Using participatory and visual arts-based methodologies to promote sustainable teaching and learning ecologies: through the eyes of pre-service teachers

M KHAU,[1] N DE LANGE[2] & L ATHIEMOOLAM[3]

Abstract

The National Framework for Quality Education in Rural Areas (DoE, 2006) draws attention to education in rural ecologies and scrutinises the role of HEIs in developing teachers who understand the diverse contexts and who are able to facilitate quality teaching and learning in such contexts. Drawing from the project 'New teachers for new times: Visual methodologies for social change in rural education in the age of AIDS', this article explores how the use of participatory and visual arts-based methodologies at a rural school can lead to sustainable teaching and learning environments that promote transformative and emancipatory classrooms. We draw on the focus group discussions held at the end of each school day as debriefing sessions with the six Intermediate Phase pre-service teachers[4] reflecting on their experiences of professional development and what was learnt about using 'new' methodologies in a rural farm school. We argue that when a cohort of pre-service teachers work together with in-service teachers using emancipatory pedagogies in a rural context, classrooms can get transformed into enabling and democratic spaces conducive for teaching and learning for all.

Key words: emancipatory pedagogies, rural school, rural ecology, student teachers, visual methodologies issues of gender, sexualities, sexual health and reproductive rights, teacher identities and HIV and AIDS in education.

Introduction

The Eastern Cape, with vast sprawling rural areas, is one of the poorest provinces in South Africa. Many learners experience challenges created by a host of social issues including HIV and AIDS, as well as educational factors such as a lack of resources and learning materials, unskilled and de-motivated teachers and parents who find it difficult to be involved in the education of their children (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). The National Framework

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[1]   Mathabo Khau (PhD) is Senior Lecturer at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and she researches on issues of gender and sexuality in education.

[2]   Naydene De Lange (PhD) is Professor and Chair of HIV/AIDS Education at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

[3]   Logamurthie Athiemoolam (PhD) is Senior Lecturer and Head of the ACE LLT Programme at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. Corresponding author email: mathabo.khau@nmmu.ac.za

[4] .   The pre-service teachers preferred to be called teachers in training, and hence in this paper, trainee teachers is used interchangeably with pre-service teachers.

for Quality Education in Rural Areas (DoE, 2006: 2) calls on "all education role players to sharpen their focus towards the delivery of quality education in rural and farm schools". This framework recognizes the limited capacity of a single unit to effectively address the multi-faceted challenges facing rural education. As such the framework proposes the involvement of a broad spectrum of role players, such as the Education system at all levels; all components of the education system (ECD, GET, FET, and Higher Education Institutions); institutions; communities (parents, land owners, governance structures, community based organisations, religious organisations and traditional leadership structures); and government departments (DoE, 2006).

Thus we initiated our project '*New teachers for new times: Visual methodologies for social change in rural education in the age of AIDS*' in the Eastern Cape as a response to the challenges arising from ever-growing HIV and AIDS infection rates in rural areas and their interaction with other social challenges such as poverty, and the impact they have on teaching and learning. We worked with [i]pre- and in-service teachers in a rural context, to try out visual arts-based participatory methodologies in addressing HIV and AIDS with the youth. Our intention was to get the participants to teach in 'new' ways which might make a difference while at the same time exposing the trainee teachers to a rural school context. The trainee teachers' engagement with the learners during their teaching practice was focussed specifically on their professional development and not on the assessment of their lessons. This created an environment in which the pre- and in-service teachers could relax and try out the 'new' methodologies with the learners.

This paper, therefore, presents our experiences and learning from engaging pre- and in-service teachers with visual arts-based participatory methodologies in a rural context. In this paper we answer the question "What are pre-service teachers' experiences of using visual participatory methodologies in a farm school?" We first discuss the concept 'rural' and what it means for us as teacher-educators. We then discuss how we prepared the teachers to work with visual participatory methodologies, followed by the findings from the study. We finally discuss what the findings mean for teacher education and education in rural communities, for social change.

Rural ecologies and education

'Rural' remains an elusive concept dependent on either place-based conceptions (Chikoko, 2008; Graham & Healy, 1999) or methodological considerations (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005) that drive knowledge production in this regard. In considering the notion of rurality, Marsden (2006) understands rurality as a signifier which is transformative, capable of changing behaviour and affecting the motivation of teachers, community workers, and learners. Research from projects located in rural areas and from projects focusing on the challenges associated with rurality demonstrates that the very generative and transformative nature of rurality serves both to inform and to delimit the effectiveness of intervention programmes designed for education and poverty alleviation. However, it remains a startling and disturbing fact that nineteen years after South Africa's first democratic elections, very little has changed in rural areas.

As has been noted in the Emerging Voices Report (2005:141), "...there is a nagging feeling that unless the real differences between urban and rural areas are appreciated and given

special attention, inequalities will persist and come to haunt future generations". This suggests that education initiatives in general and teacher education in particular remain mostly ineffective since they do not address these systemic challenges. The fact is that 'ruralities' are core to the identity of many rural community-based professionals. Thus an education that does not speak to their inner being as people does not serve them fully as it does not promote their fullest capabilities. It is perhaps not surprising then, given the urban-focused, middle-class teacher education curricula of the past two decades; that education in South Africa's rural areas remains inundated with problems and challenges.

People living in marginalised contexts, especially in rural and peri-urban contexts and, to a lesser extent, in township contexts, continue to be denied access to basic human rights, including the right to basic education, health and nutrition. This is despite South Africa having a constitution that is informed by the Bill of Rights, as well as being signatory to the Millennium Development Goals. Reasons for this include the research and development paradigms that scholars adopt in doing research on/about/for them as well as in the teaching and learning ecologies in basic and tertiary institutions (Moletsane, 2012).

Research on rurality is mostly concerned with "…space, isolation, community, poverty, disease, neglect, backwardness, marginalization, depopulation, conservatism, tribalism, racism, resettlement, corruption, entropy, and exclusion" (Balfour et al., 2008:101). However, such research tends to utilise these only as contexts for measuring under-performance in some aspect of development, for example, poverty, education, food security and other social ills (see Baro & Deubel, 2006; Schroeder & Nichola, 2006). Research seldom focuses on the dynamic interactions of the people who live, learn and work in these communities, nor on the ways in which they engage with and shape their lives in their environments.

Therefore, Odora-Hoppers (2004) writes that the theoretical constructs we use to study rurality tend to focus on the space rather than the people, and tend to treat the space as homogenous, ignoring and simplifying the variations and complexities in identity, behaviour and degree. Rurality is also understood in its relation to and in comparison with urbanity and urban contexts, ignoring the fact that rurality is dynamic, and that it has value and strength independent of urbanity and urban influences (Balfour et al., 2008). In other words, studies on rurality and the interventions intended to address the many 'deficiencies' identified tend to disregard the peculiarities of the local (see Budge, 2005) and fail to develop place-conscious and context-specific strategies (Gallagher, 1993; Gruenewald, 2003) for addressing the educational and social needs of these communities. These studies also ignore the agency of rural communities and people, as well as the assets that are available therein and that can be harnessed in developing and implementing relevant and effective interventions.

Cloke (2006) concedes that numerous understandings of rurality exist. Coladarci (2007) explains that, because of these multiple views of rurality, a clear description of contextuality places theory and methodology in research in a space of shared understanding and facilitates transferability of findings related to rurality. As such, space plays out as significant variable when contemplating rurality (Halfacree, 2006). We prefer viewing 'rural' as dynamic, shaped by a variety of systems and especially by individuals who populate the rural environment (Balfour et al., 2008; Graham & Healy, 1999). In this we embrace the generative theory of rurality provided by Balfour et al.

Waghid's (2011: 1174) argument drawn from Nussbaum's notion of a politics of humanity, namely that all people should be acknowledged and respected and that showing disgust and

shaming people does not have place in a humane society, can be applied to rural people and rurality. He further argues that "if one shows disgust, one becomes discontented with and disengaged from others in society – that is, disgust rules out the possibility of 'constructive engagement'" (2011: 1174). Waghid (2011) puts forward Nussbaum's point that the "the core idea of disgust is that of contamination to the self; the emotion expresses a rejection of a possible contaminant" (Nussbaum 2004: 99) and that shame is "potentially linked to denigrating others" (Nussbaum 2004: 209). Thus lacking a politics of humanity could translate into teachers avoiding teaching in rural areas out of fear of being 'contaminated' or to escape the shame and disgust levelled at them by teachers who work in urban areas.

Keeping a politics of humanity in mind, we wanted pre-service teachers to have first-hand experience of teaching in a rural context. We wanted to support them to reflect on their experiences such that they can deconstruct their understanding of rurality and rural schooling and to assist them to "uncover critical consequences of their activity" (Horn 2004: 175). In order to achieve this, we had to prepare the teachers accordingly.

Preparatory workshop

We organised a preparatory workshop and invited the six trainee teachers and six in-service teachers, from the farm school, who served as the mentor teachers. The purpose of this workshop was to address HIV and AIDS, to make both groups feel prepared and supported, and to negotiate the logistics of the two week programme. The workshop served several aims. It served as a platform for the two groups to meet and to get to know each other and to pair each trainee teacher with a class teacher. We also wanted to hear what their expectations were regarding the collaboration and to enable the student teachers to learn about the rural context and school from the in-service teachers in order to allay their fears. We introduced and provided hands-on experience in the use of visual participatory methodologies (e.g. drawing, collage, photo-voice and image theatre). The sessions were recorded and transcribed.

Methodology

Guided by Schratz and Walker's (1995) belief in research as social change, we conducted this qualitative and participatory research project in a rural context. We engaged pre- and in-service teachers in using collages, drawings, image theatre, and photo-voice with youth in a farm school. These methods should be used in a participatory way such that participants are enabled to reflect on their knowledge of life and their circumstances (Chambers, 1994), thus generating their own solutions for taking action and getting their voices heard.

The trainee teachers worked with in-service teachers in a farm school for two weeks. At the end of each day we had a two hour long debriefing. Each member of the research team was afforded an opportunity to facilitate the debriefing session which revolved around the students responding to carefully considered open-ended questions, requiring reflection and leading to further discussion. Highlighting the importance of reflection and reflexive practice is Palmer (1998) and Skerrett (2008) who argue that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique only but also derives from the identity and integrity of the teacher. Despite their passion for teaching, the trainee teachers knew that they had not yet mastered the courage to teach as stipulated by Palmer (1998). Thus in our desire to improve our teaching as well as theirs, we borrowed Palmer's (1998: 7) question "Who is the self that teaches?" We wanted the trainee teachers to reflect on who they were as teachers and what shapes their teaching identities in relation to teaching in a farm school.

Some examples of the questions that guided the reflections are: What are your first impressions after the first day at the school? What are your impressions of the children who attend the farm school? Do you think your teacher training prepared you for teaching in this context? What would you want to say to your fellow students back at university? This structured and systematic reflection on each day's experiences was useful for us as well as the students to interrogate their understanding of professional development and rural teaching ecologies. The debriefing sessions were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using thematic inductive analysis, whereby themes are generated from the data and coded for meaning (Patton, 2002). We familiarised ourselves with the data through verbatim transcription of the discussions. The transcribing was followed by what Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe as immersion in the data, which involved reading and re-reading through the data. Then we generated codes using open or data-driven coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where the data are opened for categories, patterns or themes emerging from the manifest content and then organised into meaningful groups.

This was followed by generating themes through axial or second-level coding (Sarantakos, 2005) which involves identifying relationships between and among the generated codes. The themes were then reviewed and refined so that the "data within the themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be identifiable distinctions between themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006:91). We then analysed the data within these themes to ensure the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of themes. The participants' words have been used verbatim when presenting the findings.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to the trustworthiness of findings in qualitative research as findings which can be trusted and are worth paying attention to. While he uses four constructs, i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure trustworthiness of the findings (De Vos 2005, 346), we draw on Merriam's constructs (as put forward in Jansen 2007: 38) of crystallization, using several sources and methods to develop the findings, and member checks with the data being verified by others than those initially involved in the study, to ensure the trustworthiness.

Ethical issues

The study was granted ethical clearance by the university research committee, and permission to do research in the school was granted by the Department of Education. We sought permission from the principal to undertake the project in the school, and consent was obtained from each student teacher and each in-service teacher. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and it was made clear that any participant could leave the project without any penalty.

Findings: Using participatory and visual arts-based methodologies in a farm school

The research team worked together with the trainee teachers to produce lesson plans that incorporated participatory and visual methodologies. These lesson plans included activities around drawings, collages, photo-voice, and image theatre. For each activity there was a prompt for the learners which guided them. For example, the drawing prompt was "make a

drawing of what makes you feel safe and unsafe at school"; while for the collage the prompt was "Using the magazines provided, cut out pictures and words to create a collage of what makes you feel good about yourself." Each of the trainee teachers had to try out the different methodologies in their respective lessons and at the end of the day reflect on their experiences. From their reflections, the trainee teachers argued that using the new methodologies helps to transcend language barriers, creates spaces for them to learn from each other and work together, and allows learners to take action and produce knowledge. These arguments have been used as themes to present the findings.

Transcending language barriers

The trainee teachers argued that they faced several language barriers when they had to interact with the leaners. Many of the leaners in the school speak isiXhosa as their first language, with a few that speak Afrikaans, while five of the trainee teachers speak Afrikaans as their first language and only one speaks isiXhosa. The use of English as a language of teaching and learning created challenges for the trainee teachers, especially when they could not use any of the first languages of the learners to explain concepts:

> Zelda: *The process was a bit slow today but it was understandable because we had to explain every step to the children and also the language was a barrier…*
>
> Rene: *I wrote the instruction on the board in English and isiXhosa, they enjoyed that, and they actually laughed when I actually spoke…they said they like me speaking their language*
>
> Basil: *You have to give instructions carefully with the photo-voice*
>
> Lwazi: *To them English is very difficult and they are using their hands to express themselves…and what I've learnt is that when you are giving learners instructions make sure that the instructions are very clear more especially with this image theatre thing.*

The following discussion ensued when the trainee teachers and the research team discussed the challenges posed by language in teaching and learning. The group reflected on their experiences in the classroom and how it made them feel:

> Jacque: *Can I ask Lwazi this: was it easier for you to explain the instructions in isiXhosa?*
>
> Lwazi: *Yah, because I first speak English then if I see that they don't understand then I speak isiXhosa*
>
> Jacque: *I think what's my problem at the moment is, I think, the drawings…like I couldn't feel that I got these children in my hands now just because of the language*
>
> Athie: *You can see that glazed expression in their eyes*
>
> Jacque: *Yes. They were looking, 'what must I draw now?', because it takes time explaining over and over and over again and I realised I am not getting anywhere*

> Athie: But it is a good learning experience for us to experience how it feels for someone who is speaking a different language…now you are teaching a Xhosa child through the medium of English, imagine how that child struggles…

> Rene: What really makes me feel bad is when I ask a learner a question…and then they speak isiXhosa and I can't understand and I feel bad not being able to understand them

However, the trainee teachers argued that trying out the 'new' methodologies assisted them in transcending the language barriers:

> Zelda: I did the drawing today with my grade 4s and I think the drawing is a very interesting way to do your teaching and also then you will get the children…they will draw something instead of saying it

> Rene: I think the drawing is a very important tool in helping you get whatever you want to teach across

> Jenny: I did the drawing…and there was basically that whole interaction between the whole class and I… they really enjoyed it, they thought it was fun.

> Basil: As the lesson progressed, they came up with these ideas and the [photographs] showed that at least they knew what they were doing

> Lwazi: I had two lessons today, the drawing and the collage one. Based on the drawing…they answered the question better in their drawing about what makes them feel safe at school.

Rene and Lwazi argue that when learners are given a chance to express themselves differently without having to use language, then they come alive and enjoy the lesson.

> Rene: My class was not responding at first…but when knowing that they can draw what they feel then the lesson took shape

> Lwazi: They were very active as compared to the lessons I that I did before with them…maybe it was their first time to do an activity like the drawings and the collage, but as time goes by I think they will get it.

Learning from each other and working together

The trainee teachers also felt that using the new methodologies in their classrooms assisted them in working together and being able to learn from each other. Because all of them were new to the use of participatory visual methods in their teaching, they felt comfortable working as a team.

> Rene: I had the privilege to observe Zelda's lesson first which helped me by identifying the areas that I would also have problems with…

> Jenny: I also observed Lwazi's lesson before I did the drawing…so I changed it a bit and asked them to think about where they feel unsafe at school.

> Zelda: I had the opportunity to observe Lwazi's image theatre and his role play…and I got some ideas on how to do it

> Rene: I observed Lwazi's lesson to see because it's nice to see how others do it so that you can get the feel of how things are supposed to be done.

These discussions show that the trainee teachers had to work together and learn from each other so that they could give their learners the best when engaging the new methodologies. While they were at first scared to try out the methodologies, they felt at ease to carry out their own lessons once they observed other lessons.

Learners taking action

The trainee teachers found that using participatory visual methodologies in the classroom allowed the learners to think critically about what they know and what they can do about their knowledge. The learners were afforded a chance to identify challenges they were facing at school and how they could change things for the better.

> *Jenny:*   *They said they would actually tell the other teachers that many kids bully, and the gates are always open at school that is why they feel unsafe…they would do those things so that they can feel safe at school.*

> *Jacque:*   *The thing that happened that was nice was that there was interaction, but there's all the bad stud that's coming out, bad experiences about themselves…they were asking difficult questions*

The learners had to come up with solutions for whatever problems they had identified about themselves and their school. They had to present these using the new methodologies as well. For example, the learners had identified lack of knowledge regarding their sexuality and pregnancy as one of the challenges they faced. They dramatized a scene where a girl had had sex with her boyfriend and got pregnant. The solution they played out in the drama showed several options that the girl had access to, such as talking to her parents, or a trusted teacher. They also showed the girl going to the clinic to ask the nurses what her options were. Thus, without the trainee teachers giving them information, the leaners produced knowledge by themselves and interrogated issues that are pertinent in their lives. The trainee teachers argue that the learners had underestimated their abilities because they had never been given an opportunity to do the kinds of activities that they had involved them in. They argued that the learners were surprised to find that learning could be fun.

Discussion

The trainee teachers who took part in this project were very sceptical at the beginning of the project in terms of how they were going to manage the challenges they envisaged for working in a rural farm school. Some of the issues that had worried them were the lack of educational resources in the school, poverty of parents and learners, crime and violence, and the language of teaching and learning which is not the first language for many of the learners. However, they were able to transcend many of these possible barriers to learning through the use of the participatory and visual methodologies. The learners were able to either make visuals to express themselves or perform their ideas. The learners were not limited in terms of how they could communicate their ideas with the trainee teachers and therefore the classrooms became lively spaces of teaching and learning. This is in line with what has been argued by scholars that using visual and participatory methodologies allows for otherwise silenced voices to be heard (see de Lange et al., 2006; Mitchell et al., 2005; Olivier, Wood & de Lange, 2009).

According to Olivier et al (2009: 13) using participatory and visual methodologies encourages active participation and helps participants to identify and talk about their experiences and generate ways of dealing with them, thus promoting social action.

Samuel (1998) contends that teacher education, especially pre-service teacher education, has to have a wider collaboration between teacher preparation institutions and the learning sites such as schools; not only to equip teachers with the required tools, but also to provide the needed skills to teacher educators so that they can challenge their apartheid-dominated ideologies, culture and history. Barasa and Mattson (1998) also noted that most South African teachers who were trained in the apartheid era lack the values, commitment and competencies to improve their professional development. One way to improve teachers' commitments towards their professional development is to provide them space for self-reflection and self-reflexivity; and one of the best places to provide such space is in the schools themselves. Hence, getting pre- and in-service teachers to work together with learners using participatory and visual methodologies allowed for the in-service teachers to interrogate their own teaching styles. This created a situation in which both sets of teachers learnt from each other in terms of how best they can serve the learners in their care.

According to Anderson and Stillman (2012:3), studies that have been done on teaching practice programmes report on "structural and logistical dimensions … but not its contributions to learning among pre-service teachers". While the trainee teachers in our study were encouraged to reflect on their experiences every day, we were mostly interested in how they immersed themselves in the experience and drew on their theoretical learning at the university, on their practical knowledge gained in the project, and their experiential knowledge in order to shift and change how they approached and viewed their teaching to enable them engage effectively in a different context to what they were accustomed to. This for us, pointed to how leaving safe and known teaching contexts can facilitate teachers to think differently about their work and their teacher selves.

Thus, through their reflections on engaging participatory and visual methodologies in a farm school, the trainee teachers in our project disrupted their understandings of teaching in general, rural schooling and rural children in particular. They also had a chance to reflect on their teaching and what difference they could make. Budge (2005: 3) confirms the notion of a context in which the "peculiarities of the local … must be understood". Seldom is rurality conceptualised as "dynamic, or as a set of preferences that have value that is independent of urban influences" (Odora-Hoppers, 2004: 111). We therefore ensured that the trainee teachers understood the context of the school and the backgrounds of the leaners so that they could not necessarily compare them to urban leaners. Hence, despite the deficiencies that they identified within the school and learners, they were hopeful and willing to take action for social change (Vally, 2007: 17). They saw the new methodologies as a way of challenging the taken for granted stereotypes about rurality and education, and engaging leaners in knowledge production. What also became clear is that the experience enabled them to see how they, through their "pedagogical actions" (Waghid 2011: 1477) in the rural context, could contribute to the good of the learners, community, and society.

Conclusion

This paper has presented how we implemented our project 'New teachers for new times: Visual methodologies for social change in rural education in the age of AIDS' in the Eastern Cape as a response to the challenges arising from ever-growing HIV and AIDS infection rates in rural areas and their interaction with other social challenges such as poverty, and the impact they have on teaching and learning. We have discussed how we prepared trainee teachers as well as in-service teachers on the use of participatory and visual methodologies with leaners. Then we discussed the trainee teachers' experiences of using the new methodologies in their teaching and the meanings they made of their experiences.

We therefore argue that working in a rural farm school using participatory and visual methodologies allowed us as teacher educators, the trainee teachers as well as the in-service teachers to realise that any classroom can be transformed into a democratic space where every learner can voice their opinions irrespective of their proficiency in the language of teaching and learning. We experienced the thrill of seeing every child excited to go into a classroom because they wanted to not because they had to. Thus we realised that we can make a difference in the lives of the children that we interact with daily. We can make a difference in how they construct their learner identities, such that they see themselves as people who have something to contribute to knowledge and that they do, indeed, know something. We, therefore, posit that when a cohort of pre-service teachers work together with in-service teachers using participatory methodologies, such as the ones employed in this study, classrooms can get transformed into enabling and democratic spaces conducive for teaching and learning for all.

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