furthermore confirms that collaborative partnerships between teacher educators can lead to the development of strong learning communities in which strong relationships are built and all members valued.

The significance and value of self-reflection for enhanced practice are further explored by Geduld, Nthimbane, and Kagola in their article, titled, "Humanising Online Teaching and Learning in the BEd. Foundation Phase Programme: Moving Beyond Covid-19." The primary focus of this study was to explore the experiences of lecturers who teach a humanising pedagogy embedded program in the Foundation Phase at a higher education institution through online learning in a highly under-resourced context. By drawing on their lived experiences and engaging in dialogue through narrative free writing and poetic inquiry, they try to make sense of the process of online learning. The themes that emerged from their self-study are mutual vulnerability and lecturer resilience and collaboration. Through this self-study, they shed light on the importance for lecturers to critically reflect on the challenges and opportunities that Covid-19 presented in order to incorporate some of the best practices acquired during the pandemic period in their teaching to enable better delivery of teaching in a humanising way post Covid-19.

The focus of reflecting on collaboration is explored by Sathorar, Geduld, Moeng, Mapasa, and Oosthuizen in their article "Leading for Sustainability and Empowerment: Reflecting on the Power of Collaboration and Humanising Pedagogy". In their article, five women academics who hold leadership positions in the Faculty of Education at Nelson Mandela University reflect on their experience of leading their respective teams through the Covid-19 pandemic. As women in leadership, they reflect on how collaboration assisted them to empower each other as well as their respective teams. Through engaging in collaborative self-study and the use of narrative freewriting to generate data, they question whether current leadership practices contribute to equality in the workplace, support collaboration, and encourage self-care and empowerment. This study makes an important contribution to our understanding of the importance of the shift from women leaders holding power to empowering each other as well as the rest of faculty through a humanising ethics of care. Based on their collaborative reflective practice engagement experiences, they co-constructed a humanising leadership model that highlights the link between democratic leadership and enhanced leadership practices.

Continuing the discussion on change in society through social justice, Mbhiza and Nkambule in their article titled, "Grade 4 Rural Learners' Views and Learning Experiences That Address Social Justice in Postapartheid South Africa," explore eight learners' experiences of learning within rural school contexts through photo-elicitation group interviews, which they analyse thematically. The findings revealed that these learners are aware of the conditions that shape their learning in rural contexts, based on issues such as the conditions of the school buildings and the challenges of learning in overcrowded multi-grade classes. Their study revealed that much still needs to be done by the postapartheid government to address issues of equity and social justice in education in South Africa.

In reflecting on where we are and where we need to be on the road of inclusive education, Seeko and Mathebula in their conceptual article, "Democracy and Inclusive Education Policy in Post-1994 South African Schools: Goal, Tension, and Struggle," critically engage with policy to understand how issues of inclusivity are addressed post 1994. In their article, they argue that despite the formalisation of inclusive education policies by the state, "active participation, deliberative engagement, and participatory representation remain a distant dream for many school-going children in South Africa." They further contend that the realisation of substantive inclusive education depends on the "protests of the excluded" to contest the ideal state policy and real school experiences of learners in post-1994 South African schools.

This reflection on policy is further explored by Singh, Leen, David, and David in their article titled, "Mending the Research–Policy–Practice Gap: Conceptualising Research as Social Change in Education." They contend that there is a widely acknowledged gap between research, policy, and practice owing

to a lack of capacity to translate and mobilise research results to end-users, including policymakers, practitioners, and community members. Acknowledging the divide, their conceptual paper focuses on how the research–policy–practice nexus in the education landscape could be strengthened so that research institutions are better equipped to meet the needs of the policymakers and practitioners. To this end, they advocate for a new approach, termed as "research as social change," which centres research as a mechanism for social change and facilitates the conditions for the mutual understanding of norms, operational roles, academic rigour, and policy and practice outcomes among all stakeholders. The achievement of this ideal, they contend, is to apply the principles of the design-based implementation research framework to the research process so that stakeholders can be empowered to overcome the disparate social and cultural milieus in which they operate.

In reflecting on where we are and where we need to be, Khau's conference report on the symposium held 26–30 of June 2023, titled, "The Sustainable Development Goals as Guidelines for Socially Responsible Universities: Symposium on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Partnership between Nelson Mandela University and the University of Oldenburg," sheds light on the 2023–2028 roadmap between the two institutions, which outlines the deepening of collaboration and interdisciplinary projects planned for the two institutions. The symposium focused on strengthening and expanding collaboration and partnership in research, teaching, community engagement, and transfer. Interesting features of the way forward for the two institutions, as highlighted in the report, include the promotion of early career researchers and joint courses for students and young researchers. Another important goal arising from the symposium, relates to joint initiatives in research and education with a focus on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Change in our lives is inevitable, and our ability to adapt to change depends on how we perceive the experiences and how we embrace change. The articles in this edition demonstrate how, through reflective practice and engaging with new ways of knowing and seeing, there is a greater sense of how we can adapt our pedagogy, ways of knowing, and insights to create novel learning experiences that will contribute to education for social change.

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Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 1-14
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Lessons Learnt From Facilitating Action Learning With Youth Facing Multiple Adversities[1]

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Abstract

Action learning has proven to be an effective change process in the field of organisational development, where it originated. However, can it work equally well with young people who face intersectional adversities that negatively affect their holistic well-being, sense of purpose, and self-worth? This paper presents the case of a participatory action learning and action research project that we considered a failure because, after eight months of working with eight youth rendered vulnerable by sociostructural oppression, group cohesion and collaboration towards a common purpose did not materialise. Our analysis of three focus groups conducted with the youth after the engagement, various electronic communications with and between them, and our own reflections as facilitators, taught us some harsh lessons about the complexities of working with such vulnerable populations. Through critical reflection on the lessons learnt, we aim to "fail forward" in true action learning style. Therefore, we offer our learning to assist others working with similar groups to avoid the mistakes we made.

Keywords: unemployment, praxeology, participatory action learning and action research, reflective learning, youth development

[1] Ethical clearance number: NWU-00782-18-A2

Please reference as: Wood, L., Kahts-Kramer, S., Waddington, R. and Neethling, M. (2023). Lessons Learnt From Facilitating Action Learning With Youth Facing Multiple Adversities. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 12(2), 1-14. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a1

Introduction

As South African researchers working in a transformative and participatory paradigm (Wood, 2020), we adopt participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as our preferred research design. We do this because, without foregrounding action learning as an integral component of participatory action research, we have found that community participation in, and ownership of, the research is less likely to happen (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2022). Working in action learning groups enables participants to learn how to reframe their experiences, solve their own problems, and ultimately, how to take action to improve their situation (Hurst & Marquardt, 2019). Furthermore, by participating in the action learning, the university researchers are less likely to "take over" and default to a directive role (Wood, 2020). To define action learning within the PALAR process, we refer to Teare, as cited in Zuber-Skerritt (2011, p. 181): "Action learning occurs when people learn from each other, create their own resources, identify their own problems and form their own solutions." Years of working with poverty-stricken communities all over the world led Teare to conclude that facilitating people to become action learners leads to personal and community transformation as participants become more self-confident and enthusiastic about learning and mobilising to change their lives. Although we are aware that definitions of action learning are many, contextual, and evolving (Pedler et al., 2005), that definition is most suited to our community-based approach in PALAR.

The first author has worked as a community-based researcher for years, and is often approached by community members. In 2021, she was approached by a director of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) whose mandate was youth development. He asked her to engage with a group of unemployed youth who had attended a computer course at the NGO, and to train them in research so they could work as volunteers at his centre. To support the NGO, the first author brought together fellow community-based researchers (the co-authors) to form a team to engage the youth in action learning. The idea was that the youth would identify the needs of youth in the community in order to develop, implement, and evaluate programmes to meet these needs. Action learning as a process has delivered good results in other research projects the first author has conducted with vulnerable populations (see, e.g. Wood, 2021). But, although it is common for one or more members to drop out of projects, as per their ethical right, we had never experienced a whole group disintegrating before the participatory research could start, as happened in this case. After eight months of bi-monthly (twice a month, every two weeks) visits with the NGO and the youth, focused on engaging them in action learning, the youth group disengaged and stopped coming to our collaborative sessions. This disengagement deeply affected us as community-based researchers because we value the growth and success of the participants we collaborate with. We subsequently wanted to understand what we could do differently to address what we assumed, at first, was a lack of commitment on the part of the youth. The young people learning how to collaborate in an action learning group would have had lasting benefits in terms of their self-confidence and personal and technical skills enhancement (Vince, 2008). The purpose of this paper is therefore to present our reflection on this particular case in order to derive implications for facilitating action learning and action research with youth facing multiple adversities. We first elucidate vulnerability as a concept in terms of unemployed youth, then move on to explaining the research methods, before presenting the findings and conclusions. The main question guiding our

reflective inquiry was: “How can we best facilitate action learning to encourage full participation in the research process of youth who are rendered vulnerable on multiple levels?”

The Vulnerability of Unemployed Youth in Challenging Socioeconomic Contexts

In South Africa, the age range for youth is 15–35 (Republic of South Africa, 2020), possibly to cater for the generations that lost education during the freedom struggle. Youth unemployment in South Africa is among the highest in the world (Maskaeva & Msafiri, 2021). In 2022, unemployment in the 15–24 age group was 46.1% for the second quarter, as revealed by the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Statistics South Africa [SSA], 2022). The country had more than 10 million youth in that age group, with only 2,5 million of them either employed or seeking a job (SSA, 2022). The rest were inactive either due to discouragement emanating from not finding a job in their locality or not finding one that matched their skills (SSA, 2022). The term used to describe these youth is “not in employment, education or training” (NEET), and the rate of NEET is growing (SSA, 2022). Black and female youth are the worst affected (SSA, 2022) due to the intersectional nature of the oppressions they face such as poverty, language barriers, lack of experience, lack of social capital, and inferior education. Youth unemployment persists despite the national budget, which allocated R5.2 billion to cover youth employment incentives and economic recovery support for the year 2022 (SSA, 2022). Their NEET condition results in negative social, economic, and health consequences that render these young people vulnerable. The longer youth are unemployed, the more likely they are to develop mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Mokona et al., 2020), drug and alcohol abuse, gangsterism and violence, and risky sexual behaviour (Kheswa, 2017). Youth unemployment in South Africa is compounded by various factors (Yu, 2013) including low quality education and less job opportunities in impoverished communities (Van Aardt, 2012), having to take on parental duties due to guardian death or neglect, or early pregnancies (Meyer, 2017), and the general trauma that comes from living in penurious and violent contexts (Jooste & Maritz, 2015). These extenuating circumstances increase risk for negative life outcomes (Arora et al., 2015). Based on our previous experience with PALAR, we assumed that learning how to integrate action learning into their lives, and using action research to address the complex problems facing them, would enable the youth to improve their lives. However, we also assumed that, before we began the participatory project, the participants would need extensive personal development. We now explain our reasoning behind that decision.

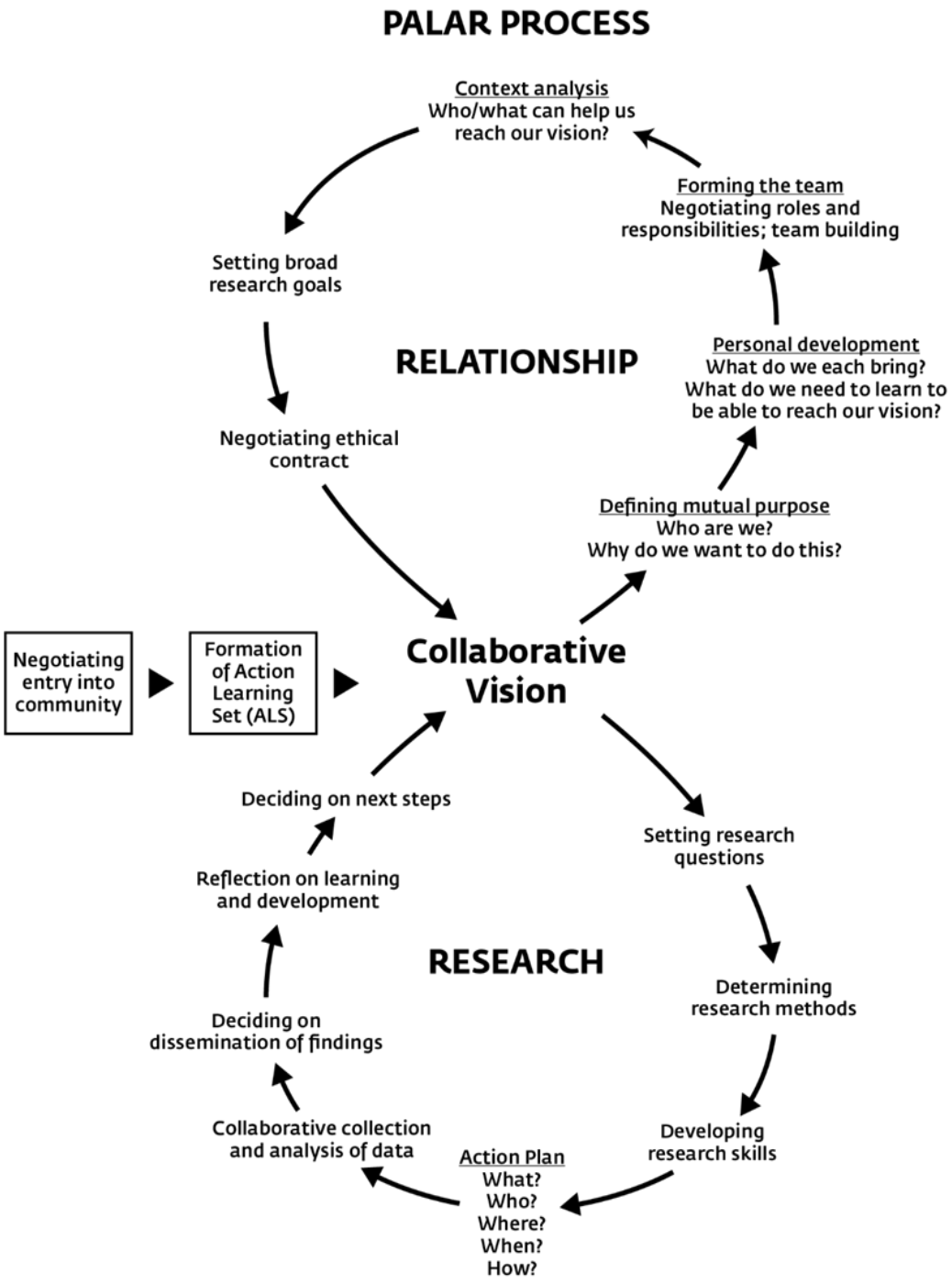
Linking Self-Leadership Theory and PALAR

Our standpoint, as community-based researchers, is that with support, young people can develop resilience to deal with adversity. Therefore, we believed that starting with self-leadership would support the youth’s transition to become community leaders capable of influencing other youth towards positive change. Self-leadership development would also help the youth become co-researchers in a participatory research project focused on their community’s needs, as per the NGO’s request. As Hougaard and Carter (2018) stated, to lead others, we need to be able to lead ourselves first. The theory of self-leadership appealed to us as a positive and strength-based approach to youth development (Van Woerkom et al., 2019). Self-leadership also increases the ability of youth to deal with trauma (Jooste & Maritz, 2015), and promotes entrepreneurial mindsets (Krieger, 2018). Self-leadership is the notion that each person has the potential and ability to lead themselves through managing their internal motivations towards action—regardless of the external forces they may be facing (Shek et al., 2015). Self-leadership theory provides pathways to develop proactive behaviour (e.g. goal setting), constructive thought patterns/cognition strategies (e.g. constructive self-feedback, positive visualisations, reducing negative emotions), physical vitality (improving fitness and energy), and task motivating strategies (changing negative perceptions about specific necessary but unattractive tasks; Manz, 2015).

The youth we collaborated with started with action learning, with the goal of transitioning towards PALAR, as developed for community engagement by Wood (2020, 2022) building on Zuber-Skerritt's (2011) seminal work. PALAR starts by forming an action learning group to engage in the addressing of complex problems that directly affect the members. Therefore, PALAR is a form of transformative community education (Wood, 2022) that enhances people's capabilities through the development of lifelong learning. Figure 1 presents an overview of the process, which comprises two components: relationship (negotiating purpose, processes, and building personal and interpersonal capacities, understanding the context, negotiating joint goals, and ethics) and research (designing and implementing the collaborative research).

The figure 8 binds these two components into one continuous, integrated cycle where participants continually reflect on both their own and group development, as well as on the research process. In effect, the PALAR process does develop self-leadership but, in this case, and whilst working with youth, we deviated from it by separating theory from action. Our reasons for doing this and the consequences thereof are clarified in the findings section.

Figure 1: PALAR Process (Wood, 2020)



Methods

The NGO director recruited eight young people, aged 19 to 30 years, who had never engaged in action learning before—two men and six women. We met bi-monthly (every two weeks, twice a month) for two hours over a period of eight months. For this article, and after the youth group disintegrated, we conducted a qualitative analysis of three 60–90-minute, non-structured focus groups (Winwood, 2019), to find out what had happened. We agreed that the second author would moderate the focus groups because she was closest in age to the participants, making it more likely that they would open up to her. We wanted to find out the youth's perceptions and experiences of the 8-month period of action learning group sessions. Our aim in these focus groups was to answer our research question of

how we could improve our own practice to encourage participation in future groups. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We thematically analysed the data (Clarke et al., 2019). Our analysis of the first focus group session informed the guiding question to ask in the second session and, in the third session, the focus was similarly determined by what we learnt from our analysis of the previous one. We thereby adhered to the principles of iterative reflection and action underpinning an action learning and action research design (Wood, 2020). All sessions were held in settings designed to put the participants at ease and to give them a break from their normal environments, such as a coffee shop and a nature reserve. The data set was augmented by our reflective field notes and WhatsApp messages that the youth exchanged during the period of the project with the second author. The validity was increased by each author conducting an independent analysis before coming together to arrive at consensus on the themes discussed in the following section. The protocol was approved by the relevant university ethics committee, attesting to its adherence to the strict ethical principles governing research with vulnerable groups.

Findings

We identified three themes that helped us answer the research question and discuss them with reference to the relevant literature. The participant quotes are identified by the code P#. It was evident that the "failure" of the project was based primarily on our own faulty assumptions.

Faulty Assumption 1: Youth Would Be Willing and Able to Communicate Openly and Honestly

Effective learning in an action learning group relies on open, honest, and clear communication (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) given that participants learn from and with each other through sharing their feelings, opinions, and ideas. We were aware of the difficulty of diminishing power relations between ourselves and the youth given our differences in terms of age, race, language, educational background, and economic status, and we worked hard at creating a fun, relaxed atmosphere through our various group activities. All of us participated in the activities, not just the youth. We assumed that they would communicate freely among themselves outside the group, but this was not the case.

The first issue was that they did not communicate between the face-to-face meetings with us. We had set up a WhatsApp group where everyone could post motivational messages and pose questions. This medium was chosen by the group because they all had phones and it was light on data. However, several of them were often unable to buy even the small amount of data needed and so were excluded from the WhatsApp conversation, which affected group cohesion and meant they missed out on information and ideas that may have been useful to them.

The lack of finance of the participants also led to them not attending the group without communicating this to anyone in advance. The group had decided that they would meet each week to work on exercises to improve their self-leadership and build relationships because we only met with them bi-monthly . They blamed non-attendance on the fact that they had to travel up to 10 kilometres to the agency site and could not afford the taxi fare.

> *The main challenge was the transport, I think. Because some live far from the community centres so that day that we had to come, the transport was really a problem then. (P2)*

As a result, they did not meet frequently enough to personally communicate with each other and build the relationships needed for successful action learning leading to action research (Méndez et al., 2017). They were also confused from the start about the aim of the project, but

> *We didn't ask, we decided to keep it to ourself. (P2)*

When asked why they did not ask clarifying questions, they could not give a clear answer:

> *I don't know . . . (P2)*

Our failure as facilitators was to assume that the director of the agency had explained the purpose of the project to them and that they had understood him. We took it for granted that everyone was on the same page from the start of the project. We later found out that he had only explained the participatory action research project as training to equip them to be volunteers but had not clarified that this required them to be trained in participatory research. When the participants stayed away from the group, we assumed they were losing interest because they took a decision (which was, in fact, a form of agency) to not share the real reasons for their absence at the time. As facilitators, we should have taken the "time to fully engage, listen for understanding and not move forward until participants . . . are ready" (Mulvale et al., 2019, p. 295). When we reflected on why we had not, we realised that the 50-kilometre drive to and from the site, and the struggle to synchronise the visits with our respective crowded diaries, was stressful for us as well. Lack of time, distance, and costs are well documented as reasons why community engagement projects often do not reach their desired outcomes (Kue et al., 2015) and are distorted to become more researcher driven (Masalam et al., 2016, p. 343). We had become hypocritical, espousing the theory about PALAR, but not embodying it fully in practice. Therefore, it was not surprising that this lack of effective communication contributed to the development of mistrust.

Faulty Assumption 2: Sufficient Trust for Authentic Participation Would Be Built up After a Few Sessions

Trust is having faith that others are reliable and have your best interest at heart, allowing you to engage in self-disclosure (Armstrong et al., 2022). Trust is, of course, central to action learning. Participants needed to trust in us (as facilitators), in each other (as group members), and in their communities (as future community-based research participants), for authentic research relationships (Wood, 2022). To do this, we chose activities that would reduce power relations and build trust. Participants appreciated the interest in their lives because this encouraged them to begin to think more critically about their goals.

> *So, once you start questioning someone about what he/she wants to achieve in life, him or her would start thinking: She [facilitator] asked me what do I really want to do in life? So, it starts there. So, if no one is asking you, and you are just waking up, eat and sleep, then that's it . . . you get frustrated and depression. (P3)*

In any action learning group, it is vital to take the time to understand members' goals and needs and explore the political, economic, social, health, and other factors that may impact them, as clearly indicated in the PALAR process (see Figure 1). According to Dobrova (2017), trust is built through dialogue and interactions that assist members to learn to consider and respect different points of view, especially when it is the first time someone who is normally silent (or has been silenced) has the courage to share. It seems that we were somewhat successful in building their trust.

> *You [the facilitators] were open . . . the facial expressions . . . we could see that you are happy to be with us . . . okay, this person cares. She's here, she's talking to us. Okay, so we're going to listen to her. (P2)*

Trust building must come across as authentic, otherwise self-disclosure and participation will not take place (Griffith & Larson, 2015). However, participants remained fearful to share their dreams with their

fellow group members. Participant 2 explained that they were afraid to share their ambitions because they might not achieve them, and then the group would be disappointed in them:

> *They are scared because we have to discuss emotions. . . . Maybe they are scared because we have to share our dreams and they feel they are slow, and this one is faster, and I am doing right now. And then they feel like they are disappointing, or something like that. (P2)*

Participant 4 explained that young people living in their context had lost hope in their ability to create a better life, finding escape in negative coping mechanisms.

> *Youth are not being open about what they are going through, what's going on in their lives. . . . They rather deal with it on their own. Sadly, some of them, when you ask if they okay or not, they would just try to convince you they fine. Sometimes you might feel like dying cause you're stuck and you don't know what to do anymore or where to go. . . . In the community, most of the youth gave up to drugs, alcohol, and parties. They only live for the moment. Even when they find something to do to change their situation, eventually they tend to throw in the towel and quit, because they are tired. Most of us can't maintain something that requires effort . . . most of us, they just don't care. (P4)*

Reading this excerpt was a wake-up call for us. We had not realised how severely the youth had been affected by living in stressful environments. We knew in theory, having read the literature and from our years of interaction with communities in similar situations, but we did not realise the deep damage caused by living in oppressed circumstances. Their ability to focus, and their holistic wellbeing, had been eroded by years of constant adversity and a daily struggle to survive (Hari, 2022). Only then, did we begin to understand why group members might stay away or drop out if they were asked to do something that they felt they could not do. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that a participant who was the most vocal and enthusiastic in the group, and seemed to be the one with the most self-confidence, suddenly dropped out when asked to do a presentation at the next session. Their fear of sharing and being judged by their peers was explained by the NGO director.

> *If you have a group of 10 people and two can share, but eight cannot share . . . there is a problem. Because now if I share, I am sharing from the heart, and you are listening to what I am going through. But if . . . you are saying you are not comfortable in sharing, next time I won't share. So, it means there's that thing of: I don't want someone to hear my progress, I don't want this person to hear, I am not comfortable. . . . And the group does not want to help each other.*

For trust to build, there must be mutual respect and open sharing of feelings, ideas, and opinions (Griffith & Larson, 2015). Without trust, positive risk taking, confidence in experimentation, and taking responsibility for one's actions, effective action learning cannot occur (Dobrova, 2017). We had not taken enough time to really listen to their needs, nor could the youth fully open up and share their needs with us. Our mistake was deciding beforehand that self-leadership would be beneficial for them instead of exploring the complexity of their situation. This was based on our next faulty assumption.

Faulty Assumption 3: Because We Live and Work in South Africa, We Understand the Problems Youth Face

Misunderstanding occurs at both an explicit (words and language used to convey concepts, thoughts, ideas, and feelings) and an implicit level (assumptions, propositions, or interpretations of verbal and non-verbal communication) (Abramson & Moran, 2017). In this instance, misunderstandings stemmed from our faulty assumptions that because we were experienced researchers who had worked in similar

contexts for years, we understood the adversity facing the youth. We found that, in the best case, we only had a superficial understanding of what their lives were like.

We were university educated, White, middle-class, and English-speaking professionals. The youth were NEET, living in an impoverished context, Black, and Setswana speaking, although they did their schooling in English. Differences in language, life experiences, race and class, upbringing, cultural and religious beliefs contribute to misunderstandings, which in turn, can promote mistrust and miscommunication (Hinner, 2017). We use cultural bias in this context to mean that, as facilitators, we are influenced by Eurocentric education, culture, economy, norms, values, and assumptions that have been embedded through our schooling, social location, culture, and visual media (Heleta, 2016). Although we tried to see the world through the lens of youth, this was not easy. Township life in South Africa remained a foreign experience to us, irrespective of our ontological values of participation, caring, equity, and diversity. For example, our assumption was that ubuntu is a common weltanschauung accepted by all African people, irrespective of age or gender. Ubuntu can be understood as a value system or normative philosophy that rejects individualism in favour of the values of collectivism, human dignity, care, respect, belonging, participation, collaboration, and solidarity (Bolden, 2014). The idea of ubuntu is often summarised by the phrase "I am because you are." Yet, these experiences indicated that the values of ubuntu were not prevalent and, rather, that the young people facing adversity had withdrawn into themselves, mistrusting others and their communities rather than seeking or offering support. Basic psychology teaches us that needs are hierarchical in nature (Maslow, 1943) so how could we expect the members of the group to be committed to the self-transcendence associated with community-based research (Schwartz, 2012) when their lower-level needs were not fulfilled sufficiently? For example, they lived in contexts where there was no or intermittent electricity, water, and sewerage services, inadequate and crowded housing, and an unstable supply of nutritious food—so their basic physiological needs were often not met. The gangs and other violence prevalent in townships, and their status as NEET, meant that their safety and security needs were threatened. Their need for love and belonging was challenged by family problems and the tendency to withdraw into their own self rather than seek the support and friendship of others. Their esteem needs were not met because they did not have the dignity of being able to provide for themselves and their families.

We had started with self-leadership, similar to self-actualisation, without taking into consideration the trauma that being NEET entails. We had a theoretical understanding of the adversities that young people face in their circumstances, but did not fully appreciate the effect of such long-term stress on their holistic wellbeing and their ability to trust and give of themselves for the benefit of others. They were reluctant to assume a leadership role because their peers would "think you are better [than us], because you are the boss" (P7).

Youth leadership can develop into negative leadership if they fear being bullied or controlled in some way, or embarrassed. Reflecting on this, we conclude that we erred in separating self-development from the research process. Moll et al. (2020, p. 2) explained the stages of collaborative research design as follows.

> *It should begin with critical and embodied reflexivity that attends to (1) ourselves—the subjective self or "I"; (2) our relationship with others—the intersubjective "we"; and (3) the systems in which we and others are embedded—the objective "it."*

These stages should happen simultaneously within the action learning group at the beginning of a PALAR project, not in a linear fashion—as we knew and had practised many times before. However, because we assumed that the youth participants lacked self-confidence, self-knowledge, and the intra-

and interpersonal skills to participate in action learning, we had reverted to “intervention” mode—let's first “fix” them before starting the PALAR process. This was an uncomfortable realisation because we had all written on the theory of community-based research. But here we were reverting to the type of engagement we had so vehemently opposed in our scholarship. Yet, only on later reflection did this become obvious to us. We now discuss the implications of these disturbing realisations for implementing action learning with vulnerable youth.

Implications for Practice

As painful as these lessons were, we believe that it was a valuable learning experience to be rescued from our complacency. Years of conducting and publishing PALAR and other forms of action research had led us to believe that we were experienced facilitators, capable of working with any group of people. However, this particular group brought us back to the basics of action learning and action research: start where people are at, focus on their issues, and move at their pace. We went in with an end goal in sight—based on the request of the NGO director—rather than following the tried and trusted process of PALAR. We had decided beforehand that self-leadership development was needed when, in fact, the group was not sure why they were there or what was expected of them. When we spoke of self-leadership in the first meeting, the skewed power relations prevented them from questioning what the purpose of the group was. Although they had enjoyed the exercises we did together, and benefitted individually from the interaction, it did not lead them to collaborative action. For example, in the focus groups they shared how they had “learned about [seeing] different perspectives” (P1) to “[focus] on the best side of my life . . . to take my life seriously” (P5) and to persist in tasks, rather than give up at the first obstacle. Several of them made applications to training courses or approached people they thought could help them with their goals. Some youth became more focused, sharing that “there was something [before] that was turning me back. I learned I had to focus to the right path” (P4). They learnt how to control their thinking and not let “imagination run their lives” (P1).

However, moving to a group project to research and develop programmes to present to other youth was not something they wanted or felt capable of doing. This is not surprising, given that they faced so much adversity in their daily lives and their main aim was to improve their own circumstances. So, what are the implications of this case for conducting action learning with youth rendered vulnerable by socioeconomic adversity? We offer some suggestions based on our learning from this case.

1. Do not assume that everyone is on the same page as far as the purpose and goals of the group are concerned. We fell into the trap of responding to a third-party request that predetermined the purpose and allowed the NGO director to recruit participants he chose to be volunteers at the NGO. We negated the power relations that existed between him and the participants that might have made them agree to the group just because they felt they had to. It is important to engage several times with participants just to listen to their stories and get to know them and their interests before requiring them to commit to a project.

2. Adequate provision of resources is important. It may not be a problem to travel 10 kilometres when there is adequate, reliable, and affordable public transport but it is a very stressful situation for unemployed youth living in township contexts. Data provision is vital for ongoing communication. To avoid this, we conclude that creating a third space for youth to engage for several days, both within the group room and “after hours,” would help build trust and group cohesion. In that way, they can build relationships without the facilitators being present all the time. Taking them to a comfortable place where they can sleep and eat without any stress or worries frees them to focus on what they are experiencing and learning in the group. Prolonged contact over four or five days helps them to form friendships, and being in a safe

and well-resourced environment makes them feel valued as part of the group. In this way, the lower-level needs as identified by Maslow (1943) can be met to an extent, so that they can focus on learning and participating in the group. A retreat also removes stress on the side of academic researchers because they can block out a week and do not have to travel long distances for each session. This may be more costly, but can be built into research funding given that the return on investment in terms of research outcomes far outweighs the cost. Doing this would help to build a strong foundation for later interaction.

3. According to the PALAR process, and many other forms of collaborative research, it is vital to start an exploration of needs, hopes, and dreams before deciding how to progress. We assumed that by first developing self-leadership, it would facilitate their participation in the research process. But we learnt again that we have to trust the process and the participants, or the engagement will end up being researcher-driven and participants will eventually lose interest. Participants did benefit from action learning on an individual basis as they learnt to set goals, find ways to reach them, revise their actions, and rethink and persist if the first attempt was not successful. However, they chose not to work as a group because their main concern was being able to deal with their own problems.

4. Constant reflection among facilitators is essential to ensure that the principles and values of participatory research are being respected. It is too easy to take shortcuts due to work pressure or other reasons when the group is not moving as fast as you think they should, or in the direction that you think they should be going. Facilitators need to keep each other accountable and hold their own action learning group on a regular basis—we did reflect on sessions in the car during the drive to and from the venue, but we really did not give them our full attention. The more time and work pressure we experienced, the more we separated practice and theory.

Conclusion

We decided to write this paper so that we could better understand how to facilitate action learning with youth who are rendered vulnerable on multiple levels in order to enable them to fully participate in and benefit from a PALAR project. The aim was for them to research, design, and implement programmes for the benefit of other youth who attended a youth development NGO. We learnt several lessons both about the youth and about our own practice. The depth of prolonged adversity these youth had experienced had exhausted them, making it difficult for them to sustain efforts that could improve their lives. They feared being judged by others and tended to withdraw into themselves rather than seek help. They did benefit from the “interventions” we did with them and the support we offered, but more individually rather than learning with and from each other. Regarding our own learning, we made several faulty assumptions that resulted in us becoming directive towards our own agenda, rather than facilitative of theirs. We present our (painful) learning here so that others may avoid making the same errors.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 15-27
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Transitioning Between Spaces: An Intersectional Account of how We are Becoming Academics

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Abstract

In this paper, we, as early career academics, share how our identities and transitioning between spaces contribute to our becoming. Using storyboarding, we draw on intersectionality and liminal theories to examine how our identities and our transition between the liminal and dominant spaces have influenced our identity construction and shaped our becoming. We learn that our identities are in a state of constant construction and that the academic spaces we have transitioned between are, and have been, significant to our becoming.

Keywords: identities, early-career academics, becoming, liminality, intersectionality

Please reference as: Msiza, V., Mbatha, N. and Ndlovu, N. (2023). Transitioning Between Spaces: An Intersectional Account of how We are Becoming Academics. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 12(2), 15-27. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a2

Introduction

Ours is a story of three Black, young, first-generation, early-career academics (ECAs) currently employed in a research-intensive South African university. We were permanently employed in 2016, 2017, and 2019 respectively. Before our appointments, Vusi, a Black man, worked as a university tutor. Nosipho and Nokukhanya, Black women, were schoolteachers. We share our story not as a "pity-party or a celebration of victimhood" (Magubane, 2019, p. iv), but to illustrate how we have intensified our zeal for academia and gained tenacity, aiding our becoming. Majorly inspired by the late bell hooks, we find great value in speaking our truth and writing about our experiences: "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, making new life and new growth possible" (hooks, 2014, p. 3). Therefore, building on our previous work, this paper will demonstrate how our identities and the spaces we have stepped into in academia contribute to our becoming academics. The question we ask is: "How do/have/are our identities and transitioning between spaces contribute/d/ing to our becoming academics?"

Pre-1994, before South Africa became a democratic country, local higher education institutions (HEIs) were sites of explicit racial discrimination, sexism, and classism akin to the country's apartheid and colonial legacy (Department of Education, 2008). The ushering in of democracy gave HEIs opportunities to take the lead in shedding the "colonial and apartheid baggage" (Department of Education, 2008, p. 6). One impetus to this transformation, amongst other things, was the Employment Equity Act (Republic of South Africa, 1998) which was intended to:

> *Achieve equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination and implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce. (p. 12)*

The Employment Equity Act has been instrumental in balancing racial demographics in academic staffing (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2016). Despite the leaps made, South African HEIs still face many challenges, stalling the transformation agenda. As articulated in *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience* (Khunou et al., 2019), amongst other things, academics of Black descent, in particular, still experience racial subjectification and practices of exclusion perpetuated by informal institutional cultures (Kiguwa, 2019). Black bodies, especially those of women and the queer community, are still seen as a disruptive element in the academy and, as "latecomers," they are "infantilized as perpetual development projects" (Khunou et al., 2019, p. 2). Black academics experience what Khoza-Shangase (2019) labelled as *intellectual and emotional toxicity*. She described this as a phenomenon "where her ability to feel healthy and safe, accepted and celebrated within this space, where her ability produces intellectual outputs and to engage in intellectual culture, is continually poisoned" (Khoza-Shangase , 2019, p. 42). Additionally, the sector faces challenges of an ageing professoriate on the one hand, and a student body growing much faster than its academic counterpart due to massification (CHE, 2016).

Against this backdrop, the official narratives we had been exposed to before our appointments were that the time had come for the South African academy to usher in new talent. This was seen as necessary for two purposes: redress and changing the academic staffing component in terms of race, age, and gender (CHE, 2016), and the growth of the academy. Our appointments were not only personal victories but, as first-generation academics, we were carrying the hopes and aspirations of our families, friends, and our communities. We entered with a sense of self-affirmation, enthusiasm to perform our duties, to integrate into the academic community, learn, and grow in our profession.

We were aware of some of the demands of being an academic, and believed the opportunities would capacitate us to execute our academic duties.

Alluding to Shortt (2015), we refer to our place of work as the dominant space. This is the space where we assumed our roles. We naively expected the dominant space and its practices to capacitate us to reach our optimal academic abilities without any foreseen shortcomings. We assumed we would be mentored to develop competence to fulfil our institutional duties and achieve our professional aspirations in an environment that would sustain our enthusiasm and commitment (Lumpkin, 2014). There were opportunities for capacitation; however, to our surprise, they were laced with exploitation, ageism, classism, sexism, and bullying. We soon noted that the dominant space was far from neutral (Puwar, 2004). It was defined through power relations, influencing how different identities take up and experience the space (Puwar, 2004). Our fledgling experience, which we had believed would be enhanced by stimulating and rigorous practices, instead made us feel alien, like impostors, a situation that Puwar (2004) described as being a body out of place. This experience was similarly shared by bell hooks (1994) when she attained her tenure—for her, receiving tenure sent her into a "deep, life-threatening depression" (p. 1) as she struggled with envisioning her trajectory in the academy. For ourselves, individually and collectively, learning of our appointments evoked happiness; however, the experiences after that left us in a state of frustration and a sense of unmet expectations.

Criss-Cross and the In-Between

Muddled in our feelings, with no sense of belonging in the dominant space, we retreated to our liminal space, as expanded in the sections below. Oblivious to the fact that we could have found the links between our doctoral studies, we later identified the potential use of our doctoral theories, intersectionality, and liminality theory, which became a lifeline in our writing for publication. In this paper, we employ intersectionality theory—a feminist framework by Crenshaw (1991) and Collins and Bilge (2016)—to understand contradictions, complexities, and ways in which our multiple identities intersect and contribute to our becoming academics. We also integrate liminality theory—an anthropological framework initially developed by van Gennep (1960) and extended by Turner (1972, 1977) —to understand how our transition from the dominant space to our liminal space assisted us in our becoming academics.

González and Collins (2019) noted that intersectionality emanates from the idea of a crossroads where different paths converge. In higher education, intersectionality is driven by the idea of "serving the formation of equitable societies and challenging inequalities through interrogating policies as well as strategies" (Nichols & Stahl, 2019, p. 1256). Intersectionality theory is critical in this paper because it focuses on identities and includes the intersection of structural systems, power, and resistance, which are often prevalent and at play in higher education (May, 2015).

Liminality theory has also been used in identity research and its construction. Shortt (2015) defined liminality or the liminal space as one that is on the border of two dominant spaces where a person does not belong fully to either of the spaces. The understanding of identity construction within organisational spaces was described by Beech (2011) and Ybema et al. (2009) as a mutually constructive interaction between individuals and their society. The construction of identities is developed in the interactions between the individuals' understandings of themselves (their self-identity) and how they are perceived in society (their social identity), as will be demonstrated in this paper through the exploration of our own identities. Noble and Walker (1997), when deconstructing identity, argued that liminality involves "significantly disrupting one's internal sense of self or place within a social system" (p. 31). Liminality can thus be understood as a reconstruction of identity, implying that the reconstructed identity is purposeful to oneself and the society into which it is integrated (Beech, 2011).

Drawing the Story to Our Intersectional Lives

"Qualitative research writing is a process, a becoming" (Ely et al., 1997, p. 8). It allows the writer to probe into the intricate web of their feelings, thoughts, and experiences, which represent a canvas of who one is while opening room to embrace and experience who one wants to become (Causarano, 2022). Therefore, it is important for us to engage in our becoming through writing to discover meaning and making sense of our experiences in a manner that might yield positive fruits for ourselves as ECAs and the academy. Our collaborative work has always been driven by a desire to reflect and learn from our experiences. This desire gave us the impetus to pause and lean on a self-study methodological approach to engage in our reflections and aid our learning. To present our data, we have used storyboarding to share our story. Storyboarding is an extension of the narrative research process (Lillyman & Bennett, 2012). It allows the researcher to present their data in an illustrative expression that may not be fully captured in words or may take longer to bring the expression through. It allows the researcher to use pictures and words to create a visual representation of the story being told (Lillyman & Bennett, 2012).

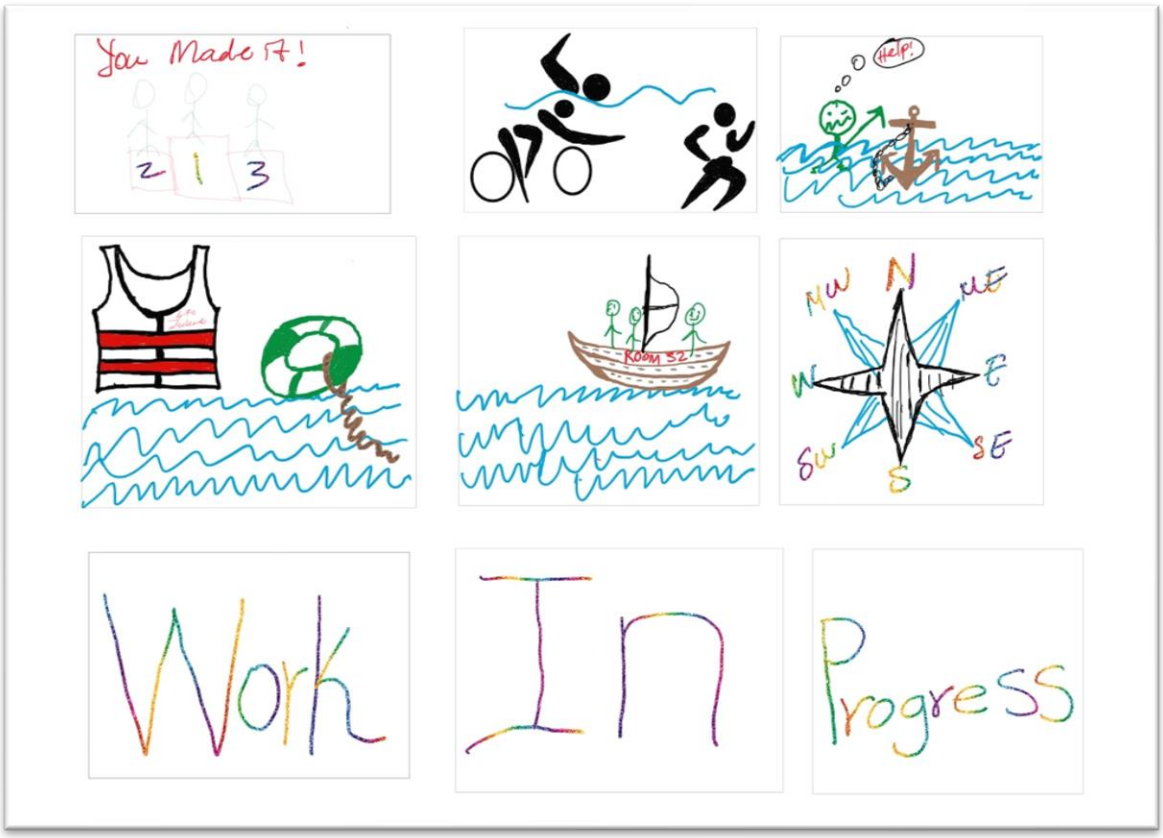
In developing our storyline, we relied on our past papers and photographs as triggers to facilitate remembering and to evoke hidden memories so the depth of our stories could be enhanced (Greenburg et al., 2012; van Schalkwyk, 2010). This activity became a premise to begin our conversations. Storyboard "is itself a way to go deeper in a discussion" (Mitchell et al., 2011, p. 229), which is significant in collaborative work because there are multiple experiences. In addition, Love (2014, p. 54) stated that "the storyboard is rich with action and dialogue." Thus, our conversations/dialogue led us to share our experiences and, from these, uncover our identities and use them to find zones where they intersected. We reflected on how these identities and intersections have aided our coming together for collaborative work, transitioning, and becoming academics.

We recorded the conversations of our storied lives because, for us, these stories were the gateway between our lived experiences and the social realities that shaped our academic lives (Bell, 2000). We used these stories to make sense of who we are and who we wanted to be (Andrew, 2007). Through these stories, prompted by our triggers, we identified three significant spaces to compose our storyboard and outlined them. These spaces (labelled below as Spaces 1, 2, and 3) assisted us in compartmentalising our experiences, also linking them to each collated frame in our storyboard. Vusi then sketched the different events we had shared through our stories. When creating the storyboard, we were concerned more about the metaphorical representation of our experiences than about the quality of the drawings (Mitchell et al., 2011). We adopted a similar approach to that of Ball (2020), where our storyboard was a medium to represent our intersectional identities and the meanings we attach to each of these spaces as we transition and become academics. As our work was collaborative, the storyboard was appealing because it allowed us to give an account of the meanings we collectively ascribe to our experiences in terms of how our identities and the transitioning through spaces contributed to our becoming academics (Ball, 2020; Labacher et al., 2012).

Chartering Academia: Our Exhibit

Our storyboard below illustrates our past and present experiences as ECAs in academia. It details the transformation of our former identity to the current state of our academic identity. Each set of collated frames represents a specific mindset or context in which we once found ourselves. Titled "Chartering Academia" (Figure 1) we unpack how we transitioned between the dominant and liminal spaces. Through this storyboard, our reasons, our current positionality, and our aspired trajectory are illustrated.

Figure 1: Chartering Academia



A triathlon is a demanding athletic activity that consists of three rigorous sports performed consecutively in a sporting competition. Often this multisport activity is entered by persons with considerable experience and training in each sport who have further displayed excellence in their performance. Equating our academic experience to a triathlon (Figure 2) may seem exaggerated. However, reflecting on our novice positionality and the demands of the academy, we realised an academic triathlon is what we had entered.

Figure 2: Space 1: Academic Triathlon

Entering the academy during its ongoing transformational period in South Africa was significant. Nokukhanya and Vusi were timber[2] of the university. Initially, as timber, there was a sense of comfort and expectation of the continual nurturing we had received as students. Yet, in contrast, we had to confront the challenge of negotiating with senior academics who were once lecturers, now colleagues.

[2] Timber: a term used within the university that identifies the students who have graduated from the university and have re-joined as academic or professional staff.

Nosipho joined from another university, which presented the slightly different challenges of being a complete outsider. Nonetheless, we were eager to learn and grow in our identity as academics.

The priority for academic work is set out in four key performance areas: teaching, research, community engagement, and administration (Debowski, 2012; Foote, 2010), which we came to learn about through seminars, induction programmes, and voluntary service in school committees. This scope was not well outlined and understood at the time of our arrival. Realising the extensive labour and our limited capacity, we were somewhat overwhelmed by how we could ever optimally perform the duties we were employed for. The realisation fostered subconscious thoughts of being an impostor. This meant that a sense of doubt constantly undermined our attempts to prove ourselves in the execution of our duties. Whether or not this attitude was evident to our colleagues, it was further met with salient or subtle acts of bullying in ageism, classism, and sexism, among others.

In the early days of our career, we were given workloads that had no currency. For instance, we were given more teaching, and administrative duties than supervision and research (Mbatha et al., 2020), which are critical for establishing one's academic profile and yield monetary rewards that enable academics to pay publishing fees and attend conferences, amongst other things. In the neoliberal academy, the game at play is publishing in top-tier journals, working solo to make the most points (McKeown, 2022). Those with the most points move to the next level and compete for grants (McKeown, 2022). Overall, those who can compete at these levels can bring financial resources to their institutions and are rewarded with less teaching, more money, and prestige (McKeown, 2022).

The high workload was overwhelming for us teaching in the era of massification. The time to focus on the other three key performance areas (supervision, research, and community engagement), was depleted by the enormous amount of teaching and administration. Subsequently, an overwhelmed ECA, buried in a high workload, unable to engage in the activities needed to run the academic triathlon, plummets into frustration and self-doubt, leaving little to no capacity to continue the triathlon assertively. In one of our papers, where we addressed the importance of liminal spaces for ECAs (Ndlovu et al., 2021), Vusi shared his experience about engaging with fellow academics in a seminar. Despite the fear that lurked within, and silencing the inner voices that validate the "PhD is the licence to talk" narrative, Vusi boldly voiced his concerns at the seminar. As outlined in our article, Vusi's voice was heard, and he received assistance in the liminal space with other ECAs and not at the seminar with senior academics. Reflecting on this experience, we understood that issues of infantilisation and classism were at play, whether intentionally or not. Though Vusi's concern was valid, he did not receive the assistance he hoped for from the seminar—leaving him despondent, without help, and thus, a debilitated ECA. How was Vusi supposed to continue the triathlon race without the assistance he needed at the time?

There were also challenges of attitudes towards ECAs, which we understood to be negative and some even demeaning. Although not directly linked to academic duties, upon reflection, we understood that they stifled our growth process and impeded the ability we believed we had to thrive in the academy. Below are some highlighted experiences we have gone through that contributed negatively to our becoming academics and affected our progress in the triathlon.

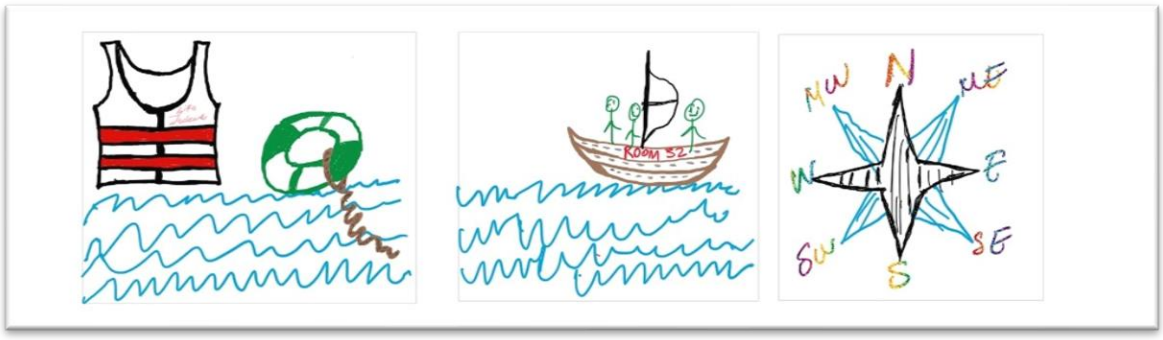
We were called *izingane za Dean* [the Dean's children] (Mbatha et al., 2021), suggesting that we were token appointments because of our age (Naicker, 2013). We also had some of the older colleagues belittle us by making comments such as "you are of the same age as my child" (Mbatha et al., 2020, p. 33). Through this lens of perception, we believe it became easy for them to give unsolicited advice and ask us to run errands that were not work related. Despite the national imperative of attracting young

academics (CHE, 2016), we found that some of our colleagues did not think we had gained sufficient pedigree to be academics.

Nokukhanya had a demeaning experience with sexist undertones. She repeatedly received benevolent sexist comments from male senior colleagues within the discipline who referred to her as a "rose" (Mbatha et al., 2021) and further remarked on her sense of fashion, commenting that she looked better in dresses than in pants. Whether innocent or not, these comments are sexist and made within the context of the academy, a space filled with intelligent people. It is sufficient to agree with Wright et al. (2007), who highlighted that within the academy, "what you experience is very tacit, unwitting . . . sexism, that is a structural system used to exclude you from certain opportunities as opposed to people being blatantly . . . sexist" (p. 151).

Plunging in self-doubt and low self-esteem, the impostor syndrome found fertile ground to set in because we saw ourselves as incapable and unfit to be in academia (Mbatha et al., 2021). Despite this, an inkling of hope remained that the academy could be better than we had experienced. This hope was kept alive by supportive senior academics who made us believe we still could be greater than what we were. That inkling of hope became a signpost that drew us into Room 32 (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Space 2: Room 32, Our Rescue



Room 32 is an unattractive, neglected physical small room. It is located in a building on the periphery of campus that primarily houses the janitorial staff and students' recreational and extra-mural activities. This is the space we retreated to after our deplorable and discouraging experiences in the dominant space. Room 32 was our liminal space. In 2017, we met with our Dean in the School of Education, and discussed expectations and support avenues for academics at our rank (Mbatha et al., 2020).

Retrospectively, from Room 32, we understand the meeting with our Dean to be our first rescue, even though, at the time, we were unaware of this. The Dean's message was a beacon of hope for us. The message was clear: "Becoming an academic is not smooth, straightforward, linear, or automatic" (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016, p. 225). However, what was emphasised was: "It should not be crippling. Nor should success, however, it is defined, come at the expense of individuals' (or families') physical and mental health or happiness" (Sutherland, 2018, p. 2). The Dean's message ignited us. We realised that there were individuals who were interested in our growth. Our glimmer of hope flickered a bit stronger.

Room 32, a space, undefined and without any prescriptions, firstly gave us refuge. Reflecting, this was our site of the second rescue. Drawn together by intersections of being young, Black ECAs engaged in their doctoral studies, having similar experiences, and having a shared ambition to thrive in academia,

Room 32 gave us the impetus to recalibrate. Our collaboration cushioned us against "the hegemonic, individualistic, competitive, and demanding landscape of academia in neoliberal university settings" (Brewer et al, 2021, p. 78). In Room 32, we allowed ourselves to be initiates again, on our terms. Land et al. (2005) and Allan et al. (2015) explained the liminal space as a psychosocial space—a mindset. During this time, the initiate understands their positionality of being the initiate and thus pursues learning everything for the role employed. Given Land et al.'s (2005) and Allan et al.'s (2015) psychosocial stance, our liminality was both a state of mind and a repositioning within the dominant space. We used Room 32 as a liminal space to shed and unlearn (Vinz, 1997) the intellectual and emotional toxicity that Khoza-Shangase (2019) wrote of. Not only did Room 32 provide a refuge for us, but it also offered the possibility for reimagining our becoming academics and beginning the work of rebuilding ourselves.

We effectively transitioned Room 32 into a study room with a healthier mindset and growing self-esteem. We met weekly to write together because we were still working on our doctoral studies. We assisted each other by sharing calls for papers and conference calls, reading each other's academic work, and role-played our presentations for our doctoral proposal review and conference presentations to refine our scholarly output to the academic audience. We regularly shared scholarly thoughts, giving and receiving advice from each other on issues related to teaching, research, and our doctoral studies. Organically, the space was evolving into a place of academic development.

Fulfilling his word to support ECAs, our Dean established the Accelerated Academic Leadership Development Programme, a project committed to developing ECAs. With this project came more opportunities for teaching relief, national conference attendance grants, mentorship from senior academics, and, our highlight, the opportunity to visit Columbia University, Teacher's College (TC). We identify this programme as our third site of rescue. Travelling to TC meant leaving Room 32. Nevertheless, we were travelling together.

While at TC, we began unpacking our experiences from Room 32, finally understanding that our relationship was a critical friendship established on values of tolerance, care, and empowerment. Our critical friendship was a life jacket that kept us afloat with mutual affirmations and kept our professional identity alive. With this mindset, we decided to maintain our practices from Room 32 even though we were at TC. The maintenance of our mindset led us to an evolved meaning of Room 32—as an embodied space. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) described embodied space as allowing the space to be occupied by the body— giving the body a psycho-spatial experience that connects the body to the space beyond physical limitations (Mbatha et al., 2020). How we experienced Room 32 was no longer limited to the physical space but also expanded to our state of mind and self; we carried Room 32 in ourselves albeit not being in the physical space. The behaviours and practices established in Room 32 were no longer limited to the physical Room 32. However, they were now embodied within us and could be emulated wherever we were. This mindset charged our enthusiasm, which offered abundant possibilities for our becoming academics.

Reflecting on our transitioning to Room 32 as a liminal space, we understand our decision to have given us a fighting chance of survival, of becoming academics. Our changed mindset opened us to new opportunities that we fully embraced when they came. With the teaching relief privilege awarded to us, we could advance our doctoral studies, cultivate our writing skills for publishing, and refine through continuous conversations our reimagined identity of becoming an academic. We also took the opportunity to attend national conferences. In this opportunity, we leapt ahead and were successful in presenting individual papers and collaboratively held a panel presentation. Our panel presentation allowed us to share our work about the pleasures, pitfalls, and possibilities of being an ECA. We were

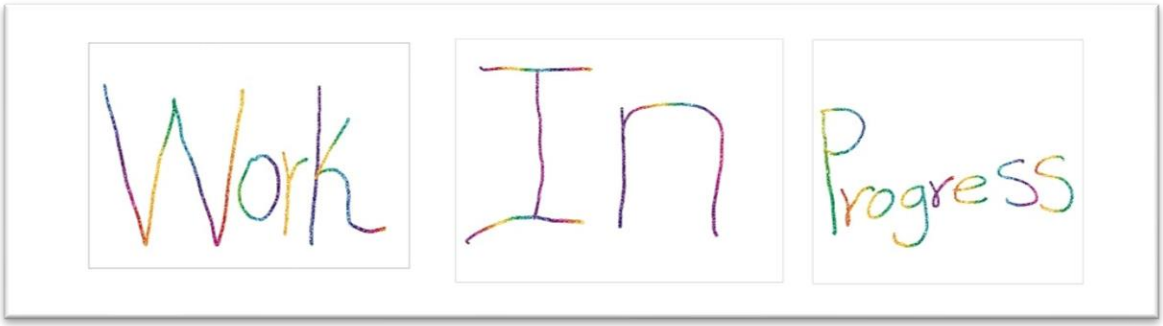
received warmly by the audience. We were given accolades and honest feedback, which deepened our thinking and contributed to our confidence in viewing ourselves as academics.

The programme had also selected senior academics within our school and from TC to assist us in our academic journey. These mentors acted in the ways we had initially expected from the academics in the dominant space—now available to us and willing to assist. Gradually, our experiences were changed. The toxic clench of the dominant space had lost its grip. Our view of becoming academics was validated by the support we received, which armoured our thinking, protecting it from the ongoing toxicity of the dominant space.

Ukuhlehla kwenqama akusho ukubaleka kusho ukuthatha amandla. This is an isiZulu[3] proverb that can be explained in the following way: "When a ram moves back during a fight, it does not mean defeat, but it is to gain more strength." That is how we now describe our retreat to Room 32. It was not to run away from the demanding, rigorous, and toxic environment. Instead, it was to cultivate our skills and increase our capacity. Currently, embodying the practices of Room 32, our envisioned academia, which we are emulating in our collaboration, is best expressed in the concept of academia as a marathon. Although carrying some similarities to triathlon as an endurance sport, the marathon allows us to pace ourselves better and support each other in the race without the compulsion of finishing first. The aim is to finish together, which is possible in a marathon. In pacing ourselves, Room 32 provided room for us to crawl until we developed the ability to walk. Our walk was surrounded by the support of multiple opportunities, which eventually made it possible for us to walk by ourselves. Such support has brought intellectual and emotional affirmation (Canham, 2019)—efforts that have validated our belonging.

Our transformation from crawlers to runners is also attributed to the self-study methodology and artistic methods. Engaging in self-study as a practice informed our research engagements (how we write and generate data together), how we interact with each other as critical friends, and how we pursue success in the academy. Self-study and artistic methods like storyboarding have amplified our voices as we find the confidence to express ourselves through the methods.

Figure 4: Space 3: A Marathon Instead



Yomantas (2021) urged us to have the agency to reclaim our dreams. She drew on Glennon Doyle's New York Times bestseller, *Untamed*, to encourage academics to "return to the wildest, truest versions of ourselves who are released from societal expectations and norms" (Yomantas, 2021, p. 304). Kopano Ratele (2019) also ignited ECAs and asked, "If you do not think and feel and behave as if where and how you live matter, why would others think and feel that you matter?" (p. 25). Rosalind Gill (2009), in sharing multiple experiences from various academics about the toxic neoliberal workplace

[3] AmaZulu (plural) are one of the ethnic groups in South Africa with isiZulu as the language. We are employed in a university located in KwaZulu-Natal province.

environment in academia, urged academics to think of ways to resist partaking in the toxic culture in the academic workplace. Reading these words as ECAs who have experienced the toxicity within academia and witnessed the results, we take them as encouragement to hold steadfast and pursue our current path of "doing" academia.

Conclusion

We began our paper with a concern to respond to the following question: "How are our identities and transitioning between spaces contribute/d/ing to our becoming academics?" We used a storyboard to illustrate three different spaces and discussed how our identities transitioned as we moved through them. We illustrated and storied how we made our transitions from entering the academy, finding a life jacket in Room3 2, and becoming a "work-in-progress." A storyboard provided opportunity for us to create and share a visual representation of our story and transition. We have also illustrated how our transitioning between the dominant and liminal spaces has contributed and is contributing to our becoming academics. We used intersectionality and liminality theories to illuminate and analyse our transition, and demonstrated the growth of our academic identities through the exegesis of our published papers.

In the engagement of our experiences, we turned the spotlight onto ourselves and became the site of inquiry (Samaras, 2011). Our social cohesion and transformation emanated from approaching research as a practice and ourselves as sites of inquiry. Connected by our intersectional identities, we restored ourselves and reshaped our identities, making the embodied liminal space fertile for our professional development. Franklin (2012) encouraged researchers to use artistic methods, especially when working with self, because researchers also need to awaken their human consciousness—and artistic methods offer possibilities in achieving that. Our experience of creating a storyboard was empowering and therapeutic. The process allowed us to revisit our past experiences without lamenting or self-pity, but with acceptance and assertiveness. In our data generative conversations, we released any remaining distressing emotions we once felt about our positions as ECAs. We took accountability for our actions, deepening our restored sense of confidence and self-esteem, ultimately reaffirming our belonging in the academy. With an awakened consciousness and depth of knowledge in ourselves, we began to engage with research boldly, finding our authentic voice and unafraid to transgress against conventions of this is how it is done and how it *should* be (hooks, 1994).

We believe there are multiple possibilities for transformation and deeper insight that can be attained through studying the self. Ours is one of many stories that present this, and we implore other emerging scholars to find their authentic voice as they navigate through the various challenges in the academic triathlon because the processes of self-study methodology and artistic methods (such as storyboard) present various opportunities of emancipation from subtle and salient imperious practices.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 28-43
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

My Pedagogical Becoming as a Stellenbosch University Residential Educator During the Covid-19 Pandemic[1]

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Abstract

This article explores my pedagogical becoming through the enactment of a residential education and support programme (RESP) at Stellenbosch University (SU). I co-created the RESP with nine women students who remained in a university residence with me during the Covid-19 pandemic. The RESP focused on the relationality and interrelationships that transpired at the nexus of the institution, the students, and me. I propose that this RESP acted as catalyst for the transmission and acquisition of valuable qualities and dispositions—what Barnett (2009) referred to as epistemic virtues—which are vital to knowledge acquisition in higher education. This article uses an autoethnography approach to capture my personal experiences against the sociocultural backdrop of residential learning and living at SU before, during, and after the pandemic. Narrative prose expressing my embodied emotional, spiritual, and intellectual self (Bochner & Ellis, 1992), and emotional recall were the primary data sources, which I analysed against van Manen's (1982, 1994) conceptualisation of the pedagogical relation and Tronto's (2015) principles of care ethics. Both those authors emphasised the centrality of the pedagogical relation for good and effective teaching. This article demonstrates how an institutional care-based response to the pandemic enacted at one residence (at a university with an erstwhile separatist educational agenda) can surpass its legacy momentarily to point the way towards the possibility of inclusive transformation at such an institution. Furthermore, this article demonstrates how nurturing pedagogical relationships based on care can effectively cultivate and transmit valuable qualities and dispositions (epistemic virtues), and why these are important in our current supercomplex (Barnett, 2007) and fast-changing world. I offer the claim that the acquisition of these epistemic virtues by students holds promise for providing them the key to unlocking an education for life.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, residential education and support programme (RESP), relationality, pedagogical relation, epistemic virtues

[1] Ethical clearance number: REC: SBE-2022-23591

Please reference as: Petersen, J. (2023). My Pedagogical Becoming as a Stellenbosch University Residential Educator During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 12(2), 28-43. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a3

Introduction

The pandemic moment rendered a diversity of experience for students at higher education institutions across South Africa. At Stellenbosch University (SU), the nexus of student, staff, and institutional structures presented a particular experience, valorised a particular ethics, and enacted a particular pedagogy. In this article, I explore my pedagogical becoming through the enactment of the residential education and support programme (RESP) that developed spontaneously and consciously as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded. I co-created the RESP with nine women students who remained in the university residence with me during the pandemic. The focus of the RESP was the relationality and interrelationships that formed at the intersection of the students, the institution, and me. In this article, I propose that the RESP provided the impetus, and acted as the catalyst, for engendering the transmission and acquisition of valuable qualities and dispositions, akin to Barnett's (2009) conceptualisation of *epistemic virtues*—which are as vital as knowledge acquisition in higher education.

I employ evocative autoethnography as a research approach to capture my personal and subjective experiences against the backdrop of residential living and learning at SU before, during, and after the pandemic. Evocative or heartfelt autoethnography "generates powerful narratives that evoke a sense of reality, highlighting concrete experiences and intimate details; it explores the meaning behind human experiences, and repositions the reader and subjects as active participants engaged in dialogue" (Ellis, 1999, p. 669). I used excerpts from a vividly narrated prose essay, and emotional recall as my primary data sources. I recorded my embodied emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experience (Bochner & Ellis, 1992) in *Pandemic Tales* (Petersen, 2020), shortly after our time together. I applied emotional recall or affective memory throughout the research and writing process of this autoethnography. Ellis described emotional recall as the act of "turning inwards" which, she stated, offers a "rich and underutilized cornucopia of data and experiences" (1991, p. 27). Pireddu explained affective memory as the "recalling and the re-experiencing of the sensory details that accompanied the experience" (2009, p. 97), and added, "it is this re-lived emotion that lends the recounted autoethnographic tale its electricity and immediacy or aliveness and verisimilitude" (2009, p. 99). These primary data sources were then analysed against van Manen's (1982, 1994) conceptualisation of the *pedagogical relation*. It was his belief that the pedagogical relation is at the heart of good and effective teaching (van Manen, 1994). I also assessed the interrelationality that was established between the institution, the staff, and the students during the pandemic, using Tronto's (2015) principles of care ethics. For Tronto, "care is about meeting needs, and it is always relational" (2015, p. 4).

Throughout the process of recollecting and writing, I was aware that the "truth of this autoethnography cannot be a stable truth because memory is active, dynamic and ever-changing" (Bochner, 2012, p. 161). As I recalled the events of this encounter, I applied my reflexivity rigorously to give a faithful description that captured the multiple and layered complexities, and took care not to reduce them to simplistic explanations and sound bites (Josselson, 2004).

In this article, I demonstrate how SU's institutional care-based response to the pandemic indicated a positive and qualitative shift toward its restitution, restoration, and transformation agenda. Furthermore, this article illustrates how and why in this time of rapid change, *supercomplexity* (as

Barnett, 2007 called it), and acute uncertainty, it is imperative to structure pedagogical relations that are based on care. It is equally important for teachers to thoughtfully construct and engage in pedagogical relations that model and inspire ethical and virtuous behaviour that can provide fertile ground for the transmission of worthwhile qualities and dispositions. The subsequent acquisition of these epistemic virtues by students holds (I propose) the key to an *education for life*.

This article is divided into three parts. I start with my pre-pandemic experience as the residence head where I live and work with more than 200 students in the university residential accommodation. Here, I relay my encounters with the residence culture and with the powerful student structures, and my experiences of being undervalued, underutilised, and unseen. Then, the Covid-19 pandemic strikes and I meet the students in the "shadow." I describe how, in my first personal encounter with them, I experienced a significant moment of clarity and purpose when I "saw" the students in the fullness of their being—which redirected my way of being and doing in the residence. In this second part, I focus on the relationality that developed between us as we turned our mealtime gatherings into educational engagements and together, created a RESP. In the final part, I reflect on my pedagogical actions in enabling practices that engendered the transmission and acquisition of epistemic virtues, and my subsequent pedagogical becoming. Furthermore, I review SU's institutional care-based response to the pandemic, which signalled positive strides and shifts in enacting its restitution, restoration, and transformation agenda.

This autoethnography is part of an extensive ethnographical case study. I received ethical clearance and institutional permission from Stellenbosch University Ethics Committee to conduct this research.

Residence Culture

On the day that I stepped into Disa[2] residence, it was with equal amounts of excitement and trepidation. Although I found myself seduced by the exterior facade of the residence, which was elegant and inviting, and the interior furnishing that created warmth and charm, the prospect of sharing living quarters with 260 other women was daunting. And, although I considered myself a confident and capable individual, it still felt intimidating to be heading a residence as the first person of Colour. My predecessor had been in this role for more than 20 years. I knew I was stepping into White shoes. It made me uneasy.

As I became acquainted with my new living and learning environment, it became clear to me that the student-based house committee (HC) of the residence was effectively in charge of many of the day-to-day operational and student life functions of the house. This group of students, who had been elected by their peers, was an essential feature of the social design of the structure and culture of SU's residence life. Each member had a portfolio, which covered all the aspects of residential living from maintenance to meal bookings, cultural events to parking allocations, and room placements to discipline. Disa residence was run like a well-oiled machine, efficiently and effectively. The HC seemed to have significant control over social and cultural engagements, gatherings, and events. They decided what student life initiatives would be happening, where they would take place, and who would participate. While they tried to discuss and consult within the team and be inclusive, it was my perception that their attempts at building community fell short in one key aspect—building relationships. I experienced this as the residence head and therefore, I am sure that some students may have experienced it too. All student life engagements, including social get-togethers, dances, critical discussions, and cultural activities such as choir performances or plays, were planned and took place with little or no input from me—except when I needed to approve the expenses thereof. From my initial observations, it was clear that the HC had everything under control and that they were in

[2] A pseudonym.

control. This is not to say that they excluded me on purpose or with malicious intent; the students merely effectively enacted the residence culture. This was just "the way things work here."

These practices, beliefs, assumptions, and ideologies, which are sometimes explicit in policies or regulations but are mostly implicit in behaviour or attitudes, are what constitute institutional culture (Matthews, 2015). According to van Wyk (2009), institutional culture is usually articulated, enforced, and perpetuated by the dominant group and is embedded in a very definite historical context and purpose that continues to play out in an invisible way. At SU, as Davids and Fataar (2022) explained, institutional culture is difficult to pinpoint, but it sends strong signals to those who are attuned to and interact with the institution. In the residential space, those authors added, institutional culture manifests as structural and cultural cues. The concrete and tangible aspects of the building, the furniture, and photographs, for example, are the structural cues that can be variously interpreted by those who enter and live there. The cultural cues are more difficult to decipher and are captured by the atmosphere, values, implicit understandings, and expected behaviour (Davids & Fataar, 2022).

The cultural cues that were displayed and relayed in the residence culture were particularly stark (to me) during the welcoming of new first-year students. The social events that were presented, the music that was played, and the clothes that the HC wore were reminiscent of a specific era, catered to a specific group of students, and sent strong signals about who was in power and held the authority there. At my first welcoming experience, I was shocked to see the HC members were all dressed in formal attire—grey, checked, double-breasted, knee-length dresses matched with black high heels. To me, their strict and formal dress code subtly and subliminally indicated the existence of a hierarchy and their presence at the helm.

Interestingly, I would later learn from the archives and through alumni conversations, that Disa residence was progressive in many ways. It was the first women's residence to allow men to visit the residents' rooms, they marched on the Rooiplein to protest women's abuse on campus, and the students were introduced to different facets of leadership development to promote diversity. In 2018, Disa translated its house song into three languages in alignment with the university's institutional transformation goals (Sharpley, 2021). However, Disa did not entirely escape or withstand the stronghold of traditions, values, and expectations from the dominant groups inside or the cues from the larger institutional culture outside. And given that the institutional culture places a particularly high premium on excellence and perfection, I came to understand that the HC's reluctance to include or consult me would be perceived as a weakness or shortcoming on their side.

I also came to understand that the HC had been conditioned to a residence and institutional culture that had been cemented over the 50 years of Disa's existence, perpetuated through habit and lack of oversight from those who came before me—or maybe, because of them. It seemed and felt as if the residence culture had been reinforced by the previous White "tannies"[3] who supported the house's traditions and ways of doing, and upheld its practices and allowed the authoritative ways of thinking, being, and doing that were espoused by the HC. I felt frustrated because my presence and expertise were unacknowledged. The White shoes were gnawing at my feet. They were not my size or my style.

The Opening Epiphany and Establishing a Pedagogical Relation

I was six months into this role when the Covid-19 pandemic struck. News reports from around the world instigated fear and anxiety and, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization announced

[3] "Tannie" is a colloquial term that students use to refer to women residence heads as a form of respect. It is debatable whether this is suitable for the modern role that residence heads play as educators.

that the rapid and roughshod spreading of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (Covid-19) presented an apocalyptic threat to the global community. Days after that announcement, the South African government declared the pandemic a national disaster and announced that the country would be under a national lockdown from 27 March for 21 days. A mass exodus of students from the SU campus ensued. In my residence, nine women students remained steadfast in their decision to stay on campus. Willem de Villiers, Rector of SU, announced in March 2020 in an email communication to staff and students that the university would make provision for students who were unable to return home by accommodating them in its residences and ensuring that the necessary Covid-19 protocols were adhered to.

For those of us who stayed together in the university residence for the next nine months, the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic would mark the birth of an "extraordinary, life-giving experience or epiphany" (Bochner & Ellis, 1992, p. 3). Epiphanies are those moments that are perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of one's life. They reveal ways that a person could negotiate "intense situations" and "effects that linger—recollections, memories, images, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished" (Bochner, 1984, p. 595).

I recorded this life-giving experience in a short essay and present excerpts there from in this autoethnographic study (see Petersen, 2020).

The essay begins as follows:

> *It is two days before lockdown; we are meeting downstairs in the oopsitkamers. The wingback chairs—upholstered in beautiful hues of blue—are arranged in a circle.*
>
> *There are 10 of us. We come from places far and wide in Southern Africa—Zimbabwe, Limpopo, Gauteng, and all the way down to the Cape Flats. Did I say we came? No, I think we were called. Our grandparents' parents prayed and paid for this. The faces I see in front of me look weary and fatigued—three (aspiring) biochemists, an earth, an animal and a plant scientist, a chemical engineer, a psychologist, and a social worker—they have remained steadfast in their decision to stay. (Petersen, 2020, paras. 3 & 4)*
>
> *I am distraught—what will we do, we hardly know each other, God forbid—what if something happens to them or their parents? I do not know if I can do this—provide emotional care, support, warmth, a sense of togetherness, and a home. Is that what they want, or do they want to be left alone? As I am about to utter my fears the unexpected happens . . . the last lines of Yeats's poem start to reverberate in my head: "I . . . have only [these] dreams, I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams" (as quoted in Menon, 1960, p. 31). The fog in my mind lifts, and as I look into the faces, our eyes lock and they tell me: I am on the precipice of my dream, I just started my dream, I am my grandmother's dream. At that moment, my fears become inconsequential. I hold their gaze and we enter into a silent agreement to ride this pandemic wave together and protect each other's (now) fragile dreams. (Petersen, 2020, para. 5)*
>
> *And just so, after reassuring the girls their decision to stay was most brave and courageous, our facades drop, we breathe a sigh of relief, and we get to the business of Being. Almost in unison we agree this might be the rest, the respite, we needed from our daily hustle and inner wrestles! (Petersen, 2020, para. 6)*

My first face-to-face encounter with the nine students remained etched in my brain. While I was conjuring up all the possible dark and fatal outcomes that the pandemic could bequeath us, something remarkable happened. As I quieted my mind, became present, and gave my full attention, an opening came, a clearing. At that moment, the ears of my ears awoke, and the eyes of my eyes opened (Cummings, 1950). I saw each individual student, unique and in the fullness of her being. I saw the anxiety in their stubbornness and the fear in their courage. And, without a prod or nudge, each one disclosed her reasons for staying: "I must graduate at the end of this year; I cannot lose sight of my academic project now," "I will not have access to the internet," "We have intermittent electricity cuts," "My parents cannot afford to feed another mouth," "Our house is noisy and overcrowded." I saw and heard a piece of myself in each of these utterings—their story was my story. My mind raced back to my formative years; I too shared a room with my three siblings. I remembered the sparsely furnished room: two double bunks, a cupboard, and a chest of drawers, with no place to study. Throughout my high school years and later when I went to university, I would rise in the depth of night, when the world was quiet, to commit to my books. Sometimes my sister would beat me to the kitchen table, and I had to resort to the couch in the small living area.

I read the defiance in their eyes, which seemed to say, "We are not going to succumb to the threat of an invisible virus derailing our futures. We invested in a destination, and no matter how tenuous, we will remain en route, with or without you." I reacted with an affirming nod, our gazes locked, and I communicated back to declare with soft eyes, "I am here for you; I will hold your hand, and you have my unyielding support."

Van Manen (1994, p. 38) told us that every active encounter is a potential pedagogical moment because it requires action, even if the action is a nonaction, a tender touch, an admonishing look, or an affirmative nod. To me, the significance of this moment was captured in the students' revealing of their subjective being, of their dreams and hopes, their fragilities, and their vulnerabilities. I saw the aspirant Black bodies from the urban and rural underclasses who had struggled, sacrificed, and survived to come to university pursuing their dream of becoming scientists, social workers, and engineers. They were the first in their families to gain this opportunity of entering higher education. They came here not just for themselves but as representatives of their clans and communities, whose aspirations they carried with them. The distant future may have been uncertain to them, but they reacted with certitude to the possibility of the present moment in which they had access to the resources and comforts that they needed to make the dream possible.

I knew these Black bodies. I was once in their shoes. In that moment, my purpose was reawakened, and my passion reignited. In that opening, I stepped out of the White shoes and into my own Brown genuine leather boots.

Enacting the Residential Education and Support Programme

Meeting the students in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic activated my default setting—to care, to share, to make a difference—a motto that I had lived and breathed for seven years when I taught at Christel House South Africa (https://christelhouse.org/). In fact, it felt as if every teaching and learning experience that I had been exposed to, engaged in, and experienced had prepared me for this moment. I knew that eating together would create opportunities for us to be together, check in with each other, and, hopefully, help us to get to know each other. I also anticipated that it would allow us to access one another for the emotional care and psychosocial support that we might need from each other as the pandemic unfolded.

I wrote as follows about this:

> *We have regular coffee check-ins and eat supper together every other night. This turns out to be the highlight of the pandemic for me. I cook and they feed my soul! Over casseroles, pasta, wraps, and burgers, the girls invite me into their world. We traverse the Limpopo via their backyards where they lie under Marula trees, eating the citrus-like fruit they bear, where the avocadoes are bountiful and the mangoes are the sweetest, most juicy. I listen to stories of them growing up and reciting their ancestral lineage at large family gatherings—coached and coaxed by their dads to do so with pride and gusto. They share their embarrassment about their parents when they boast to friends and family about their daughter's achievements, and they refer to their younger siblings with gentle dearness. (Petersen, 2020, para. 7)*
>
> *This practice of eating together does something for us—it transforms our anxiety into appreciation and then affection. (Petersen, 2020, para. 8)*
>
> *Food is the soother, a healer and connector. My attempt at samp and bean soup delights, and I am praised as if I brought a gift from home. We include pap and chakalaka as side dishes to our main meals. I become the lockdown scone expert, and we enjoy this together, warm, with cream and jam. We make Easter Sunday special with a feast that stretches into late afternoon cake, doughnuts, and Easter eggs. Sanelisiwe's 21st birthday is celebrated with caramel birthday cake, candles, braai, music, dancing, and singing. (Petersen, 2020, para. 9)*

And just like that, my deft orchestration of our practices of eating together became our classroom. Our gatherings evolved into forums for educational engagement, and we established, with conscious spontaneity, the RESP, based on the deep care and relationality that we had developed. I sharpened my practice by being intentionally present, attentive, and curious. My response to the pandemic predicament was premised on Tronto's tenets of care; she explicated: "Care is about the meeting of needs, and it is always relational" (2015, p. 4). Her assertion is that in a relationality that is fostered in care, one must pay attention to fully understand the care that is needed and then act on the moral responsibility to do so. Importantly, the carer must be competent enough to provide the care, and if the cared for reciprocate, one can satisfactorily claim that a pedagogy of care was established.

The constitution of the RESP took on the structure and form of the pedagogical relation as van Manen (1994), Nohl (1957), and Spiecker (1984) conceptualised it. Van Manen (1994, p. 149) saw the pedagogical relation as "the concept of a caring human vitality that encompasses the normative and qualitative features of the educational process." Nohl (1957) added that the pedagogical relation is "an intensely personal relation, rooted in a special quality between the teacher and student and developed effortlessly" (as quoted in Spiecker, 1984, p. 137). The teacher "cares for the child as they are and whom they may become," explained Nohl (1982 as quoted in van Manen, 1994, p. 143) referring to the intuitive understanding of the lived experience and inner workings of the child. Spiecker (1984, p. 208) concurred, and added that it is the "pedagogical relation that makes human development and personal becoming possible." Most importantly, when the intentions of the educator to give direction are met by responsiveness on the part of the student, the pedagogical relation is activated (Bollnow, 1989). By mutual agreement, the students and I entered a relationship that was interdependent and reciprocal. The dynamics of the pandemic steered me to provide a sense of comfort, care, and stability. And the students reciprocated with an openness to receiving it. More importantly, my role was to lead: "Educere" means to lead *out of,* and "educare"' means to lead *into*—leading students out of childhood and leading them into adulthood (van Manen, 1982, p. 285).

Theoretically, the notion of residential education diverts from the instrumentalist and rationalist modes of teaching which place emphasis on knowledge transmission, acquisition, and assessment. Here the focus is on the development of self and the development of self in relation to the other. Biesta (2009) referred to this as the socialisation and subjectification purpose of education. In other words, residential education is meant to positively bring students together, where they live and learn from each other. In doing so, students develop and grow an understanding of who they are in relation to others and themselves.

In 2015, SU adopted a residential education paradigm with the adoption of its Residential Education Programme (Kloppers, 2015). This values-driven programme is geared toward leveraging the value and potential of outside-of-class experiences in the enhancement of the student's learning experience and student success. At SU, the values approach favours the use of community selected values as the "moral compass" and "guides to action" to navigate "desirable" interactions with members of the community. According to Solomons and Fataar, the educational values-driven approaches emphasise "values, things and persons that are desirable" (2011, p. 225) and can therefore be open to misinterpretation and speculation and are often confused with social norms and traditions. At SU, values are meant to be the organising principle for all community actions and interactions and residence heads' training and development espouse this approach.

Our RESP addressed the pertinent issue of how we can educate in the residential environment, and why this is important. Eating together, having a genuine interest in other persons, trying to understand each other's lived experiences, and laughing at our foibles were some of the simple practices that we followed. In the process, we were able to build rapport and trust, share our differences, and revel in our similar journeys of aspiration. Most significantly, though, was the space that we gave each other to just be in our skins—relaxed, open, and unashamedly ourselves, with loud laughter and academia-induced fears and anxieties.

The notion that we were co-constructing and co-creating a RESP came from the awareness that this is how living and learning can be—a blueprint or template for residential education. This is how we can learn about each other and learn from one another. The benefits thereof are bountiful—building authentic relationships and experiencing living with and in an awareness of difference. These engender and promote qualities of empathy, care, respect, and compassion, amongst others.

Pedagogical Risks

The pedagogical relation sets the conditions, motives, and intentions for teaching. As we became more comfortable in our own being and in being with each other, I decided to take our engagements a little further and deeper.

Reflecting on the relationality that we established, I wrote,

> *These poignant encounters [mealtimes we shared] make room for deeper dialogues, including conversations around our cultural and societal constructs like marriage, how children should be reared, and real friendships discerned. We talk about losing our voices upon entering the forest, being overwhelmed by the magnitude of newness, adjusting, and assimilating to get in on "how things are done here." These discussions provide me with the opportunity to broach topics of belonging, how it is (in my opinion) inherent, a given, and reciprocal—demanding an openness to receive and give. We talk about victimhood, complacency, and agency—finding your voice again. My "world experienced" viewpoint provokes and shocks; it also evokes new curiosities (I hope). I share my dad's favourite and*

> *often-used word of the time, "propaganda," and let them in on a life lesson I was taught in an academic literacy class—consider everything you read to be contentious! I could be wrong, but from these talks, I deduce that finding a sense of self is becoming more important than pleasing parents, culture, and traditions. (Petersen, 2020, para. 10)*

I remember that I wrote this one evening in response to a barrage of inviting questions from the students: "Tell us, how did you meet your husband?" "How long have you been married?" "How did you know he is the *right one*?" I offered them a naughty grin and responded: "Is there only one right one?" My banter added lightness and frivolity and piqued their curiosity. I shared the story of how my husband and I met at school, had our beautiful son in our early twenties, and got married 10 years after his birth. They were noticeably intrigued; I sensed both judgement and permission. This revelation created the opening to segue into more intimate and authentic discussions about the contemporary human condition. I shared how I felt excluded, being a single mother within a circle of friends who were all married, albeit unhappily. How society's constructs reduced my sense of being, made me feel less than. How I coped with the death of my parents within two years of each other and having a child that was not two years old then. How for years I kept asking myself why my parents named me Joy, and what was the purpose of my life! I remembered being amazed at how comfortable I was sharing these personal stories. I sensed that the students may have resonated with me. I may have answered some questions that they may have wondered about but not asked out loud.

It was Barnett's (2007) view that when students find personal meaning and can identify with another's story, a new energy and resolve is given to their being and a new spirit emerges—the person is *in*spired. He admitted that such a conceptualisation is elusive and mysterious; inspiration, he maintained, cannot be taught—but those who have determination, care, and enthusiasm to come into issues their own way will catch it. The RESP provided such a pedagogy for inspiration; here both the students and I actively participated in creating an inspirational loop based on the mutual disclosure of, and fascination with, each other's stories. This transformed our educational engagements and provided the impetus for us to take greater pedagogical risks (Barnett, 2012). Three stand-out pedagogical moments jump to mind.

Two months into our stay together, the George Floyd murder happened. He was the Black man who was brutally killed by the police on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States of America. The students were visibly upset and, when I probed their distress, they disclosed that their anger was directed at the lack of response from the SU community. As the murder spiralled into the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement's march, and the global condemnation of racism, they started talking about their own experiences of racism. One student shared how the family that she lived with whilst on an exchange programme in Australia had told her: "You speak very good English for a South African." Another told us how she had felt constantly harassed and reprimanded to fix her hair at the White Afrikaner school she had attended. I tried to keep the conversation going, allowing the students to debate, argue, and present their viewpoints, facts, and emotions while listening with stunned disbelief at how these young Black bodies had already been exposed to the societal constructs of inequality and racism.

In another conversation, I asked about their welcoming experiences, and how they had subsequently adjusted to the new and different SU environment. Only three of them had applied for residence placement, and were placed here at Disa. The others shared the cumbersome process of waiting to be placed in a residence but, once here, they had settled in and found the student leaders warm and welcoming. It was the faculty space where they experienced great difficulty, especially with the Afrikaans language. One student was allocated to an Afrikaans tutor group. She explained how she had never been exposed to the Afrikaans language or Afrikaans-speaking people until she arrived at SU.

Almost every student recalled an incident in which they felt explicitly excluded in a conversation or from a group because of the use of Afrikaans.

These pedagogical encounters created intimacy, discomfort, and disturbance among all of us. I remember being very aware of my own positionality and pedagogical integrity, not wanting to impose my own stance and opinion on the students. I was cautious to reply verbally. A soft gaze and touch on the shoulder to acknowledge the pain and hurt experienced was mostly my response. We became comfortable sitting in silence and holding space for each other.

Not all our pedagogical interactions were emotionally heavy and cognitively charged. By far the most significant of these pedagogical moments was the celebration of one student's 21st birthday. We decided that this important milestone was to be remembered with a proper South African braai, and so we did. The students brought the quad alive with music, boisterous singing, and exuberant laughter. The smoke and smell of barbeque wafted in the air. The students choreographed a coordinated dance to the blaring sounds of the musical hit *Jerusalema*. It was a day of joy and laughter—an altogether marvellous day! We were barefoot and carefree!

There was a teachable moment in every engagement. With a heightened sense of awareness and presence, I became skilled at discerning these opportunities to learn and improvise according to my reading of the situation. I drew from my reserve of *mensenkennis* and applied it with pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact. *Mensenkennis* is a Dutch word that means having

> *a sensitive insight into the nature of humans, a wisdom about how people are and how they tend to act and react in specific situations, a practical type of knowledge of how people's actions relate to motives, intentions, emotions, feelings and moods. (van Manen 1994, p. 138)*

Pedagogical thoughtfulness directs one to act mindfully, in a way that takes into consideration the student's strengths and weaknesses, inclinations, and life circumstances. Pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact refer to the way that our "action is framed by our special orientation or commitment that defines our relation to others, expressed as love, hope, and responsibility; it is always immediate, situational, contingent, and improvisational" (van Manen, 1991, p. 507).

I became adept at consciously engaging my thoughts during our interactions—taking the students' lived experiences and views into consideration as I did so. I tried to present the students with all the "possible truths" about a specific social or personal dimension of their experience, and have them develop a curiosity about power structures and patterns of inequality. The aim was to incite an inquisitiveness for their own further investigation.

Reflection and deep contemplation also became essential practices for me when I retreated into my personal space. Taking some distance to disengage and think about the meaning and importance of our interactions, a "recollective or retro-active reflection" (van Manen, 2006, p. 87), helped me to suspend my immediate judgment and savour the joy and grace of our surreal encounter.

The RESP, spontaneously and organically, took on a dialogical teaching approach. This meant that during our exchanges, the students were encouraged to think and question ideas, explore new viewpoints, and construct knowledge in dialogue with their peers and me. Alexander (2004) explained that the aim of the dialogical approach is to engage students in sustained stretches of talk to stimulate and extend their thinking and advance their learning and understanding. He added that harnessing the

power of talk empowers the student for life-long learning and active citizenship. Dialogic teaching endorses the holding of different ideas or perspectives together in the tension of a dialogue that leads to new insights and mutual illumination (Wegerif, 2019).

As the interlocutor of the RESP, I found myself modelling and projecting particular qualities in these dialogical exchanges. These included, as mentioned above, courage, risk, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, discernment, patience, curiosity, and restraint, amongst others.

Epistemic Virtues

The qualities mentioned in the previous paragraph were manifestations of my disposition or sense of being in the world (Barnett, 2009). Aristotle named it *virtues*, from the Greek word *arete* that means the excellence or quality of a person's character and identity that makes a particular life exemplary, good, admirable, or excellent (as cited in Myers, 2008, p. 95). Virtues can be described as the normatively desirable ways of being that are developed over time and become a normative practice through habituation (Eflin, 2003). Virtues, as opposed to values, are therefore the deliberately and rationally chosen habitual practices of one's intellectual, emotional, and passionate self (Myers, 2008). How you apply your mind, and your natural powers of reasoning responsibly ultimately becomes a question of virtue—epistemic virtue—a way of developing good mental habits that will allow you to form your beliefs responsibly (Greco, 2000).

In recent years, virtue theorists have made a distinction between virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. Virtue ethics takes a practical perspective on doing what is good, right, and just, whereas virtue epistemologists emphasise the thinking and intellectual perspective of what would be normatively desirable. Since teaching is "at heart a virtuous, normative practice, or, in Aristotelian terms, pedagogy is the excellence of teaching" (van Manen, 1994, p. 151), it holds that pedagogy is both an ethical and epistemological virtuous practice. We find that in the act of teaching, the teacher is actively also applying reasoning and thinking that is, for example, thoughtful, mindful, and tactful. In my pedagogical becoming, I embraced this new consciousness—teaching as both an ethical and epistemological imperative—and, like virtues, it can be developed, strengthened, and refined through practice.

Barnett (2009) placed a particular focus on the development and transmission of epistemic virtues in higher education. He explained that epistemic virtues are evinced through our dispositions and qualities. As explained earlier, dispositions are the "universal ways of our being in the world, and qualities are reflections or manifestations thereof" (Barnett, 2009, p. 433). For example, a will to learn (disposition) will show up in our resilience (quality) when we experience difficulty in a course or module. It was Barnett's belief that these worthwhile dispositions and qualities (epistemic virtues) can be transmitted and acquired through the pedagogical relation and pedagogical practices. He said: "A deep and personal encounter with knowledge calls for and helps to nourish certain ethically worthwhile forms of human being" (Barnett, 2009, p. 435). He further contended that students can acquire these (epistemic virtues) on their own but that a "well-designed course of study in higher education can also engender the formation thereof" (Barnett, 2009, p. 435).

The RESP, I propose, was such a course. The RESP was enacted in response to recognising and understanding the students in their being—their fears and fragilities, hopes and aspirations. Based on that, and in a time of unpredictability, the RESP premised its pedagogy on an ethics of care. The constitution of the RESP or pedagogical relation was an intensely personal relation, bringing the students and teacher together in a close and intimate way, which enabled the transmission, cultivation, and nurturing of the dispositions and qualities that the teacher modelled and transmitted.

Stellenbosch University's Institutional (Transformational) Shifts

To many people, the apocalyptic Covid-19 pandemic signalled a violent and cataclysmic ending for the world (Dein, 2021) and, for many people who lost their loved ones, it was the end of the world. However, for our institution, SU, there appeared (at least, momentarily) a glimpse of what rebirth could be. But the questions and suspicions still nagged at me.

I wrote:

> *This is not to say I know how to navigate this pandemic terrain. I explore, feel my way through, and largely consult with the owls. Yes, many a day I wander in the courtyard, seeking their wisdom from where they are located high up the towering jacaranda tree. The counsel and enlightenment I seek have to do with making sense of the serendipitous circumstances surrounding our presence here. How did we arrive at this present pandemic moment finding ourselves in fortified accommodation, with a stocked pantry and access to emotional and material support and assistance? Not to say we are not grateful for it. (Petersen, 2020, para. 11)*
>
> *But the harsh reality, which is difficult to lose sight of, is the fact that the atrocity that was apartheid has its foundational roots here too; this is where it was engineered! It is here where all the scheming happened, and exclusionary practices and structures were promulgated! And let me add "exclusionary" in every sense of the word—based on the colour of your skin. Does this mean we are now included? Is this caring sincere, a definitive and tangible activation of the transformation we have heard about? They say owls can see what is invisible to the naked eye; they can see beyond deceit and masks. (Petersen, 2020, para. 12)*

Despite the precarity that befell the majority of higher education institutions across South Africa, SU continued to provide a fortified experience for the students who chose to remain in residence. I, however, could not shake my doubts and suspicion of this institution that had instigated and promulgated separateness. Apartheid was based on the preposterous notion that conditioned people to think their Whiteness made them more worthy and therefore superior to people of Colour, and it was conceived, declared, and regulated from the very grounds I was standing on. And SU played a key educational role in reproducing such racialised conceptions of being among its White students.

And now, the once-shunned Black bodies were cared for and venerated by the same institution! The paradox of it all. Or was this a genuine move based on the implementation of the 2017 SU Transformation Plan that was developed to operationalise and accelerate transformation? And was it a sincere attempt, the spontaneous and organic enactment and execution of the 2018 Restitution Statement declaring SU's intention to heal and restore relations with those towards whom it had acted harmfully? I ask because my lived experience of the pandemic showed and revealed practices that indicated an institutional relationality that was based on and espoused concrete caring practices. Applying the same principles of Tronto's (2015) care ethics, the institutional response to the pandemic showed an attentive caring as staff and student needs were listened to and prioritised. The fact that students were allowed to stay, not just on campus but also in their own residences to enable familiarity and stability, comforted students and lessened the possibility of an outbreak because social distancing could adequately be applied. SU acted on its moral responsibility to care for staff and students—as was evident throughout the pandemic in the communications, the disbursement of laptops and data, and the continued availability of the emotional and psychological support services that were fully

functional online. The caregiving was done with humility and discreetly without fanfare or announcements of grandness. Students and staff generously received the care that was offered, and for the duration of the pandemic, it seemed as if a new trust had been established.

Were these the qualitative changes that Chris Brink (2006), former SU Rector, alluded to—a change in institutional behaviour and consciousness, a concomitant shift toward real transformation, restoration, and restitution? Marie Brennan (Badroodien & Fataar, 2020, 29:45–31:50) pointed us toward such a measure when she said: "If one was to look at the relationality and interrelationships that shape our current lives and institutions (in this pandemic moment), we can understand where we are, and what we moved away from." This kind of measurement would indicate positive and qualitative shifts towards the envisioned SU as a university.

My Pedagogical Becoming

My pre- and post-pedagogical beings are not the same. The RESP reawakened the pedagogue in me in profound and powerful ways. When I commenced this journey with the students, I acted on intuition and experience, on my moral and ethical duty as a human being. The deep and intense relationality that emerged and the pedagogy of care that was reciprocated was a beautiful blessing.

I wrote:

> *As for us, I do not know if we are the same people who entered the regal residence building that became a home amidst the pandemic. We arrived without fanfare, quietly, tiptoeing into new lives, into a new world—unseen, unheard, and unacknowledged, with very little but our dreams. We stayed to guard and protected our dreams when they seemed threatened by the pandemic. Our dreams, it now seems, were the easy part. As Sarah Ban Breathnach (2008, September 9) affirms, "The Power that gifted you the dream knows how to help you make it come true." In our encounters, we were met by a few dream collaborators who conspired to turn our possibilities into realities. (Petersen, 2020, para. 14)*
>
> *But it is the unanticipated and inconceivable transformations revealed on this dream quest that sits with us, what Sarah alludes to very potently: "Dreams are gifts of Spirit, meant to alter us" (Breathnach, 2008, September 9). This new stirring, a divine discontent, is what stays. It feels like a shedding, a parting from who we were before the pandemic, a loss of our old selves. (Petersen, 2020, para. 15)*

It is Freire (1978) who proclaimed, "Ultimately, a genuine higher education is none other than a transformation of being" (as cited in Barnett, 2007, p. 38). As I reflect on our time together and our participation in the RESP, I hope that it empowered those nine students to uncover, recover, or discover their self-belief and sense of agency and that, in their openness, they acquired the worthwhile qualities and dispositions that they were modelled. As for me, I have become intentional and invitational to establish relations and have centred my praxis on the fullness of the students' being and their aspirational becoming.

Conclusion

As recount this epiphany, I can recall the significant moments, practices, and experiences that have shaped my pedagogical growth. One pivotal aspect was the recognition and adoption of a pedagogy rooted in care, which was modelled and inspired by my university's response to the pandemic. I drew

inspiration, motivation, and encouragement from the rector and the Institutional Committee for Business Continuity, who prioritised establishing a relational approach based on care. Their commitment to listening to students, addressing their basic needs, and fostering open dialogue through the various SU community stakeholders set a powerful example. It was through this collective mindset that I found the opportunity to implement the principles of the RESP.

Another crucial understanding that profoundly influenced my growth as an educator was the importance of establishing deep and personal connections with my students. This required me to be present, to see the student in the fullness of their being, and to listen attentively to what was said and not said. This pedagogical relation laid the foundation for the co-creation of the RESP, drawing on multiple approaches. The pedagogy centred on care and trust fostered open dialogue, where my commitment to being present and attentive allowed me to engage with my students and transmit values such as respect, active listening, and intellectual humility. Within this framework, we embraced critical pedagogies and explicitly established standards for engagement, emphasising openness, equality, and the exploration of contrasting insights and perspectives. We approached our discussions on the diverse experiences of the pandemic in South Africa, naturally transitioning into a pedagogy of justice. We explored our own resilience, encouraged one another, and recognised the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the existence of diverse knowledge systems. The pedagogical relation is fundamental to setting the conditions for the cultivation, nurturing, and transmission of worthwhile qualities and dispositions—epistemic virtues.

As a residential educator, I've realised that I have the power to shape and influence students' development by modelling virtuous behaviours, attitudes, and ways of being. By practising and embodying these qualities, I provide students with examples to emulate and integrate into their own actions. The goal of residential education is to cultivate important dispositions in students such as thoughtfulness, humility, receptiveness, critical thinking, resilience, courage, and contemplation. As educators, our focus should be on understanding who students are and guiding them towards their potential. This approach requires a pedagogy that embraces risk, mutual disclosure, and occasionally, disruptive teaching methods. Through building relationships and fostering a sense of community, residential education can enable the emergence of authentic individuals who act purposefully and judiciously.

According to Barnett (2007, 2012), in our uncertain, supercomplex, and unknowable contemporary world, it is worthwhile human qualities, rather than mere knowledge and skills, that are crucial for students to thrive. I agree with this viewpoint. Developing dispositions such as a will to learn and engage, a willingness to listen, and a determined attitude to persevere—demonstrated through traits like openness, restraint, discernment, and generosity, among others—will make students desirable candidates for employment. Most importantly, an education that seeks to cultivate and nurture the transmission and acquisition of epistemic virtue or worthwhile qualities and dispositions is essential for students' personal growth, and amounts to an education for life.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Aslam Fataar, who encouraged me to tell my tale and guided me throughout the writing and re-writing process. I would also like to thank my dear friend and colleague, Delecia Davids, and the students who were all instrumental to my pedagogical becoming.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 44-61
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Reflecting on Teaching in the Higher Education Context During the Covid-19 Era: A Collaborative Self-Study Project[1]

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Abstract

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic created unimaginable upheaval, uncertainty, and even hostility in the education system, worldwide. Teacher educators in higher education settings were compelled to interact with their students using online platforms to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning. However, the effectiveness of that approach has been questioned. This article presents the narratives of two South African teacher educators who explored pedagogical approaches using such digital platforms. We created collages, concept maps, and a pantoum poem to reflect on our teacher educator practices during the initial and ensuing levels of the Covid-19 lockdown period to provide guidelines for such approaches in the aftermath of the pandemic. We gained various insights into future teaching practices using arts-based media and platforms such as WhatsApp, Moodle, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. The sociocultural theoretical perspective underpinned this self-study project. This theoretical approach highlights the importance of working together in educational settings to create knowledge and make sense of teaching and learning experiences. We discovered that the transition to digital platforms presented both advantages and disadvantages for our teaching. In the latter instance, we found that teaching and learning using digital platforms were rendered inefficient for students from rural settings who were computer illiterate and who had limited access to technology and the internet. However, by conducting workshops, engaging in collaborative initiatives, and appropriating feedback from various role players, we gained understanding of ways to support our students and address their diverse needs. In light of these findings, we recommend intensified teacher educator collaboration and sharing to reimagine and reshape teaching and learning in the higher education teacher training context in the post-Covid-19 era.

[1] Protocol reference numbers: HSS/0060/017D & HSS/0095/018D

Keywords: arts-based research, Covid-19 pandemic, online platforms, self-study, teacher education

Please reference as: Kortjass, M. and Mkhize-Mthembu, N. (2023). Reflecting on Teaching in the Higher Education Context During the Covid-19 Era: A Collaborative Self-Study Project. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 12(2), 44-61. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a4

Introduction

We, Makie and Ntokozo, are two South African teacher educators who engage in self-study projects to improve teaching practices. Most of the students we teach are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ntokozo is involved in the teacher development studies discipline, where her work entails teaching and supervising postgraduate students, whereas Makie teaches in the early childhood education discipline. Her work involves lecturing in the undergraduate programme and supervising postgraduate students. We have both recently completed our respective doctorates in the self-study field (Kortjass, 2020; Mkhize-Mthembu, 2020). And we subsequently aimed to enhance our learning by working collaboratively during the Covid-19 pandemic to understand how new methods and requirements might influence how we engage with our students to optimise their learning.

This article recounts our educational experiences and emerging insights during the Covid-19 pandemic. We illuminate how these experiences shaped our understanding of what teacher educator teaching and learning might constitute in the post-Covid-19 era. Our study was guided by the following research question: "What can we learn collaboratively about teaching in higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic era?" First, we outline key concepts of teacher education and online teaching in a higher education setting during the Covid-19 pandemic. We then present a discussion of the sociocultural perspective as the theoretical framework that underpinned our investigation—with particular reference to teacher educator collaborative initiatives. Second, we identify ourselves as research participants who engaged in narrative inquiry. Third, we discuss how collage making, poetry writing, and concept mapping assisted us in identifying key concepts and phrases, based on the research question. To conclude, we share some of the dilemmas we experienced and the discoveries we made as we worked collaboratively during the pandemic to assist our students.

Teacher Education

Korthagen (2017) stated that teacher learning occurs unconsciously, and encompasses the cognitive, emotional, and motivational dimensions of learning. She argued that both novice and veteran teachers are habitually unconscious of their behaviour and sources. For this reason, our study reflected consciously on our teaching practices to illuminate and contextualise our behaviours and cognitive thoughts. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasised that teacher education should embrace active learning—that teacher educators should unswervingly engage in exploring teaching approaches because this will offer them opportunities to engage in the same learning style they are designing for their students. Therefore, like our students, we had to learn virtually using digital platforms such as Moodle, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams.

Online Teaching in Higher Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, most higher education institutions used online teaching only to complement face-to-face contact sessions. However, with the dawning of Covid-19 and during the lockdown phases, the teacher education system was infused with doubt, fear, and even hostility. The need to cope during the pandemic changed how we could think and interact with our students for optimal teaching and learning. We now have to envision the aftermath of Covid-19 by reflecting on both successful and unsuccessful pedagogical approaches and considering innovative learning styles. In essence, we need to review our curriculum and practices to suit the digital world. We have thus resorted to online learning to interact virtually with our students who have had to learn to access learning material in recorded slides and videos. These were also uploaded on Moodle for students who could not attend our Zoom sessions. Engaging in online teaching has forced us to find innovative ways to deliver teaching asynchronously.

Our experiences during the pandemic compelled us to see the education world differently. A critical understanding that emerged was that, in this digital-driven age, students would need to engage in more independent learning to build their knowledge and insights without being guided synchronously. Peters et al. (2020) stated that pandemics have historically forced humans to separate from the past and envision their future world in a new light. What does this mean in terms of higher education? In a nutshell, we have to revisit our pedagogic approaches and allow our students every opportunity to learn independently. On the face of it, this seems paradoxical given that the sociocultural approach we endorse argues strongly for collaborative learning. The challenge is thus to strike a balance between independent and collaborative teaching and learning in what is now commonly referred to as the new normal—which is online learning for students. Therefore, while technology offers tremendous opportunities beyond physical borders and is not limited to geographical or physical settings, various negative implications and disadvantages are associated with the demands of such learning. Not every student is privileged to engage in online learning in a developing world because many students come from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. Peters et al. (2020) stressed this point, elucidating that their experiment in non-voluntary transposition into virtual classrooms highlighted various dimensions of unequal access such as regions with inadequate or non-existent Wi-Fi, students with low quality equipment (or none), and different levels of comfort and experience with applications like Moodle or Zoom.

Digital technology can simplify teaching and learning and influence how students and teachers process and engage with content to develop critical knowledge and thinking. However, it is hard to tell what the future holds—and how we can continue to conduct teaching and learn to create educational contexts that are equal for (and inclusive of) all because it is an undeniable requirement that all socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences need to be accommodated in educational contexts. Peters et al. (2020, p. 11) underlined the point that a pandemic such as Covid-19 "might raise this awareness for some but, for most, the uncertainty strengthens the quest for definitive answers." The uncertainty associated with the pandemic and its aftermath means that we must be proactive and should focus on methodological issues and the lessons in order to build on new knowledge and understanding of teaching in the post-Covid period.

As teacher educators, we were challenged to reimagine and reinvent teaching that was accessible to students from all social backgrounds. Neuwirth et al. (2020) stated that Covid-19 obligated institutions to adapt to unprecedented challenges and hastily convert from traditional face-to-face education to distance learning formats through virtual classrooms. Most colleges and universities worldwide had previously assimilated online teaching methods into their module/course outlines. However, the pandemic required an almost overnight transformation of curricula into virtual learning, and educators at all levels were required to build virtual classrooms. Although some universities may already have

had robust online structures, many developing countries found the mass demand for virtual classrooms challenging. Most students from rural settings are not computer literate and do not have access to data-driven technology and the internet.

Peters et al. (2020) highlighted that thoughtful teaching is based on reflective dialogue and collaborative discussions in the milieu of real-time teaching situations and space. However, when we migrate to virtual learning, we need to revisit the policies that applied in the past. For example, the lack of infrastructure and teaching and learning resources need to be addressed urgently if online learning is to be effective and inclusive. Furthermore, the pandemic saw re-emergence of old questions regarding education quality and equality. It is pivotal that the social injustices in the education system that persist in certain universities are addressed. Universities that still lag in that regard can learn from those who have attempted to close this gap by exploring avenues to allow democratic learning employing digital platforms. For such processes to succeed, collaborative learning and building partnerships amongst knowledgeable and experienced role-players at universities are paramount.

There is crucial need for a coordinated, collaborative, and collective global response to the best-practice principles for online instruction. Crawford et al. (2020) explained that technology solutions do support online teaching. Such facilities include narrated PowerPoint presentations and freeware such as Skype, Google Classroom, Moodle, and Facebook. For example, by accessing Moodle, students can engage with other students from around the globe, and students and lecturers can post information on these forums. Students can use these online platforms asynchronously to have open discussions that cultivate collaborative study engagements.

A Sociocultural Theoretical Perspective

This self-study project was underpinned by the sociocultural theoretical perspective, highlighting the importance of working together in educational settings to make sense of our individual learning experiences. The sociocultural perspective advocates self-study research because it encourages collaborative learning (Samaras, 2011). Therefore, to address the dichotomy between face-to-face classroom and remote digital-based learning to some extent, we related our teaching and learning practices to the real-life experiences of our students. According to Samaras and Freese (2006), self-study research is created from knowledge based on everyday experiences and practical theories. Teacher educators develop their teaching philosophy, based on social development. We thus understand that learning is not a solo path but one that requires collaborative effort. By working collaboratively, we were able to identify new ways of teaching and learning as demanded by conditions during the pandemic. And we were able to establish an online learning community that strengthened and enhanced our efforts and insights.

Enlightened by sociocultural theory, we understand that learning is developed through our interactions with the people around us. Gerhard and Smith (2008) maintained that the sociocultural perspective believes that learning is not an individual activity but a social experience. Similarly, Samaras et al. (2014) emphasised that learning is dynamic and social and that interchange shapes individuals' psychological practices, including learning. McMurtry (2015) highlighted that social interaction is a tool that supports teachers and helps them to alter and streamline obscure understandings. Furthermore, the sociocultural perspective illuminates how learning transpires among people of diverse cultural and social backgrounds. We hoped to simplify and engender thought-provoking interactions as teacher educators by embracing the sociocultural perspective. Easton (2012, p. 50) affirmed that "learning means that we work with people [by] encouraging discoveries and learning from mistakes, [thus] helping everyone to find what works." When hitherto unexplored challenges confronted us during the pandemic, the obvious starting point was to work together by sharing ideas and exploring successful strategies using digital platforms to enhance our practice. In this

process, we were compelled to question methodologies and reflect on our teaching practice—particularly, what worked and did not work for our students. We were also mindful that it would be a learning journey. We would have to make constructive discoveries and learn from our mistakes, consciously. But we knew that, through collaborative effort, we could establish a robust support system.

Diversity in education is a reality, and teacher educators must be conscious of each student's social and cultural background in order to achieve positive academic outcomes. Banks et al. (2001) advised that teachers must be informed about their students' collaborative and enlightening teaching and learning features when creating learning opportunities for them all. Similarly, John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) argued that learning and growth occur cooperatively and in culturally constructed surroundings. Moreover, the latter authors affirmed that "human functioning is tied to cultural, institutional, and historical settings since these settings shape and provide the cultural tools that individuals master to form this [educational] functioning" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 193). Northfield and Sherman (2004) affirmed that our actions, and how we perceive and treat one another, are founded on the values and beliefs we develop as we grow in our relationships with others. This means that we can find ourselves by building positive relationships (McMurtry, 2015) in various contexts. Working collaboratively to improve our teaching practice as teacher educators thus meant that we had to familiarise ourselves with our students' diverse cultures, social backgrounds, beliefs, and daily customs so that the digital channels of communication would be effective.

When familiar with the sociocultural theoretical perspective, teachers understand why learners behave the way they do. According to Gerhard and Smith (2008), the sociocultural perspective is a lens that can be used to scrutinise what learners learn, and who they become. Gerhard and Smith (2008) implied that this is a two-way process of scrutiny that creates a learning community in which all individuals can actively participate and thus contribute to learning. Additionally, Murphy and Ivinson (2003) stated that the knowledge acquired by participating in various such learning communities offers learners diverse possibilities for retrieving knowledge that is valued and instituted by teaching institutions. Against this backdrop, we were mindful of the diversity among our students and thus devised learning activities that accommodated their various needs and realities.

Narrative Inquiry

As self-study researchers, we continually strive to develop and improve our teaching practices. Narrative inquiry is a space where we can reflect on and share our experiences in order to address challenges and enhance our effectiveness. Hamilton et al. (2008, p. 17) described narrative inquiry as a study process "that looks at a story of self." Ford (2020, p. 237) agreed, stating that "narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative research focused on human stories." We were able to share and learn from others through interactions and conversations about our evolving teaching practices by employing this methodology in the current investigation. Narrative inquirers recognise that experience and context are not constant—but changing and shifting phenomena. Thus, *temporality*, *sociality,* and *place* are essential thinking tools within narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin (2013) also considered narrative inquiry to be a source of critical knowledge and understanding that people acquire over time in particular social environments.

Hamilton et al. (2008) concluded that narrative inquirers sync with the self and others' feelings, needs, and moral natures. Clandinin (2013) asserted that inquiries attend temporal ways towards the past, present, and future of the people, places, things, and events under study. The stories of people thus become a gateway through which their experiences of the world are interpreted and made personally meaningful because their stories shape their lives (Clandinin et al., 2007). We therefore recount our

relevant teaching experiences as they occurred along our journey to explore the use of digital platforms during the Covid-19 era.

Sociality involves personal and social conditions. Clandinin (2013) noted that narrative inquirers must attend to these conditions simultaneously. Narrative inquiry thus helped us to understand our struggles, emotions, and experiences as we attempted to drive student learning in novel and challenging circumstances. We acknowledged that feelings were vital in the process of navigating new spaces/conditions of teaching and learning, and that our students' cultural and social settings had to be considered at all times (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). As a methodological approach, narrative inquiry enabled us to examine and explore our experiences and selves through storytelling. We enhanced our inquiry using collages, poetry, and a concept map in this process.

Data Generation and Interpretation

Arts-Based Self-Study Methods

We examined our personal experiences by employing an arts-based self-study methodology. Tidwell and Jónsdóttir (2020) elucidated that using the arts-based method in self-study projects generates understandings that embody the social, cultural, and meaning-making contexts from which experience and engagement are developed. Using this method enabled us to break out of conventional ways of engaging in qualitative research. The arts-based media we employed to reflect on our experiences as we examined our practice were collages, a concept map, and a poem.

Collages

According to van Schalkwyk (2010, p. 678), the collage is an illustration that involves "the use of photos, pictures and cuttings [also text] from magazines and other media" to portray a phenomenon. When creating a collage, the researcher or participant selects and pastes magazine cuttings or pieces of fabric on paper, creatively, to influence or captivate the reader/viewer meaningfully and to reflect insight and understanding (Pillay et al., 2019). Collage research continues to gain momentum in qualitative research (Lahman et al., 2020) because it can expose and explain personal–professional connectedness in our daily practice (Pillay et al., 2019). The ability of a collage to express meaning affords researchers various ways of understanding and communicating their lived experiences. In this research project, we used two collages to reflect on our practice during Covid-19. First, we created them reflectively to focus on our questions, dilemmas, feelings, and emotions; we thus selected images that metaphorically reflected aspects of our thinking. Then, operating intuitively, we created collages that produced a holistic visual composition using selected fragments. Such a collage-creating process breaks away from the linearity of written thoughts as the subject works first from feelings about something and then shifts to the ideas they evoke—instead of the reverse (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010).

Each image and text in the collages narrates the story—or a significant part of the story—about our personal and professional experiences and developmental needs during the Covid-19 period (Masinga et al., 2016). As researchers, we each created a collage and presented it individually to critical friends while articulating our experiences and understandings. All the meetings and interactions were conducted via Zoom. We recorded our discussions and transcribed them later. Considering the issue of trustworthiness, we presented our collages to critical friends for critique and extended input. Samaras (2011) described a critical friend as supporting a self-study researcher to gain new views and understandings and assist in reframing interpretations. Our purposively selected critical friends were willing to participate and contribute (Childs et al., 2020). Makie presented her collage to Simo (pseudonym), and Ntokozo presented hers to Nomali (pseudonym). We allowed ourselves a week to

meet with our respective critical friend. With their permission, we recorded and transcribed our discussions. The collages are presented in Image 1 and Image 2 below.

Image 1: Ntokozo's Collage: Wading Into Unchartered Waters

Ntokozo's Narrative About the Images and Texts in the Collage

Face masks: The face masks worn by two men represent my feelings of doubt and uncertainty during the Covid-19 period, which were quite alien to my usual sense of confidence and purpose. I felt anxious and fearful as if I had been imprisoned, and this sense of being imprisoned compelled me to reflect repeatedly on my teaching practice. The facemasks represent how I was shielded from a clear understanding of my way forward as a teacher educator. As a result, I constantly felt remote from others and struggled to read their emotions as we were compelled to hide behind facemasks.

Word search": While it was challenging for me to engender positive energy during this pandemic, I had the opportunity to reflect on teaching practices that would hearten teacher educators and shape and strengthen human relationships, particularly those between me as a teacher educator and my students.

"Connect": While creating this collage, I was experiencing a surge of emotions that compelled me to think afresh of my position in teacher education. I aspired to explore new ways of learning and to adopt a positive mindset. I also realised that I would be nurtured by positive relationships with my colleagues, who also experienced what I was going through.

"Challenge": I also was responsible for developing learning outcomes and devising strategies to drive student learning and sustain teaching opportunities where everyone would feel accepted and accommodated. I was challenged to reach all my students because some came from remote areas with limited or no digital network connection and data.

"Power" and "Settling": Upon reflection, I realised that we were renegotiating our position as new power relations were generated between the impact of the virus and what we perceived as normal.

Lost in the jungle: As a teacher educator, I faced unparalleled trials. At first, I was struggling to run away from the chaos. I was conscious of my duty to establish innovative instructional programmes and routines, but the sudden transition from in-person teaching to remote learning was daunting. I was experiencing diverse emotions along this journey as I questioned and revisited my pedagogical approach. Finally, I realised that I needed to work together with my students, colleagues, and critical friends to help me devise alternative ways of effective teaching. They were the people who would help me find my way out of the jungle.

Image 2: Makie's Collage: A Glimmer of Hope

Makie's Narrative About the Images and Texts in the Collage

Adaptor: The image of the adaptor in my collage is that of the iDapt multi-charger. It simultaneously charges multiple (up to four) devices and saves time and electricity. It is indicative of the multi-tasking we had to engage in when teaching remotely, and the numerous workshops and meetings we had to attend to help us during the lockdown period.

"A touch of sunshine": These words and the picture of dogs pulling a sleigh together illustrate that we can achieve something only if we work together. We felt overwhelmed, and we had to understand our feelings and learn to cope under the circumstances.

"Our emotions": That sensation is also captured by this phrase, The Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown regulations engendered a sense of loneliness. However, the learning that was generated by collaboration comforted and supported us.

"It's just an amazing feeling": This phrase captures the sense of achievement I felt when I was successful.

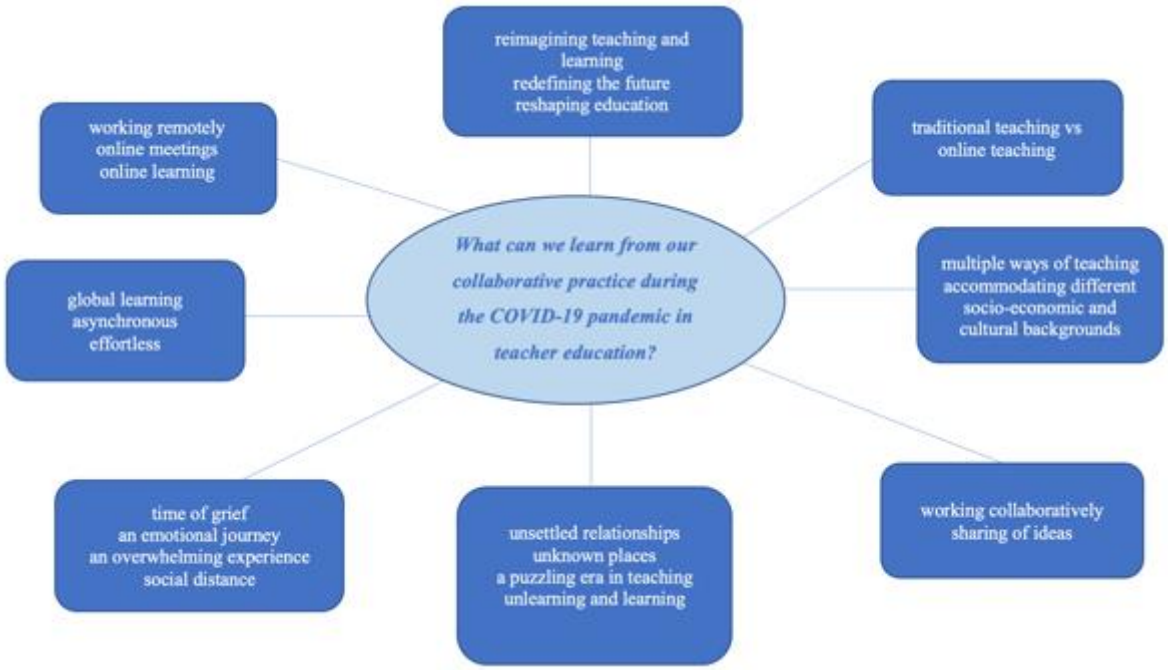
“A space to reimagine”: These words demonstrate that we had to quickly use digital platforms and be more creative than ever before.

We deemed collage-making to be an all-encompassing learning activity because we could express ourselves freely without fear of criticism or ridicule. It also introduced new parts of ourselves that we had not been aware of before. After intensive discussion and reflection, we collaboratively developed a concept map.

Concept Mapping

Chamberlain (2015) described concept mapping as a graphical illustration of information that links different concepts using arrows. According to Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010), concept mapping is a stimulating strategy qualitative researchers use to make sense of their data and keep track of interpretations as they begin to emerge. It is mainly helpful for "documenting the relational aspects of initial data interpretations" (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010, p. 6). Concept mapping is particularly suitable for qualitative work because it maintains and reinforces qualitative underpinnings and helps to reduce data. We created a concept map (Image 3) by perusing the transcripts of our collage presentations. We circled keywords and phrases that were significant for our learning experiences in this process. We then grouped these words and phrases according to what belonged together.

Image 3: Concept Map Depicting Emerging Concepts and Phrases Related to Our Research Question



Like collage making, the mapping process can yield a visual reformulation of ideas with text condensed to keywords and phrases, arranged and linked using sketched shapes (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). Furthermore, the mapping process strengthens data analysis and aids in developing an enhanced conceptual understanding of the phenomenon under study (Vaikla-Poldma, 2003). Creating this concept map allowed us to reexamine our thoughts and illuminate the understanding and meaning making of our ideas and thoughts.

Poetry

Researchers around the globe have used poetry for different purposes. According to van Schalkwyk (2010), a prevalent application of poetry is its use as a tool of data presentation and representation. In their self-study project, Hamilton and Pinnegar (2013) used poetry to examine their thinking and understanding of collaborative practice. They developed the drive to "push the boundaries of their data analysis process by using both metaphor and poetry" (Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020, p. 33). Our investigation yielded a pantoum poem using the concepts and phrases captured in the concept map to represent and present our shared discoveries.

A pantoum is composed by repeating lines meaningfully. Furman et al. (2006, p. 28) described the pantoum as "a French poem based on Malaysian forms" arranged so that each stanza's second and fourth lines are repeated as the first and third lines of the next stanza. We created the pantoum express both our frustrations and our sense of achievement when teaching using digital platforms. In addition, the process allowed us visualise our shared experiences in a single but mutually created piece.

We found this poetic form reflective of our research and teaching practice, and a valuable and fundamental tool to express our understandings. Using the poem uncovered pivotal themes and assisted us in seeing beyond what mere data presentation in the discursive text could offer. As a result, the poem emphasises the reoccurring themes that encouraged us to work collaboratively during the Covid-19 pandemic. Below is the pantoum we composed.

Covid-19 Era: Redefining Teaching

Working collaboratively
Traditional teaching vs. Online teaching
A time of grief
Together we are stronger

Traditional teaching vs. Online teaching
An emotional journey
Together we are stronger
Reimagining teaching

An emotional journey
A time of grief
Reimagining teaching
Working collaboratively

By crystallising our working experiences, this pantoum represents our deepest emotions and dilemmas, and illuminates our learning journey.

Discussion

We employed thematic analysis to analyse the data obtained through the arts-based media that we employed. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasised that researchers need to ensure that their interpretations and analytical arguments are in line with the data excerpts in thematic analysis. We thus checked and re-checked our interpretations of the collages, the concept map, and the pantoum

poem to ensure they addressed the topic under investigation. Thus, we developed the following themes from the patterns within the data: navigating relationships virtually, accommodating diversity, openness and vulnerability, and creating shared spaces.

Navigating Relationships Virtually

We wanted to engage in collaborative learning to positively navigate relationships among and with our students, and encourage perseverance in facing the challenges we all experienced during the pandemic. We realised that learning institutions exercise all-embracing power concerning social, emotional, and academic development. Luthuli (2021) expressed that classrooms and schools should be places of emotional security and affirmative relationships to influence learners' attitudes and an optimistic mindset. We participated in social change and turned our virtual classrooms into spaces that promoted learning facilitated through collaboration, communication, creativity, innovation, empathy, and respect. Looking back, we comprehended that we were negotiating power relations between the impact of the virus and what we perceived as being normal.

Through our interactive pedagogies, we attempted to support students through teaching and supervision. As teacher educators, we wanted our students to remain enrolled, knowing that our support and creative learning would sustain them despite having to face sudden unanticipated changes and sensitive responsibilities such as social distancing, masks, and sanitising for vulnerable students. Even with these measures in place, as teacher educators, we were mindful that inequalities lingered—predominantly for students living in remote places and from underprivileged households where internet access was often insufficient. We realised the need for supportive, collaborative, and reciprocal communities of practice within our virtual learning communities. There was great concern regarding re-imagining teaching and learning to harvest opportunities for the understanding of shared knowledge, collaboration, co-creation, and involvement. Our collaborative narrative for teaching and learning introduced us to social emotional values and to the importance of inclusivity, engagement, and collaboration. Embracing asynchronous teaching and learning was also important because many of our students were household heads or young parents themselves, who were parenting infants and young children at home with no assistance while living under non-conducive conditions.

Samaras (2011) stated that self-study research requires working collaboratively with a critical friend or friends. She elucidated that critical friends hearten us and ask questions so we can adopt diverse perspectives. They also assist us in validating our self-study research. We thus acknowledge that the teaching and learning journey was not an unaccompanied one but that one needed the collaboration and support of critical friends. We gratefully learned to be each other's sounding board and pillar of support. How we negotiated the online process will be discussed in a subsequent section.

Accommodating Diversity

In the face of the pandemic, we were mindful of our students' backgrounds and challenges, and we critically thought about accommodating them all. Kidd and Murray (2020) highlighted that teaching online requires insight into the diversity of students' surroundings and how that impacts learning. They mentioned, for example, childcare and domestic responsibilities, privacy, and the number of family members who share connecting devices. We thus employed learning platforms that accommodated our students' diversity and needs. For example, in her postgraduate module, Ntokozo uploaded videos to Dropbox and Moodle for students who could not attend Zoom or WhatsApp sessions due to personal or technical issues. The university provided the students with data, and students who were funded were also given laptops to support their online learning.

We learned more about different teaching and learning platforms that could accommodate students from all socioeconomic backgrounds. While working with students from diverse backgrounds, we realised that we also shaped our professional learning. Aligned with Weare (2004), professional learning had to be continuous and required feedback and reflection on what was being learned or assessed. Reflecting on our teaching learning prepared us to find solutions to the challenges we encountered. Similarly, Easton (2008) highlighted that "professional learning requires a new action plan for systems that are engaged in improving so that all children [students] can learn" (p. 756). We needed to become knowledgeable about our teaching and use insight to connect with our students through multiple digital platforms such as Moodle, WhatsApp, and email. It was challenging to reach all our students because were in remote areas with poor or limited network connections.

And, as Khau (2021) has alluded to, worldwide education systems were contending with online learning challenges such as cyber security, technical glitches, data costs, connectivity issues, social exclusion, depression, and lack of human contact. For example, Ntokozo tried to interact with her students via Zoom meetings on numerous occasions. After many failed attempts and poor attendance due to a lack of data, poor connectivity, and load shedding, Makie suggested she rather conduct her lessons via WhatsApp and email. Ntokozo thus grasped the need to unlearn old ways of teaching and to learn new ways. In this manner, she engaged in self-development for the benefit of her students. She explored different platforms to reach her students and accommodated their diversity as she shifted from Zoom meetings to WhatsApp sessions.

In this regard, we also learned an important lesson. As teacher educators, we initially wanted to adopt the most sophisticated communication platforms (Zoom and Moodle) because their use seemed professional and was what others at better equipped institutions employed. However, as we came to understand our students' backgrounds and diversity, the least sophisticated platform (WhatsApp, which was utilised by the majority of the students) was used and became the most effective means of communication.

Openness and Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a unique characteristic of self-study research. Berry and Russell (2016) asserted that self-study researchers must thoughtfully make themselves vulnerable and open in their study. The theme of *openness and vulnerability* thus iterates our feelings and approach during this research process. As we shared our experiences of teaching remotely, we realised that it was an exhausting task. We found ourselves working on our computers seven days a week. Students were constantly sending messages on WhatsApp, and emails asking for clarity on assignment requirements, while others asked for extensions because they had missed due dates for their assignments. We felt obliged to respond to them even during weekends because we understood their predicament. We sometimes felt alone and thought: "We did not sign up for this!" At the same time, we understood that the Covid-19 pandemic had affected everyone. Many conflicting emotions surfaced. We were anxious and frustrated but told ourselves that we should be thankful that we still had jobs given that many people lost their jobs during that time. We strove to succeed and assist our students to the best of our ability.

Creating a Shared Space

As teacher educators working at the same institution, we decided to create a space to share our teaching experiences. Dinkelman (2011) has argued that teacher educators who work together can create planned inquiry spaces centred on their practices to make sense of their setting. We established Zoom meetings and met on this online platform twice a month. As we encountered more challenges, we met once a week. In some instances, teaching became inefficient because most students were from rural settings, computer illiterate, and had little access to technology and the internet. We discussed

during these meetings how we could assist students who could not access the learning platform, Moodle. Makie indicated that WhatsApp worked well when she had a small group but was unsure how to use it with a larger number of undergraduate students. On deliberation, we thought it would be best if Makie divided her students into groups, and so she created three WhatsApp groups so all her students could be accommodated. The teacher educators at our institution were advised to use asynchronous teaching so no student was left out. Our students could access notes, slides, and audio recordings posted on WhatsApp. Creating a shared space helped us manoeuvre this terrain by sharing and bouncing ideas on what might work. These meetings became our learning spaces where we felt we overcame the difficulties we faced. Working collaboratively made us believe that there was a glimmer of hope.

It is acknowledged that not all our students were engaged all the time, initially. However, we encouraged the involved students to use their connections to engage others. In this manner, all the students who persevered were eventually connected.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Ensuring trustworthiness and credibility is an essential aspect of qualitative research (van Schalkwyk, 2010). Narrative inquiry is explained as attending to the ethical issues of voice and power by turning a study inward and making the researcher and participant the same (Clandinin, 2013). We have presented a comprehensive and detailed account of how the data were generated and represented. We also offer evidence of the value of working collaboratively to improve our teaching practice.

We met weekly via Zoom meetings to deliberate on issues faced by teacher educators during the Covid-19 pandemic. We made a point of engaging our critical friends in order to share their insights and help identify alternative ways to improve our practice. For example, as Creswell (2009) explained, qualitative validity has to share precise details based on research. In this regard, we documented our research process in as much detail as possible. In addition, Creswell (2009) highlighted that validity strengthens qualitative research, and it is grounded in determining whether the findings are truthfully presented by researcher and participant, and meaningfully interpreted by the reader. Similarly, Feldman (2003, p. 27) suggested that "we can increase the validity of our self-studies by paying attention to and making public the ways [in which] we construct our representations of our research."

Implications and Limitations

As teacher educators, we continue to face unparalleled trials. We are not running away from the chaos but are fighting together on a united front. We are conscious of establishing instructional programmes and routines to cope with the sudden transition from in-person teaching to remote learning. We have also experienced diverse emotions, and questioned and revisited our pedagogical approaches throughout this journey. We realise that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic taxed us emotionally, and now we ponder our face-to-face engagement with people. We certainly missed our interactive conversations in the classroom and long for the chaotic moments that resulted in organised ideas and thoughts.

We felt isolated during our study's initial stages due to social distancing requirements and ambiguities about personal safety and health. But although it was challenging to maintain an optimistic mindset during the pandemic, we realised that we had an opportunity to reflect on how to employ teaching practices that hearten teacher educators and shape and strengthen human relationships in our particular educational context. We envisage that the outcomes of this research project will encourage teacher educators to be cognisant of learning outcomes, and that they will be motivated to develop

strategies that will drive student learning and sustain teaching and learning opportunities so that everyone feels accepted accommodated.

While creating our collages, we experienced a hive of emotions that obliged us to rethink our position as teacher educators. We aspired to explore new ways of learning and to adopt a positive mindset. We also realised that we would be nurtured by forging relationships with colleagues who had experienced what we went through, and this was indeed a great source of support and comfort. This sentiment was also reflected by Carrillo and Flores (2020), who stated that interactions with online learning communities provide teachers and teacher educators with valuable support for peer collaboration and increased reflection in their everyday practice.

The study was limited because we did not explore our students' authentic online learning experiences. We also did not consider their assessment outcomes in order to determine the effectiveness of our online teaching efforts. A follow-up project will address these components for a more holistic view of the topic. Another limitation was that we engaged online with colleagues from our institution, only. Creating learning communities involving teacher educators from other similar institutions and study fields is thus envisaged.

Conclusion

This study highlighted how changes in the academic environment during the Covid-19 era forced us to quickly adapt and improve our pedagogic practices. We made every effort to be capacitated to drive our students' learning and ensure their academic success in 2020, despite the disruption of the academic year. Working collaboratively engendered a deep understanding of the possibilities of positive change in educational delivery. This change resulted in novel and unparalleled lived experiences that taught us more about who we are and who we have to become.

Furthermore, our study confirmed that working collaboratively as teacher educators, as advocated by the sociocultural perspective, can build a strong learning community where all members are valued, and healthy relationships are cultivated. We learned that positive learning experiences are generated when we listen emotively, adapt our practice to digital teaching, and reflect honestly on our daily adventures and challenges. This approach has significant implications for teaching and learning during a pandemic. However, the impact of remote teaching on students' learning still seems understudied and needs to be addressed.

Using a narrative inquiry design has engendered an enriched understanding of the lives of teacher educators who need to navigate their personal and professional knowledge landscapes in a novel and unexpected context. The study encouraged student participation, regardless of their diverse social backgrounds, and inspired our ability to link arts-based research with teacher education and digital platforms. This approach was redemptive because it provoked amended perspectives and triggered exhilarating possibilities for teaching and learning remotely, which will be addressed in a follow-up project. Moreover, teacher educators might feel a sense of healing through engaging other people in their teaching practice and utilising various artistic methods to understand and promote teaching and learning. The findings of this narrative inquiry study, which employed an arts-based approach, are intriguing and will hopefully motivate other teacher educators to utilise comparable methods. We hope the study will afford teacher educators new insights into the need to embrace social change and accept the new normal in education.

In conclusion, the value of learning from one another is pivotal in education. In this self-study project, the arts-based media we employed enhanced our responsiveness, and highlighted the importance of

recognising others in educational research. Therefore, we recommend collaborative teaching and the sharing of experiences among teacher educators in order to constantly reimagine and reshape teaching and learning in the higher education context in the post-Covid-19 pandemic era.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 62-77
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Humanising Online Teaching and Learning in the BEd. Foundation Phase Programme: Moving Beyond Covid-19

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Abstract

Covid-19 brought unforeseen and unpredicted challenges to higher education institutions (HEIs). In this paper, we recount the authors' experiences of exploring a humanising pedagogy as a way of practising social justice during online learning. Our Bachelor of Education, Foundation Phase (FP) classes consist of students from predominantly rural and urban low socioeconomic environments. The primary focus of this study was to explore the experiences of lecturers who teach a humanising pedagogy-embedded programme in the FP at an HEI through online learning in a highly under-resourced context. The study further focuses on technological strategies and pedagogies used in HEIs, issues related to lecturers' inclination and adaptation to technology, the digital divide, and barriers to online learning. This study resides within a critical transformative paradigm, and uses humanising pedagogy principles as a lens. We draw on our lived experiences and engage in dialogue to make sense of the process of online learning. In this qualitative research, we engage in narrative freewriting to gather data. Thematic analysis was used to reduce the data and to identify common themes. The two themes that emerged, and are discussed in this paper, are mutual vulnerability and lecturer resilience and collaboration. The findings of the study encouraged lecturers to critically reflect on the challenges and opportunities that Covid-19 presented, and to incorporate some of the practices that enabled better delivery of teaching in a humanising way.

Keywords: humanising pedagogy, technology, narrative freewriting, mutual vulnerability and poetic enquiry

Please reference as: ? Geduld, D., Nthimbane, K. and Kagola, O. (2023). Humanising Online Teaching and Learning in the BEd. Foundation Phase Programme: Moving Beyond Covid-19. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 12(2), 62-77. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a5

Introduction and Background

As higher education institutions (HEIs) navigated the 21st century, we found ourselves faced with a global crisis. This crisis was based on the Covid-19 pandemic, which demanded rapid advances in science and technology, and the polarised growth of online learning as a consequence. The impact of the pandemic has been very difficult yet life changing as lecturers rushed to put in place practical temporary and immediate solutions for distant and online teaching and learning.

Covid-19 succeeded in unsettling every bit of certainty and the course, Bachelor of Education (BEd.) Foundation Phase (FP) was no exception; face-to-face learning came to a grinding halt as contact sessions were offered online. The FP department scraped to focus and create teaching strategies and modes of learning that would sufficiently sustain and encourage teaching via a distance, online platform. Lecturers' challenges with online learning were now magnified. It was possible for others to see their shortcomings when it came to online platforms. This was especially evident among lecturers living in rural areas—they struggled without access to proper digital devices and with very poor internet connectivity.

As distressing and demanding a period as that was, it also ushered in a belated and much welcomed renaissance and transformation of our teaching and learning spaces. The pandemic was a great eye-opener for many role-players, giving them a better grasp of the vulnerabilities and shortcomings in our HEIs in South Africa. It has highlighted how crucial it is for our lecturers to be technologically literate to work, perform, and develop in a world in which social distancing, greater digitising of facilities, and more digitally engaged information might gradually become the custom. Essentially, Covid-19 resulted in us challenging our own ideas and concepts of when, where, and how we deliver education.

Technological Teaching Practices Used in HEIs in SA During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic and its impact arrived abruptly, with little to no preparation plans in place globally, and in South Africa, especially. All sectors, including education, were greatly affected by the pandemic (Mpungose, 2020). More specifically, HEIs were required to temporarily shut down, which resulted in a need for different ways of ensuring that teaching and learning happened in our effort to salvage the academic year (Landa et al., 2021; Magubane, 2020). In South Africa, technological teaching practices presented numerous benefits and challenges to lecturers. Landa et al. (2021) postulated that education in emergencies, as experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, relies extensively on basic technological access, and basic access to technology was the most significant challenge for HEIs. In the context of initial teacher education, lack of access to devices such as laptops and computer tablets hindered lecturers from reaching many of their students (Mpungose, 2020).

To respond to this, faculty members had to arrange and deliver their lectures remotely (Hodges et al., 2020) with the support of various learning management systems, course management systems, and

virtual learning environments—depending on the requirements of their institutions (Landa et al., 2021). This also meant that lecturers had to act as constructors and actors and had to design tasks, environments, and resources to help students learn. Furthermore, they had to consider the modality, pacing, student-instructor ratio, pedagogy, online instructor role, online student role, online communication synchrony, the role of online assessments, source of feedback of their programmes, and delivery of their courses (Hodges et al., 2020). Institutions and staff faced practical and technical challenges in implementing online learning and struggled with technical support (Hodges et al., 2020), so these institutions and staff frequently retained their focus on old procedures. Hodges et al. (2020) further suggested that, although moving instruction online can enable flexibility for teaching and learning anywhere and at any time, the speed with which this move occurred during Covid-19, coupled with technical problems such as installation and login problems, proved to be daunting.

Research indicates that the use of online materials flourished immensely when teaching and learning at HEIs were limited to the online space (Strydom et al., 2020). In their investigation, Strydom et al. (2020) also found that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many lecturers were provided with an opportunity to search and explore information and materials through learning management systems. Authors have also suggested that these learning management systems, such as Moodle and Blackboard as well as websites and other related resources, had not been used optimally prior to the pandemic (Hlalele, 2012; Strydom et al., 2020). This could be attributed to the limited training of lecturers in relation to the use of information communication technologies for teaching and learning purposes (Dube, 2020) Accordingly, in this study, we believe that the resilience needed for the rapid capacity development of lecturers presented itself as a benefit to our practice and to the South African HEI landscape in general (Dube, 2020). As highlighted in the study by Dube (2020), lecturers and university administrations explored the opportunity for the development of blended learning and working remotely. This allowed staff to continue engagement outside the confines of a traditional university lecture hall.

According to Mpungose (2020), the digital disparities among staff were exposed without warning given that there is unreliable internet accessibility in many of the peri-urban and rural areas where some staff are based. Added to these problems, van Niekerk and van Gent (2020) found that a lack of adequate prior training on the requirements of online teaching and learning for lecturers was a serious problem in the initial stages. Many lecturers grappled with how to function effectively using these new technologies.

Problem Statement

In 2020, when the National State of Disaster was declared in South Africa (Republic of South Africa, 2020), the higher education landscape was faced with existing and new challenges. The academic year had not yet commenced in the envisaged face-to-face modality, and lecturers had not received any training to offer remote or online teaching (Dube, 2020). For decades, the changing learner context has required a move from traditional classrooms to a combination of physical and virtual spaces (Suorsa & Eskilsson, 2014). Yet, literature highlights a gap in the research with reference to understanding the experiences of lecturers who teach through online learning in under-resourced contexts. As online modules and programmes increased, the methods of provision required constant modification and assessment to guarantee that the programmes and modules sustained student demands. This increased consciousness of the necessity for experienced and skilled online lecturers (Gregory & Lodge, 2015). According to Roddy et al. (2017), much research attention focused on the view of online student readiness however, very little attention was given to the experiences of online lecturers.

Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) postulated that if more attention were given to the experiences of lecturers, universities would be forced to expose their faculty to training on the use of various forms of digital learning and education. Many lecturers were affected by the unavailability of laptops, computer tablets, computers, or library facilities to use in connecting to the online modality—which was a challenge (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Mpungose, 2020; Strydom et al., 2020). This issue could have been addressed if more literature was available on the challenges faced by lecturers. Thus, online lecturer readiness is emerging as an important concept that needs to be interrogated (Bates, 2020). Houlden and Veletsianos and Houlden (2020) suggested that because not enough research had been done pertaining to lecturer experiences of online teaching, this added to their stresses when they were struggling to balance teaching, research, and service responsibilities in addition to their work-life wellness.

Against this background, we have distilled some reflections of university lecturers who teach a humanising pedagogy-embedded programme in the FP through online learning. The reflections we offer are based on research, and on years of little to no online learning and teaching experience. Online teaching and learning have disrupted the margins between teaching and learning and lecturer experience (Fawns, 2019). Basically, lecturers have had to become inventors, creators, and teachers, utilising equipment very few have confidently learned. The objectives of this study were as follows:

- To explore lecturers' experiences of teaching a humanising pedagogy-embedded programme in the Foundation Phase at an HEI, through online learning in an under-resourced context.
- To focus on technological strategies and pedagogies used in HEIs, issues related to students' inclination and adaptation to technology, the digital divide, and barriers to online learning.

This study draws on the experiences of three lecturers at an HEI in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, during the Covid-19 pandemic, and seeks to answer the following question: "What are the experiences of lecturers who teach a humanising pedagogy-embedded programme in the Foundation Phase at a university through online learning in an under-resourced context?" After we have reflected on ourselves, we radiate out and discover the possibilities around us. In this light, lecturers critically reflect on their own practices and experiences of teaching online.

Theoretical Framework: Humanising Pedagogy

This study is located in a critical paradigm and employs humanising pedagogy principles to frame it. It draws on critical theory as it seeks to "take cognisance of the subjectivity of individuals and their experiences in a complex world where not all experiences can be explained by logic" (Foley et al., 2015, p. 113). McKernan (2013) further explained that it is crucial for us in teacher education to realise that criticality is more than considering a specific situation—it includes working collaboratively towards changing oppressive situations in order to liberate student teachers. We concur with the opinion of Apple (2004) that critical theory interrogates and considers the personal and individual curriculum of students' daily lives. It critically reflects on the oppressive structures of power that control and prejudice rationality and truth (Foucault, 1984) and disputes how subjectivity converts into a political ontology (Giroux, 2007). Foley et al. (2015) reiterated that humans construct their understanding of reality and the world they live in through the relationships and collaborations they have with other human beings.

Freire (1970) viewed humanising pedagogy as essential to lecturers' success, as well as to their academic and societal adaptability. Bartolomé noted that a humanising pedagogy encourages honest collaboration between persons, "educational reliability and scholarly settings where power distribution is facilitated among them" (1994, p. 174). Macedo and Bartolomé (2000) built on that definition, emphasising that this pedagogy honours lecturers' personal life stories and historicity.

Humanising lecturers, according to Freire (1970), avail themselves to seek mutual humanisation where dialogical engagement between lecturers needs to be encouraged. A dialogical perspective advances critical consciousness and is explained by Freire as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (1970, p. 17). Lecturers who engage in humanising pedagogy can partake in praxis and reflection on the world with the aim of transformation.

A fundamental principle of Freire's (1970) humanising pedagogy is the concept of *conscientisation*, which speaks to the idea of rebuilding, and re-imaging together with collaborators. Diemer et al. (2017) explicated that critical consciousness is the analysis and disruption of oppressive inequities within society. Accordingly, Heberle et al. (2020) motivated engagement activities that challenge social inequities and encourage the importance of personal wellness and the building of resilience. If we say we are critical humanising pedagogues, we need to move from our comfortable, neutral, and uncritical positions on information and learning technologies. Galloway (2019) and Cowden (2019) advocated for lecturers to become mindful and cognisant of themselves as public intellectuals, and to recognise and analyse practices of power and hegemony. This reasoning has moulded present-day concepts of transformation (Luke, 2017). Boronski (2021) believed that lecturers enrich the learning environment, thus, the necessity for an educational curriculum that integrates all knowledge resources.

As we tried to make meaning of the philosophical elements of computer-aided learning, the extant methods of humanising online teaching and learning in our department seemed to be noticeably lacking with respect to humanising pedagogies in the Freirean culture (Zilka et al., 2018). And there has been a great deal of talk on the significance and usefulness of interactive media, computer-based projects for lecturers, and a growing presence in online settings. In this paper, we embrace critical theory to question frameworks that promote humanising approaches in online education. Through our narrative freewriting, we present how we have woven into our fundamental pedagogy, opportunities to humanise virtual learning environments and reconceptualise them for purposeful lecturer learning. It is important for us not only to present suggestions made in this paper as representations for duplication, but to also highlight our anxieties, difficulties, and pressures—which allowed us to grow, and stimulated new thinking processes that strengthened our commitments to critical and humanising processes.

Teaching and learning is an exchange of knowledge, thus research on lecturers has been driven by the assumption that knowledge is at the heart of their professional competence and development (Shulman, 1986). Sayed et al. (2018) suggested that, while the idea of knowledge sets helps to understand the conceptual framing of initial teacher education programmes, in the end, it is how this translates into programme design that determines their usefulness. Nonetheless, online teaching and learning imply a certain pedagogical content knowledge, and an ability to navigate online technologies (Rapanta et al., 2020) and hybrid modalities for teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2020).

Methodology

We adopted a qualitative arts-based design in line with Creswell and Creswell (2017), which allowed us to understand how we make sense of our working world and the experiences we have in it. The study was further located within the participatory visual methodologies by using the data generation method of poetic inquiry to recount our experiences of exploring a humanising pedagogy as a way of practising social justice in online learning during Covid-19 times. De Vos et al. (2011) and Notshulwana, (2020, p. 63) argued that when participatory visual methodologies are encapsulated in a qualitative approach, they allow the research process to be inductive, holistic, and process-orientated in nature, therefore, "the approach allows for a safe environment and flexibility for the participants." In this study, we were able to be vulnerable in sharing our practices of humanising pedagogy as a way of

practising social justice during online learning, through the use of a qualitative approach and participatory methods. Poetic inquiry, underpinned by the critical transformative paradigm, meant that we were able to reconstruct our thinking on what humanising pedagogy could look like in the online learning space moving beyond Covid-19.

As FP lecturers, we were attracted to the practice of arts-based research in which poetic inquiry was utilised as a methodology. The authentications of this research design are a dedication to engagement, interrogation, meaning-making, and ample and inviting understandings of people's experiences (Cahmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018). Faulkner (2009) declared that there is no clear description of poetry, but when it is utilised as a methodology, poetry is validated by its word-based hallmarks. Faulkner (2019) further stated that poetry is an ambiguous method of writing that is expressed through alliteration, form, image, language use, line, metaphor, and so forth. One can thus comfortably say that a poem is an image, an expression, a thought, summarised into an artistic, poetic scholarly genre; poetry is a meaningful way of writing that is unique and interconnected to established research designs. Leggo (2008, p. 168) said:

> *Poetry calls attention to itself as text, as a rhetorical device and stratagem. Poetry does not invite readers to consume the text as if it were a husk that contains a pithy truth. Poetry is not a window on the world. Poetry invites us to listen. Poetry is a site for dwelling, for holding up, for stopping. Poetry prevails against hermeneutic exhaustion, hermeneutic consumption, hermeneutic closure, and hermeneutic certainty. Poetry is not hermetic. A poem is a textual event, an "act of literature," an experience of spelling and spells.*

We embraced this definition of arts-based research because, as lecturers, it connected us as researchers as well, reflecting on our own experiences.

We used a critical transformative paradigm to locate this study because we aimed to critically rethink, reflect, and foster pedagogical change or shift in our online teaching pedagogies. Scholars using this paradigm postulate that historical, socio-cultural, and political perspectives shape the multiple realities that exist (Chilisa, 2012; Mertens, 2010). For example, our understanding and thinking of humanising pedagogy as a vehicle for the attainment of a socially just online learning environment was informed by our personal experiences and contextual realities.

The study took place at Nelson Mandela University in the Eastern Cape Province, one of the three rural provinces of South Africa. The rurality of the province resulted in it being under-resourced in terms of stable network connections, access to technological devices, and electricity (Yamile, 2021). Thus, it became imperative for us as lecturers to explore our experiences of teaching a humanising pedagogy-embedded programme via online learning in a highly under-resourced context such as the Eastern Cape. In this study, we wrote poems on our experience of teaching different modules in the BEd. programme. Our experiences in teaching have been different. For example, before entering the university space, Obakeng lectured at a technical and vocational college facilitating early childhood development modules for practitioners. Currently, he is responsible for module writing, teaching, and research in the BEd. programme. Deidre was the head of the FP programme for 11 years. She led the curriculum renewal process of the BEd. FP. Her experiences as a classroom-based educator for over 17 years contributed towards her teaching the module, School-Based Learning, which is a generic module offered to all undergraduate BEd. students. Lastly, Koketso, an emerging academic previously teaching at two South African universities and assuming a role as assistant director at a national educational institution, had recently joined the faculty. He used his experiences from other institutions and the current study to write a poem on his involvement while presenting teaching methodology and practicum at fourth-year level during Covid-19.

Data Gathering Strategies

Fricker (2017) offered this definition of reflection: it occurs when an activity is ceased in order to think or rethink any part of an occurrence such as, for example, validity, confirmation, practices, or possible consequences. Reflection may be an independent activity or performed by a group of people. It was initiated by us because of the Covid-19 pandemic and having to teach online. Because we were reflecting on our own practice, we did not require ethical approval for this research. We collaboratively set these reflective questions that guided our poetic inquiry and narrative freewriting.

- What are we hearing?
- What are the challenges and opportunities we experienced?

These two questions helped us to critically reflect on our practices and experiences of teaching modules embedded in a humanising pedagogy in the online platform.
For data generation, we had a Microsoft Teams meeting to recite our poems to each other and reflect on them. We agreed to record our conversation and had it transcribed verbatim. The knowledge gained through the above participatory method allowed us to enhance and change our teaching in our respective modules. In this section, we first present the poems as Phase 1. Table 1 presents the poems we wrote, and which sparked the conversation that led to meaning making and generated rich data. The poems are followed by extracts from the freewriting we did, as Phase 2.

Phase 1

Table 1: Authors' Poems

"You Uninvited Guest" by Deidre	**"An Unexpected Shift" by Obakeng**	**"Teaching in Uncertain Times" by Koketso**
1. Who invited you in without any announcement? 2. Don't you know you were never welcomed? 3. Go away, I don't need you, my colleagues don't need you and my students especially don't need you. 4. But wait, wait, wait 5. Let me look, see and listen. 6. New opportunities—it's exciting 7. I am learning 8. We are learning 9. We are learning 10. I am learning	1. It hit us unexpectedly 2. We were unsure of what's next 3. Anxiety, disruption and new normal kicked in. 4. lose, pain and discomfort was the dominant feature. 5. One had to be strong for others and self 6. Disruption in ways of learning and teaching 7. Crafting nuanced ways of delivering content. 8. Zoom, Teams, and WhatsApp teaching become the order of the day. 9. No data, no internet, and no gadgets were the	1. When I teach I always smile, 2. Like a child in a shop, walking through the toys aisle, 3. Then came the lockdown, 4. The difficulties that came with teaching through technology made me frown, 5. my students experienced it too, so we stuck together like glue, 6. How do I use Zoom, sometimes we ran out of data, 7. Then boom, It seems, we have to use Teams, 8. The township streets we no longer have to

11. New opportunities—it's exciting 12. Let me look, see and listen. 13. But wait, wait, wait 14. Go away, I don't need you, my colleagues don't need you and my students especially don't need you. 15. Don't you know you were never welcomed? 16. Who invited you in without any announcement?	barriers we had to deal with. 10. Like Brice said: The show goes on	aimlessly roam, because we are building an educational empire that will outlast Rome. 9. The township streets we no longer have to aimlessly roam, because we are building an educational empire that will outlast Rome. 10. Then boom, It seems, we have to use Teams, 11. How do I use Zoom, sometimes we ran out of data, 12. my students experienced it too, so we stuck together like glue, 13. The difficulties that came with teaching through technology made me frown, 14. Then came the lockdown, 15. Like a child in a shop, walking through the toys aisle, 16. When I teach I always smile

Phase 2

Elbow (1998) defined freewriting as a spontaneous approach to encourage the free flow of thought. The emphasis is on unbroken writing on any specific issue. The idea is to not stop whilst writing—no editing is allowed, just continuous writing. Elbow (1998) further declared that freewriting promotes inspired communication and the creation of thoughts in easy-going, rapid, unrestricted, and relaxed circumstances (see Table 2).

Table 2: Freewriting That Emerged From the Participants' Poems

Deidre	Obakeng	Koketsu
1. Go away, I don't need you, my colleagues don't need you and my students especially don't need you.	1. We were unsure of what's next.	1. Where teaching and learning have become less formal.
2. Who invited you in without any announcement?	2. Anxiety, disruption and new normal kicked in.	2. The difficulties that came with teaching through technology made me frown.
3. Don't you know you were never welcomed?	3. No data, no internet, and no gadgets were the barriers we had to deal with.	3. How do I use Zoom, sometimes we ran out of data, Then boom, it seems, we have to use Teams.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data generated during the poetic inquiry, and we were guided by Tesch's steps (as mentioned by Creswell, 2013). These steps included transcribing and translating the data, and we made note of the first layer of data analysis, which meant we asked each other questions and were further involved in trying to answer those questions. In our individual spaces, we repeatedly read the poems and transcribed data from our conversations in search of common themes. We coded the data and wrote them next to relevant paragraphs of the text. For ensuring the quality and accuracy of our findings, we referred to the raw data we had generated to further check consistency in the themes and raw data. We continuously asked each other questions in areas that required clarity or where someone did not understand—this can be regarded as *member checking* in instances where the researchers are participants. The above was also done to ensure trustworthiness and maintain the integrity of the study.

Two dominant themes emerged from the data: lecturer mutual vulnerability and lecturer resilience and collaboration. As seen from the literature, many universities responded to the challenges of electronic machine learning by providing appropriate infrastructure to staff and online professional development initiatives to try and strengthen staff capacity to work online but, somehow, did not focus on lecturer mental wellness.

Theme 1: Lecturer Mutual Vulnerability

The data highlighted the heightened levels of anxiety lecturers experienced because things remained uncertain for so long. Participants mentioned experiencing feelings of insecurity, stress, and fear. Deidre mentioned that knowing that others felt equally vulnerable in the online space, gave her confidence to continue learning and trying. Obakeng stated that he occasionally felt that he was living in a bubble, and that reality was much broader than he'd previously thought. But he knew he wasn't experiencing it alone. Koketso admitted that he was comfortable with not knowing the outcomes of his choices or action, appreciating that others felt likewise: " My own uncertain, was very comforting to me. I knew others were in the same boat, scared of dropping the balls, which made me feel tougher."

Participants also confirmed that little or no guidance was given to them on how to approach the situation. This only increased their feelings of vulnerability. As mentioned by the participants, they did not have any training to utilise online platforms. Deidre stated that she had not been willing to change her practice to using online tools:

> *I am a Foundation Phase lecturer, and my students need to know how to teach. And that requires hands-on learning and teaching. We were on our laptops day and night, a 24-hour day was just too short to accommodate our students and their needs. Moving between the many balls I had to juggle left me feeling so vulnerable, so limited, so incapable. As head of department, I am supposed to be the knowledgeable other to lead my team, it felt that I needed leading more than anyone else.*
>
> *The poems and reflective freewriting allowed me to breathe, I wasn't in it alone—my colleagues felt as vulnerable as I did.*

Obakeng said:

> *It is okay, we are okay, we will pull through. We just need to hang in there and assist each other as best we can if we want to survive this pandemic of mass destruction whilst being online.*

Participants were able to bring their whole selves into the online learning spaces. Admitting to their students that they too felt vulnerable and less abled. "It felt like bringing my personal life into the public domain open to critique, and interrogation," said Koketso. Deidre emphasised that we witnessed our students'

> *lived realities, the conditions under which they studied, the vulnerability to technological limitations of devices and wifi access. There wasn't much we could do except ensure they had access to wifi and be available to them when they called on us.*

The online spaces confirmed that it was okay not to know, and to admit to ourselves and colleagues that we needed assistance to reach our outcomes within our respective modules. The findings revealed that vulnerability served as a pedagogical tool where we became co-learners in spaces unknown to many of us—if not all of us. Nations, communities, and individuals generally, were vulnerable because their beings were entrenched in surroundings and conditions that had enhanced their vulnerabilities during the pandemic. Delgado (2021) highlighted that vulnerability can no longer be summarised, as it typically was, as an individual issue or concern; it is an experience or understanding informed by humanising principles of reflection, consciousness, and dialogue. The participants recognised that colleagues' states are naturally delicate and that others experienced the same difficulties. Mutual vulnerability occurred because all people are integrally linked to the world, they participate in relationships with other human beings, and work together constantly within their immediate environments and the world. As participants, we concluded that we could not succeed and endure if our being and realities were not linked to the survival of others.

The concept of vulnerability relates to cohesion and mutuality—the demands, and necessities of people and communities, not just of individuals. In this viewpoint, as expressed by us, vulnerability is not an individualistic capability nor shortfall but a collective and mutual response. Delgado (2021) extended the idea of mutual vulnerability to the significance of resilience and collaboration.

Theme 2: Lecturer Resilience and Collaboration

Table 3 portrays the intensity of hopefulness amongst lecturers amid Covid-19. As indicated, lecturers had a remarkable degree of resilience amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The data highlighted that despite the danger and encounters caused by the pandemic, lecturers persisted in being confident and expectant that things would turn out for the best. This type of perspective might be ascribed to information on successful implementation experiences as expressed by their students and colleagues.

The data also indicated that the biggest shift for lecturers was the mindset one. All three participants agreed that when they were able to make the shift, they could see their own growth and determination to succeed increase. This was supported by the continuous questioning or inquiry-based approach adopted by the participants. The trust among the three participants with our collective knowledge, skills, and methodologies pushed us to be resilient. We were mindful that we were designing courses that spoke to the needs of our diverse student population. Our poems and narratives indicated how, as participants, we moved to and from our own learning zones as we built competencies—and our resilience increased as well.

Deidre's poem in Table 1 also indicates that as a more mature lecturer, her fears were much bigger than those of Obakeng and Koketso, who are younger lecturers. She mentioned her own vulnerability in her guided questions. And, Koketso re-emphasised the new learning opportunities have been created because of our collaboration—as we were partnering with each other, so our skills and competencies improved. The data show that assuming an approach of togetherness, and acting in ways that supported each other, had marked consequences on our own resilience.

Table 3: Authors' Poems

Deidre	Obakeng	Koketsu
1. We are learning I am learning	1. Crafting nuanced ways of delivering content.	1. My students experienced it too, so we stuck together like glue.
2. Let me look, see and listen. New opportunities – it's exciting	2. Zoom, Teams, and WhatsApp teaching become the order of the day.	2. The township streets we no longer have to aimlessly roam, because we are building an educational empire that will outlast Rome.
	3. One had to be strong for others and self	3. Like a child in a shop, walking through the toys aisle, When I teach, I always smile

Obakeng highlighted that collaboration with colleagues and students "created a space for shared intellectual effort by all in the online learning space." For him, this was a way the technological landscape became a humanised space of collective learning, and it strengthened his resilience to keep on going.

This study is in conversation with the literature on humanising pedagogy and the benefits of online learning, and argues that lecturers need technological online environments where they can build resilience and collaborate with colleagues to improve the way they facilitate teaching and learning for humanisation. The culture of collaboration amongst colleagues strengthened their resilience due to the peer support received. Younger colleagues were not only a source of encouragement but also of collaborative learning. This connects to the collaboration thread throughout the study.

What are the Teachings and Learning We are Taking With Us Into the New Academic Face-to-Face Contact Sessions?

The lessons that we learned during this period are twofold. They relate to 1) our personal professional development in relation to technology-enhanced teaching and learning and 2) to mental wellness. Regarding professional development, we believe that it is important for us to remain abreast regarding new technological developments in the education landscape. As was seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, many educators including us, relied solely on the support or lack thereof provided by universities. This was a disadvantage to us because we only had beginner knowledge of how to use Zoom and Microsoft Teams, and it became very difficult when we were dealing with large numbers of students online. Lecturers need to develop creative initiatives to overcome the limitations of virtual teaching, we need to vigorously collaborate with one another at phase, faculty, and institutional levels to improve online teaching methods. Doucet et al. (2020) asserted that there are unmatched opportunities for collaboration, creative blends, and a willingness to learn from others by trying different devices as lecturers. If a university is going to adopt a blended approach, then it is important that it ensures the professional development of their staff—which is a demand for us not to be found ill equipped.

Finally, regarding mental wellness, we believe that for one to be productive as a lecturer, one must maintain mental well-being. Facing the challenges that came about due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as mentioned in our poems, made us very worried. We were in national lockdown (Levels 4 and 5) for almost five months, working from our respective spaces. The difficulty at that time was to assist lecturers in shifting from face-to-face contact sessions to online teaching. Research has revealed a significant rise in stress and burnout (Pellerone, 2021), and especially in technostress, during the pandemic It has been recognised that lecturers' occupations prior to Covid-19 demand extreme endurance, sympathy, resilience, and persistence to present relevant education during the academic year. Lecturing in HEIs is also known as an occupation of great stress and high exhaustion levels (Sokal et al., 2021). During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, the task of lecturing online became exceptionally problematic, and the change in HEIs' environments, plus the demand to use various online devices that had never been used before, compromised lecturers' mental wellness. The participants are of the opinion that support from management was extremely limited, or absent in some cases. It is vital for HEIs to invest in holistic wellness programmes prepared to meet the demands of lecturers. But, more importantly, wellness is each person's own responsibility. Lecturers need to grow competencies for handling the blurred lines between work and their personal lives (such as the handling of emails related to their employment matters). It is important that these matters be addressed at appropriate times during the day and not follow lecturers into their sleep. Lecturers need to equip themselves with programmes on wellness offered by their institutions. Colleagues need increased reflexivity, mindfulness, and positive opinion of themselves as lecturers. Creating communities of practice helps provide networking prospects to enhance collaboration.

Conclusion: Mapping a Way Forward for Teacher Education

The Covid-19 pandemic pushed us as lecturers into a new reality of online/remote/distance learning through computer-generated classroom spaces. The transitions from traditional face-to-face classes to online learning have brought about a number of deliberations that we as FP lecturers had to reflect on, rethink, and re-envision—and come to a compromise in order to achieve mutual and meaningful collaborative learning and social spaces. It is important to acknowledge lecturer mutual vulnerability, resilience, and collaboration. We need to highlight lecturers as learners who are flexible, adjustable, and actively engaging on online platforms. So where do we begin to re-envision the purposes of higher education when the questions we are challenged with as an institution are so big, and our own vulnerabilities and insecurities feel enlarged, and we lack agency at times amid these larger forces and

barriers? Today, what we know for sure is that we are that person in the mirror; begin with yourself, begin with your classroom, begin with your institution.

Communication channels need to be open amongst lecturers for collaborative conversations to communicate experiential knowledge gained during the epidemic, and knowledge about practices develop during that period. Concerted efforts need to be made by the participants to upskill themselves, and to offer a setting that shapes professional learning. Lastly, lecturers need to develop more interest in online technologies and find more ways to integrate them into their teaching and learning. The pandemic period afforded us with both chances and trials. It brought about positive options from the participants regarding their quick move to online learning spaces. It is important that our teaching and learning experiences allow us to build collaboration and partnerships with others in the space. It facilitated a process of connectedness and support in the learning process.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 78-95
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Leading for Sustainability and Empowerment: Reflecting on the Power of Collaboration and Humanising Pedagogy

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic caused great distress in the higher education sector, globally. Higher education institutions had to adapt from presenting in-person classes to online remote learning, bringing with this several challenges of increased workloads, feelings of loss, grief, and being overwhelmed for both students and academic staff. Leading in times of crisis is not easy. It is even more difficult for women leaders who must deal with the historical impact of gender inequality in the workplace as well as the stereotypical views of the role of women. In this paper, five women academics who also hold leadership positions in the faculty of education at Nelson Mandela University reflect on their experience of leading their respective teams through the Covid-19 pandemic. Researchers have postulated that women in strategic leadership positions would better understand work policy obstacles owing to their knowledge of such barriers, as well as advancing the educational outcomes for all stakeholders in higher education. As women in leadership, we reflect on how collaboration assisted us to empower each other as well as our respective teams. The characteristics of democratic leadership guided this inquest. A critical paradigm and humanising pedagogy principles were used to

frame the study, which enabled us to draw on our lived experiences and to engage in dialogue in order to make sense of the process of empowerment for sustainability. We engaged in collaborative self-study and used narrative freewriting to generate data. In addition, use was made of a thematic analysis to reduce the data and identify common themes. The findings of the study question whether current leadership practices contribute to equality in the workplace, support collaboration, and encourage self-care and empowerment. The study proposes a humanising leadership model to enhance leadership practices.

Keywords: democratic leadership, humanising pedagogy, collaboration, critical theory

Please reference as: Sathorar, H., Geduld, D., Moeng, M., Mapasa, T. and Oosthuizen, H. (2023). Leading for Sustainability and Empowerment: Reflecting on the Power of Collaboration and Humanising Pedagogy. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 12(2), 78-95.
http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a6

Introduction and Background

It is well argued in literature that higher education institutions have a significant role to play in the evolution of society because they educate and train future leaders, workers, and citizens (Teague, 2015). One aspect of advancing society is to ensure that it is sustainable, which requires a strong higher education system. Amongst many others, higher education is currently faced with leadership challenges. Moodly and Toni (2017) contended that for higher education to be sustainable, its leadership needs to be reimagined. Seale et al. (2021) suggested that women leaders are the answer to the leadership crisis faced by higher education. The latter authors argued that women can shift existing patriarchal hegemonies to create a pluralistic leadership culture that encourages transformational leadership to flourish.

Moodly and Toni (2017) contended that women are more likely to adopt a more collaborative, cooperative and democratic leadership style. Raelin (2012) advanced that such leadership requires power to be shared, and encourages reflection-in-action. He further argued that it occurs beyond hierarchical roles and positions and requires genuine participation in leadership and in decision-making at all levels and in different processes. Therefore, fundamental to collaborative leadership are the principles of mutual respect, trust, non-judgemental inquiry, sharing of information, and critical scrutiny of others (Terzi & Derin, 2016).

Higher education has seen its fair share of challenges in the past two decades. Constant changes such as the continuing decrease in subsidies, mergers and incorporations, a rise in student numbers, the #FeesMustFall movement, calls for decolonisation, as well as Covid-19 have required a special kind of leadership to ensure higher education sustainability. Governments and institutions globally, have recognised that coordination and collaboration are the only way to deal with these challenges effectively. Reflecting on the challenges of Covid-19, Shingler-Nace (2020) argued that authenticity and foundational concepts can assist in the most complex and complicated situations. One of the basic foundations she shared from her lessons learnt is collaboration. She further argued that a fully committed team, with members who lean on one another and can be depended on, empower each other to recognise when they need to hand over to the next leader in order to minimise burnout.

Lawton-Misra (2019) argued that during the #FeesMustFall protests, leaders were thrust into roles to which they had never before been exposed, and that they needed to make every effort to find ways to navigate and respond to students' demands. In their study of women deputy vice-chancellors, Moodly and Toni (2017) argued that re-imagining leadership forms part of the decolonisation process. They found that women leaders displayed inclusive, caring, cooperative, and service-oriented qualities that would put them in a better position to lead during turbulent times.

Traditionally, leadership implies a relationship of power to guide others. Recently, focus has moved from power to empowerment with leaders transferring power to their teams through collaboration (Raelin, 2012). Moreover, the main features of leadership models have evolved from authoritarian to collaborative and participatory leadership styles (Terzi & Derin, 2016). This shift in leadership styles has coincided with more women taking up senior leadership and management positions in institutions, including universities (Seale et al., 2021).

In this paper, five women academics who all hold leadership positions in the faculty of education at Nelson Mandela University reflect on how collaboration and a humanising pedagogy assisted them not only to fulfil their respective roles but also to empower their respective teams. A humanising pedagogy is based on the idea that humans are driven by a need to reason and participate in decision making regarding their lives (Freire, 1970). In this qualitative study, we engaged in collaborative self-study as well as narrative freewriting to generate data. The data were reduced through thematic analysis, which assisted in identifying common themes. The findings of the study aim to encourage leaders in education to question whether current leadership practices contribute to equality in education, support sustainable work practices, and encourage self-care.

Humanising Pedagogy and Collaborative Teaming

This study resides in a critical paradigm and utilises humanising pedagogy principles as well as the advantages of collaborative teaming to frame the study, and draws on critical theory to "take cognisance of the subjectivity of individuals and their experiences in a complex world where not all experiences can be explained by logic" (Foley et al., 2015, p. 113). Similarly, McKernan (2013) explicated that criticality is more than understanding a specific situation; it involves finding ways to change oppressive situations to liberate people. According to Sathorar (2018), critical theory questions and investigates the subjective curriculum of everyday life (Apple, 2004). It interrogates the power structures that manipulate and influence rationality and truth (Foucault, 1984; Giroux, 2007) and challenges how subjectivity becomes a political ontology (Foucault, 1984; Giroux, 2007). Thus, critical theorists agree that humans construct their understanding of reality and the world they live in through the relationships and collaborations they have with other human beings (Foley et al., 2015).

In this paper, we reflect upon our lived experience of leadership, the development of agency through a critical look at our world of work, which takes place in collaboration with others, and seek to transform our working environment through active participation in democratic imperatives. We postulate that leadership is dependent on relationships and that applying humanising pedagogy principles would enhance leadership practices. Humanising pedagogy can be described as teaching practices that intentionally utilise the histories of our students, recognising the importance of their life experiences and background knowledge (Geduld & Sathorar, 2016). Freire's (1970) ideas about liberatory education respect and employ students' lived realities. We acknowledge the realities of our students as an integral part of educational practice and cast them as critically engaged, active participants in the co-construction of knowledge (Del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Geduld & Sathorar, 2016). We believe that when one leads, one also educates—and this serves as justification for applying humanising pedagogy principles to our leadership practices.

Humanising pedagogy enables us to draw on the lived experiences of staff members and to engage them in collective decision making in our respective departments in the faculty. Humanisation is closely linked to collaboration. Freire (1970) suggested that true dialogue that takes place under conditions of deep love for the world and humankind, humbleness towards each other, reciprocated trust amongst dialoguers, and the ability to think critically would assist in changing the world into a humanised place. Thus, leading in a humanised way requires collaboration through dialogue. A humanising perspective of collaborative leadership teams starts from the supposition that leaders are fully human; they resist the dehumanising efforts of leadership approaches that deny them and their teams a sense of interest and the opportunity to question the world critically (Freire, 1970). A humanising perspective acknowledges that critical consciousness is ever changing. This supports the idea that leaders are not infallible and that they require intellectual growth in various areas. Nowell et al. (2020) referred to four advantages of collaborative teams that support a humanising approach to leadership, namely, (1) promoting individual dignity, equality, uniqueness, and capacity to grow, (2) showing respect for the individual, (3) fostering an ethics of care, and (4) having a concern for the common good.

Dignity is premised on respect for and from others and, explicitly, mutual respect. Dignity is demonstrated by combining competence with compassion and decisive actions whilst strengthening capacity on the one hand and attending to the needs of vulnerable groups on the other (Khilji, 2021). It is an interpersonal act respected by all stakeholders who engage with each other in a fair, democratic, and honourable way that supports instinctive values and rights. Such an inclusive interpretation of dignity supports an interactive and interpersonal understanding of leadership (Khilji, 2021; Nowell et al., 2020).

Respect is an outflow of acknowledging the importance of human dignity. Respecting and valuing the opinions of others are key requirements for true dialogue and collaboration, which, in turn, are central to humanisation (Freire, 1970). The ethics of care signifies assenting values related to a commitment by the individual to render a service to those in need. To lead is to serve and to serve in a way that will make a change in the lives of others. This demonstration of compassion is necessary for human flourishment and fulfilment (Khilji, 2021). Finally, concern for the common good is demonstrated through the interconnectedness of individuals within a community of practice (Del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Communities of practice are driven by a common interest, and members are responsible for working towards a common goal as well as ensuring the collective growth and development of all.

In this paper, we advocate for a review of leadership practices and suggest that there is a need for humanising leadership principles to be implemented. We framed the study by drawing on the humanising pedagogy principles of humanisation, collaboration, and dialogue while reflecting on lived experiences. We linked these humanising pedagogical principles to Nowell et al.'s (2020) advantages of collaborative teams that also focus on humanisation. We acknowledge the similarities between humanising pedagogy and ubuntu. Mbigi (1997) reminded us that both these philosophies are founded on, and supported by, these human-centred principles, ideologies, values, and beliefs:

> *Solidarity, kindness, cooperation, respect, and compassion. Ubuntu, when embraced correctly, can therefore promote and nurture communal living, coexistence, and interdependence in educational settings. (p 31)*

This article only focuses on humanising leadership principles as they align with humanising pedagogy, which is one of the guiding philosophies of our institution and our faculty. The use of a democratic leadership style is proposed because it embraces humanising principles; and the use of collaborative teams is encouraged to harvest the advantages as described above.

Democratic Leadership: A Platform for Humanising Leadership Principles to be Implemented

Contemporary higher education is one of the most exacting and complex organisations, and therefore requires leadership that is built around a range of competencies and thinking (Morrill, 2010). Given the pressures of a knowledge economy, the uncertainties that characterise contemporary higher education, and the diversity of our faculty, creating a fully inclusive faculty with a humanising approach to decision making can be a challenge. A plethora of leadership styles and theories are available. Mango (2018) explicated that this abundance of leadership theories is not only overwhelming, but also poses a challenge when trying to situate oneself within a clearly definitive leadership style.

The Nelson Mandela University vision, mission, and institutional values encourage the use of a participatory approach to leadership and decision making. Our institution's teaching and learning are underpinned by a humanising pedagogy that is premised on principles of mutual trust, collaboration, and participatory decision making. These principles create a platform to work towards social justice and transformation for the good of all. Guided by these humanising pedagogical principles that underpin the core business of the university, it makes sense to employ a leadership style that embraces similar principles of participation and collaboration. The required leadership style needs to have a strong focus on inclusivity and recognition of the human dimensions of what leadership entails. One leadership style that embraces these humanising principles is the democratic leadership style.

According to John Dewey (1916), democracy is much broader than a political form that makes laws; instead, it is a way of living as well as freedom of the intellect for effective independence. Dewey (1916) regarded participation as an important aspect of democracy and argued that active involvement and access to social dialogue are the foundations of democratic communication. Democracy is thus considered as a system in which those who will be directly affected actively participate in the decision-making process (Mbotya, 1999). In furthering this argument, Raelin (2012) contended that dialogue is an authentic exchange between people, and extends their knowledge while allowing them to reflect on different perspectives with the prospect of learning. Furthermore, he argued that dialogue builds trust and mutual understanding that lead to collaborative action (Raelin, 2012). For Paulo Freire (1970), dialogue was a creative act based on humility and commitment to others in an attempt to learn in order to name the world. It is an educative process that leads to action (Freire, 1970).

Democratic leadership is a collaborative style that can be effective with committed team members who are open to new ideas. Rustin and Armstrong (2012) postulated that this approach could also lead to the discovery of untapped potential in the professional development of colleagues. They mentioned that this leadership style balances decision-making responsibility because everyone is given a seat at the table and the discussions are relatively free flowing. Democratic leaders actively participate in discussions and value the collaborative processes. Mango (2018) explicated that democratic leadership is theoretically different from authoritarian leadership. The characteristics of democratic leadership include delegating duties and commitments amongst stakeholders, empowering team members, and enabling collaborative decision-making processes.

Thus, democratic leadership is an inclusive approach that requires team members to be committed to a common goal and to work toward the common good (Kılıçoğlu, 2018). Woods (2004) argued that an aspect of the democratic leadership's conceptual framework is democratic advocacy. He posited that democratic advocacy consists of four democratic rationalities, namely, decisional (participation and influencing of decision-making), discursive (possibilities for open deliberation and dialogue), therapeutic (creation of well-being, social cohesion, and positive feelings of involvement), and ethical (aspirations to truth, and who and what is counted as legitimate contribution).

Democratic leadership also involves the delegation of responsibility amongst team members, empowering and supporting them through collaborative decision-making (Terzi & Derin, 2016). Democratic leadership further prioritises the transformation of opinion through deliberation and dialogue with the intention of reaching consensus (Dryzek, 2005). Dryzek (2005) further contended that deliberation requires fair terms of cooperation and a commitment to reciprocity by all involved.

The leadership practices in the faculty of education at Nelson Mandela University are founded on the characteristics of democratic leadership. This provided a platform to explore the implementation of humanising pedagogy principles to empower ourselves and our teams for sustainability.

Methodology

This study is located in a critical research paradigm and aims to emancipate and to give voice to a group of women leaders in the faculty of education at Nelson Mandela University. A paradigm comprises "the abstract beliefs and principles that shape how a researcher sees the world, and how he/she interprets and acts within that world" (Kivunja & Kuyini 2017, p. 26). Critical research assumes that reality is socially constructed, and that truth is authenticated through more than just reviewing the social world. This confirms the importance of reflection and action processes to establish truth and to bring about transformation (Freire, 2000). The epistemological assumptions of critical theory specify that knowledge is power if it can be implemented in practice to empower people through a process of collaborative meaning making. The authors of this article align themselves with the axiological beliefs of critical theory, which emphasise the principles of equality, fairness, social justice, inclusivity, and human rights. The term "axiology" is of Greek origin and means "value" or "worth." Li (2016) noted that axiology relates to the role of the researcher's own value at all stages of the research. This study was premised on a qualitative research approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specific human challenges were investigated to enhance our understanding of how we make sense of our working world and our experiences in it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Self-improvement requires deep reflection that involves personal introspection. Reflection helps participants to become more conscious of their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs (Mortari, 2015). In addition, self-reflection encourages the examination of current behaviour to plan for an improved future (Mortari, 2015). Reflection is necessary in "designing, implementing, learning through, and evaluating one's leadership style" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018, p. 519). We were of the opinion that reflecting on guiding questions would enable us to learn about ourselves, others, and our knowledge of leadership. We set the reflective questions as a community and as an appropriate tool to generate valuable data. The knowledge gained through critical reflection assisted us to change and enhance our leadership processes in the faculty.

The following reflective questions guided our research:

- How would you describe your leadership style with reference to specific characteristics of your leadership style?
- Describe the relationship you have with the other members of the leadership team and how you work together.
- How does this collaboration with the other members of the leadership team help you in your leadership task?
- What is the impact of this collaboration for your department/faculty?

We reflected on these questions by utilising narrative freewriting (Elbow, 1973). Freewriting elicits thinking and the expression of thoughts through narratives that enhance learning and development. Freewriting further reduces the mental complexity of trying to "think of words and also worry at the same time whether they are the right words" (Elbow, 1998, p. 5). Spiri (2019) proposed that during a freewriting activity, the authors need to continue writing for 10 minutes without pausing to read, correct, or delete anything that they have written. Authors are urged to write even if they cannot think of something to write. They are encouraged to keep on without focusing on accuracy or linguistic correctness (Elbow, 2000; Elbow & Belanoff, 2000). Li (2007) highlighted that the intention of freewriting is to afford authors a free-flowing array of thoughts on a given theme, consequently creating understanding of that concept. Freewriting has the potential to be an engaged space for humanising pedagogy, encouraging authors to deliberate through critical questions, dialogue, and reflection. Guided freewriting can enable authors to reflect on their objectives, beliefs, and values and can serve as a complement to the personal or collective experiences of women in leadership.

This study employed collaborative self-study as the research design, thereby enabling us to reflect on our personal experiences as women in leadership. According to Stenhouse (1975), the collaborative self-study proposes a systematic and methodical approach that allows researchers to enhance their practices. A crucial characteristic of such researchers is their ability to focus on self-enhancement by engaging in systematic self-study and then participating in critical dialogue on the findings (Stenhouse, 1975). This research strategy allows researchers the freedom to investigate their own practice and to identify the underlying motivations, beliefs, and values that inform their practices. The utilisation of a self-study approach not only enabled us to reflect and improve our own practice, but also to contribute to the debate regarding women in leadership.

We drew on the research of Kitchen and Russell (2012), Tidwell et al. (2009), and Dillon (2017) who postulated that self-study as a methodology allows researchers to explore their own practices. In responding to the reflective questions, we focused on individual endeavours within our own departments as well as what we did collaboratively as a team. According to Mkhize-Mthembu (2022), self-study research utilises various methods such as arts-based and memory work to answer the research questions. We engaged with narrative freewriting in this study, enabling us to reflect on our experiences by recalling them from memory.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions, we were confined to online platforms to compile our freewriting narratives. We held a Microsoft Teams meeting in which we were given time to respond to the reflective questions using freewriting. We subsequently shared our freewriting narratives with each other via email and met to discuss what we had written. In this transformative research paradigm, a democratic space was created for all participants' voices to be heard.

Based on the principle of democracy, the knowledge and experiences of all of us as participants were valued and recognised during the group interactions. We highlighted the main points of our narrative freewriting, and shared these with one another. We further allowed for clarifying questions to be asked. Individual lists were then compiled of key words from our narratives, and we subsequently compared our lists to identify common key words that would serve as themes for further discussion. These common key words validated the identification of the following four themes: leading through collaboration, social justice and empowerment, a compassion to serve, and self-care. We agreed to record our discussion and later transcribed it verbatim. Ethical approval for this research was not required because we were reflecting on our own practice. Méndez-López (2013) maintained that there are no formal regulations regarding the writing of a narrative account because it is the meaning that is important; it is not the making of a highly academic text. We see ourselves as being liberated and

representing ourselves—we are not colonised beings, nor are we subjected to others' agendas or reduced to the position of subordinates.

The analysis of our freewriting and the subsequent discussion highlighted the following findings: the need for collaboration amongst teams to support a humanising approach to leadership, the need to create a socially just work environment where staff members are equally supported to achieve their goals, the requirement for compassion and mindfulness of the lived realities of staff members, and the importance of self-care for leaders to fulfil their leadership role effectively. These findings will be discussed below.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the themes and subsequent findings that emerged during the data analysis are discussed and linked to the characteristics of democratic leadership, the principles of a humanising pedagogy, and the advantages of collaborative teaming. The themes identified were (1) leading through collaboration, (2) social justice and empowerment, (3) a compassion to serve, and (4) self-care to self-empower. A brief discussion of each of these themes follows.

Leading Through Collaboration

The data revealed that the authors placed a high value on collaborative leadership. The following quotes from our data supports this view: Heloise said: "I collaborate with my team in merging their personal goals with that of the department so that we can collectively achieve the departmental goals." Helena also referred to this in the following statement:

> *As a leader, I need to be able to give my team the freedom to openly discuss their views and to feel that it is a safe environment for them to share their concerns. I like a lively discussion and to listen to different opinions as we collaborate.*

Freire (1970) reminded us that the humanising of education helps humans to understand their place and role in the world. This facilitates the way humans think, act, and engage with others and themselves. Engaging with others refers to collaboration that involves the sharing of responsibilities, as well as information and resources that support working towards a common goal (Owens & Wong, 2021). Using collaboration supports Wood's (2004) decisional democratic rationality because it encourages active participation and allows for influencing decision making. Collaboration in our respective teams assisted us to establish full and equal participation of team members in the faculty.

The process of collaboration we follow in the faculty is democratic and participatory, striving to include all voices, encouraging human agency, and human capacities to support change. Muki highlighted: "My relationship with my team members is open, honest, and inviting for new and fresh ideas." Tobeka agreed, saying: "We have a collaborative relationship; we work constructively when we have a common project/challenge with a common goal."

As leaders, we design staff learning around creating a vision for our faculty, informed by stories and ideas collected from students, lecturers, and community members. Heloise reflected on this process as follows: "I inspire, motivate, and encourage team members to work together in order for us to reach specific goals and to ensure we realise our vision." Muki responded by saying: "I do not interfere with the work that my team does as long as it reflects the values of the institution and is aligned to the vision and mission of the faculty." We found that increased collegiality amongst faculty members provided moral support and promoted confidence as well as enhanced our focus on teaching, learning, research, and engagement. In our engagement, we found that the leader and the team members are

equal parts of the same goal, and that we merely have different tasks and responsibilities. Darder (2006) emphasised that Freire had believed that individuals have an ability to reconstruct themselves in collaboration with others.

We are of the opinion that a learning leadership environment reflects emancipatory conditions. A critical safe space has been created in the faculty for team members to voice their opinions and engage in transformative action. A collaborative approach to humanising pedagogy allowed us the opportunity to see the possibilities, the challenges, limitations, and barriers—not only for ourselves as leaders, but also for our team members. As leaders, we are faced with real-life problems, and we have to encourage our teams to seek solutions that will support the common good. The solutions are shared amongst us, and we are encouraged to continue the process of questioning, ultimately seeking the best solution for the collective.

Dialoguing is imperative to the process of collaboration. In our faculty, as Heloise mentioned:

> *I am able to learn from the other team members in how they do things in their departments. We are honest and frank with each other and this also encourages self-examination and contributes to growth and development. We call each other out if one of us does something that is out of line. We collaborate in solving problems.*

Deidre emphasised the following: "Allowing your team the liberty of voicing their opinions, even disagreeing with you, is necessary—it gives them a sense of belonging and fosters good working relationships." She further highlighted: "I realised I lacked the sense of introspection; it left me extremely exhausted because I was helping others without helping myself." We realised through our engagement with our team members that humanising leadership cannot be packaged and sold as a one-size-fits-all model; we reached this realisation through continuous reflection and action.

Social Justice and Empowerment

The data suggest that we are aware of our critical role in transforming leadership practices through empowerment. The data confirms that we are aware of divisions and inequalities caused by our apartheid past and that we strive to create safe spaces for equal participation in decision making. The following extracts from the data serve as reference: Muki said:

> *My leadership style is democratic, caring, and persuasive. I like that people should have an opinion and contribute to matters that are discussed before a matter is decided upon. I like to delegate responsibility so that others get a chance of having the responsibility to lead in a certain area.*

In similar vein, Deidre stated: "I follow the path of delegative leadership by delegating certain tasks to certain team members that utilise their strengths to achieve both individual and departmental goals."

Higher education institutions are known as spaces that foster inequalities. We consequently had to courageously address difficult or complex topics that are often ignored in the workplace such as privilege, racism in the workplace, and racially biased hiring and promoting practices. It is important for faculties to create humanising spaces that promote the values of freedom and fairness for all. In our faculty, we have employed the courageous conversation strategy (Zinn & Rodgers, 2012) to help us determine and create awareness of who we are as well as the numerous social identities we construct in the workplace. This strategy embraces Wood's (2004) discursive democratic rationality and allows us to engage in open deliberation and dialogue. We used the courageous conversation

strategy to examine our behaviours, attitudes, feelings, and ideas and how these align with core values of the faculty and the institution. Deidre highlighted the importance of social justice as follows:

> *I would like to believe that my interaction with my team members is embedded in the principles of fairness, justice, transparency, and, above all, humanity. Thus, I engage in courageous and open conversations with staff about challenges and concerns they might have.*

Heloise reiterated this in the following statement:

> *It is important to be aware of the realities of injustice and how it is perceived. It is further important to address these injustices and the perceptions thereof by openly and honestly engaging staff in courageous conversations regarding the issues that concern them and to collectively construct a way forward.*

We live in contradiction because many of us come from a monocultural experience at home, to the faculty space that is characterised by diversity regarding nationalities, race, culture, religion, class, gender, and sexual orientation. This creates a challenge because we lack practice in effectively engaging across cultures. To engage with the differences and the challenges this poses, leaders need to employ effective listening skills and ask critical questions. It further requires leaders to pause and reflect on the complex nature of human dynamics that occur at the junctures of diversity (Owens & Wong, 2021). In this vein, Tobeka emphasised:

> *The heart of leadership for me is about authentic growth, vulnerability, and courageous transparency. We can nurture a rare opportunity to dare to venture into the hearts of those we lead. I know my team members and I have a genuine interest in their well-being as well as that of their loved ones. I make time to get to know the strengths and weaknesses, limitations and challenges of my team members.*

Freire (1970) and Darder (2006) reminded us that that we are not complete as human beings, but that we are in a continuous process of becoming. Our becoming happens in an environment where we have to navigate, higher education policies and practices as well as our own thoughts, which have been conditioned through a culture of competition to approve of and support inequalities.

As leaders and teams, we need to create environments that encourage equal opportunities for all, regardless of race, gender, religion, physical, or learning ability. Empowering leadership creates a relationship between formal leadership and the informal processes that can lead to novel problem solving and transformation for the good of all (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). We realised that enabling leadership amongst racially and culturally diverse individuals can facilitate the creation of novel forms of knowledge, skills, abilities, and solutions needed for our faculty to move forward in the most adaptive way possible (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). Engaging in these courageous conversations also enabled us to reflect on inequalities in the community we serve, and to strive towards social justice in our engagement projects. Usman et al. (2021) postulated that focused engagement allows leaders to direct processes along the required path by emphasising connection through mutually beneficial collaboration. In her reflection, Heloise also referred to the community that the university serves, and how important it is to link what we do in the faculty with societal needs in order to bring about true social transformation. This highlights the fourth advantage of collaborative teams, namely, that of working towards the common good.

A Compassion to Serve

Globally, we have seen an increase in the focus of leaders to serve with compassion. Reflecting on our leadership styles in this research was intentional in order to identify whether our leadership styles were humanising in nature or not. The results of the study show that our leadership styles are true examples of caring and nurturing leadership, and being responsive to the needs of our team members as the following statements show:

> *Tobeka: I am sensitive to the needs of those I work with and those I lead.*
>
> *Helena: My staff members' wellness is very important to me, and I encourage them to take care of themselves emotionally.*

Offering support by being vulnerable as a leader has appeared as a strategy by means of which to foster the confidence of staff members to be vulnerable as well, and to open up about their struggles. There is agreement in literature that support in the workplace is one of the important ways of enacting a compassionate response in times of crisis (Poorkavoos, 2016; Tehan, 2007). Compassion at work has been viewed as promoting the social and psychological connectedness of workers (Poorkavoos, 2016). Research also indicates that there is a close link between social connectedness and personal well-being (Tehan, 2007).

In a faculty that is guided by a humanising pedagogy, it is not surprising that the characteristics of compassion were more evident than the other three themes in the results of this study. Even though it is natural for women to be nurturing and compassionate, one commends the conscious efforts to create an environment that is supportive to the growth of the individuals and teams, and where people feel safe and secure in having their opinions listened to and considered (Walters et al., 2021). Our leadership styles show that we are inclusive in that we acknowledge the input of the members of our teams because they are people and, as such, have voices. Practising compassion emphasises Wood's (2004) therapeutic democratic rationality given that it encourages staff involvement and contributes to staff wellness. The following statements from our reflective freewriting serve as reference:

> *Heloise: I seek the opinions of staff member before making decisions.*
>
> *Helena: I like to discuss issues with my team.*
>
> *Muki: I like that people should have an opinion and contribute to decision making.*
>
> *Deidre: I firmly believe in involving team members in decision-making.*
>
> *Tobeka: I try to listen to what everyone says.*

According to Hougaard and Carter (2018), team members want to be engaged, and appreciate being involved in decision-making—contrary to what many leaders and managers believe. They further postulated that involving team members in decision making and asking them for their opinion contributed to staff well-being and subsequently correlated with contentment, a factor associated with the retention of staff.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the link between leadership and compassion had been questioned (Walters et al., 2014), however, the pandemic revealed the necessity for leadership styles that were compassionate in nature because they enhance staff morale and contribute to a positive work environment (Ngambi, 2011). In the years 2020 and 2021, more than ever, leaders needed to lead from the heart as the country and the world were plagued by grief and the loss of workers, co-workers, and

loved ones. The physical, emotional, and mental struggles brought about by the pandemic were real. The lived realities of leading staff working under these stressful conditions and troubled by depression, sense of loss, and sense of isolation, amongst others, led us to think deeply about our leadership styles. The pandemic taught us the need for human-centred approaches to leadership.

Self-Care to Self-Empower

The importance of self-care was highlighted by all five authors, all believing that taking care of oneself will help one to take care of others. Self-care helps one function at one's best and it thus plays an important role in determining how one will lead. The following statements from the data serve as evidence of the value placed on self-care:

> *Tobeka: As a compassionate leader I am aware that in order to support and nurture my team I also need to take care of myself.*
>
> *Helena: My staff's wellness is very important to me, and I encourage them to take care of themselves emotionally. I try to practise what I preach by deliberately creating spaces to talk about self-care.*

Self-care is a necessary lifestyle practice for good health. Leaders who practise self-care demonstrate to their teams the importance of wellness as they make an effort to be present for their teams in a personal and professional capacity. Self-care enhances resilience because it contributes to increased energy levels and serves as motivation to feel good about yourself (Riegel et al., 2021).
Nowell et al. (2020) referred to the ethics of care as an advantage of collaborative teams, highlighting that it refers to assenting norms related to a commitment by the individual to take care and provide a service. The following responses were made by the authors, and show evidence of the ethics of care. Heloise stated: "I lead by example. I would not expect staff do something that I myself will not do." Deidre and Helena also make mention of the importance of being self-aware and learning from mistakes. According to Anālayo and Dhammadinnā (2021, p. 1353), "multidimensional self-care is important to incorporate as an essential leadership practice to facilitate a culture of resilience and well-being in the workplace."

Compassion is one of the leadership qualities valued by this team; however, one cannot have compassion for others if one does not have compassion for oneself. Walters et al. (2021) postulated that it is difficult for women to practise self-care because they feel they have to prove their value to others and work twice as hard to earn respect and acknowledgement. Women are programmed to sacrifice themselves and always support others. They need to reach the stage where they realise that self-care is vital and they should not feel guilty when they need to take time out (Walters et al., 2021). As a strong leader, you need to be able to lead by example and to take care of yourself.

Practising self-care also serves as an opportunity to exemplify the practice to your staff. A happy staff is a productive staff. Thus, we strive as leaders to instil the value of self-care in our teams. Attitudes have the ability to influence others. If a leader ignores the need for self-care, it will negatively impact their teams and subsequently influence their well-being and productivity (Riegel et al., 2021). Developing a culture of self-care contributes to the prevention of burnout amongst team members and will subsequently encourage higher levels of productivity, employee engagement, and staff morale throughout an organisation (Ngambi, 2011). We need to realise that self-care can sometimes mean that we need to delegate responsibilities to other team members, and that we cannot be the best in everything we do (Walters et al., 2021).

Bryan and Blackman (2019, p. 21) wrote the following:

> *The pressure to meet the multiple demands of higher education, alongside personal goals and diverse value-systems, can make it difficult to prioritize self-care. As such, higher education lifestyles, which are propelled by distinctive career or academic goals, may include self-sacrificing and self-compromising practices, which can lead to chronic stress.*

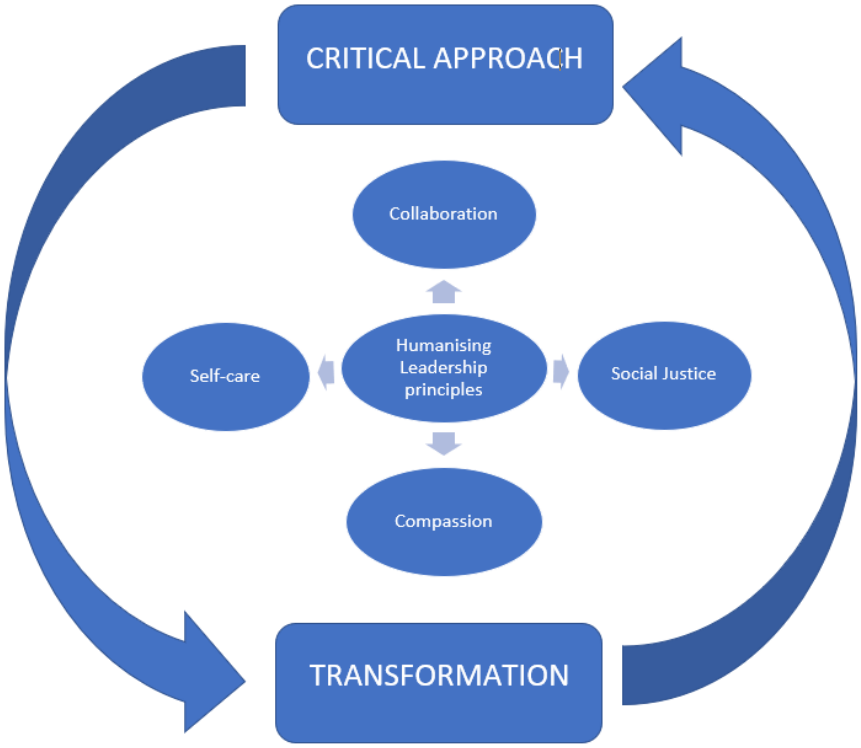
It is thus imperative that effective self-care strategies in and outside the workplace be established. Riegel et al. (2021) listed setting realistic goals, developing effective work boundaries, as well as maintaining a healthy balanced lifestyle as effective self-care strategies. We found that when it came to modelling wellness to our teams, openness and action were paramount.

A Humanising Leadership Model

This study revealed a link between democratic leadership and applying humanising pedagogy principles. The purpose of the study was to reflect on our own leadership practices and how collaborating with each other encouraged empowerment of the self and others. Darder (2021) explicated that transformative knowledge can only be built through personal involvement in collective and collaborative struggle with others. This requires an openness to the world around us, and through sustained dialogues about experiences of everyday life and lived histories.

Our reflections and subsequent findings highlighted the need for us to co-construct a humanising leadership model in which we indicate the four themes that were revealed in the study as important elements of applying humanising principles to leadership. The goal of our co-constructed leadership framework is to develop and support accountable, committed, responsive, and compassionate leaders with a strong commitment to learning and the ability to continually develop oneself and others. The advantages that we reap from this leadership approach are all strongly entrenched in the foundations of human dignity, respect, equality, and growth capacity—and they underline the importance of co-construction and social good. This proposed leadership model resides within a critical paradigm and aims to bring about transformation in leadership and, in turn, contribute to social transformation. The construction of the model is grounded in our readings and practices of a humanising pedagogy as one of the guiding philosophies at our institution. The discussion of our freewriting led us to the identification of themes that were aligned to the humanising pedagogical principles of collaboration, compassion, social justice, and self-care (Darder, 2021). Our discussions and reflection on our lived experiences helped us realise the need to share the value of applying these principles by constructing the humanising leadership model in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Humanising Leadership Model



The humanising leadership model emphasises the link between democratic leadership and humanisation. Humanisation as a strand of critical pedagogy seeks to bring about transformation, while the model illustrates that in order for this to happen, certain principles need to be applied. The principles identified in this paper are collaboration, compassion, social justice, and self-care. We acknowledge that these are not the only principles that could impact humanising leadership, and we acknowledge that all four principles do not have to be present at the same time or applied at the same intensity levels.

Our study also revealed a lack of research on the link between democratic leadership, humanising principles, and self-care. This serves as impetus for an investigation into self-care and the possibility of developing a pedagogy of self-care. A pedagogy of self-care could provide more guidelines to support leaders to take care of themselves and their teams.

Conclusion

This article shared how collaboration and humanising leadership principles can contribute to the growth of both the leadership team and the faculty. Our co-constructed model is premised on a democratic leadership style. We used narrative freewriting to make sense of how we lead as individuals and as a team. The generated data were then categorised into themes from which key leadership principles that guide the leadership process were extrapolated. Collaboration, social justice, compassion, and self-care are the themes that emerged.

The article provided a synopsis of the leadership model co-constructed and embraced by five women leaders in the faculty of education at Nelson Mandela University. This model is framed by a critical humanising pedagogy and subsequently foregrounds the value of human dignity and a fully inclusive

approach. A humanising pedagogy and collaborative leadership model thus emerged as critical in this context.

The shift from women leaders holding power to empowering each other critically, as well as the rest of faculty, through a humanising ethics of care comes through as a strong element in the study. This allowed for the co-construction of the humanising leadership model that provides guiding principles to enhance leadership practices. The model emphasises the link between democratic leadership and humanisation. It also exposes the need for further research regarding a pedagogy of self-care. This article highlighted the need for a review of leadership practices, and raises questions regarding how leadership can contribute towards equality, sustainability of the organisation, and the empowerment of leaders.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 96-113
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Grade 4 Rural Learners' Views and Learning Experiences That Address Social Justice in Postapartheid South Africa[1]

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Abstract

The complexity and dynamic nature of rural contexts and schools present intricacies for teaching and learning practices, understanding the challenges learners experience, as well as the overall educational achievements within the South African context. We argue that learning is fundamentally a social phenomenon that occurs within communities, making it important to explore the strengths, diversity, as well as learning challenges presented by the rural context to learners given that they learn in rural schools and classrooms daily. The symbolic interactionism framework was used to understand emergent meanings in the process of interacting with primary school learners, and how learners made sense of their experiences of learning in rural schools. A qualitative phenomenological research methodology was espoused to unearth learners' experiences of the rural contextual conditions in relation to learning. Photo-elicitation group interviews were used to collect data from eight learners from three different schools, and the data were analysed using a thematic approach. The findings revealed that children are aware of the conditions that shape their learning in rural schools. The information provided by the learners shows that much is yet to be done by the postapartheid government to address issues of equity and social justice through education in South Africa.

Keywords: rural, learning, learning conditions, experiences, rural schools, photo-voice

[1] Ethical clearance number: 2015ECE006S

Please reference as: Mbhiza, H. and Nkambule, T. (2023). Grade 4 Rural Learners' Views and Learning Experiences That Address Social Justice in Postapartheid South Africa. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 12(2), 96-113. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a7

Introduction and Background

The United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), especially Article 12 of the CRC, gave children the right to express their views and be heard on all matters affecting them (Robinson, 2014). Due to the dearth of research in rural education, one of the main goals of this study was to understand the views and learning experiences of Grade 4 rural learners. The CRC clearly stated the expectation for schools to ensure the views of children are "heard and valued in the taking of decisions which affect them, and that they are supported in making a positive contribution to their school and local community" (United Nations, 2008, p. 5). We also promote the involvement of children in the process of knowledge construction in order to get their honest views on how best to improve learning in rural primary schools. Learners who reside in rural schools continue to experience complex teaching and learning inequities related to textbooks, chalk/white boards, chairs and tables, pens and pencils—things that could be taken for granted yet play a major role in learner performance. The Republic of South Africa's (RSA, 1996a) Constitution and the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b) stated that every South African learner should have access to learning and teaching, similar facilities, and equal educational opportunities (Singh, 2022)—which remain wishful thinking for many rural learners. Therefore, a particular focus is given here to how contextual elements play a role in defining the learning experience.

Usher (2018) stated that if we accept that constructing meaning from experience may be a more useful way of thinking about learning, then we are forced to recognise the active part the learner must play in that constructive process. The learning experience is a process in which situations can influence the way we are constituted in a certain time (moment of life) and space. Given that learning can happen in different social contexts, time, and space, in this study, we clarify that we are interested in the learning experiences in the primary schooling as context, and in the rural school as learning space. Even though some progress has been made since the end of apartheid in 1994, addressing social justice in the education system has been a challenge—particularly for the rural communities, schools, and learners. In postapartheid South Africa, rural schools continue to experience inequity in resource allocation, unequal access to funding opportunities due to remoteness, inefficient continuous professional development, and reluctant visits by district officials due to distances to schools (Mbanda & Ncube, 2021). These issues affect learning for rural learners because they compromise infrastructure and learner transportation (which can affect learners' consistency in school attendance) and teacher's professional development and practices.

Teachers usually tend to reflect on young children's successes and failures from their own perspectives, forgetting that children might attribute their successes or failures to entirely different factors (Bandura, 1977). According to Grau and Whitebread (2012), little is known about how children evaluate their own learning—even though this skill is critical for effective learning. Marcus et al. (2018) stated that children are renowned for having fantastic imaginations and have an enormous potential to think outside the box and produce truly innovative designs but are usually hindered by a strong sense of what the adult wants to hear. In this study, we allowed children to take pictures in order to see and understand rural schools and classrooms from their viewpoints, and to gain insight into learning experiences from their positions. The learning context plays a significant role in how children engage with learning tasks and situations. Colliver and Fleer (2016) posited that children's perceptions of the learning context influence their beliefs about themselves, their confidence, and their schoolwork. In turn, these beliefs and this confidence can influence the nature and extent of their engagement with learning tasks and situations. We focused specifically on Grade 4 learners because

of the current research gap on this cohort in a rural context, and because we believed that they could talk about their own views and learning experience. We acknowledge the complex challenges of researching children's views and experiences due to age and cognitive development differences, diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and experiences, as well as communication barriers. We seriously considered these complexities during the conceptualisation and data generation process and, for that reason, we used photos to make it easy for learners to talk about what they have captured.

Research has predominantly focused on teachers' experiences and teaching, resulting in a preponderance of teaching knowledge and positioning of teachers as experts of that knowledge, possessing the right to speak about teaching and learning processes. There is a paucity of research that interacts and presents primary school learners' views as experts on their own knowledge and experiences of learning, recognising them as individuals capable of speaking about and acting upon their experiences and knowledge (Pinter et al., 2013). Our position was to interact with rural primary school learners as active participants in the research on learning in rural classrooms. It was important for us to ensure that we did not trivialise the learners' involvement or let them become mere novelties, but to value their views and experiences and respect their involvement in ways that recognised children's thinking (Danaher, 2020). This is one way of redressing the overlooked critical discussion with primary school learners who experience the day-to-day conditions of learning in rural schools, as well as addressing issues of social justice as prioritised in the National Development Plan (RSA, 2012). Considering that discussion, this paper sought to answer the following research questions:

- What are the Grade 4 learners' views of learning in rural schools?
- What are the learners' experiences of learning in rural classrooms?
- What are the factors that influence learners' views and learning experiences?

The Research on Children's Perspectives

Research focusing on children's perspectives aims to unearth children's experiences, ways of thinking, ways of knowing, as well as ways of acting within a specific context (Ford et al., 2017). The research on children's perspectives resonates with the notion of child-centredness, which emphasises the need to view and treat children as active subjects (Graham et al., 2015; Powell et al., 2013). Previous studies that adopted child perspectives have highlighted the capability of children to act actively as producers and co-producers of research knowledge (Carter & Ford, 2013; Honkanen et al., 2018), a position we have taken seriously in this study. According to Honkanen et al. (2018, p. 184), "the well-being of children and young people has typically been studied from the adult's point of view, and traditional adult-centred research orientation has led to an adult's interpretation of child and childhood." We problematise the positioning of children and young people in research as individuals who are incapable of reflecting on their own experiences, and support researching with children in order to gain insight into their views and experiences, which continue to be marginalised by education researchers in South Africa. This resonates with studies that advocate the need to place children centrally for researchers who seek to understand their experiences and perspectives on schooling, learning, and well-being (Fattore et al., 2012).

In light of the above discussion, Farrugia (2014) posited that place and space are integral parts of children's lives given that they live and interact within specific cultural, geographical, historical, and situational contexts. Thus, awareness of their views about rural schools and classrooms as specific places and spaces that could influence their day-to-day learning experiences is important in order to gain insights into their everyday schooling lives, and to advance the understanding of education that children receive (Christensen et al., 2015; Nansen et al., 2015). We need information about primary

school learners' experiences of learning in rural schools and classrooms, and how they see their schooling environment, so contributions can be made at policy level for the improvement of rural schools. In this regard, recent studies have emphasised the importance of listening to children's views on matters that are relevant and affect them as individuals as well as their communities (Christensen et al., 2015). Although researchers have shown a developing interest in children's experiences internationally, there is dearth of research within the South African context that has highlighted children's voices, especially in rural contexts and rural schools (Mbhiza, 2021; Nkambule, 2017). In this paper, we positioned primary school learners as experts of their own lives, researching with them to explore and problematise the nature of rural learning conditions and rural education.

Situating Research on Children's Learning Experiences

There are few studies that have explored children's views and learning experiences in rural South African schools. We decided to focus on children's views in order to understand their lived learning experiences as participants and learners in rural classrooms. As mentioned earlier, it is important to consider children's learning experiences because much of the research has been done from teachers' perspectives (Poulou, 2017), and has overlooked the important role that children play in their learning experiences. Children should have the right to be heard and are their own experts in describing their experiences and the impact of those experiences on their performance (Fattore et al., 2019; Simmons et al., 2015). Given that existing research has not focused on rurality, we believe it is important to understand how a rural learning context is experienced by children, and the role it plays in shaping their learning experiences. Such research has not been prevalent in South Africa because of the dominant focus on teachers' perceptions and experiences of teaching in rural contexts. Learning from the experiences of children is essential for teachers to understand their teaching from the everyday experiences of the children, and to enhance teachers' practices in context of children's views.

According to Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir (2016), a substantial body of research has argued that young children are incapable of understanding what learning is, and of reflecting on their own learning process. In addition, the practice of defining learning and reflecting on its processes has historically excluded children from the conversation. Murris and Muller (2018) stated that modern schooling positions children as knowledge consumers, not producers, because it is assumed that they are (still) developing, (still) innocent, (still) fragile, (still) immature, (still) irrational. Earlier, Hopkins' (2008) study with 180 junior school learners in Years 3–6 (ages 7–11 years) sought to elicit learners' views of learning and found that learners from all four year groups viewed the chance to be active learners and involved in hands-on activities as important contributory factors to the enjoyment of learning in school. In addition, learners became demotivated when they considered teachers over-talked, and expressed their perception that most teachers "talk too much," and such over-talking is the reason that learners have insufficient time for completing work in lessons: "She tells us again and again, then we run out of time" (Hopkins, 2008, p. 397). John-Akinola et al.'s (2014) study of 248 primary school learners aged 9–13 years reported that positive interpersonal relationships and feeling a sense of belonging were two aspects of their school experiences that were significant in contributing to learners feeling they were members of the school community.

In a study involving forty 3 to 6-year-old children from a Brazilian early childhood education and care school and Finnish day-care centres, Ferreira et al. (2018) used photographs to investigate children's perceptions of their learning experiences in the contexts of early childhood education. Their findings showed that the children's perceptions of learning were intimately connected to how they explored objects and places, indicating that children created opportunities to freely construct knowledge based on their appropriation and multiple uses of objects. This shows that children not only reproduce meanings, but produce them; they do not just adapt to the modification and (co)construction of social values and norms—they also influence them. This was an important study to consider for our study,

because we also gave learners small cameras to take photographs of their schools and classrooms to understand the role the infrastructure plays in their learning experiences in such contexts. A relatively large study in Ireland, involving 1,149 primary school children aged 6–12 years, explored learners' attitudes towards, and experiences of, science in school (Murphy et al., 2021). Findings from that study resonated with those from other studies (Grau & Whitebread, 2012; Leinonen & Venninen, 2012; Tirosh et al., 2012) exploring learners' general views on learning in primary schools. They indicated that learners enjoyed and engaged with hands-on science and would like science lessons to involve more experiments and less writing. Learners also expressed a preference for working collaboratively with a friend in science, rather than on their own, and appreciated the benefits to learning when working collaboratively.

Theoretical Framework

The espoused theoretical framework for this article is symbolic interactionism, which enables the examination of how learners interact within their contexts. Blumer (1969), who coined the term "symbolic interactionism," was Mead's student and asserted that humans interact with things based on meanings they ascribe to those things. For symbolic interationism, the meanings we ascribe to things come from our interactions with others and society. Blumer (1969) posited that "the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances" (p. 47). Mead's contribution was in the development of self, especially in childhood, where he detailed how the child learns to take the role of the other, which is important in our study, because Grade 4 learners are still considered to be children (Mead, 1943, in Fink, 2016). We used photos as symbols to understand how learners communicate their views and learning experiences, thus developing meanings. The primary premise of this framework was the need to understand the meaning making that occurs through complex interactions within specific contexts (Blumer, 1986; Lifumbo, 2016), and the subjective meanings Grade 4 learners give to their experiences of learning in rural schools. Symbolic interactionism comprises three key principles: meaning, language, and thought (Lifumbo, 2016). Meaning is significant to human thinking and behaviour because humans act towards other people and objects based on the meanings they attribute to those individuals and objects (Lifumbo, 2016). Accordingly, the experienced conditions of learning in rural schools are symbolic because they do not possess meanings on their own. Learners ascribe meanings to rural education in their own ways as they experience what it means to learn in those contexts and schools. In this article, we do not view the specific conditions to be universal; rather, the meanings that learners attach to their lived rural experiences are dynamic, generative, and space and time specific.

The second principle of symbolic interactionism is the significance of language in the process of meaning making because it is through language that humans negotiate meaning through social symbols (Denzin, 2017). According to Vygotsky (1978), children accumulate language as they grow up in a society and mediate the kind of understanding they can form or construct. This means that language, in its different forms, constitutes the major symbolic tool appropriated by children and it shapes their views and understanding of learning experiences. According to Mead (1934), there is a relationship between thought and language because thought develops into action through language. This means that thought transforms the interpretation of the objects in the environment, using language in discussions and conversations. In this paper, the principle of language is important because it allows information about the rural learners' thoughts as they describe their views and experiences of learning within rural schools. Smit and Fritz (2008) stated that thoughts modify the symbols an individual encounters within their environment, and language reveals their thoughts and provides meaning and positionality, which is negotiated through symbols upon which the learners acted in the current study. In view of this, gaining insight into primary school learners' learning experiences, thoughts, and meanings of social condition using language are important in rural schools.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the subjective experience of the social actor (an individual) is a tool for analysis in understanding a particular organ of society—the school as a social organ for this paper (Stryker, 2017). Rural learners interact socially and adjust their behaviour in response to other people's actions and, as people interpret the actions of others, they adjust their own actions and behaviour. Thus, it becomes important to make sense of rural primary school learners' actions and interactions within an environment, using language that presents specific conditions of learning within rural contexts and schools. Thus, in this paper, we consider that learners are socialised as active beings and actively construct meaning in their social world, hence creating their own social reality relating to the learning conditions they experience (Carter & Fuller, 2016).

Furthermore, Blumer (2018) posited that the basic premise of symbolic interactionism is the understanding that events cannot be seen as purely objective but are impacted by the meanings social actors ascribe to external stimuli. Considering this, we believe that researching with learners to understand their lived experiences is essential to help us identify and understand specific conditions in rural schools that enable or constrain the effectiveness of their learning. For this paper, it was therefore important to allow learners to identify objects in their particular school that they were happy with as well as those they regarded as constraints to effective learning. We also paid attention to the specific meanings and interpretations learners ascribed to specific objects during our interactions and discussions.

Research Methodology

This study used the qualitative phenomenological design to explore Grade 4 learners' views and learning experiences in their natural setting, while making sense of the phenomena within complex, locally constructed realities (Qutoshi, 2018). Phenomenology explicates the meaning people attribute to everyday experiences—which were the ways in which the learners live in relation to a phenomenon (Vagle, 2014). Thus, knowledge is not viewed as universal truth but as a subjective understanding of reality we gathered through observation and interpretation. In our study, we used a qualitative phenomenological research methodology to explore Grade 4 rural learners' experiences and views of learning in rural schools and classrooms. The focus in phenomenological study is placed on the individual's lived experiences, rather than on the world as something detached from the person (Seamon, 2018). In our study, this meant understanding the nature of rural schools, specifically learning in rural classrooms as experienced by the learners.

We describe things as mentioned and represented by the learners—the way that rural learners experienced the conditions of learning in their schools—and looked for meanings embedded in their experiences. An understanding of the rural learners' world was the focus of the study because we believe that children make choices that are bounded by the specific conditions of their daily lives (van Manen, 2017). We believe that the social reality of learning in a rural context, as well as the meaning of the phenomena, are entrenched within the conscious experience of the learners. Accordingly, we allowed the learners to take photographs about aspects they loved about their schools as well as those they felt constrained the effectiveness of their learning, and we subsequently talked about issues related to these during our interviews (Carter & Ford, 2013).

Photo-Elicitation Interviews

In our study, we used child-centred photo-elicitation interviews to facilitate the generation of quality data with rural primary school learners. This method was helpful because it liberated the children's ability to express their views on conditions of learning in rural schools (Carter & Ford, 2013). We believed that the traditional methods of data generation, such as individual and focus group interviews, would constrain the depth and quality of data generation due to factors such as the

children's reliance on verbal skills to answer questions, and their need to respond promptly to questions with no referent to aid their thinking (Miller, 2016). Photo-elicitation interviews as a data generation tool is based on the use of photographs that are supplied by researchers or the participants during conversations about the subject under scrutiny. In the current study, we gave learners cameras for approximately an hour to take photographs of the things they believed helped their learning, as well as things they felt limited their learning in their schools. After these activities, we engaged in photo-elicitation interviews about their different photographs. We used the photographs as visual inventories of different objects, artefacts, and depictions of events that the learners regarded as either positive or negative in their learning. The photographs helped us to generate an in-depth understanding of the conditions of learning in rural schools, and further allowed us and the learners to explore meanings about the conditions that were generated through learners' photographs (Mandleco, 2013).

Furthermore, the use of photographs with the children facilitated communication, resulting in detailed discussions with the learners about the conditions of learning in rural schools, and bridged the gap between the researchers' and participants' worlds because understanding was anchored in the photographs (Wells et al., 2013). This method helped us to explore the rural learners' lived experiences, critically examining things that are of importance to the learners, and allowed us to explore areas that we might otherwise have overlooked if we had only used the traditional adult research approach (Meo, 2010; Miller, 2016). Allowing the learners to provide and dictate the contents of the images that the conversations revolved around helped "to reduce the researcher bias embedded in the selection of specific images, subjects, and themes used in the interviews" (Lapenta, 2011, p. 206). The use of learner-driven photo-elicitation, and in accordance with symbolic interactionism, power dynamics between researchers and participants were altered because we allowed the learners to define what was important rather than what we thought was important. Thus, we conducted the study *with* primary school learners, rather than *on* them and *about* them because we considered the learners as legitimate and capable knowledge-producing agents (Grant, 2017). This process created a strong connection between the practices of photography and photo-elicitation to present in-depth insights into learners' experiences and views about learning in rural schools and classrooms. Even though it is an effective research method for the study, it was time consuming for the learners because they had to move around to identify appropriate symbols, make sense of them, talk about through reflection, and link them to their views and experiences of learning. The interpretation of the photos was done by the learners given that they gave meanings to the pictures, and our analysis and meanings were taken from the way learners talked about the pictures.

Data Analysis

We used a digital recorder to capture all the conversations with the learners, after having obtained consent from the parents and themselves. The initial stage of data analysis involved reducing the data, guided by the research questions. During this analysis stage we generated codes and developed them into key themes that we grouped together to form the final themes for discussion. We used a prior and emergent codes because they allowed us to work with the wealth of data in its entirety. In essence, we engaged in the following stages of data analysis: data reduction, consideration of plausibility of data and coding, conversion and clustering, verification with each group of learners and, finally, factoring. This process enabled in-depth understanding of learners' experiences and views about the conditions they encounter within rural schools and, in turn, how such conditions facilitate or constrain learners' effective learning.

During the analysis of the interviews, we focused on the learners' explanations of the content of their photographs and reasons for taking photographs of specific objects. This approach enabled us to understand some of the reasons for the learners to take photographs and the meanings ascribed to

the photographs. Without the learners' explanations for the taken photographs, the ascribed meanings would have been misinterpreted (Mandleco, 2013; Miller, 2016). We transcribed the interviews separately from the photographs so the interview transcripts did not have context until we viewed the photographs that corresponded with learners' reflections. Accordingly, when the photographs and interview transcripts were viewed simultaneously, we created codes of learners' explanations and reasons for taking specific photographs as instrumental and symbolic in understanding their views and experiences of learning in rural schools and classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

We considered all the ethical processes in the study. All parents, the Wits School of Education, the Mpumalanga Department of Education, and the learners gave permission. For the learners, teachers assisted by explaining the nature of the study and the volunteering process to participate in the study. What was important throughout the data generation processes was reflexivity on how we developed the process in a way that facilitated opportunities for primary school learners to engage in the study. To ensure anonymity of the information that was provided by the learners during the photo-elicitation interviews, we used pseudonyms to conceal the identities of the children and their schools.

Findings and Discussion

The quality of rural education in South Africa has been in the spotlight in recent years (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). The concern has been on how the quality of education rural learners receive can be improved. The Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005, p. viii–ix) had earlier argued that "the great majority of children in rural poor communities are receiving less than is their right in a democratic South Africa." Although the often-cited challenges for rural schools in South Africa include large class sizes, limited learning and teaching resources, and under-qualified or untrained teachers, learners in the current study identified other challenges that impinged on the effectiveness of their learning. The following sub-sections present and discuss the challenges identified by the learners through photographs and conversation-elicited interviews. These deal with the conditions of the school buildings and learning in multi-grade overcrowded classrooms.

The Conditions of the School Buildings

Photographs of decaying school buildings, broken windows, and classrooms without doors demonstrated features of the learners' views about learning in rural schools that they believed constrain the quality of education they receive (see Images 1 to 5). The learners complained that they suffer from the cold in winter and, in summer, it rains inside the classrooms. One learner from Rivoningo described her school and classroom thus:

> *We decided to take this picture because look at our school, there are lot of broken windows, it gets cold inside the classroom and some of us don't even have jerseys to be warm. (Image 1)*

This statement demonstrates the infrastructural impediment at Rivoningo as well as levels of poverty that result in learners not having jerseys for cold days. Considering that we pay attention to the learners' meanings and interpretations ascribed to specific objects within their schools, it is important to note that the above statement reveals the interrelationship between the conditions of the infrastructure and the levels of poverty in the community. If the above statement is critically analysed, it reveals that learners do not ascribe meaning to the experiences of cold weather only to the broken windows, but also to the fact that they do not have jerseys to keep themselves warm.

When the above statement is critically considered alongside Images 1 to 5, one could argue that rural schooling contexts experience infrastructural impediments that are unique to schools located those areas in South Africa (du Plessis, 2014). According to Kak and Gond (2015, p. 13), poor infrastructure in rural schools contributes to poor learner attendance, which has a significant impact on their academic performance. In view of the learner's comment about classrooms with broken windows, broken doors, and lack of jerseys, learners might stay away from school on cold days due to these infrastructural constraints.

Image 1: Broken Windows: Rivoningo Primary

At another school, Gede Primary, learners commented that most of their classrooms are dilapidated, and they fear that one day when it rains very hard, the school buildings might collapse. Learners commented on Image 2, saying:

> *Look at this classroom, the, one day when it rains a lot the whole school will fall, and we remain with nowhere to learn in.*
>
> *When it rains, the water comes in these holes.*

Image 2: Collapsing Roof: Gede Primary

Learners at Rivoningo Primary commented on Image 3 and said:

The reason for this picture is because we can die when the classes fall, it is not safe.

This roof can fall, look at the roof, the water comes in and breaking the roof more, it can fall on us when we are learning.

Image 3: Collapsing Roof: Rivoningo Primary

These comments illustrate the safety concerns the children have about the state of their school buildings. From these comments, we establish that to leapfrog the standards of education in rural schools, good classrooms with windows and non-dilapidated walls and roof are fundamental, according to the learners. It is also important to note that these learners actively reflect on these conditions daily, and their level of awareness regarding the unconducive infrastructure points to social justice and the need for government to prioritise the improvement of the appalling infrastructure in rural schools.

Ogungbemi et al. (2014) asserted that adequate provision of infrastructure enhances the quality of life while improving the quality of basic services, which, in this context, is rural education. We argue that the infrastructural impediments identified by the learners are due to rural schools being marginalised and underdeveloped. The inequality facing rural schools is related to the special characteristics that impede resource accessibility and government service delivery while upholding inequality and social segregation through education.

The issue of dilapidated buildings was also mentioned by children from Tlanga Primary where one of the learners reflected on Image 4 saying:

I always look up to see if the roof is not falling on us, I have seen in movies buildings falling, this classroom can fall on us.

The principle of language for symbolic interactionism is important here to make sense of the learner's choice of words (Denzin, 2017). The words "I always look up" and "this classroom can fall on us" illustrate that learners spend learning time worrying about the condition of their learning environments, which they believe puts their lives at risk. It could be argued that this robs learners of learning opportunities because of divided concentration. While another person could argue that the buildings in the photographs are not the worst, it is important to remember that the events or objects cannot be seen as purely objective but are impacted by the meanings learners ascribe to the conditions of their school buildings (Blumer, 2018).

Image 4: Collapsing Ceiling: Tlanga Primary

Furthermore, learners at Tlanga reflected on Image 5 and described the condition of their toilets as follows:

> *We took this picture because our school is rotten, look at this toilet, it can collapse, or we fall inside.*
>
> *When we went on a school trip to Pretoria, we saw toilets that flush at the schools we visited; why does ours not flush? Those learners are our age and they use flushing toilets, but ta hina ta nuha [ours stink], loko u nghena u huma ukha u nuha [when you enter there, you come out smelling].*
>
> *The Grade R can fall in there, at least us, we are a bit bigger you see.*

The learner's choice of words, "our school is rotten," signifies that they consider the toilet to be unpleasant and that they are fearful that they will lose their lives. We see this infrastructural constraint as a violation of Section 29 of the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a) and South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b), which require equal access to quality education, educational opportunities, and learning opportunities.

Image 5: Pit Toilet: Tlanga Primary

Gardiner (2017) contended that the socioeconomic conditions facing rural areas impinge on the quality of education offered to rural learners. He considered the geographic marginalisation of rural areas and schools as a key hindrance to good infrastructure in those schools. This resonates with Badat and Sayed's (2014) iteration that the geographic disparities between rural and urban areas constrain the opportunities for quality and equality in educational outcomes in rural areas. Without homogenising rural schools, we argue that policymakers need to configure strategies to bridge the infrastructural gaps that exist between rural schools and their urban counterparts, especially if the urgency of ensuring social justice and transformation is seriously considered. The information provided by the learners illustrates the urgent need for national government to address these identified circumstances to improve the educational opportunities for rural learners and make education equitable across contexts. The following section focuses on learners' reflections about learning in multi-grade and overcrowded classrooms, which they believe constrain the educational opportunities they receive.

Learning in Multi-Grade Overcrowded Classrooms

Rural education research in South Africa suggests that rural schools continue to have large class sizes and a shortage of teachers (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Myende & Hlalele, 2018). Other photographs learners presented and reflected upon pointed to the learning space in terms of the size of the classrooms in relation to the number of learners in the classrooms. The learners commented that the classroom accommodation is inadequate as they are overcrowded. The overcrowded classrooms, coupled with multi-grade learning environments, were cited by learners as a hindrance to their learning. Images 6 and 7 were captured by the learners at Tlanga Primary school to depict the multi-grade learning conditions in their schools, which they view as constraining effective learning. For ethical purposes, Image 7 is not attached in this paper because it showed learners' faces. Of importance to note is that the classroom was overcrowded, with some of the learners sitting on the floor. Reflecting on Image 6, one learner stated:

> *We are learning in the same class with the Grade 3, we can hear what their teacher is saying and sometimes when we know the answer we answer, we know those things.*

Similarly, another learner commented on Image 6 indicating:

> *Our class is too full, but we don't divide because we only have small number of rooms.*

These statements reveal that the children view the conditions they learn under as not being conducive for their learning.

Image 6: Limited Number of Classrooms: Tlanga Primary

While the answering of questions by learners from a different grade could be interpreted as helpful for the lower grade, it could equally be seen as disruptive because Grade 4 learners are tending to focus on the Grade 3 learners, resulting in them missing out on the content for their own grade. The following excerpts further illustrate learners' reflections on Image 6:

> *There is many of us in one class, there is only one class for grades, so they make us learn under one room with Grade 3. I don't like that because we are learning with children.*

> *You see these numbers, there are only four grades in our school, that's what it shows . . . so when we pass Grade 4, we go to another primary school, it is not nice, they should build more classes here so we finish Grade 7 here.*

Little et al. (2006) saw multi-grade classrooms as referring to classroom situations in which one teacher teaches learners from more than one grade level in the same classroom. Similarly, Makoelle and Malindi (2014) described multi-grade classrooms as learning environments in which a single classroom space contains learners from multiple grades. It should be noted that previous studies on multi-grade and overcrowded classrooms have predominantly been from the teachers' viewpoint (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015; Kivunja & Sims, 2015; Mulaudzi, 2016), overlooking learners' views and experiences of these teaching and learning situations. The information provided by the learners during photo-elicitation interviews demonstrated that learners consider that overcrowded and multi-grade classrooms constrain effective learning. We recognise that previous studies have identified advantages of multi-grade teaching—flexible schedules for teachers, opportunities for self-directed learning, and a less formal classroom situation (Makoelle & Malindi, 2014; Taole & Mncube, 2012)—however, the situation of multi-grade learning and overcrowded classrooms in rural classrooms is not through choice but dictated by the lack of sufficient classroom accommodation. This further reinforces the need for government to address the infrastructural challenges facing the majority of rural schools in order to improve the educational opportunities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Researching with children is a limited but developing practice in educational research. In the current study, we incorporated Grade 4 rural learners into participatory research through creating meaningful

and ethical spaces to explore issues relevant to them. Using photo-elicitation interviews, we gained insight into learners' experiences and views of what it means to learn in rural schools and classrooms. Framed by the social interactionist perspective, learners' participation was built on the understanding that they are competent thinkers, social actors, and rights holders. The information provided by the learners demonstrates that rural schools should be prioritised in improving the infrastructure if the urgency of addressing social justice and equity is considered. We found it helpful to create research opportunities with young learners to explore issues that affect their learning and to actively participate in research.

It is important for education researchers to rethink spaces for children's participation in research, particularly in rural areas and schools, to gain insights into how they view their learning contexts. This implies the need to develop research studies that are built on the understanding that young learners are aware of the social objects and events that impact their learning. We argue that we need to rethink and restructure the role of rural children as partners in research and embrace the epistemological position that they can critically reflect on the issues that affect them.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 114-129
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Democracy and Inclusive Education Policy in Post-1994 South African Schools: Goal, Tension, and Struggle[1]

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Abstract

Globally, the idea of inclusive democracy is synonymous with the participation, deliberation, and representation of citizens in the management of the affairs of nation-states. In the light of this global picture, South Africa's constitutional democracy and its inclusive education policy ensure the right to education for school-going children (from foundation, to the intermediate and senior phases). Unfortunately, the zones of exclusion (i.e. difficulties to exercise the right to education) have shown that in post-apartheid South African schools, inclusive education gains have not been enjoyed by the intended recipients—the learners. This means that despite the formalisation of inclusive education policies by the state, substantive inclusion (i.e. active participation, deliberative engagement, and participatory representation) remains a distant dream for many school-going children in South Africa. Against this backdrop, the authors show that formal inclusive policy in schools in South Africa is split between social changes on one hand, and political democracy on the other. Consequently, the authors support the call for a continual struggle by (or for) educable learners who fall within the zones of exclusion in post-1994 South Africa. Ultimately, the authors argue that the realisation of substantive inclusive education depends on the protests of the excluded, who struggle in the interstices of zones of exclusion that have created and deepened the gulf between the ideal and the achievement because democratic inclusive education is at a crossroad; it is extended and dragged in opposite directions in post-1994 South Africa schools.

Keywords: democracy, participation, deliberation, representation, education, inclusive education policy, South Africa, schools

[1] Ethical clearance number: 2019ECE028M

Please* reference *as: *Seeko, L. and Mathebula, T. (2023). Democracy and Inclusive Education Policy in Post-1994 South African Schools: Goal, Tension, and Struggle. Educational Research for Social Change, 12(2), 114-129. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a8*

Introduction

As a starting point, we argue that in the Athenian prototype of democracy, participation and education are inseparable:

> *Participation . . . together with democracy and education . . . forms a three-piece suit advertising one's enlightenment and fellow-feeling, showing one's good taste and sympathy, and putting one among the pure and innocent. (Margetson, 1978, p. 35)*
>
> *Participation then is educative in that it is itself a learning process with the crucially valuable function of developing what is essentially human about persons. (Margetson, 1978, p. 40)*

It is not surprising that we find ourselves contemplating this three-piece suit, the Athenian prototype of democracy, in relation to its nature, its aims, and its character. Hence, focus on its intellectual ancestry and its future prospects in post-1994 South Africa are at the heart of this article. With that said, this article:

- provides a conceptual clarity—the interpretation and feasibility of theories of participation, deliberation, and representation as lens through which to analyse the policy of inclusion in schools
- shows that the goal of inclusive education policy vacillates between the transformative project on the one hand, and the democratic project, on the other
- asserts that the zones of exclusion point to a continuing tension between ideal (policy documents) and practice (achievement) in schools, and
- argues that the realisation of a substantive inclusive education lies in the struggle waged by those who are excluded from formal democratic schools in post-apartheid South Africa.

Methodology

According to Jaakkola (2020) and MacInnis (2011), a conceptual article that adopts a theory adaptation approach should do three key things, namely, problematise a theory, suggest an alternative frame, and formulate a new perspective. Adding to this view, Brodie et al. (2019) signified that incorporating the aforementioned aspects expands the scope of the research as well as justifies why a particular perspective is pivotal. To achieve this end from the theory adaptation point of view, this article suggests that all research is partly conceptual, empirical, and philosophical. In simple words, all research strives for conceptual clarity, contains (or should contain) a review of literature, and locates empirical research within the preferred theoretical framework. A conceptual article, proceeds only on a theoretical level characterised by the review of literature, critical analysis of policy documents, and rigorous argument. Thus, this conceptual article employs three methods of inquiry. On the descriptive side, the authors look at the origin, history, and development of democratic theory (i.e. participation,

deliberation, and representation). On the analytical side, we proffer a critical review of national legislation on inclusive education policy via the zones of exclusion in post-apartheid South African schools. Lastly, from a normative perspective, the authors find the potential "locatedness" and "usefulness" of the ideals and the achievement for inclusive education in post-apartheid South Africa. In other words, the authors' methodology is a process with three aspects. First, it adopts a preferred theoretical framework to look at inclusive education policy in South African schools (theory development). Second, it identifies challenges in inclusive education policy in South African schools (review of literature). Lastly, it presents possible alternatives to the problems of inclusive education in South African schools (rigorous argument).

Athenian Prototype Democracy: Participation, Deliberation, and Representation

This section provides conceptual clarity—the interpretation and feasibility of theories of participation, deliberation, and representation—as lens through which to analyse inclusive education policy South Africa. The origin of the concept *democracy* dates back to the Athenian prototype circa 500 BC derived from the two Greek words, *demos* [people] and *kratos* [power]. It was Pericles (450–429 BC), governor of the Greek city-state of Athens, who succinctly summed up this notion of the collective *will of the people*:

> *Our constitution is called democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. . . . We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect. . . . Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics . . . we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. (Thucydides, 1972, pp. 145–147)*

Briefly, there are three points worth mentioning about Pericles' Athenian prototype of democracy. First, in Athenian democracy, the word citizenship reflects two different formulations: citizenship is a legal status (to be a citizen), and citizenship is a practice (to act as a citizen). Second, Pericles also distinguished democracy as the rule of the people—a notion of democracy rekindled and celebrated by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 as "government of the people, by the people, for the people" (as cited in Rogers, 1984, p. 20). Third, Pericles claimed that the democratic principles of the city-state of Athens encouraged the people to participate in collective self-rule—thus showing that active participatory citizenship has educational benefits. Kreibig (2000) asserted, "we might contest Pericles' claim that 'the whole people' governed, but here is a powerful statement in support of participatory democracy" (p. 94). In the end, Pericles saluted the active Athenian prototype as being the best possible constitution in classical Greece. As we shall soon see, Benhabib (1996) defended the model of deliberative democracy as an element of Athenian democracy.

Benhabib (1996) maintained that a deliberative type of democracy gives rise to reason and guarantees pragmatic reasoning in constitutional democracies. Accordingly, the theorists of deliberative democracy argue that:

> *The institutions of this polity are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all results from processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals. The more collective decision-making processes*

> *approximate this model the more [it] increases the presumption of their legitimacy and rationality. (Benhabib, 1996, p. 69)*

As far as can be judged, deliberative democracy allows citizens to use popular participatory institutions to deliberate about issues of common concern in the polity. In the light of this, deliberative structures result in democratic legitimacy with free and unconstrained public deliberation. As interlocutors, Benhabib's deliberative citizens are considered as equals—morally and politically. Benhabib's deliberative democracy challenges Schumpeter's (1950) typical, common citizens who surrender "to extra-rational or irrational prejudice and impulse" (1996, p. 262). Giving credence to Pericles' Athenian constitutional democracy, Benhabib's deliberative democrats are also informed about general politics. As a consequence of free and unconstrained debates, citizens are able to question, interrogate, and determine the national agenda. In short, in a deliberative democracy, reason-giving and justification of collective decisions are key requirements. Of note, in Benhabib's deliberative model of democracy, members of a society's opinions are tested, challenged, examined, criticised, and rearticulated, as in parliamentary procedures.

In *The Concept of Representation*, Pitkin (1967, p. 240) advanced the idea of substantive political representation in this way:

> *The concept of representation . . . present[s] a continuing but not hopeless challenge: to construct institutions and train individuals in such a way that they engage in the pursuit of the public interest, the genuine representation of the public; and, at the same time, to remain critical of those institutions and that training, so that they are always open to further interpretation and reform.*

In the eyes of Pitkin, the term representation was fraught with tension between purpose (ideal) and institutionalisation (achievement). By disrupting this duality, a democratic participatory representative body demonstrates that 1) its citizens are able to assume control over what it does and does not do, 2) its actions have substantive content, that is, the citizens are also able to act through their leaders—far from being spectators of its actions, 3) it is accessible, responsive, and accountable to the general public—the electorate, and 4) in the spirit of genuine participation and deliberation, the people are capable of initiating government activities. In turn, the government is or should be conceived of as responding to the people unless there are good reasons for not doing so. Pitkin's concept of representation is, we think, a good illustration of how to select emissaries to a democratic participatory representative body that serves two main functions: 1) asserts that participation by Pericles and deliberation by Benhabib are not incompatible with representation—in fact, these two elements are not independent but are mutually tied to each other, and 2) affirms a maximal control of people's power over their elected representatives.

So, we have provided a theoretical framework as lens to analyse the presumptions that are evident in the policy of inclusive education post 1994 in South Africa using three criteria, namely, participation, deliberation, and representation: 1) Pericles' constitutional democracy has been shown to be self-improving and has the educational value of fostering active participatory citizens—this is a participatory criterion, 2) Benhabib's deliberative democracy promotes open, informed public conversations—this is a deliberative criterion, and 3) Pitkin's substantive political representation shows how individual citizens working within formal, outer institutions (popular participatory institutions) are able to pursue the public good—this is a representative criterion.

To all intents and purposes, a classical democratic theory framework is not premised on old-fashioned and unrealistic theoretical-impractical foundations, but is applicable to both old democracies and to

newly established democracies, including South Africa. It follows, as the authors will show in the next section, that inclusive education policy that promotes democracy, participation, and representation in South Africa generally, and in formal schools specifically, is feasible, desirable, and encouraged.

Inclusive Education Policy in Post-1994 South Africa: What is the Goal?

The attraction of Athenian prototype of democracy is apparent in the first section of the Freedom Charter,[2] "The People Shall Govern!" that stated:

> *All people shall be entitled to take part in the administration of the country. . . . All bodies of minority rule . . . councils and authorities shall be replaced by democratic organs of self-government (Congress Alliance, 1955, p. 1).*

In the main, a few points are worth stating with regards to the Freedom Charter's concept of *the rule of people*. In essence, the allusion to the people's will is a powerful reflection of prototype Athenian democracy as pronounced by Pericles. Second, it outlines the theoretical–practical basis for a democratic type of government in a unitary, non-racial, and just South Africa. Third, it visualises the power of people, including jurisdiction over elected representatives—similar to Pitkin's idea of substantive political representation. Moreover, "The People Shall Govern!" is equally unique in that it suggested that the people can self-govern; it also reiterated that "democracy is no dim and distant chimera, confined to the [Athenian] Greek city" (Pitkin & Shumer, 2000, p. 392). In the words of Sayed and Carrim (1997), "central to the notion of educational democracy in South Africa is the idea that democracy entails, and should enhance, greater participation" (p. 91). Sadly, the Freedom Charter's concept of the power and control of people—and by association, the education of people (democratic goals)—was diluted during the interregnum (the shift from the art of apartheid to the art of democracy via the art of transformation).

The concept of the power of citizens envisaged in the Freedom Charter tradition was also summed up in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA)[3] and, illustrating this point, its preamble reads:

> *We the people of South Africa, recognise the injustices of our past. We, therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice, and fundamental rights; lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by the law; improve the quality of life of all the citizens and free the potential of each person; and build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations. (RSA, 1996b, p. 1)*

In our view, there are four points worth pointing out about the Constitution. First, South Africa is a constitutional democracy that rests authority in the hands of its citizens—this is in line with the participatory element of classical democracy. Second, it is the sensible nature of South Africans as free, non-racialist, self-directing citizens that enables them to devise a social pact or laws applicable to humanity—this is a deliberative model of classical democracy. Third, the Constitution ensures maximal degree of citizens' control over the representatives—this is a representative model of classical democracy. Fourth, there is a lurking ambiguity at play here—the Constitution is torn between

[2] The Charter's preamble has the hallmarks of prototypical Athenian democracy: people's power, self-rule, equality and freedom, and it envisaged "a government . . . based on the will of all the people . . . black and white" (Congress Alliance, 1955, p. 1).

[3] From this point on in this article, this is simply referred to as the Constitution for ease of reading.

transformative goals (to rectify historical injustices) and democratic goals (to establish a just, equal, and democratic society) with roots in the anti-apartheid struggle, and as reflected in the Freedom Charter tradition. As Liebenberg (2010, p. 25) has shown, our "Constitution is simultaneously backward- [recognition of injustices] and forward-looking [establish a just society]" (p. 25). In heightening this contrast, von Holdt (2013) maintained that, "the constitution is marked by these tensions. It is a complex document reflecting the stalemate between the contending forces and the need for redistribution of power and resources in order to right historical injustice" (p. 592). The result, it is argued, is that democratic elements of the Freedom Charter are indefinitely stated, and cancelled out by the broad transformative inclination of the Constitution—and in subsequent inclusive education policies, as the reader will see.

More profoundly, in the heart of hearts of the South African Schools Act (SASA; RSA, 1996a) rests the notion of democratic model of governance including partnership. The Act created the way for democratic representative bodies known as school governing bodies (SGBs). An SGB of an ordinary public school includes the elected members [parents of learners at the school, educators at the school, members of staff at the school who are not educators, and learners in the eighth grade or higher in the school], the principal . . . [and] co-opted members. (Department of Education [DoE], 1996, p. 18)

The aim of the SGB's school democratic governance is further expressed by the Act as shown in the following quotation:

> *The governance of every public school is vested in its governing body. . . . A governing body stands in a position of trust towards the school. . . . The governing body of a public school must function in terms of a constitution which complies with minimum requirements determined by the Member of the Executive Council [MEC]. (DoE, 1996, p. 14)*

Our disquiet with the above-mentioned Act is that the provision of school governance and co-operation is unclear and not helpful for these reasons: 1) MECs are entrusted with authority to regulate the powers and functions of these participatory representative structures, 2) in performing their roles, functions, and responsibilities, SGBs do not exclude the Department of Basic Education's calling upon experts, and 3) by centring and limiting the Athenian enthusiasm for participation, deliberation, and representation, the SASA seems to favour a top-down as well as a vertical logic that weaken the democratic objectives that had their origin in the principles of the Freedom Charter. From Colebatch's (2002, p. 23) point of view, the vertical dimension with regards to education policy,

> *sees policy as rule . . . it is concerned with the transmission downwards of authorised decisions . . . the ability or capacity of subordinate officials to give effect to these decisions . . . so as to achieve this compliance.*

Put differently, the Department of Basic Education gets to decide on practices that are democratic within the school context and convey them to MECs to execute. Additionally, due to the compromise of people's power for people's education, the genuine consultations concerning school governance have become identical with a top-down form of government. As a consequence, this type of consultation, has come to exhibit what Arnstein's (1969) referred to as a *degree of tokenism*, not genuine participation, in post-1994 South African schools.

Alongside the Freedom Charter's notion of democracy, encapsulated in the Constitution and envisioned in the SASA, is Education White Paper 6 (EWP6; DoE, 2001a) on inclusive education that makes provision for quality educational opportunities for all school-going children in South Africa by

> *Maximising the participation of all learners in the culture and the curriculum of educational institutions and uncovering and minimising barriers to learning. (p. 7)*
>
> *The mobilisation of out-of-school [all] children and youth of school-going age. (p. 8)*
>
> *Focus[ing] efforts on improving the capacity of education and training to accommodate learners who experience the various forms of learning difficulties. (p. 26)*
>
> *A flexible curriculum and assessment policy that is accessible to all learners irrespective of the nature of the learning needs. (p. 31)*

In a nutshell, three points are worth underlining about EWP6 and its view on inclusive education. First, it refers to the maximal degree of learners' participation in the culture and curriculum in South African schools. Second, through active participation in school affairs, it guarantees learners deliberation on matters relating to barriers to learners in schools. Third, by mobilising children (out-of-school) and young people (of school-going age), EWP6 contributes to their genuine representation in public formal institutions in South Africa. Commendable, no doubt, but we should question whether the EWP6 vocabulary inherited from Pericles, underpinned by the principles of the Freedom Charter and linked to the SASA, circumscribes the idea of democratic participation. Furthermore, does it translate into the reality of learners' lived experiences considering that the anti-apartheid democratic ideals are "celebrated but not translated into a radical rethinking of liberation theory" (Gibson, 2001, p. 72) because they were sacrificed on the altar of a negotiated transition to democracy in South Africa? The authors' response is simple: the post-1994 inclusive education policy's conceptualisation of democratic citizenship education undermines the very goal it seeks to advance, that is, to "contribute to the betterment of the life of the people, it has to be practical"—to use Maluleka and Mathebula's (2022, p. 65) work on philosophy of education in post-apartheid South Africa.

Thus, the authors assert that the policy stance on inclusion of the learners in post-1994 South Africa can be summarised as follows: 1) Pericles' Athenian democratic energy that was apparent in the Freedom Charter was weakened during the transition from the apartheid regime to a democratic type of government, and 2) the result is that the elements of democracy were indefinitely stated and cancelled out by the general transformative inclination of the Constitution 3) because of the compromise of the rule of the people; even school democracy, as the SASA shows, resembles an elitist form of government (a degree of tokenism, not genuine participation) and 4) even EWP6 and its view on inclusive education is not spared—it undermines democratic citizenship education, that is, the right to education for all learners in the school context in South Africa. This begs, more precisely, the question of why there are so many questions, uncertainties, and debates on whether inclusion of learners is ideal or has been achieved in South African schools. Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) posited that the uncertainty that underpins effective implementation of inclusive education has, instead, shifted focus to researchers who are interested in documenting the barriers behind the failure of successful inclusive education instead of proposing a solution to learner inclusion. Given the drifting focus on how learners can be effectively included in schools, Ferguson et al. (2019) reached the conclusion that implementation of inclusive education policy has proved to be rather elusive in schools in South Africa. In a similar vein, the zones of exclusion in schools also show the tension between ideal (inclusive policies) and practice (inclusion of the learners) in South Africa's constitutional democracy, as we shall see in the ensuing discussion.

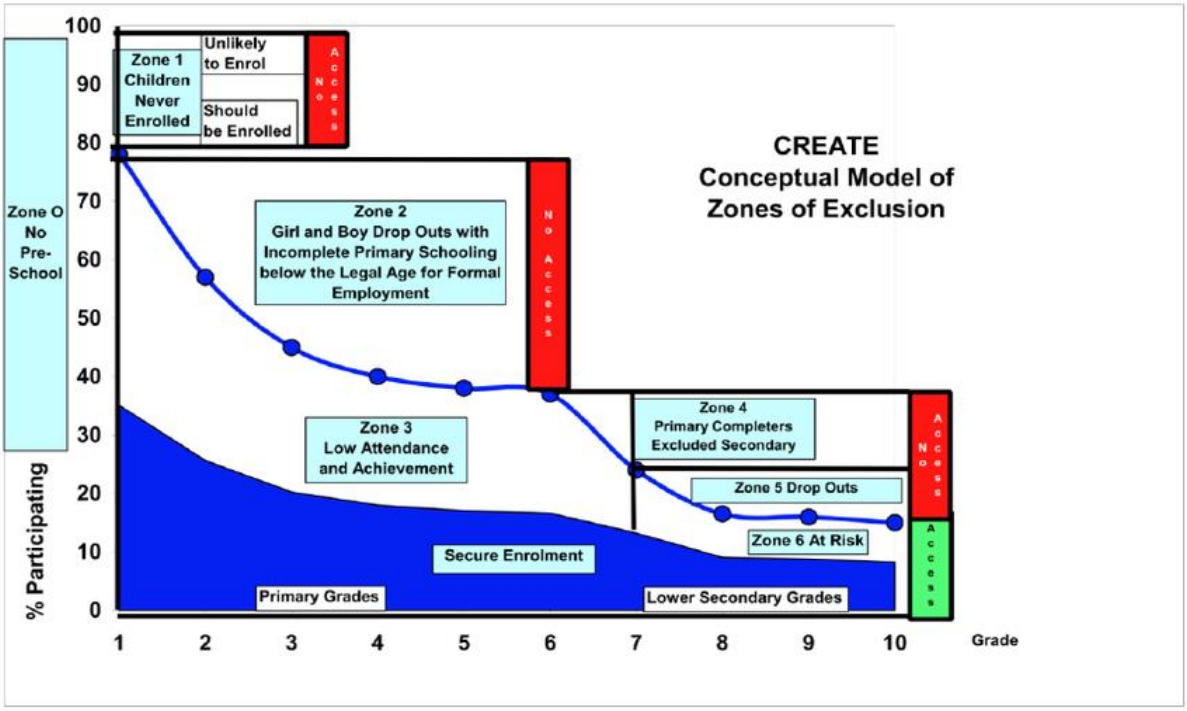
Inclusive Education and the Zones of Exclusion in Post-1994 South Africa: Where is the Tension?

As already pointed out, our disquiet with the policy on inclusive education post-1994 South Africa is its continuing tension between ideal (intention) and practice (achievement). In the words of Christie (2010),

> *the gap between the expression of rights and their delivery in practice has haunted [the] existence [of inclusive education framework]. One of the major shortcomings of formal statements of rights is that when they encounter the texture of lived experience, they easily prove to be abstract and empty. There are dangers in not recognising the limited nature of rights. (p. 5)*

There are some points worth considering about Christie's analysis of inclusive education policy encapsulated in the Constitution (with its transformative orientation envisioned in the SASA, which diluted the democratic ideals and were captured in EWP6) that undermined democratic goals. Christie (2010) warned of justiciable socioeconomic rights (for instance, the right to education, in particular) that, "are abstracted from their social context and the real-world consequences flowing from the enforcement of these abstract rules" (Liebenberg, 2010, p. 44). In line with this view, Hulme and Hulme (2012) cautioned against the "ahistorical and de-personalised accounts of [inclusive education framework] complete[ly] devoid of human experiences" (p. 44). Waghid (2005, p. 337) also alerted us to formal (inclusive education) declarations, charters, and bills of rights that are unlikely to "create space[s] in which . . . [political authorities] are able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished and awaken us to the multiple voices and multiple realities." As a consequence of this gulf between ideal and practice, we question the educational benefits of the espoused inclusive education policy in post-1994 political settlement in South Africa. Our focus now turns to the zones of exclusion in post-1994 South African schools (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Zones of Exclusion



Source: Lewin (2007)

Although he described educational access of school-age children in low enrolment countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Lewin's (2009) zones of exclusion (i.e. patterns of how learners face exclusion in schools) are also applicable in South Africa. The reasons why inclusion of learners in schools is arguably yet to be achieved since transition in 1994 lie in Lewin's (2009) zones of exclusion outlined in the diagram below. As for South Africa, Zone 0 (pre-school participation), at worst, paints a picture of those learners who are not part of the democratic education system—the absence of the practical ideal of the participatory model of democracy and its educational benefits in South African schools. At best, it goes against Pericles' maximal concept of constitutional democracy that is self-improving and fosters active participatory citizens. This shows a degree of tokenism, not authentic participation in education in South African schools. As far as can be judged, pre-school participation (Zone 0) speaks to all school-going children without access to basic learning in the South African setting. This state of affairs, in our view, curtails basic human rights, namely, access to primary education in South Africa.

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) declared, "everyone has a right to education [that] shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (p. 4). Also, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organisation of African Unity, 1999) indicated that the education of the children should be geared towards "fostering respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (p. 4). Moreover, in providing for the global and regional human rights framework, the Constitution further promised the right "to a basic education, including adult basic education and further education" (RSA, 1996b, p. 12) in South Africa. Furthermore, the SASA seeks to preserve the rights of all learners. In relation to the aforementioned policy documents, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (Department of Basic Education, 2012) also promoted "human rights, inclusivity [and] social justice as defined in the Constitution" (p. 5). From an Athenian democracy perspective, school-going children in Zone 0 form part of the unrecognised, excluded, and unheard voices of millions of learners who remain outside the ideal–practice education policy framework in post-apartheid South Africa. Let us now turn our focus to Zone 1.

Equally, Zone 1 (children never enrolled) focuses on children who, ideally, are supposed to be in school (should be enrolled) but, practically, are not (unlikely to enrol)—a clear example of the practical impotence of the representative model in South Africa's democracy schools. Although the Constitution, the SASA, and EWP6 are intended to support democracy, they fail to provide guidance where it matters, that is, the practical representative aspect of inclusion—especially in the education space that is besieged with problems of "persistent inequality, inadequately trained teachers, poor infrastructure, lack of educational materials, poor support and management, unmotivated learners, and low educational outcomes" (Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2017, p. 1). Additionally, from a socioeconomic point of view, the rights and responsibilities of a democratic school community (parents, educators, members of staff, learners, the principal, and co-opted members) are regarded as those of consumers of the commodity called education as opposed to being participants in the education ecosystem. Also, teachers face challenges in dealing with "socio-economic problems in the community, e.g. poverty and substance abuse" (Department of Basic Education, 2015, p. 37). Thus Dube's (2020) argument that the Department of Basic Education should pay major focus on devising an inclusive approach that accomodates all learners, even those in rural settings in South Africa. Given this proposal, it is, we believe, fair to observe that if we find the forward-looking Freedom Charter's concept of people's government laudable as a vehicle for the struggle for democratic representation, we must also find the backward-looking Constitution, SASA, and EWP6 untenable at best and unjustified at worst. Our focus now shifts to Lewin's (2009) Zones 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

For the purpose of this article, Zone 2 (drop-outs due to incomplete primary schooling), Zone 3 (poor attendance and poor achievement), Zone 4 (do not transit to secondary level primary, and completers excluded in secondary schools), Zone 5 (drop-outs at secondary level) and Zone 6 (school-going learners who are at risk of dropping out from secondary level) refer to learners in the schooling system struggling with educational demands of different kinds—a glaring inability to transcend the ideal–practice divide of the deliberative type of democracy in schools in South Africa. In theory, the ideal of deliberation is unrestricted and just because learners are perceived to be educational equals in school governance, namely, policy matters relating to learners' retention, attendance, and performance. If this argument is accepted, a schooling system from a deliberative perspective promotes free and unconstrained deliberation between members of SGBs (i.e. learners, educators, managers, parents, and other interested interlocutors). To elucidate the above-mentioned point, in his chapter "The Student Government," Kane-Berman (2001) asserted that, during the Soweto uprising in 1976, the Soweto Students Representative Council "revealed an intelligence, a clear-sightedness, a reasonableness, an awareness of responsibility to the [school] community" (p. 132). Seen in this light, the ideal–practice move towards democratic inclusive education is likely to 1) emphasise individual autonomy (i.e. a learner's ability and desire to act for themself), 2) promote solid school communities that encourage active, critical, and informed learners, 3) allow deliberative engagement, that is, "open and reflexive human encounters" (Higgs & Waghid, 2017 p. 9), and 4) encourage collective empowerment (i.e. thinking new thoughts, facing new challenges, and charting a new path) in South African schools.

By way of brief summary, the zones of exclusion paint a picture of an inclusive education that diluted the democratic ideals, and undermined democratic goals in South African schools. School-going children are not part of the democratic education system (Zone 0); a large number of educable children who are supposed to be in schools are not (Zone 1); and among those learners who are enrolled drop-out (Zone 2), poor attendance, and achievement (Zone 3) are rife, it is difficult for many to transit to secondary schools and those who do are excluded in secondary schools (Zone 4), at secondary level the drop-out rate is very high (Zone 5), and learners struggle to deal with academic demands placed on them (Zone 6). For inclusive education to be effective, it thus becomes essential to establish a conducive environment for "learners to . . . demonstrate readiness and practise deliberation, which would enable the education system to produce responsible, responsive and democratic citizens" (Mncube, 2008, p. 89). On a positive, hopeful note we can draw inspiration from the Freedom Charter tradition that showed that a school that embraces participatory, deliberative and representative models of democracy is likely to "represent, in the pattern of its life, the values and qualities of human relations that promote growth . . . demonstrate habits of cooperation, free communication, and reflective thinking—the values of the democratic ideal" (Wirth, 1966, p. 125). It is no surprise, therefore that inclusive education (and by implication, the zones of exclusion) is the next stage of struggle by (or for) learners denied the right to democratic education—and thus giving substance to the ideal in post-apartheid South Africa schools.

Inclusive Education and Democratic Classrooms in South Africa: Why a Perennial Struggle?

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the authors argue that the realisation of a substantive inclusive education lies in the struggle waged by those who are exclded from formal democratic schools in post-apartheid South Africa. As indicated above, protest scholars viewed democratic inclusive education as part of a protracted struggle to be undertaken on behalf of learners who are denied the right to education as fellow citizens. In support of the protest scholars' argument, Dembour (2010) insisted that we should

> *look at the . . . right [to democratic inclusive education] as claims and aspirations . . . in favour of the oppressed . . . they advocate relentlessly fighting for [this] right [to democratic inclusive education], as one victory never signals the end of all injustice . . . most of them are more concerned with concrete source of [socioeconomic] right[s] . . . in social struggles, which are as necessary as they are perennial. (p. 3)*

> *[What this means is that democratic inclusive education goes beyond] the natural scholars (i.e. democratic inclusive education is not a given), deliberative scholars (democratic inclusive education is not just agreed upon), discourse scholars (democratic inclusive education is just talked a about). But, is linked to protest scholars (i.e. democratic inclusive education is fought for). (p. 9)*

We can note four points about democratic inclusive education as a national human rights matter in South Africa. First, the protest school of thought accepts that learners in Foundation to Intermediate and Senior Phases in post-1994 South Africa are national rights holders who are excluded zonally (as depicted by the zones in Figure 1), and are in need of a meaningful and pragmatic education as a human right. Second, the advocates of the protest school maintain that human rights injustices give rise to endless demands for redress in South African schools. Third, the state's inability to realise justiciable rights is the root of an ongoing struggle to give actual form to the ideal of the inclusive education agenda of advancing equal opportunities for everyone in South Africa. Fourth, democratic inclusive education encapsulated in the Constitution, envisioned in the SASA, and captured in EWP6 is merely given (natural school), agreed upon (deliberative school), and talked about (discourse school) in South Africa. Fifth, the protest scholars call for a need to go beyond the natural given, agreed upon, and talked about approaches to fighting for a democratic inclusive education in South Africa. In Christie's (2010) words, "South Africa's anti-apartheid struggles that gave rise to [democratic inclusive education] are now out of view. [Democratic and inclusive education] rights are fought for, won, lost, and won again" (p. 6).

And hence, Enslin (2003) captured the transformative-centric and democracy-centric discourse well, when she argued that

> *South Africa's emergent conception of citizenship has to be understood in the context of the negotiated transition to democracy that was marked by the election of 1994, and also the period of struggle against apartheid that preceded it. . . . This still recent transition and the radical break with the past that it is supposed to represent means that South Africans do not yet have a settled conception of citizenship [and, by implication, for democratic inclusive education] to draw on. . . . Thus citizenship education [and, by implication, democratic inclusive education] too, is still in a formative stage. (p. 73)*

Enslin's quote shows how half-baked constitutional democracy has a direct bearing on inclusion of learners in South Africa. For example, a review on education change and transformation for the period 1994 to 2001 (Department of Education, 2001b, p. 1) maintained that post-1994, educational changes are steered by the necessity "to overcome the devastation of apartheid, and provide a system of education that builds democracy, human dignity, equality and social justice." Artiles et al. (2021) stated that, as a consequence, inclusive education came to the fore to equip educators with the tools to address the past inequalities and injustices that some learners had previously faced within the schooling system. The attention turned to a novel system of education that aims to rectify the ills of the past education system and speed up transformation into a democratic society. This transformed society, it is believed, is likely to be translated into an inclusive citizenry in South Africa. As we saw earlier, the transformative agenda neatly encapsulated in the Constitution sets the tone for the SASA and EWP6. Normatively, a post-1994 concept of citizenship allows a "transformed" citizen to move

beyond the apartheid divide, that is, race and ethnicity-based notions of citizenship in South Africa. Commendable modesty, no doubt, but the same transformed citizens are also committed to providing the tools needed for such transformation in pursuit of a revised accommodative version of a democratic citizenship education envisaged in the Freedom Charter. As Chisholm and Fuller (1996) noted, the democratic movement that dominated the National executive committee of the African National Congress

> *advanced an agenda for central and local transformation built on the foundations of [democratic] education. . . . The NETF [National Education and Training Forum] came to be dominated by representatives whose history and allegiance did not lie in the democratic movement. (pp. 704–705)*

Given this state of affairs, democratic inclusive education that is much vaunted remains a promise unfulfilled. Going back to Pitkin's (1967) substantive political representation, the tension that exists between the ideal and practice of democratic inclusive education in South African schools should be clear, and

> *should lead us neither to abandon the ideal, retreating to an operational definition that accepts whatever those usually designated as representatives do, nor to abandon its institutionalisation and withdraw from political reality. Rather, it should present a continuing but not hopeless challenge: to construct institutions and train individuals in such a way that they engage in the pursuit of the public interest, the genuine representation of the public; and, at the same time, to remain critical of those institutions and that training, so that they are always open to further interpretation and reform. (p. 240)*

If we accept, as we believe we must, that the practice gives short shrift to the ideal only at great peril when we refer to democratic inclusive education substantively, it seems that there is a need to disrupt the dichotomy between ideal and practice by creating "third spaces or interstitial spaces" (le Grange, 2007, p. 586). So, in a sense, democratic inclusive education does not simply involve the intent disconnected from the practice experiences of learners—it should (and must) transcend the ideal–practice divide to help us make practical sense of deep idealistic issues in democratic education in South Africa. Our contention is that the zones of exclusion make it impossible for learners to actively participate, engage deliberatively, or be represented substantively in South African schools. In the eyes of Engelbrecht (2020), policy guidelines that foreground inclusive education in South Africa continue to be questionable. Thus, Siegel (2014, p. 24) asked how inclusive education practitioners in a democratic South Africa can stop the suffering—that is, "self-imposed restrictions on themselves and their work." The answer, Siegel suggested, is that we should "think of [inclusive education] of education as first and foremost a part of, and responsible to, [inclusive democracy]" (2014, p. 25). Put differently, when it comes to democratic inclusive education, the concepts of democracy and education are interconnected; thus, democracy "plays mainly the role of a midwife: it helps in bringing education to birth in the way that midwives help in delivering babies" (Akinpelu, 1987, p. 167). From a democratic perspective, the struggle is waged in order to give meaning to the purpose—a constant pursuit of democratic inclusive education in South Africa broadly, and in schools, specifically.

The argument may be summed up this way. First, our disquiet with the policy on inclusive education post-1994 South Africa is its continuing tension between ideal (intention) and practice (achievement). Second, by extension, the zones of exclusion in schools also show the tension within the ideal (inclusive policies). Lastly, the practice (inclusion of learners) reveals a regressive rather than a progressive realisation of inclusive education—a dream deferred for the majority in schools. It is not difficult to understand why this is so, given that the realisation of substantive inclusive education depends on the

protests of the excluded who struggle in the interstices of zones of exclusion that have created and deepened the gulf between the ideal and the achievement because democratic inclusive education is at a crossroad—it is extended and dragged in opposite directions in post-1994 South Africa schools. The inability of formal inclusive education to realise justiciable social rights (i.e. the right to basic education) is the source of perennial struggle "to liberate and free [school-going children] from the influence of public policies that repress and attack individual liberty in post-aparheid South Africa" (Mathebula, 2019a, p. 19). In this, and only in this sense, we reorient the discourse from the history (democratic theory), the evaluation (formal policy), and the analytical (policy versus achievement) inquiries (such as, what democratic inclusive education should do when it comes to schools) to philosophical inquiry, that is, "a single, careful and systematic thinking [method]" (Mathebula, 2019b, p. 25) about democratic inclusive education in a new and inclusive South Africa. You may not agree entirely, or perhaps at all, with our conclusion, but we hope you will agree as a matter of emphasis, that the task awaiting those who are silently excluded is to 1) align themselves with protest scholars' fight for a democratic inclusive education that transcends the ideal state policy and real school experiences of educable learners in post-1994 South African schools, 2) realise that the transformative goals and democratic goals are not fundamentally incompatible but are closely and mutually linked, and 3) acknowledge the noble and urgent need to disrupt the dichotomy between the purpose and achievement of inclusive education in schools in South Africa; to contribute to the betterment of the life of the learners it has to be practical.

Conclusion

We began this article by providing a conceptual clarity—interpretation, and feasibility of theories of participation, deliberation, and representation—as lens through which to analyse policy in the context of South African education. As a noble idea, it is not difficult to comprehend the educational benefits of the Athenian prototype of democracy that 1) fosters active participatory citizens—Pericles' (Thucydides, 1972) participatory criterion, 2) promotes open, informed public conversations—Benhabib's (1996) deliberative criterion, and 3) with substantive political representation—Pitkin's (1967) representative criterion. Sadly, the democratic spirit of Pericles' popular form of democracy envisioned in the Freedom Charter was compromised on South Africa's journey to democracy during the transition from apartheid to democracy. This started with key elements of democratic theory being indefinitely stated and cancelled out by the broad transformative inclination of the Constitution. Subsequently, inclusive education policies were followed by the SASA's school democracy, which is identical to an hierarchal form of government. To top it all, EWP6 undermined inclusive education that sought to provide quality educational opportunities for all school-going children in South Africa. Of concern, is the ideal–practice divide that characterises democratic inclusive education as depicted by the zones of exclusion in post-1994 schools in South Africa. As things stand, there are three tasks awaiting proponents of democratic inclusive education in South African schools. First, to align themselves with protest scholars' fight for a democratic inclusive education that transcends the ideal state policy and real school experiences of learners in post-1994 South African schools. Second, to realise that the transformative goals and democratic goals are not fundamentally distinct but are closely and mutually connected. Lastly, to acknowledge the compelling and urgent need to disrupt the dichotomy between the purpose and achievement of inclusive education in post-1994 schooling system in South Africa.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 130-146
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Mending the Research–Policy–Practice Gap: Conceptualising Research as Social Change in Education

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Abstract

There is a widely acknowledged gap between research, policy, and practice owing to a lack of capacity to translate and mobilise research results to end-users including policymakers, practitioners, and community members. Acknowledging the divide amongst researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, this conceptual paper seeks to address the following: How do we devise ways to strengthen the research–policy–practice nexus in the education landscape such that research institutions can better attend to the needs of policymakers and practitioners? How can we facilitate greater interaction among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to create a common understanding of the challenges, needs, and what works for all stakeholders? To do this, we propose a new approach that employs research as a mechanism for social change and uses the consciousness of the self as a resource for research. More specifically, we develop a framework that facilitates the conditions for the mutual understanding of norms, operational roles, academic rigour, and policy and practice outcomes among all stakeholders. Additionally, this framework seeks to foster increased inter-stakeholder conversations and dialogues to narrow the divide between researchers and policymakers and, correspondingly, improve policy translations from academic research.

Keywords: education policy, research–policy nexus, research utilisation, research–policy–practice gap, research as social change

Please reference as: Singh, S. A., Chiam, C. L., Huang, J. S., and Hung, W. L. D. (2023). Mending the Research–Policy–Practice Gap: Conceptualising Research as Social Change in Education. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 12(2), 130-146. http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2023/v12i2a9

Introduction

The gap between research, policy, and practice has been an enduring feature of the educational landscape in many countries. Akin to numerous fields such as healthcare, social work, criminology, national defence, and others, the research–policy–practice gap in education and its attendant causes and implications in research and policymaking has been well documented and analysed (Broekkamp & van Hout-Wolters, 2007; Plank, 2011). Although there are several complex and interrelated factors contributing to this gap, it can be posited that the cultural differences amongst researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in terms of work environment, priorities for knowledge, levels of technicalities employed during communication, and the time frames for results, feature as the dominant reasons (Lewig et al., 2006; Shonkoff, 2000). Accordingly, these cultural differences are manifested in the lack of an intersubjective understanding of the systemic issues and concerns throughout the educational landscape amongst the various stakeholders involved, thereby further impeding the utilisation of research in policymaking and practice (Christakis & Kakoulaki, 2021). Moreover, systemic constraints involving the lack of existing networks or forums as avenues for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to communicate about research and to develop the relationships needed to sustain ongoing communication is another barrier to research utilisation (van der Arend, 2014).

In this paper, the main question we seek to address is: "How can we devise ways to strengthen the research–policy–practice nexus in the enterprise of higher education such that research institutions can better attend to the needs of policymakers and practitioners?" To address this, we will also analyse the following issues: What kind of framework would be conducive for research utilisation? How can we devise strategies to facilitate more inter-stakeholder conversations underpinned by an intersubjective understanding of the key issues? What social mechanisms should be present to incentivise stakeholders to participate in such a framework?

Thus, we propose a theoretical concept for mending this research–policy–practice gap through an organisational approach that seeks to enhance research translations to policy and practice. In so doing, we anticipate that our theoretical model could produce research that better attends to the needs of policymakers and practitioners in a timelier fashion. We envision that mending the research–policy–practice gap, in this case, necessitates fostering an intersubjective form of research collaboration that accords various stakeholders with an equal partnership while delivering substantive outputs for policy and practice. The partnership needs to be collaborative rather than the complementary forms they traditionally possess (Furlong et al., 2000). According to Furlong et al. (2000), complementary partnerships are limited in the level of educational discourse that occurs between partners. On the other hand, collaborative partnerships are those in which members of the partnership—whom we see

as including policymakers, researchers, and educators—work as a team toward a common professional goal. Such collaboration facilitates the development of a greater understanding of one another's role, respect for one another, and the nature of learning that can be achieved in each setting—thus, better able to eliminate power differentials.

In this regard, we advocate for a new approach, termed, *research as social change*, which centres research as a mechanism for social change. To do this, we seek to apply the principles of the design-based implementation research (DBIR) framework to the research process in order to empower stakeholders to overcome the disparate social and cultural milieus in which they operate. Therefore, we argue for an organisational framework fostering productive inter-stakeholder discourse that facilitates the conditions for the mutual understanding of norms, operational roles, academic rigour, and policy outcomes. Although this paper will draw on ideas and discussions from past empirical work, it should be qualified that this is not based on empirical research but, rather, seeks to offer a theoretical proposition that can be advanced in future research projects. Our goal, eventually, is to broaden the application of our theoretical model of research–policy–practice collaboration to contexts across the world.

This paper will be divided into six sections. The first section provides a review of the existing literature on the research–policy–practice nexus in education, in particular, the various models of collaboration among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. In the second section, we highlight the theories of situated cognition and knowledge management as the underlying ideas informing our collaborative model. We explicate, in the third section, the limitations of design-based research (DBR) and the need for a design-based research implementation (DBIR) approach whilst detailing the principles of DBIR that are integral to the research as social change framework. The fourth section provides an account of the overall process of the research as social change approach, elaborating on the three key phases of the process. The implications of our proposed framework to research, policy, and practice will be subsequently discussed in the fifth section followed by a discussion of the challenges in its implementation, and then, the concluding section.

Literature Review

In the scholarship of research utilisation, Murray (2011) identified three main models of collaboration between researchers and policymakers based on the level of deliberation among various stakeholders: i) the customer/client model, ii) the interactive model, and iii) the joint construction model. The customer/client relationship can be understood as a scenario whereby policymakers identify a policy-related problem, and the solution is sought through existing research and information. In this case, research is utilised instrumentally with minimal knowledge exchange and collaboration between researchers and policymakers (Elliott & Popay, 2000). This approach, however, has been criticised for its lack of adaptability to real-world situations (La Brooy & Kelaher, 2017) and for reinforcing groupthink in policy development because policymakers pick-and-choose existing research that validates their worldviews (Jørgensen, 2011). The exclusion of some key stakeholders in this deliberative process, correspondingly, could be detrimental to the interests and well-being of the relevant stakeholders in the long term. In the interactive model, by contrast, there is some level of interaction between researchers and policymakers, but the exchange remains technocratic and does not involve deliberation. The joint construction model, to a larger extent, is deliberatively oriented and includes a process of communication between policymakers and researchers. According to Murray (2011), in this model,

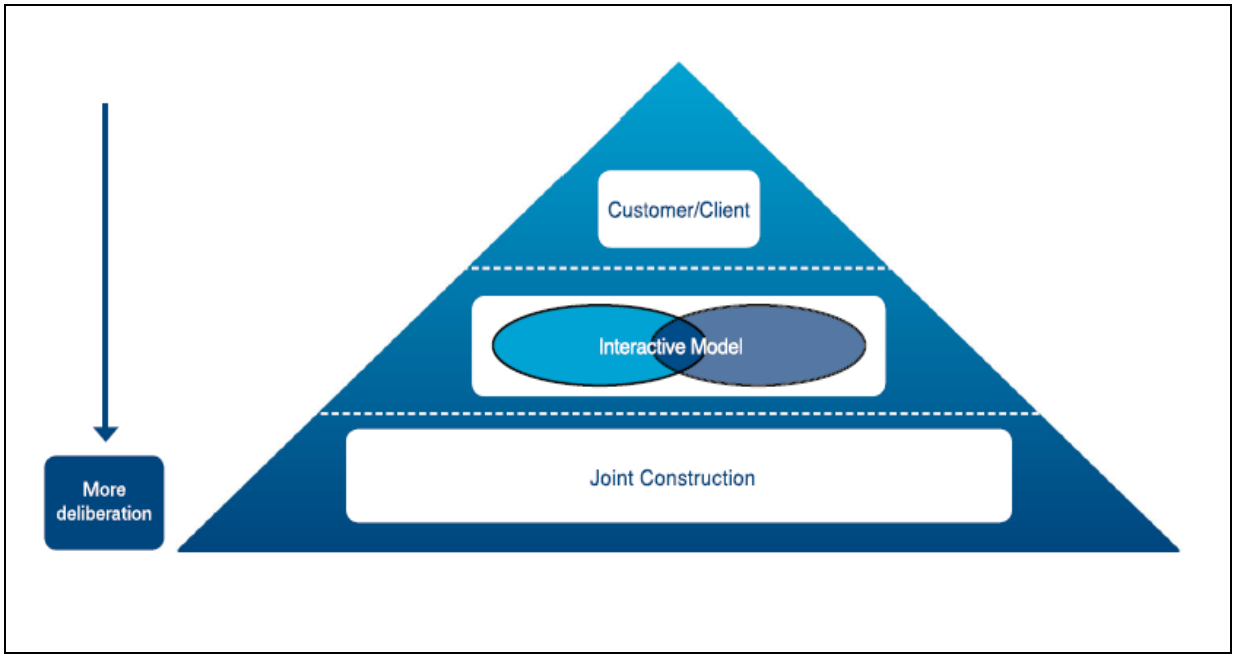
> *there is a joint construction of social knowledge-based on the dialogue between social science and the social world so that the process should include two-way communication between researchers, policymakers and citizens; examine the contexts in which research*

> *is to be implemented; and continue to interpret and recontextualise the research within the implementation context. (p. 461)*

Another benefit of incorporating researchers and other actors in the deliberative process is the increased influence of researchers and practitioners in agenda setting and conceptual rethinking of educational policies in the policymaking cycle (Jørgensen, 2011). Moreover, it accords opportunities for empowerment and ownership over policy beyond the initial stages of policy development (La Brooy & Kelaher, 2017). Figure 1 depicts the range of deliberation involved between researchers and policymakers in the three models with the customer/client model being the least deliberative and the joint construction model having the most dialogue and collaboration.

Figure 1

Murray's (2011) Typology of Collaboration Between Researchers and Policymakers



Although we are inclined to advocate for the joint construction model as an ideal framework for engagement, the limitations of this model should not be understated. Specifically, the varying skills, worldviews, and work-related exigencies amongst the key actors pose an obstacle to collaborations and joint engagement. An effective framework for a research–policy–practice nexus, therefore, should entail anticipating and pre-empting these obstacles by preparing the necessary organisational and procedural guidelines that incentivise engagement in a coordinated and sustained manner in the policy process.

Additionally, the significance of research as a process for social change should be underscored by enabling actors to influence the research agenda, methods, methodology, and the general conduct of the research process. More importantly, participation in this context should mean active, and not passive, involvement and it should be transformative (Slocum & Thomas-Slayter, 1995). Transformational participation has the potential to lead to genuine empowerment, leading to a shift in power at both the behavioural and structural levels (La Brooy & Kelaher, 2017). As such, with proper implementation, deliberative models can facilitate shifts in power toward less powerful or marginalised groups by according them the opportunity to actively participate in policy processes that directly affect them.

Research as Social Change: Definition and Significance

Within the context of education, the discourse on social change has typically focused on the role of the school system in the transformation of society. John Dewey, in his earlier works on the significance of education on social change, articulated that the main objective of education should be to nurture individuals who possess the capacity to grasp the complexity and broader implications of social issues, who are empowered to engage with such issues, and who are motivated to work towards developing real solutions to systemic problems (Dewey, 1937; Pérez-Ibáñez, 2018). Thus, social change is understood to be a process that empowers learners to be active participants in redressing systemic injustices and inequalities for the betterment of society. To Dewey (1937), democracy was an integral frame of reference that engenders critical thinking, free association, and communication with others as a means of sparking social change. Dewey (1958) noted that "society must have a type of education which gives individuals personal interest in social relationships and control and the habits of minds which secure social changes without introducing disorder" (p. 99). While we concur with Dewey's stance on the role of education in endowing individuals with the critical attributes to advocate for social change, we contend that democracy may not be an appropriate frame of reference in all contexts given the variations in political settings across countries. Rather, we advocate that education needs to be rooted in current social problems (Pérez-Ibáñez, 2018). This is especially pertinent in East and Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore where a hierarchical work culture and a society that values pragmatism (Hairon, 2017) would be less receptive to the societal disruptions common in liberal democracies. Moreover, we argue that school systems are not the exclusive domain for social change in the educational ecosystem. In fact, education research can also be a vital impetus for social change by mobilising key stakeholders to address systemic problems. To do this, we propose a new approach termed, *research as social change*, that employs research as a mechanism for social change and uses the consciousness of the self as a resource for research.

Research as social change is defined as an approach whereby research is used as a mechanism for systemic social change by including relevant stakeholders across the system, who collaboratively work to identify problems and design solutions through iterative studies for the benefit of all stakeholders. This diverges from traditional conceptions of educational research as a positivist process that documents the teaching and learning patterns across the whole system and provides a systemic overview of the social change enacted. Such positivist models of research divorce researchers from the interactional patterns of teaching and learning. Our model also differs from design-based research that aims to verify the efficacy, effectiveness, and efficiency of interventions needed for the development of evidence-based policy and practice (Levin & O'Donnell, 2000). Rather, our model seeks to address some of the existing limitations regarding the capacity of educational research for social change.

Shulman (1997) noted that the conduct of education research studies has shifted from the laboratory to schools and classrooms. Hence, one key obstacle for existing models of educational research is the varying conditions across schools, classes, teachers, and students—consequently diminishing the transferability and generalisability of findings (Labaree, 1998). Moreover, obtaining conclusive evidence for effective methods across these contexts remains an enduring challenge (Berliner, 2002). In seeking to address these issues, our collaborative framework seeks to deliver adaptable strategies to these varying contexts.

Collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers could also deepen trust in research findings (Mohajerzad et al., 2021). With technology and social media becoming the prevalent form of communication across the world, the spread of misinformation has become increasingly commonplace. This has adverse implications for research–policy collaborations in times of crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic because an inability to counter misinformation can undermine public trust

in science (Enders et al., 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020). However, misinformation is not exclusive to fringe voices in popular and social media. Rather, the scientific and scholarly communities also face a parallel set of challenges—from hype and hyperbole to publication bias and citation misdirection, predatory publishing, and filter bubbles (West & Bergstrom, 2021). Hence, we posit that research as social change could potentially mitigate the spread of misinformation given that stakeholders would be able to disseminate information and knowledge within these collaborative settings, thereby enabling stakeholders to identify and flag sources and themes of misinformation within the scholarly community.

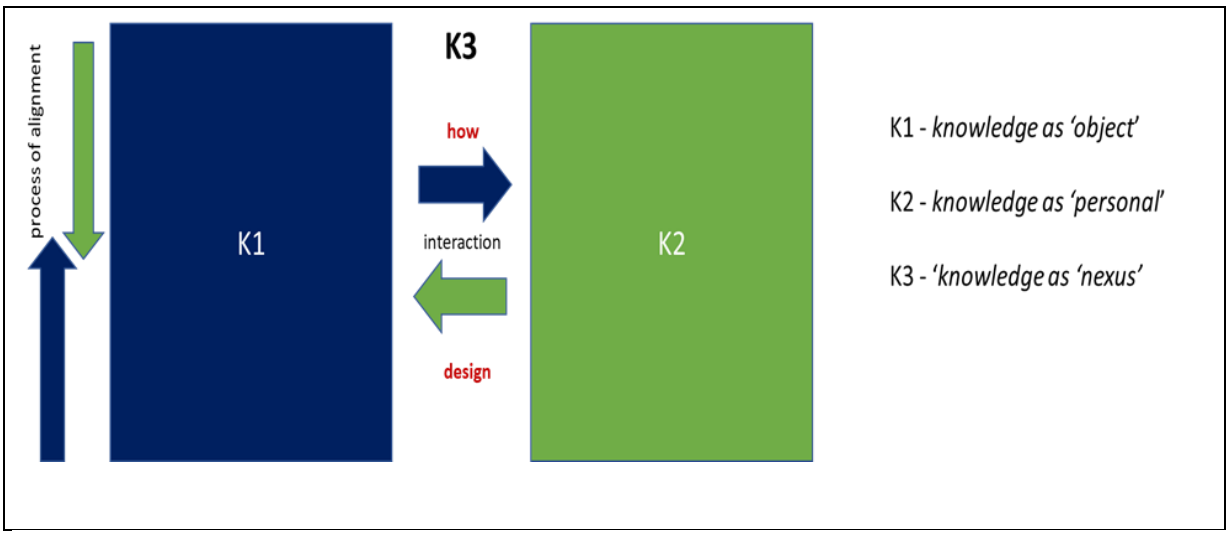
The research as social change framework, additionally, intends to address some critical gaps in the policymaking cycle by extending participation and incorporating critical inputs from researchers and practitioners. While policymakers are the chief custodians of the policy cycle, seeking information and data from researchers, practitioners, as well as a diverse range of actors is vital for the promulgation of fair and equitable policies. Where key actors are excluded, policies implemented could have adverse effects on marginalised and underrepresented communities (La Brooy & Kelaher, 2017; Murray, 2011). Policymakers, furthermore, may often lack the requisite technical expertise necessary for the effective formulation and implementation of evidence-based policies. Neglecting to consult key actors, therefore, could lead to inadvertent consequences and even the exacerbation of social inequalities (Jørgensen, 2011; Quah, 1984). Accordingly, establishing frameworks that consistently cultivate engagement among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners ensures that the interests and well-being of the relevant stakeholders in the development of evidence-based policy are carefully considered.

Theory: Intersubjectivity and Knowledge Management

A critical pillar of our framework rests on developing a culture of intersubjectivity amongst various actors in the research process. Intersubjectivity can be defined as “the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals” (Scheff et al., 2006). Cognitive sociologists conceive intersubjectivity as a group of individuals sharing similar social experiences, which induces a common worldview or epistemic understanding of a social phenomenon, alternatively known as thought communities (Zerubavel, 1997). Examples of thought communities include churches, professions, scientific beliefs, generations, nations, and political movements. To foster a culture of intersubjectivity in a collaborative framework, we employ the theories of situated cognition and knowledge management to underscore the significance that all knowledge is linked to activities bound to social, cultural, and physical contexts (Greeno & Moore, 1993).

We posit that developing a culture of intersubjectivity engenders affordances in specific learning contexts. Utilising one of the key principles of social constructivism—that learning is inseparable from its social context (Gibson, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978)—we contend that intersubjective knowledge is the product of the flow of knowledge derived from the interaction of personal knowledge (i.e. embodied learning experience influenced by cognition, idiosyncrasies, affective, historical dimensions such as parenting, family environment, life and cultural experience and our professional training) and knowledge as object (i.e. the abstract or reified representation of the subject matter, material object, resource, artefacts or thing; Chiam, 2018). As shown in Figure 2, an agent’s process of acquiring knowledge on a subject matter is the product of the flow of interaction between the subject content (K1 or knowledge as object) and the agent’s cognitive and socio-emotional capacity (K2 or knowledge as personal), which arises through the individual’s relational engagement with the context of time and space of their development (Chiam, 2018). In other words, knowledge as nexus (K3) is about being in the flow state—the here and now.

Figure 2: Knowledge as a Nexus Between the Personal and the Object (Chiam, 2018)



Appropriating Gibson's (1979) idea of affordances, we contend that any interaction between an agent and the environment, inherent conditions, or qualities of the environment induces the agent to perform certain actions within the environment. Greeno (1994, p. 340) also suggested that "affordances are preconditions for activity," and that while they do not determine behaviour, they increase the likelihood that a certain action or behaviour will occur. Research as social change, therefore, is the result of K3 knowledge, which extends participation to the agent in a deep meaning-making process with other agents in a common environment. Herein, the consistent and sustained interactions with others within a social group increases the likelihood of forging a common intersubjective understanding of themes and topics discussed.

In acknowledging this awareness of K3 as the interaction or the interplay of the reified, the selves, and the phenomenon (Hung & Chen, 2008), considerations necessarily come to the table on the need for individuals to have greater opportunities for engagement with situated and dialogical processes that prompt reflection and learning across the widest field. Herein, a consequence of this consciousness is the need for greater inclusivity of the types of knowledge, embracing the differing values and moral framings that underpin the preferences of different stakeholders' "hats." Helping individuals through metacognition becomes important to enable them individually to reflect on who they are, what they know, what they want to know, and how they can get to that point and monitor their learning.

However, a great challenge to that change lies in the fact that human beings are creatures of habit with different stages of openness to, or readiness for, change—and ingrained habits are difficult to change. Therefore, we suggest that research as social change is a process that requires deliberate inclusive processes and conscious action at all levels of dominant player—at the policy and service levels, directly or indirectly.

Using Design-Based Implementation Research (DBIR) for Research as Social Change

Research as social change aims to address systemic problems through iterative research that can be more effectively translated and scaled to practice and policy. To achieve this, we apply the principles of design-based implementation research (DBIR) as a conceptual framework. DBIR can be understood as a design-based approach at the nexus of research, policy, and practice that engages researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to collaboratively produce innovations that are iterative and scalable to education systems (Fishman & Penuel, 2018; Penuel et al., 2011). DBIR emerged as a result of concerns that even though many design-based research interventions were effective in field trials,

subsequent implementations in real-world settings were unsuccessful in achieving the desired results (Fishman & Penuel, 2018), thereby precipitating a gap between "what works" and "what works where, when, and for whom" (Means & Penuel, 2005, p. 181, as quoted in Fishman & Penuel, 2018, p. 393). Moreover, most design-based research interventions tend to be context-specific and are, therefore, difficult to generalise. Hence, findings from design-based research do not allow for classroom innovations to be scaled up to a systemic or policy level. DBIR, as a result, seeks to provide the mechanisms necessary to scale and translate findings to various contexts and a broader systemic level. Specifically, we aim to include the following four principles of DBIR (Fishman & Penuel, 2018; Penuel et al., 2011) in our conceptual framework:

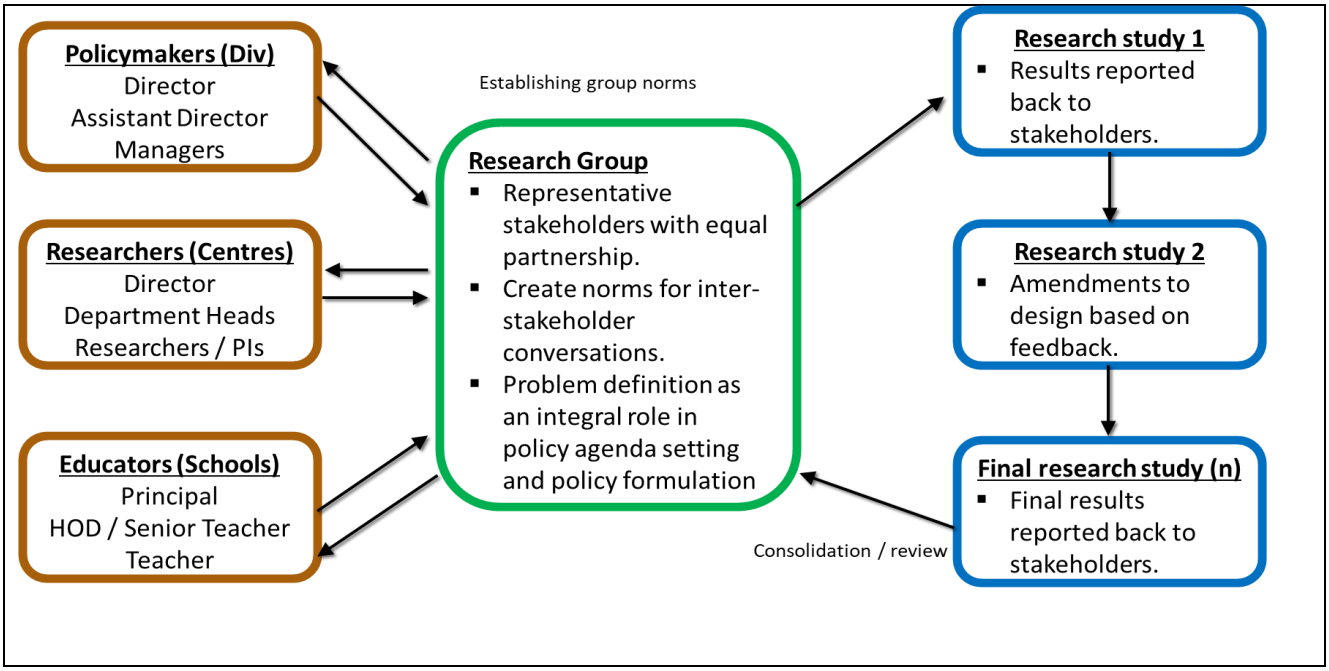
- A focus on persistent problems of practice from multiple stakeholders' perspectives.
- A commitment to the iterative and collaborative design of programmes, or change interventions, to achieve desired outcomes.
- A concern with developing theory related to both classroom learning and implementation through systematic inquiry.
- A concern with developing capacity for sustaining change in systems.

Historically, DBIR in education was conceived as a means of advancing organisational change and quality improvement. It shares common characteristics with several theoretical approaches to educational research and evaluation, specifically, in programme evaluation and evaluation research, community-based participatory research, and social design experimentation (LeMahieu et al., 2017). In community-based participatory research, for instance, researchers collaborate with stakeholders outside of academia to execute joint research on common objectives (Strand et al., 2003). This kind of research represents a hybrid of research and social action and is used to mobilise support and ownership of the co-designed interventions as well as the scaling up of innovations that show evidence of effectiveness (LeMahieu et al., 2017; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Another research approach that informs DBIR is implementation research, which can be understood as the systematic study of the implementation of interventions by focusing on how interventions are adopted in specific organisational contexts by actors or individuals (Fixsen et al., 2005; LeMahieu et al., 2017). In this regard, DBIR represents a patchwork of various research approaches that adhere to the pragmatic tradition of education philosophy (Dillon et al., 2000; Penuel et al., 2011) with a commitment to solving practical problems through collaborative efforts among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

Applying Research as Social Change

In our conception of research as social change, DBIR is an integral aspect of this endeavour. While conventional designed-based research deploys a linear trajectory of research from the laboratory to the classroom and eventually scales up to the system, our process would enable researchers to seed potential experimentations throughout the system through joint collaborations with policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders at various rankings. Figure 3 encapsulates an overview of research as social change as a deliberative model of research that seeks to foster inter-stakeholder conversations throughout the research process.

Figure 3: Overview of Research as Social Change as a Process

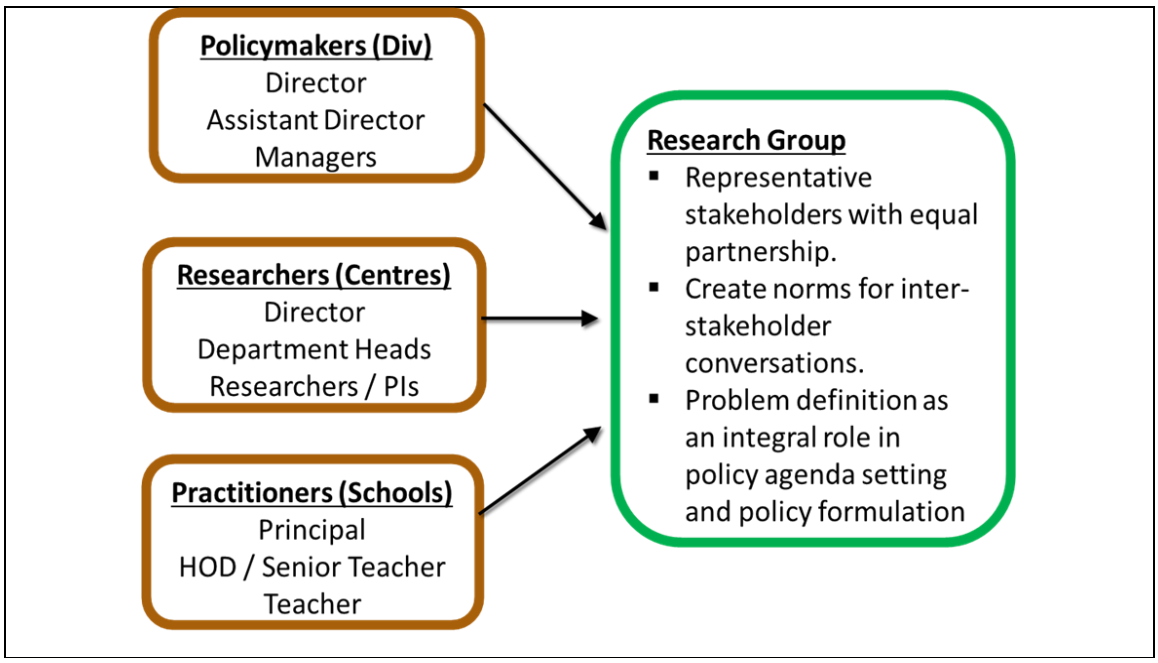


The process as depicted in Figure 3 can be disaggregated into three main phases, which will be explained in the subsequent sections: i) establishing group norms, ii) iterative research cycles and feedback loops, and iii) consolidation and review of research activities.

Phase I: Establishing Group Norms

In the first phase of the research process, it is imperative to establish group norms that enable a common intersubjective understanding of the significance of the research problem and to cultivate empathy amongst participants for the underlying concerns of all stakeholders. This would be vital for the facilitation of productive inter-stakeholder conversations and to ensure, internally, the coherence of the research process as well as minimising the potential for attrition by members. As observed in Figure 4, representatives from various stakeholders, including but not limited to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners would be nominated by their various organisations to participate in the research group. Each stakeholder may nominate representatives from varying levels of seniority. Nominations would be contingent on the significance of the issue and the respective needs and concerns of the organisation. Upon nomination in the first phase, representatives may hold frequent meetings to foster group norms and build a collective identity as a team to ensure the long-term viability of the group. More significantly, the established norms should ensure that collaboration throughout the research process is based on an equal partnership and mutual understanding amongst all stakeholders.

Figure 4: Phase I: Establishing Group Norms



The challenge of establishing group norms and social trust is especially pronounced when considering the differences in the levels of expectations, skills, and commitments among stakeholders (Lewig et al., 2006). Despite the vast literature on organisational management and social capital, there is no universal approach to ensuring (with absolute certainty) that stakeholders from disparate backgrounds will be able to overcome their epistemological differences and collaborate without conflict. Rather, successful group dynamics in such collaborations would depend on multiple variables including, but not limited to, how closely stakeholders have worked together in the past, the research topic being investigated, and the alignment of interests amongst stakeholders. Nonetheless, we contend there are three main norms or issues that stakeholders should build consensus on to ensure that inter-stakeholder conversations are effective. As noted from the research utilisation literature, the three main issues to be discussed are:

Languages for Communication

Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners typically employ different vernaculars in their respective fields. The languages used by a stakeholder are reflective of the priorities for knowledge and the work environment germane to each profession (Lewig et al., 2006). Researchers, for instance, usually employ highly technical, inaccessible, and expert language within the scholarly community whereas policymakers may utilise bureaucratic or specialised terms that may be exclusive to the public sector. Devoid of familiarity with either profession, practitioners may feel alienated during a collaborative research process. To mitigate such scenarios, we advise stakeholders to adopt an open mindset while actively engaging other stakeholders in their work. Through deliberative and sustained interactions, trust, empathy, and social capital can be fostered—which are instrumental in assuring the resilience of the research group (Putnam, 1993). In the initial stages, this can be achieved through educational games or icebreaker activities but would require a more concerted effort by the nominated leaders of the collaborative group to ensure an inclusive research unit where perspectives, knowledge, expertise, and values are respected throughout the research process. This could be achieved through various activities such as spontaneous and planned exchanges, best practice demonstrations, workshops, and seminars (Lewig et al., 2006).

Time Frames for Results

Policymakers and practitioners in professional settings usually operate in shorter time frames compared to researchers who require longer timelines to produce high-quality research (Lewig et al., 2006). If left unresolved, this could be a potential source of fissure within the research process. To alleviate this, research groups should openly deliberate and build consensus on the planned time frames of the research group at the outset of the research phase. More importantly, all actors should adopt an open and flexible mindset given that research work tends to be circumstantial and contingent on multiple intervening variables that could cause delays to the research timeline. Hence, the dynamic nature of research and its attendant effects on the timeline of the project must be communicated at the initial stages of the formation of the research group.

The Nature of Evidence and Building Agreement Around It

Another source of contention amongst researchers, policymakers, and practitioners deals with the nature of research evidence and its perceived usefulness to a stakeholder (Lewig et al., 2006). In this regard, the subjective interpretations of research evidence and its use are largely informed by a stakeholder's priorities for knowledge. Hence, assessing the professional priorities of each stakeholder is useful for apprehending the logic guiding the decisions of each profession. Researchers, for instance, tend to ask questions that can be answered scientifically and are drawn to theory-making, conceptualisation, methodology, and data collection. Conversely, policymakers are concerned with questions of feasibility, implementation, benefit, and relevance, while practitioners are guided by questions of "what works," efficiency, and effectiveness (Lewig et al., 2006). Although we acknowledge that these concerns are not universal to all of the aforementioned stakeholders, we emphasise that there needs to be a discourse in the incipient stages of the research group on the significance of the evidence and the underlying concerns and objectives influencing the participation of each stakeholder.

According to Shonkoff (2000), one strategy for building consensus around the nature of the evidence is to employ a simple taxonomy that classifies knowledge based on three main categories:

- Established knowledge—as defined by the scientific community and regulated by the scholarly community's strict criteria for evidence.
- Reasonable hypotheses—produced by researchers, policymakers, or practitioners as assertions to be tested based on established knowledge.
- Unwarranted assertions—ideas that are either distortions of, or far removed from, established knowledge and do not inform responsible policymaking or service delivery.

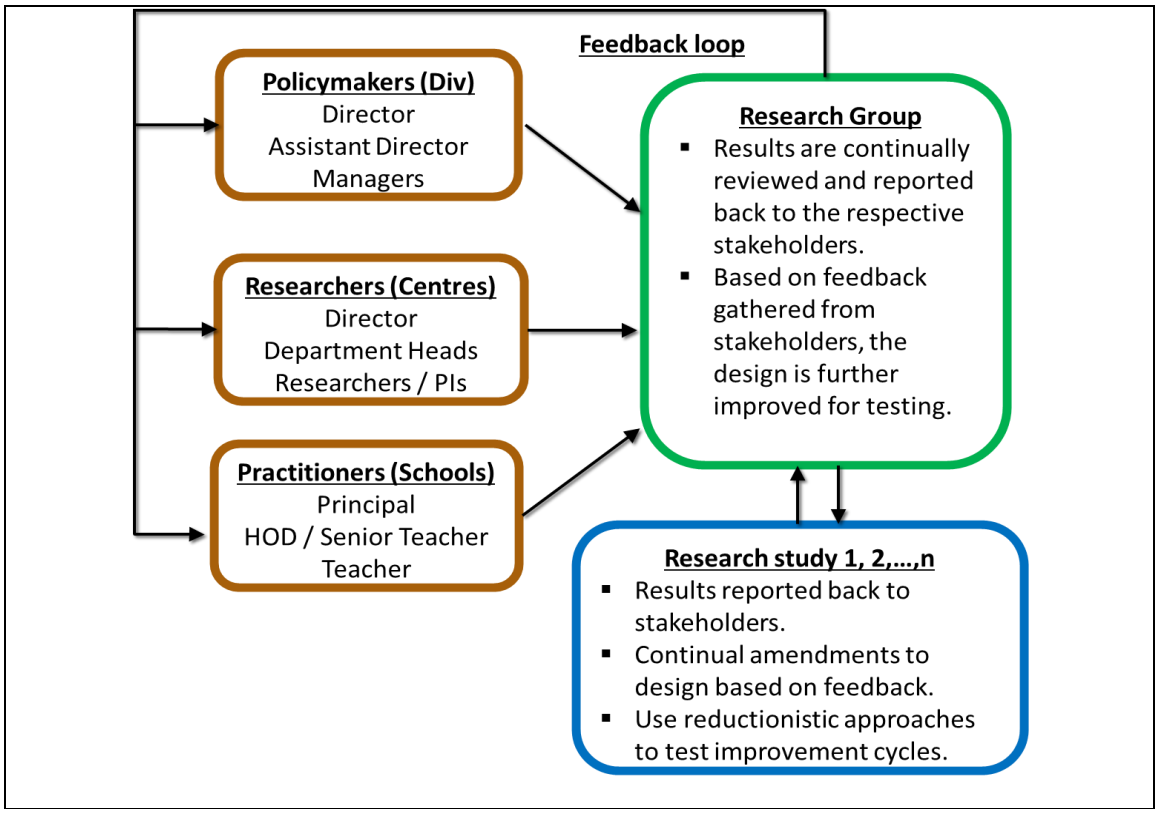
In establishing these categories, the collective understanding and mutual norms of the group would more likely converge towards a scientific understanding of knowledge and evidence, which is integral to the long-term conduct of the research process (van Zyl & Sabiescu, 2020). Aside from establishing group norms, the first phase also enables stakeholders to identify key problems in education and sets the research agenda for subsequent phases of the research process.

Phase II: Iterative Cycles and Feedback Loops

Upon identifying the key research questions, the research group conducts further investigations conceptualising, operationalising, and implementing multiple field trials of the intervention in real-world settings. As can be observed in Figure 5, following the conception of the intervention, the research group conducts multiple field trials through several iterative cycles to fine-tune and improve the intervention. This is also a core attribute of the DBIR approach of conducting multiple cycles of

design, implementation, and refinement of educational innovations (Means & Harris, 2013). During these cycles, the necessity for introducing modifications or enhancements to the interventions will vary according to the nature of the partnership, the issue that is being addressed, as well as prior insights, experiences, and suggestions of stakeholders (LeMahieu et al., 2017). Nevertheless, such a DBIR partnership would refer to multiple types of evidence to warrant changes to the intervention, and the evidence that the research group relies on should be influenced by the goals and the design of the intervention (LeMahieu et al., 2017).

Figure 5: Phase II: Iterative Cycles and Feedback Loops



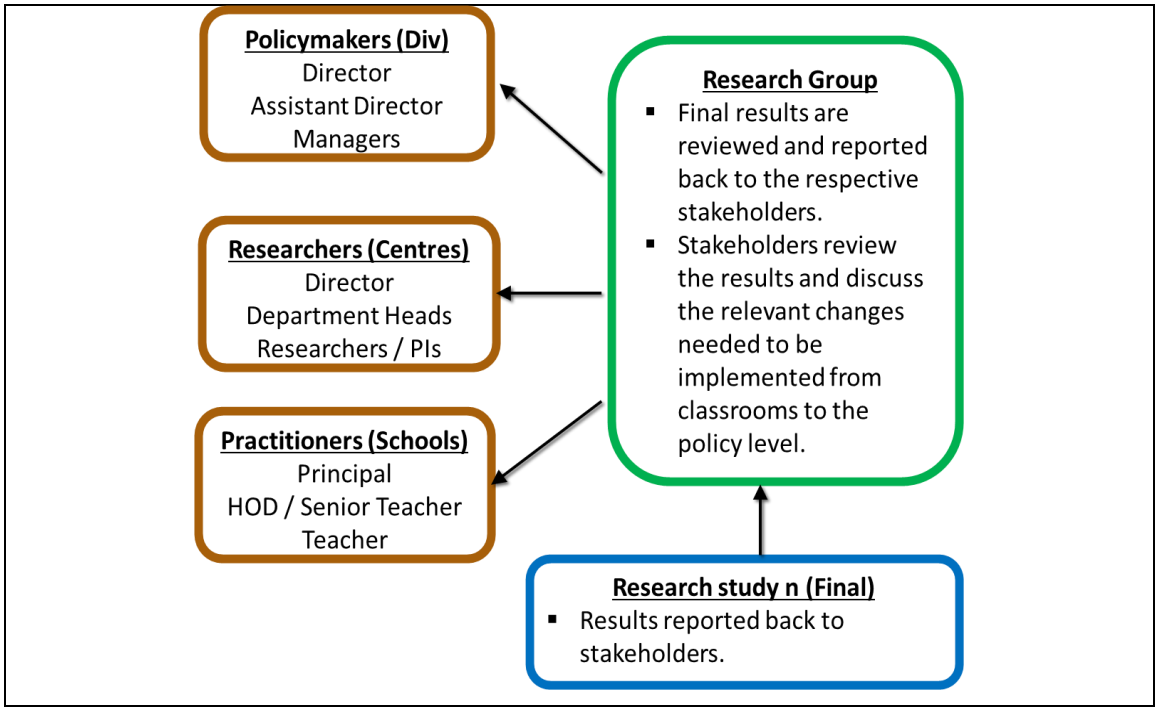
Following each improvement cycle, the research group reviews the results, and representatives from the research group will report on the status of the intervention to their respective organisations. As a feature of systematic inquiry, the organisational leadership is expected to review the results and provide feedback to the research group through their representatives in order to improve the design of the intervention in successive cycles—also known as feedback loops. In each cycle, the perspectives of each stakeholder are shared in the research group, and conflicting views are resolved within the group. The cycle continues until the objectives of the group are fulfilled or participants are satisfied with the design of the intervention. Where necessary, reductionist approaches may be employed to distinguish significant variables in the iterative process.

Phase III: Consolidation and Review

At the final stage of the research study, the results would be reviewed by the research group and representative stakeholders would discuss the changes to be implemented at all levels of the system, from classrooms to the policy level. As depicted in Figure 6, upon reaching a consensus, participants of the research will report on the results of the study to their respective organisations where the results and recommendations are reviewed. Where appropriate, the recommendations may be adopted by the stakeholder. To raise the likelihood of stakeholders adopting the recommendations, representatives can act as a broker to lobby for changes to be implemented. Considering the

investments in time, expertise, and resources into the research process, the representatives would be incentivised to advocate for the adoption of the proposed interventions. In so doing, our framework seeks to embolden actors in the research as a social change process to undertake the initiative to develop the organisational capacity for sustainable system change.

Figure 6: Phase III: Consolidation and Review



Implications

Beyond empowering policymakers, practitioners, and researchers with the agency and support to undertake collaborative research in co-designing interventions for social action, our framework also seeks to deliver affordances to its stakeholders. At the policy level, a collaborative team comprising multiple stakeholders could improve the agenda-setting phase of policymaking given that it endows researchers and practitioners with greater influence in the development of policy narratives (Jørgensen, 2011). Collaborations between researchers and policymakers could also lead to the sharing of ideas and technical knowledge that could improve other aspects of the policymaking process such as policy evaluations. With more stakeholders involved, policymaking could lead to more equitable outcomes while better addressing the needs of society. For researchers, our framework could see improvements to research utilisation and impact because policymakers and practitioners would be more inclined to adopt these interventions in classrooms and at the policy level owing to their participation in the process. In addition, it also allows higher education institutions to foster productive partnerships with multiple agencies to address complex issues such as low progress for learners, and educational inequalities. It further enables institutions to better forecast and plan research projects that can be tailored to the needs of policymakers.

Amongst practitioners, research as social change could have multiple effects at the school and classroom levels. At the classroom level, practitioners may be more receptive to experimenting with innovative practices and pedagogies learnt from the collaborative process. Moreover, having participated in the design of these interventions, practitioners would be more likely to advocate for their adoption in classrooms. Another affordance of this process is the potential for the creation of networks between schools that can be leveraged to scale up knowledge building. These networks could

comprise teachers, principals, curriculum planning officers, and other invested stakeholders. Aside from discussing knowledge building principles, these networks could also function to enact these principles in classrooms.

Challenges

Although our framework presents multiple affordances to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, it is critical to acknowledge potential challenges in its implementation. Firstly, difficulties in coordinating collaborative research are inevitable due to the tight schedules and varying commitment levels of stakeholders. As a research group increases in size, the more difficult it may be to find a common time for participants to convene and conduct participatory research. For those in non-research settings, it may be an obstacle to adopting a research mindset. Hence, there needs to be investments in time and resources to train participants in the rigours of research design and methodology before the execution of the research.

A notable challenge in implementing such a framework is the difficulty of forging equal partnerships in a hierarchical culture. This is especially so in East Asian contexts like Singapore where power differentials between groups and a deference to authority may lead to a hierarchical relationship rather than an equal one. This could stifle the social dynamics of the research group given that some stakeholders might be unwilling to air dissenting perspectives on enhancing the design of interventions in improvement cycles. To prevent this, stakeholders should be mindful of the underlying objectives of the research group and endeavour to inculcate a climate of openness and transparency. Another issue concerns the mindset of practitioners towards research. Practitioners may be reluctant to undertake work outside of teaching due to their tight schedules and a perceived lack of benefits to classroom practices in the short-term (Hairon, 2017). Guskey (2002) highlighted that teachers who participate in professional development seek to acquire knowledge and skills that will contribute to their growth and enhance their effectiveness with students in the day-to-day operations of their classrooms. Hence, the mindset that engaging in such participatory research is merely an “add-on” to the teacher’s workload rather than a vital component of professional development is an obstacle to recruiting practitioners to the research process. Nonetheless, more effort should be expended on promoting the benefits of research as social change to practitioners and to listening to their concerns. For example, school leaders could ensure that educators who participate in this programme receive additional benefits—either in terms of career development or being offered a reduced workload.

Conclusion

While research has varying purposes, a key goal of research, from our perspective, is to enable social change through conversations and dialogue, and designing research through an iterative process to bring about social change. Each stakeholder’s consciousness of the self is a powerful way to make conversations and dialogue empowering and effective in achieving the goal.

This paper has sought to improve research utilisation by fostering the structural conditions to engender collaborative research for social change. To do this, we have proposed a framework that fosters inter-stakeholder conversations and joint ownership of the research process by facilitating the conditions for mutual understanding of norms, operational roles, academic rigour, and policy outcomes. Research as social change is, therefore, a collaborative partnership that empowers stakeholders to participate in research that influences outcomes at all levels of the education system. DBIR is an integral element in the creation of the socio-technical infrastructure for research as social change to happen. Despite its challenges, research as social change presents manifold benefits and affordances to its stakeholders such as more impactful educational policies, improvements to research

utilisation and impact, capacity building to address systemic issues in education, and developing more productive school networks for knowledge building.

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Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)
Volume 12 No. 2 October 2023
pp. 147-149
ersc.nmmu.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070

Conference Report

The Sustainable Development Goals as Guidelines for Socially Responsible Universities

Symposium on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Partnership Between Nelson Mandela University and University of Oldenburg

University of Oldenburg, Germany
26–30 June 2023

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This symposium, held at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany from the 26 to 30 June 2023, was the culmination of a successful 25 years of collaboration between that university and Nelson Mandela University. The symposium was attended by delegations from both universities as well as the general public of the city of Oldenburg. The two universities' delegations were led by President Ralph Bruder and Vice Chancellor Sibongile Muthwa, respectively.

The welcoming event of the symposium, held on 26 June, marked the official start of the collaboration celebrations, and represented a further milestone in the 25-year partnership between the two universities with the signing of a joint 5-year roadmap by Muthwa and Bruder. The roadmap outlines the extension and deepening of collaborative specialist and interdisciplinary projects planned for the future of the two institutions within eight central fields of action. The executive boards of the two institutions have adopted the "Roadmap for Cooperation 2023–2028" in a bid to strengthen and expand their collaboration and partnership in research, teaching, community engagement, and transfer.

Ralph Bruder asserted: "Our universities are a perfect match. We share the same values," and went on to point out that both universities were named after Nobel Peace Prize Winners: Nelson Mandela and Carl von Ossietzky. He further stated: "We take responsibility and stand for an open society and tolerance. Together, we are helping to make the future more sustainable." The two universities signed their first cooperation agreement in 1998 and, since then, several students, lecturers, and researchers have taken part in exchange programmes between the institutions. Sibongile Muthwa noted that at the signing of the 1998 agreement, no one could have imagined how successful the cooperation would be. In commending the connection that has developed between staff and students of the two

institutions, she stated: "Without the great commitment of those involved over the years, this would not have been possible."

The two institutions have collaborated on teaching and teacher education, further education, and sustainability research since 1998 and, in 2017, a new collaboration in marine research was established. One of its aims is to develop strategies for more effective management of marine ecosystems. From 2023, the cooperation will be expanded to include the humanities and social sciences, medicine and health sciences, and renewable energies. In the field of the humanities and social sciences, there are various common fields of action, for example, in gender studies or at the interface between art, humanities, and computer science.

The newly signed roadmap, which focuses on eight subject areas, also focuses on knowledge transfer and the promotion of early career researchers. Joint courses for students and young researchers (online and in person) will be part of the new collaboration. The two partners have also explored the possibilities of expanding jointly supervised doctoral theses and exchange programmes in the future to promote international dialogue. In addition, as part of the successful start-up culture at the University of Oldenburg, there are plans to develop instruments that systematically support start-ups across borders.

Higher education and educational science have been an important focus since the beginning of the cooperation. The partners are currently cooperating on, amongst other projects, the Dimensions of Diversity in Teacher Education project funded by the German Academic Exchange Service together with the University of Groningen the NHL Stenden (Netherlands) with the aim of further internationalising teacher education. Educational research approaches and further academic education are the focus of another two projects: the East and South African–German Centre for Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA), and the Digital Initiative for Centres of African Excellence (DIGI-FACE), to which other African countries and universities have become partners. Research and education that benefit the fundamental transformation of our societies in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are another important focus of the roadmap. The universities also want to exchange ideas and experiences of how they could make their own structures more sustainable and thus future proof.

Commenting on the role of Nelson Mandela University within the international network of the University of Oldenburg since 2005, Karsten Speck, Vice President for Studies, Teaching and International Affairs, and Ambassador for the Cooperation, said: “We work closely and trustingly together. Alongside the University of Groningen, Mandela University is our strategically most important partner university."

The celebrations of 26 June were rounded off with a festive welcome dinner for all delegates at the botanical garden of Oldenburg. The scientific director of the botanical gardens, Dirk Albach, gave an enthralling presentation to enlighten the delegates on the history and culture of botanical gardens.

The symposium on "The Sustainable Development Goals as Guidelines for Socially Responsible Universities” was held on the 27 June. This hybrid event was attended by researchers from both institutions and the public to discuss different dimensions of sustainability, and how universities can play a role in ensuring a sustainable future for all. Sibongile Muthwa and Karsten Speck made welcoming remarks to start the day on a high note. This was followed by a presentation from Speck titled “The University of Oldenburg’s Engagement and Transfer Mandate and Activities in Light of the Sustainable Development Goals.” Thandi Mgwebi and Bruce Damons then presented a talk on “Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals at the Nelson Mandela University,” highlighting how

each of the two institutions had worked towards the attainment of the development goals. This was followed by Bernd Siebenhüner and Anna Kramer whose focus was on "Towards a Carbon Neutral University." Participants heard about research-based strategies of reducing our carbon footprint and using alternative energies. Then, Carine Steyn and Werner Olivier presented on "University–School Engagement for Quality Steam Education: The Govan Mbeki Mathematics Development Centre at the Nelson Mandela University," which addressed the work of the centre in advancing science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and arts education in schools—especially in marginalised areas.

The midday session began with a presentation from Herena Torio and Baback Ravenbach on "Renewable Energies: Local and Regional Solutions to the Energy Crisis," followed by Danai Tembo who talked about "Projects Towards the Sustainable Development Goals: An Example From the Department of Development Studies." The latter two presentations focused on how universities can be engaged with communities to address energy challenges especially in resource-poor settings. Jorge Marx-Gomez and Jean Greyling then presented on "IT and Entrepreneurship for Sustainability" in which they shared pointers on how technology could be used to promote sustainable entrepreneurial projects within communities. The session closed with a presentation from Mathabo Khau and Ayanda Simayi titled "The Role of Critical Research, Teaching and Engagement: Gender and Sexuality Education Towards Gender Equality and Quality Education" which focused on the importance of advancing gender equality through incorporating Indigenous knowledges in critical research and teaching on sexuality education.

The symposium concluded with a roundtable discussion in the afternoon, titled "The Future of Transformative and Responsive Higher Education Institutions in the South and North-Transdisciplinary Perspectives," in which the future of education and educational institutions was discussed from a transdisciplinary perspective. The roundtable was hosted by Karsten Speck and Mathabo Khau, and the panellists were Priscilla Mensah and Muki Moeng from Nelson Mandela University and Hans Gerd Nothwang and Hans-Michael Trautwein from Oldenburg University. Some of the questions that the panel members responded to were:

- What is the future of transformative and responsive higher education institutions? What is the role of universities?
- How can we position ourselves as universities to address the challenges of our societies in a meaningful way?
- How can Uni/Comm partnerships become an actor in driving transformation towards more sustainability, social justice, and social change?

These and other questions from the audience created a lively discussion on how universities can become more transformative in their engagements with communities towards the world we want.

The rest of the week was allocated to team meetings between the two institutions, where researchers met with colleagues to plan new collaboration ideas, or establish ways of strengthening existing collaborative projects. After these meetings, on 28 June, the annual International Summer Fest picked up on the anniversary of the cooperation with a suitable theme, and colleagues enjoyed music and dance while sampling cuisine from the diverse nations represented. Finally, on 29 June, participants from Nelson Mandela University were treated to a tour of the cities of Oldenburg and Bremen to explore historical monuments and enjoy a day out with friends.