



SARiHE

Southern African Rurality in Higher Education

Rurality and Education

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Introduction

This working paper is a non-exhaustive survey of research on rurality. It covers key themes in order to arrive at working assumptions for an understanding of rurality to inform the SARiHE research project. It contains a broad focus on rurality and education, as it is discussed in the international literature, as well as a specific focus on South Africa, as this is the setting in which the SARiHE study is located. Although the focus is on education, many of the observations in the literature on rurality and politics, society and social services, influence and in some cases mirror what occurs with regard to education. Thus, it covers a slightly wider ambit. The discussion is on rural general education, i.e. schooling, as well as higher education, partly because much of the theorising on rurality occurs in relation to general education, and partly because a student's experiences of general education will influence their experience of higher education.

Extent of Research on Rurality

Despite the claims that rurality is not a strong focus in education - even though there are countries such as the United States, where 50% of all school districts are classified as rural and rural schools account for 33% of all schools (Cicchinelli and Beesley 2017) - there is nonetheless a small but significant body of research on this topic. There is, for example, the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education and the Journal of Rural Studies, of which the latter includes articles on rural education. In the US there is a National Centre for Research on Rural Education and a Special Interest Group on rural education of the American Education Research Association. Most of the research concerns rurality in general, rather than higher education. Research on rural education is also scarce in South African universities (Balfour 2012) – other than the REAP Study (Jones et al, 2008) and the Czerniewicz and Brown (2014) study.

According to Balfour, de Lange and Khau (2012) rurality studies emerged from disciplines such as agricultural sciences, agricultural education and human geography. The shift to a focus on sustainable development has influenced rural education and rurality research. Place as a concept is increasingly of interest to literacy, environmental, indigenous and rural education (Green and Reid, 2014).

Most of the widely available literature on rurality (in English) comes from Australasia, North America and the UK. This provides a certain slant to the reporting, leading to gaps and silences, given the varied conditions that pertain, for example in Africa or Asia. Whether a country has the majority of its population as rural can also affect the reporting, since if the majority of a country's population is rural (85% for Malawi as

opposed to South Africa where only 35% of the population is rural (tradeingeconomics.com)), this can affect the concern with and depiction of rurality. There may also be differences to do with the histories of regions, for example whether rurality is affected predominantly by colonialism, apartheid and neo-liberalism (South Africa or Namibia) or a combination of colonialism and neo-liberalism, for example Canada or Australia. In the latter two cases colonialism had a hugely destructive effect on the small first nations populations. In recent times the white rural populations began to feel the negative impact of neo-liberal policies.

Attempts to Define Rurality as a Research Construct

The concept of rurality is at once a demographic, geographic and cultural one (Roberts and Green, 2013). It is defined 'empirically' as having sparsely populated areas and ontologically as 'a category and a set of experiences' (Moreland, Chamberlain and Artaraz, 2003: 56). It is also spatial, geographical and contextual (Green and Reid, 2014).

In both quantitative and qualitative research on rurality there is a concern that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to define rurality. For Randall, Clewes and Furlong (2015), it was even difficult to define the distinction between rural and remote rural. In the US there are a variety of coding systems that can be used to research rurality, and these have implications for the research itself, for example using county level systems (which are too broad). This includes the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) systems, the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes etc. There are also sub-county codes. There are also researcher-developed codes: the index of relative rurality that aggregates for population size, population density, percentage of population that is urban; and remoteness from urban areas. It is a comparative rather than absolute measure. In the US the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCED) uses the following 'urban-centric' definitions of rural:

- Rural fringe – 5 miles or less to an urbanised area or 2.5 miles or less from an urban cluster
- Rural distant – 5 – 25 miles from an urbanised centre or 2.5 – 10 miles from an urban cluster
- Rural remote – more than 25 miles from an urbanised area, and also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (NCED, 2006), quoted in Cicchinelli and Beesley (2017).

Similar variations in constructs are reported from Australia by Stafford, Stokes and Holdworth (n.d.). When choosing a measure, one has to consider the purpose for which it was developed (Hawley, Koziol and Bovaird, 2017).

At a more conceptual level, the idea of 'rural' has its roots in modernity:

This binary view of rural as urban's 'other' also has a strong place in the social sciences, where rurality's invisibility is anchored within the roots of modernity with its urban development and modernization (Cuervo, 2016, p. 18).

Research on rurality is not always an end in itself. Many studies shed light on non-rurality specific phenomena, such as exclusion, change or the universalisation and hegemonisation of dominant cultures. According to Roberts (2014):

In a globalised world, the rural allows us to see the impact of policies and ideologies that have become obscured by the familiarity of modern metropolitan life. Thus, our research speaks not only to the rural, but to the non-rural as well, in that it can shed light of what it takes for granted and what it has lost in the process of modernity. (p.139)

And further,

... the rural works as a metaphor for the local, as we are able to observe how dominant global cosmopolitan knowledges and understandings are produced, and the processes through which they marginalise other ways of understanding the world and deny situated knowledges. (p.145)

In other words, rurality is not only a useful construct for investigating life or education in rural areas, but a case in point for larger issues, of local-ness or difference.

Simandan (2011) makes several useful distinctions that could be taken up in work on rurality and context: 'kind environments' vs. 'wicked environments' which he sees as a function of their capacity to enable people to learn from experience; and 'exacting environments' vs. 'lenient environments' – as a function of the consequences of having failed to understand and adapt to them. He argues that these concepts can illuminate in novel ways 'long-standing geographical concerns with the problematic of fairness' (2011:383).

South Africa has used various constructs when presenting rurality as an indicator. For example, in the 2003 Statistics South Africa report there was a distinction between 'formal rural' (e.g. farm, small holding) or 'tribal area' (e.g. tribal settlement or village not in a tribal area). In the 2011 Statistics South Africa report (p. 18) the definition of 'rural' was: 'Any area that is not classified urban. Rural areas may comprise one or more of the following: tribal areas, commercial farms and informal settlements.'

An important point about rurality in the South African context made in the HSRC report (2005) pertains to the interrelatedness of urban and rural areas:

There are 'urban' areas within these rural areas; equally, there are 'rural' features within the more 'urban' settlements. (HSRC, 2005:xi)

This will no doubt influence how people understand their own identities and affiliations, as rural, urban, or as both intersecting.

Rurality, Race, Class and Power

It is fair to say that ethnicity, race and class intersect with rurality in important ways, such that one cannot research issues of rurality without taking contextual, historical and socio-economic trends into account. Much literature of direct relevance to rurality and education with a backdrop of colonisation and social injustice is not signposted as being about rurality, but as being about indigeneity, relationship with the land, colonialism, or about matters of local knowledge versus formal knowledge.

An interesting case presented by Randall, Clewes and Furlong (2015) is of New Brunswick, Canada, which is strongly affected by neo-liberalism and where inhabitants see themselves as 'at the bottom of the heap', influenced by global economic and political trends, for example multinational activities. The economic activity and size of the populations is decreasing drastically. Urban professionals are also increasingly having weekend and holiday homes in rural areas and turning those near the cities into dormitory areas. But the urban people do not contribute to the civic work in the rural areas. Services are also being depleted, making it more difficult for the aged and the sick. Although New Brunswick is bilingual English/French, the French communities are more depressed economically, and the first nations communities even more so. The latter also experience a great deal of racism. For Randall, Clewes and Furlong (2015) there are relations of power and oppression – exercised by people outside of the rural areas, but also power and oppression exercised by people within the community on each other.

With regard to South Africa the history of the 'progressive destabilisation of rural livelihoods' (Balfour, de Lange and Khau, 2012: 1) includes mass migrations, colonial wars, dispossession of land, and forced labour migration to the mines. The relationship between race, geography, land and rurality is underscored by Gordon (2015), who refers to a 'geography of race', in which "white populations hav[e] more geographical space than people of colour ...". (Gordon, 2015:163). By 2005 1.3 million households lived on 14% of the land, and rural areas were characterised as such:

The destruction of peasant economies, the ensuing labour migration and the emphasis on traditionalism have given these areas their distinctive character. (HSRC, 2005: 133)

Conceptions of Rurality in Relation to Disadvantage and Identity

An interesting observation by Cuervo (2016) is that communities might respond to hardship by romanticising their own conditions and pulling together in a laager as a form of defence. Traditional values such as hard work, responsibility and solidarity 'serve to create a strong social solidarity in both communities. Through the idealization of the rural values some members of these communities, perhaps inadvertently, construct a "normalisation" (Young 2006) of what it means to belong to each place'. This runs 'the risk of further increasing the atomization and divisions within the communities' (Cuervo, 2016, pp. 149-150).

People from rural areas have to be careful of internalising the metanarratives about themselves, e.g. 'I am just a hick' (Randall, Clewes and Furlong, 2015, p. 14)

One should be wary of assuming mobility for students – it is for those that have the cultural capital to pursue that path. Cuervo quotes Appadurai, (2004, p, 70) “the better off’ have greater resources and capacities to aspire, greater facility to read these navigational maps to their aspirations, to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities” (p. 63).

In South Africa the binaries between rural and urban lead to a fantasy of the innocence of the rural, occluding the harsh realities such as unemployment and child labour (Balfour, de Lange and Khau, 2012).

One should be wary of assuming that there are conditions of sameness for all students. The HSRC study (2005) notes that there are varying degrees of poverty within rural areas, and cases of relative wealth amidst the poverty. A case in point is from a study conducted with students at the University of Stellenbosch, where one student from rural KwaZulu-Natal explained the varying degrees of material advantage, within a rural setting. She uses her own biography to make this point:

I grew up in a rural area, I had to walk for like 8 km to school. From grade 2 onwards I think I was always no.1 in class but I don't think that was because I was brilliant, it is just because, in comparison to the families that were around, our neighbours, we had better food because my dad was working but I would only see him maybe once a week, so we had cheese, we had good food, so we could think better than other students. (Leibowitz, 2009: 267)

A key observation is thus that rurality does constitute a form of disadvantage; however several writers are at pains to point out that there are advantages to rural life in some cases (Stokes, Stafford and Holdsworth, n.d.) for example, that parents have more control over what their children are exposed to or that smaller class sizes allow for more intimacy. Similar claims are that people living in rural areas are resilient and determined, despite the constraints, to pursue a 'better life' (Randall, Clewes and Furlong, 2015). Rurality has been associated with discourses of traditionalism, disadvantage and even backwardness (Roberts and Green, 2013). 'Spatial blindness', is a large source of concern, as it assumes students from metropolitan and rural areas have the same needs. A further serious concern, according to Roberts and Green (2013) is that educationists assume that rural students need to become less rural, or 'other' than what they are.

Flux

Rural populations do not necessarily remain the same over time - especially where economic conditions influence mobility (Cicchinelli and Beesley 2017). According to a newspaper article by Albert Modi (2016), who grew up in a rural 'Bantustan' during apartheid, conditions in rural areas in South Africa have deteriorated: people might be more educated, but they tend to rely more on government grants, are less self-reliant in terms of food production and are more likely to migrate to the cities.

Conditions in Rural Education

Regarding education, the following factors prevail: internet connectivity, access to technology, the condition of facilities, the composition of the student population, and stability of the local populations (Cicchinelli and Beesley, 2017). One of the points cited regarding rurality in the US were the barriers to teachers taking up professional development opportunities due to time to travel (Nugent, Kunz, Sheridan, Hellwege and O' Connor, 2017).

In Australia rural people make up almost a third of the population, but in higher education only 17% of places are taken up by rural students. For many young people the transition from secondary school to further and higher education 'demands a reconstruction of their belonging and forging new identities in urban spaces, due to the lack of local educational institutions and employment opportunities' (Cuervo, 2016, p. 48). He maintains that uncertainty and barriers are harder to negotiate for some, eg indigenous groups.

With regard to South Africa Mgwashu (2016) argues that rural students are one of the most marginalised groups that have attracted little attention in widening participation research to date. He argues, further, that higher education encourages students to turn against rural life. This would be unsurprising, if it is the case as Roberts and Green (2013) argue, educationists assume that rural students should become less rural. A study of 'disadvantaged' students in higher education in South Africa found that a multiplicity of factors affect transitions from rural areas, including geography, financial resources, schooling, language and 'other socio-cultural factors' (Jones, Coetzee, Bailey and Wickham, 2008). Czerniewicz and Brown (2014) also use the theories of Bourdieu and Wacquant, on habitus and social and cultural capital to explore the life stories of five rural university students. In South Africa there are no clear statistics for rural students in higher education, and they tend to be lumped together with disadvantaged students (Czerniewicz and Brown, 2014). These authors cite evidence to show that students from rural areas are disproportionately represented in higher education (lower than they should be).

In the case of South Africa disadvantage comprises material conditions such as lack of electricity, television or books, as well as discursive, such as access to the dominant language, English (Leibowitz, 2001). In a study on rural education in the North West province, Mentz et al (2012) report on IT conditions, including constraints with regard to internet access, lack of technical support and learners not having computers at home; and in some cases, challenges with regard to electricity supply, shortage of textbooks and insufficient software. The two schools in their study enjoy varying conditions pertaining to IT, and conclude that rural schools do have generic conditions, but that these conditions nonetheless vary significantly from school to school. By 2005 schooling in rural areas was observed to be predominantly teacher-led, despite the introduction to Outcomes Based Education (HSRC 2005). The authors acknowledge that teacher led approaches are not necessarily bad, and cite examples of teacher led practices that facilitated as well as hindered understanding.

Moletsane (2012) argues that a negative feature in research on rurality is a deficit-based approach which instrumentalises actors and denies them agency. Research in situ is also able to prove or disprove some of the common assumptions about deficit associated with rurality. As a case in point Islam (2012) observes myths that 61 pre-service teachers doing their training in rural areas in South Africa were able to negate, for example, that schools in rural areas lacked a learning culture. Fataar and Filies (2016), writing about rural working class students in South Africa, challenge the conceptions that they lack the necessary cultural capital for educational success. Using theories of cultural capital of Bourdieu, they show how the learners maximise their family and community resources in their quest for educational success.

Jones, Coetzee, Bailey and Wickham (2008) suggest that it is not only the students who are disadvantaged, but the institutions that are not prepared to support their needs. This point is also made by Mahlomaholo (2012), who writes that rural students feature more prominently in statistics provided for early school leavers. He attributes this to the lack of adaptation by the system to the needs and strengths of students from rural areas. With reference to the work of Tara Yosso (2005) he argues that the students possess 'community cultural wealth', which the schools misrecognize and fail to build upon.

Other examples of conditions in rural schools may be specific to particular rural areas. For example, Ebersön and Ferreira (2012) report on three schools in the Mpumalanga Province in South Africa, where teachers live outside the area, require support for transport to the schools and tend to be less engaged with the community. This distance is reported as a negative feature, whereas in the study on sexuality education teachers in Lesotho (Khau, 2012) being so close to the community can also operate as a constraint, especially if a teacher's classroom discussions are of concern to parents or traditional leaders and if one is seen as going against community norms.

The HSRC report (2005) discusses deep divisions within many communities, between teachers and parents, or between schools and community leaders. There is also a respect for education amongst parents, but without an in-depth understanding of what education entails:

There is a great need and high hopes for what can be achieved but apparently very little understanding of, or involvement with, its substance. (HSRC, 2005: 119)

The HSRC report (2005) refers to the strong influence of traditional leaders and norms, where 83% of the schools in that study were on community held land, which according to 45% of principals surveyed, gave traditional leaders authority over the school. Half the teachers surveyed found the leaders' roles useful, and the other half, not.

Khau points to the complexity of studying rural education, and to a degree of ambivalence and ambiguity when she implies that the constraints facing teachers teaching sexuality education has a negative impact in terms of unwanted pregnancies and the spread of HIV/AIDS, but concludes thus:

Rurality has always been associated with lack and characterised by loss (Corbett, 2007; Kelly, 2009). However, rural communities have always survived irrespective of the loss or lack, proving rural communities' resilience and determination to make it with what they have. Thus, an education for rurality should view lack and loss as opportunities to re-examine old certainties, provoke new knowledge and forge new relations. Unless rural communities have a sense of ownership of the curriculum, unless the curriculum reflects aspects of what people believe in, and unless the sexuality education offered in schools is what is needed by people within rural villages, then school-based sexuality education in rural classrooms will not have the desired effect on youth. (Khau, 2012: 67)

In other words, while for rural communities to engage with new ideas is necessary, this must take into account expressed needs and beliefs of that community. The incommensurability of the two impetuses and what would be required to respond to this, is not explored in depth by Khau.

In an illuminating study on rural youth in Lesotho and how they navigate journeys to school, Morojele and Muthukrishna (2012) demonstrate how young people utilise agency to navigate and interpret activities such as the long walk to school. Variation in their experience is also due to differences in family dynamics (for example being orphaned and living on one's own due to HIV/AIDS versus living with family members).

This variability of outcome or effect of a particular phenomenon, is further illustrated in the HSRC study in a discussion on household tasks and labour. This is a source of tension between parents and schools in some instances, as these tasks can cause children to be late for school, to be punished or to avoid going to school on that particular day to avoid being punished. However, the expectation that children carry out household chores is embedded within a larger system of values, which could in fact be an important source of strength and agency for children in their later lives:

Not only do parents need their children's labour, they also believe the household chores are part of learning about and preparing for life, complementing formal education. This is not a simple question of cost alone, it is embedded in social mores and values. (HSRC, 2005: 46)

Need for contextual relevance

Governments should consider the impact of policies on rural areas before finalising them, in order to avoid sometimes disastrous consequences (Randall, Clewes and Furlong, 2015). These authors also point out that their (urban) university training in the social and service professions did not prepare them adequately for working in rural areas. But teachers, for example, need to learn from the other, not about the other (Cuervo, 2016). 'Place- based learning is also presented as a successful way of engaging and motivating socially marginalized students or so-called students at-

risk through a politics of recognition and association that includes and values their contribution the school and the community' (Cuervo, 2016, p. 200).

Writing in South Africa in 2012 Balfour, de Lange and Khau write that almost all policy is intended to serve the urban elite. The needs of rural education and rural educators were ignored by education policy. Islam (2012) also reports that In general education faculties do not prepare students for the realities of rural education (Islam, 2012; Masinire, Maringe and Nkambule, 2014).

Research and Methodological Issues

The research field is represented by a variety of ideological and epistemological positions. One of the few writers to define a normative position is Cuervo (2016) who bases his work on the understanding of social justice posited by Iris Marion Young, with justice comprising distributional, recognitional and associational justice. Hlalele (2012) also advocates social justice as a response to the inequalities affecting rural education, in particular a distributive approach.

Research methods

Research methods used to investigate rurality and rural education vary, alongside different normative and epistemological approaches. For example, the Nugent, Kunz, Sheridan, Glover and Knoche US based collection (2017) is mostly positivist and quantitative in nature, whilst the international White and Corbett (2014) volume deals with qualitative and interpretive methods such as narrative and the use of visual methods. Lanas and Rautio (2014) advocate an exploratory, relational and open method, which, they maintain, becomes challenging, when one has to account for the work to one's funders.

There are currently in use a wide variety of participatory, exploratory and participatory approaches using various methods, including a strong reliance on the visual. Calling for the adoption of a strength-based epistemology, Moletsane argues that participatory visual methodologies such as photovoice engage participants as active agents for change. In a study with Foundation Phase schoolchildren at a farm school in the Western Cape, de Lange et al (2012) used a combination of a "teddy bear diary" in which each child had the opportunity to take home a cuddly toy and draw with their family in response to a prompt, then verbally explain the drawing to the researchers. Morohale and Muthukrishna (2012) use a combination of family drawings, route mapping and diamond ranking in their study of rural children in Lesotho who undertake long trips to reach school.

The HSRC study (2005), conducted in three provinces, made use of a combination of a survey reaching role-players such as teachers and principals, as well as a wide variety of qualitative techniques such as asking students to write essays, and of participatory approaches, for which they elicited participation from youth in and out of school as fieldworkers. They deliberately encouraged a strong dialogic approach

within communities, including community meetings, which appear to have had beneficial results in many instances.

Randall, Clews and Furlong (2015) make a strong case for the use of story rather than a more traditional qualitative research method. Stories allow for the complexity and richness of the rural experiences to emerge.

Brann-Barrett (2014) uses photographs to explore participants' perspectives. Participants create photo narratives using photos to represent ideas, experiences and perceptions about their community – this opens the door for discussions between them. Lanas and Rautio (2014) used letter writing with their research participants, which, they claim, had a positive effect on the participants. Pillay and Saloojee (2012) use a combination of life history and collage composition.

Green and Reid (2014) use social cartography as a theoretical and methodological concept: 'geography encompasses social and cultural life in particular locales. It also takes account of maps, as texts and technologies, and of mapping as a social-semiotic knowledge practice.' (p. 28). Although mapping is a technology of power and colonialism, it allows for complexity and mutability.

Kvalsund and Hargreaves (2014) focus on the theory of life course research. This is generally retrospective or prospective. The context of events is very significant. They refer to Elder and Giele (2009)'s fourfold paradigm of mutually influencing layers for the research: 1) historical time or place, or cultural background, which includes transitions e.g. from school to university; 2) linked lives or social integration, which refers to the social ties in our lives that link us to others with whom we live and interact interdependently; 3) human agency or individual goal orientation; 4) timing – location of transitions in time.

The nature of the research methodology and methods one adopts clearly depends on the kinds of questions being asked. In cases where one is attempting to make sense of individuals' worldviews and lived experiences, a qualitative methodology that is capable of capturing complexity, and of granting agency within the research process to individuals as subjects rather than as objects, should be considered.

Research ethics

Concern with rurality has to do with the small sizes of the populations under study and the difficulty with ensuring anonymity (Cicchinelli and Beesley 2017). Specific concern with the use of photographs was raised by Brann-Barrett (2014), who suggested that photographs of buildings rather than of people, could be a helpful response. For Randall, Clewes and Furlong (2015) a common-sense approach – rather than a rule-bound or 'tick box' approach – to ethics is also required.

There are many ethical challenges. For example, Gristy (2014) set out for her research to be participatory. Ideas of 'voice' and 'participation' are complex. Students still remain objects of elite adults' plans:

Some writers argue that participatory techniques can reinforce rather than challenge hierarchical power relations (e.g. Cooke and Kothari, 2001). There are also some inherent risks with the consultation of young people in their schools. For example, school systems advantage students who have the recognised forms of cultural and linguistic capital (Bernstein, 1970; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and there is a very real danger that 'uncritical adoption of student voice initiatives may reinforce existing hierarchies' (Noyes, 2003: 537). It could be argued in this study, for example, that the attempt to include young people in the study further alienated them and reinforced their position as 'different'. (p. 107)

Furthermore, Gristy writes that research in marginalised communities risks furthering the othering of people and reinforcing separation. She also maintains that researchers should explore our own knowledges and the kinds of beliefs we should hold. Thus, particular care should be taken in research of this nature, to create respectful conditions in which the research takes place, as well as particular care not to cause harm to research participants.

Implications for Research Approach for SARiHE Study

Other than the HSRC study and perhaps one or two papers, most of the data concerns rural life in general. There is a scarcity of information about what happens inside the classroom, and about the epistemological and ontological dimensions of young people learning, and how this shapes their learning at university. This underscores the significance of the SARiHE project, which needs to interrogate these issues in more detail.

The variation in conditions between regions, schools and families suggests that the cohort of rural students that reach university might be atypical of students in rural areas. This should caution the SARiHE researchers against drawing conclusions from the data about rural education. The accounts will remain important, however, to signal the kinds of experiences of the rural students who do reach university, and how these are recognised or misrecognised.

Assumptions for SARiHE study

Drawing on the literature, the following is a set of working assumptions to guide the SARiHE study:

- Rurality cannot be given a precise and comprehensive definition. One can certainly investigate what rurality means to people, as we are attempting to do in this study, but creating a hard and fast set of indicators or clear, once off definition, is inadvisable.
- Rurality should be discussed in relation to the following dimensions: geography, space, history, power, culture, material resources and identity issues.

- Although in certain regions there might be broad tendencies associated with rurality, actual conditions vary across schools, families and individuals.
- Constructions of rurality are generated by different role players who may be influenced by amongst other conditions, their urban or rural origins. They are also constructed in relation to discourses of romanticization or defensiveness, rejection, deficiency and resilience.
- Ethical issues should be given particular consideration in research on experiences of rurality.
- Rurality requires responses from institutions and national policy-makers that recognize the lived experiences of students from rural areas.

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