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Taking note of obstacles research partners negotiate in long-term higher education community engagement partnerships

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers negotiated challenges to remain partners in a research initiative.
- Generative theory of rurality locates engagement challenges with rural schools.
- Insights provide knowledge about partnerships with marginalised-school partners.
- Insights inform the conceptualisation and implementation of enduring partnerships.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article describes the challenges that teachers negotiated in a rural school (thwarted by rurality in an emerging-economy context) to remain partners in a long-term research project. We use the generative theory of rurality to theoretically locate the challenges and thematic analysis of six years' Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) data with South African teachers ($n = 9$) in a rural school. Insights may contribute to knowledge about partnerships with marginalised-school partners. Knowing which obstacles teacher-partners had to overcome to continue in a project, may inform the conceptualisation and implementation of enduring partnerships.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research for social change through partnerships

Social scientists often integrate a quest for social relevance and immediacy into their research agendas. This is particularly the case in emerging-economy countries, such as South Africa — currently the most unequal society in the world (OXFAM, 2013; The World Bank, 2012) — where resources are limited and not easily accessible, risks are high and the desire for feasible and innovative solutions drives many a scientific inquiry. A call to democratize research is one methodology discourse which challenges one-sided structures of constructing and negotiating power in research partnerships (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; De Lange, 2012; Knowles & Cole, 2008) and strives to enable academic engagement as well as contribution to community life and taking up social responsibility. Democratizing research and research for social justice (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, & Slamat, 2008; Rosner-Salazar, 2003; Stanton, 2008; Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2006) carries with it the ambit of mutuality: knowledge generation in the scientific domain and improved functioning in the work and/or personal lives of civil society partners. Such research agendas therefore often presuppose partnerships with marginalised communities where benefits may occur and where there is the greatest need, and insights may be scaled to other comparable settings by means of knowledge

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dissemination. Such ideals ground the research partnerships. The realisation of partnerships is however thwarted by obstacles – both in the haloed halls of the academe and in the harshness of living and working in, for example, an unequal society. In this article we share the barriers which teachers in a specific marginalised context, a rural school in South Africa, had to negotiate in order to persevere in a long-term community engagement collaboration with educational psychology scholars in a study investigating resilience in high-risk schools. One characteristic of this research partnership is teachers' continued participation, with some intermittent attrition. We wanted to understand the stressors that teachers in this rural school had to cope with to persist in the on-going partnership with university.

Increased pressure to bridge the gap between higher education and society is a phenomenon in research agendas globally. In the United States, leading work in this field includes Boyer's *Scholarship reconsidered* (1990) and his follow-up article *The scholarship of engagement* (1996), in which he reconceptualises scholarship as discovery, integration, application and teaching; and Cherwitz's Intellectual Entrepreneurship programme (2004), which connects intellectual resources with communities to address community problems collaboratively. This challenge led to the establishment of the Committee on Engagement in 2002 to provide strategic advice to the CIC (chief academic officers) on different matters involving community engagement in the United States. The goals were to conceptualise the meaning of engagement, benchmark strategies for community engagement, identify measures of performance and advise on collaborative opportunities which could be included in the CIC strategic plan (Bloomfield, 2005).

Globally, growing numbers of colleges and universities have committed themselves to efforts to revive and prioritise community engagement in their local communities. Recent policy documents in Australia (DEST, 2002; Nelson, 2002) support the current international debate about the role of universities, by expressing growing support for higher education–community engagement (Winter et al., 2006). Similarly, in Europe there is a rising demand for researchers, university administrators and policy makes to be more aware of the important role of the range of levels of regional engagement by universities (Boucher, Conway, & van der Meer, 2003). Although liberal arts colleges and state universities initially took the lead in promoting community engagement in the United States, research universities are increasingly providing leadership on this issue. Research universities' exceptional students, financial resources and well-equipped research facilities position them to play a vital role in community engagement and change (Stanton, 2008, 2012). Tertiary institutions have valuable human, financial, organisational and intellectual resources, placing them in a key position to promote significant community engagement and development (Smerek, Pasque, Mallory, & Holland, 2005). For example, Gibson (2006) highlights the link between a university's intellectual resources and communities' challenges, by focussing research on the production of socially robust knowledge.

In the transforming society of one of the most unequal societies in the world, South Africa, universities have been called on to become active partners with communities (Bender, 2008a, 2008b; Hlengwa, 2010; Lazarus et al., 2008; Osman & Petersen, 2010; Petersen, Dunbar-Krige, & Fritz, 2008). Kruss (2012) highlights the importance of reconceptualising university interaction with external social partners, by extending their knowledge to benefit a wide range of external social partners. A South African education sector policy paper (White Paper, Department of Education, South Africa, 1997) outlines a programme for higher education transformation and lays the foundation for making community engagement an integral part of higher education, by emphasising one of the aims of higher education, namely to encourage and create an awareness of social responsibility through community engagement and development. Lazarus et al. (2008) point out that the release of this policy document shifted the focus in the debate on community engagement in South African higher education. Hence, community engagement has become an essential portion of teaching and research with a more profound sense of context, locality and application. Bender (2008a, 2008b) highlights the potential of community engagement to rejuvenate academia, redefine scholarship and engage communities in a valuable discussion about the role of higher education. The social purpose and research agenda of tertiary education institutions is therefore expanding, so that universities are more socially responsive to the needs of a transforming society (Hall, 2010; Subotzky, 1999).

1.2. Power and politics in higher-education community engagement partnerships

Social responsiveness and community engagement often heighten awareness of power and politics in partnerships (Nhamo, 2012; Petersen et al., 2008). Holland (2005) states that all too often, tertiary institutions assume that in a university-community partnership, the role of the university is to teach and the community partner's role is to provide a set of social issues that need to be explored and addressed. As a result, academics often enter a community from what may seem to be a privileged and controlling position, resulting in a skewed power relationship in partnerships (Butin, 2003; Holland, 2005). Factors such as demographics, race, culture and language often lead to differences between university and community perspectives. This is sometimes seen as a challenge to ensuring mutual benefits for both partners. Petersen et al. (2008:127) warn that academics often tend to forget the link between "their world" and the "world of the people". Bringle and Hatcher (2002) advocate moving away from a "charity model", where resources and surplus are given from one community to another, towards a "justice model", where resources are regarded as mutual and shared among members. The current literature focuses on establishing long-term partnerships with communities, where community engagement activities are characterised by social justice and care as essential elements. Through this process, a new platform could be developed to foster engagement with communities which would translate into long-term partnerships with mutual benefits for the communities and for the higher education institutions (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Hlengwa, 2010; Petersen et al., 2008; Rosner-Salazar, 2003; Stanton, 2008, 2012).

Another trend in participatory methodology debates relates to the challenge of partner expectations and the attrition of community partners (Harper et al., 2004; Israel et al., 2006). Foremost amongst such research-partnership barriers is the additional responsibilities and time constraints associated with the role of community partners (Bennell, 2004; Israel et al., 2006; Israel, Schultz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Kegeles, Rebchook, & Tebbetts, 2005; Lantz, Viruell-Fuentes, Israel, Softley, & Guzman, 2001; Yoo, Butler, Elias, & Goodman, 2009).

Gaventa and Cornwall (2006) argue that the issue of power is dominant to participatory methodologies as a relationship of domination in the control and the production of knowledge. Knowledge is an essential aspect of power and determines the explanation of what is perceived as important in research. Actors can affect the boundaries of power through access to knowledge and participation in its construction, use and dissemination. Within rural contexts particularly, Van der Riet and Boettiger (2009) found that the relative difference between knowledge, power, capacity and access to resources of a researcher and that of the research participants is always apparent. They further contend that under such conditions, it becomes a critical challenge to maintain equal