Developing Academic and Community Research Participation in a South African Township and Rural Community

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Abstract

Participatory action research (PAR) has been promoted as an important collaborative methodology for addressing local concerns. This article reflects on two community engagement PAR projects, one in a township and the other in a rural community, and the issues I faced as an academic researcher coming from the "ivory tower". Historically, community engagement projects caused significant distress, and led to mistrust and misunderstanding of research within communities. In the South African context, academics and researchers are not usually trained to work with communities as partners. When I involved the respective communities, I realised how critical it becomes that participatory researchers understand the extent to which their academic–scientific approach differs from, as well as converges with, community members' practical–experiential perspective. I also outline implications for developing future successful partnerships between the university and the community.

Introduction

During the past decade of democracy in South Africa, the need for higher education institutions to venture beyond the academic "ivory tower" was affirmed in government policy documents (Fourie, 2003). When contemporary educators use the term, ivory tower, pejoratively, as we often do, we seem to condemn not only its legacy of exclusivity but the purity of ivory and the isolation of towers. Consciously or unconsciously, we express hostility toward the ivory tower's esoteric quality: the fact that it defines an inner circle set apart from the rest. Of course, in an age where greater access to higher education is often described as a national priority, and where educational goals are frequently defended with reference not to individuals' intellectual gains but to the revitalising economic effects that advanced training will bring to our communities, it is not surprising that an esoteric and disengaged educational metaphor would be rejected as antidemocratic and reactionary.

The question that arises is, how do we bridge the gap between university and schools—which are viewed as a basic stepping-stone in life where children can receive much needed emotional, social, and spiritual support and guidance? Introducing preservice teachers to participatory action research projects with transformative agendas can go a long way towards promoting community–researcher partnerships. In recent times, there has been an increase in community-based participatory research and service learning in institutions of higher learning with regards to education and community development (Pine, 2009; Westfall, Van Vorst, Main, & Herbert, 2006). A shift toward community-based experiential learning can result not only in enhancing student learning and civic engagement, but also in altering the epistemological priorities and methodologies of the university. Furthermore, engaged scholarship can expand the social, cultural, and human capital of both local communities and universities—and generally improve our attempts at understanding and addressing social ills.

In this article, I reflect on how I attempted to inculcate the capacity for critical inquiry and reflection, as well as the integration of theory and practice, amongst preservice teacher-researchers by exposing them to participatory action research projects. I describe and reflect on two community engagement projects, one in a township and the other in a rural area, and explore both the building blocks for, and critiques of, engaged scholarship and the ways in which teaching techniques can be critically reimagined to include an experiential learning pedagogy of social change. I also suggest how future partnerships between the university and the community can be developed and nurtured.

Perspectives from the Literature

Forging mutually beneficial relationships between field workers in the community and academic researchers from the ivory tower has proven to be a challenging enterprise. The communication gap identified by many educators and researchers highlights the rift between what the research says and what practitioners do. Historically, educators and academic researchers have established their own worlds, their own communities of practice, their own ways of operating and communicating. As Hayes and Kelly (2000, p. 454) pointed out, "the emphasis on research in higher education helped establish a division of labour between those who did conceptual work (academic researchers) and those who executed the ideas established by others (educators or community workers)." Furthermore, some educators feel they have been treated as subjects in educational research with unrealistic demands of what they can and should do (Vaughn, Klingner, & Hughes, 2000). One approach to closing the gap between teaching and research includes direct involvement of educators in research, and direct involvement of academic researchers in teaching. This has been taken up most significantly by participatory action researchers (Sagor, 2005: Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Community-based participatory research and service learning are recent attempts to reconnect academic interests with education and community development (Ennals, 2004; Pine, 2009).

Service learning is a closely related process designed to encourage students to actively apply knowledge and skills to local situations in response to local needs and with the active involvement of community members (Moely, Billig, & Holland, 2009). Many online or printed guides now show how students and faculty can engage in community-based participatory research and meet academic standards at the same time (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2007; James, Slater, & Bucknam, 2011; McNiff, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, 2009; McTaggart, 1997).

Research into the impact of the use of action research in teacher education indicates that teacher candidates can benefit significantly from engaging in the process of inquiry and reflection that action research demands (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005). According to Brown and Tandon (as cited in Babbie & Mouton, 2001), participatory action research can be seen as an integrated activity that combines social investigation, educational work, and action. The goal of participatory action research is to work with stakeholders to generate knowledge in order to initiate change (O'Leary, 2004, p. 98).

Participatory action research (PAR) in the 21st century has emerged from the community research initiatives of Kurt Lewin (1948) and the Tavistock Institute in the 1940s, and all formulations of PAR underscore that research and action must be done *with* people and not *on* or *for* people (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Swantz, 2008).

My PAR projects were inspired by the ideas of Freire (1972), who utilised and implemented critical pedagogy and dialogical reflective methods in his adult education classes in Brazil. The approach implies that "the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world" (Freire, 1982, p. 30). I was also attracted to the way Fals Borda utilised PAR in promoting popular knowledge in his uneasiness within conventional academic circles in developing literacy (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Quigley, 2000). He was also an advocate of counterhegemonic education as well as youth development on issues such as violence, racial or sexual discrimination, educational justice, and the environment (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fine & Torre, 2008; Noffke & Somekh, 2009).

For Cornwall and Jewkes (1995), the key element "lies not in methods, but in attitudes of researchers, which in turn determine how, by, and for whom research is conceptualised and conducted" (p. 1667). Researchers must critically realise that they are not coming to save or rescue the needy and the poor; rather, they must see the community as a place of learning and as an equal partner in the exchange of knowledge, service time, and sharing of resources. Researchers also need to manage expectations and tread a careful path between generating sufficient interest for participation and not raising false hopes.

Placing the Two PAR Projects in Context

During the 2012 academic year, I was involved with two PAR projects. One project (safety schools enrichment project) was with a township school classified as "dysfunctional" on the Cape Flats; the other project (career guidance for Grade 11s) was with a master's student and in a rural area in the Western Cape.

The township safety schools enrichment project

The township project was *Sport against Crime: Chess for Change!* and one of the main objectives was to use the game of chess as a vehicle to promote positive lifestyles amongst the learners and to make them aware of the dangers and social ills they faced in their everyday lives. In this township school, a group of five preservice teachers and I engaged Grade 7 learners as part of a school enrichment development project.

The township project was an initiative that came from our BEd 4th year Research Methods class to support and enhance safer schools and to enrich these schools through practical innovations.

First, the preservice student teachers had to identify a problematic issue they intended to address at a school, or an innovative classroom approach whereby they would seek to introduce change into the classroom, school, or community. They had to write up a brief outline indicating:

- What the problem or innovation is.

- Why they are concerned or keen to introduce the innovation.

- What they intend to do.

- What kind of evidence they could collect to help them make a judgement about what happens as a consequence of their action, and how they intend collecting such evidence.

Next, they had to plan an approach that would address the problem or bring about the desired change—preferably done in collaboration with one or more colleagues who shared some of their concern. This outline had to be handed in by the preservice teachers on 10 March 2012 as a research proposal. In the next stage, they had to put their plan into action over a period of time and monitor or observe how their actions were experienced by all involved. It was emphasised that not only would their action require careful preparation, but the means by which they monitored and gathered evidence of what was happening would need to be carefully thought through and set up in advance. In other words, they had to reflect on (1) what happened in the light of what they originally planned, and (2) their original plans and thinking in the light of subsequent experience. As far as possible, they had to write up their actions, evidence, and reflections as they proceeded—at least in rough draft. The project had to be completed and recommendations submitted before the end of the semester.

At a staff meeting held at the school, the student research group I chaired was given an opportunity by the principal to present our proposed project. After my input, we had a short question and answer session, which I recorded in my diary. The meeting was concluded by the principal, who said he looked forward to the outcome of the proposal, and that the school fully supported any project that would enhance the status and safety of the school.

The theme for the project was *Sport against Crime: Chess for Change!* and the objectives of our township enrichment project were to:

- Use chess as a vehicle to promote a positive lifestyle and to make learners in schools and communities aware of the dangers and social ills facing them.

- Train teachers and learners in playing, coaching, and administering chess activities.

- Increase cognitive skills and improve learners' ability to think rationally.

- Promote in young players, a sense of self-confidence and self-worth.

- Promote gender equity—chess allows girls to compete with boys on a non threatening, socially acceptable plane.

- Promote healthy competition and socialisation in a safe environment.

- Teach children to try their best to win, while accepting defeat with grace.

The rural school career guidance project

The rural school project was conducted by my master's student over a period of two years (2011–2012) and I mostly played a participant–observer and advisory role; we engaged Grade 11 learners from the Boland rural district, Saron, regarding career guidance and life skills. Amongst the characteristics of this rural school are the following:

- Its distance from a town.

- Transportation, and the state of repair of the roads and adjacent bridges.

- Access to communication and technology.

- Access to basic services and facilities (electricity, water, sanitation).

- The education, health, and economic status of the community.

All these characteristics become challenges in the stark reality of teaching in a Saron rural classroom. This action research project was an attempt to improve the student's classroom practice in Career Guidance, a subdivision of Life Orientation. The need for the study arose because matric learners at this rural school

appeared confused about their future careers. They lacked the capacity to do self-planning, and did not really comprehend how to plan their future careers—in line with Cuseo's (1996) view that education is guaranteed not only by giving form to the structure of the curriculum, but by what happens between learners and educators in the classroom. To quote the master's student, who completed his action research thesis towards the end of 2012, "I believe that any attempt to improve the education and conditions of our rural and disadvantaged schools would go a long way in addressing the inequities prevalent in our society".

Ethical Considerations Regarding the Two Projects

Whitehead and McNiff (2006) emphasised the need to gain permission from all participants involved in the reflective exercise. Before we started with the projects, we felt it would be ethical to discuss our work with the various participants involved in the PAR projects, and negotiate the scope of their engagement. We could not possibly claim to be empowering the students and the school community if we did not involve them from the outset of the research process.

Regarding the Cape Flats project, the negotiating procedure was quite lengthy because five candidate teachers were involved. Although all these preservice teachers had agreed to participate, I nevertheless questioned them as to why they were willing to engage in the research deliberations during class and with the challenging school concerned. Their responses meant a lot because they were key participants in the project. These are some of their comments:

- Projects are thought provoking and make teaching and learning more meaningful.

- As participants, we become more mature and begin to see realities.

- Reflecting on our actions improves our future practices.

- The possibility of adding value to a local township school makes one feel good.

- Time spent on projects is time spent on building constructive communities.

These expressions by the students regarding their involvement in the project conveyed a positive response and gave me, as facilitator and teacher–researcher, a clearer notion of what the students wanted and expected from the proposed project. It was conveyed to the students that as coresearchers they had to be actively involved in conceptualising and designing the project, collecting, and also analysing data. They had to be prepared to be interviewed by stakeholders, complete survey forms, keep a diary and, if they were comfortable about it, to hand in their diaries to be scrutinised and analysed at the end of the project. Although we were approached by the school to bring our school enrichment project to them, we nevertheless first met with the principal, teachers, learners, governing body, and an official from the Department of Education for the approval of our safe school project. In our deliberations with them, we highlighted the ethical issues involved. Mouton, (2009, p. 238) indicated that ethics is the science of what is right and what is wrong. De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport (2007, p. 61) and White, (2005, p. 210) all indicate that the most important aspects of ethical issues in research to be addressed are violation of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. In our project, we also took the advice of Chevalier and Buckles (2013) that norms and ethical conduct and their implications may have to be revisited as a project unfolds, and that PAR cannot limit discussions about the ethics of the design and proposal phases.

Regarding the project that focussed on enhancing the career paths of Grade 11 learners at the rural school, I was invited together with the master's student to address the principal and the governing body on 5 June 2012. Initially the student felt apprehensive and he conveyed to me that the exercise appeared rather technical, and that the application letter we had sent to the governing body earlier was informative enough. Here we were cautioned by Chamber's (1994, p. 1253) point that, in a rural context, practitioners and researchers should guard against rushing the research processes. Once the meeting was finished and the governing body had given their stamp of approval, we felt some sense of achievement. The main

caution from the school was that in our reporting and writing we must not portray the school in a negative light. In his deliberations with the principal and the governing body, the student quoted McNiff (2002) and conveyed the following:

- I intend reviewing and reflecting on our contemporary ideas regarding career guidance.

- Once I detect the problem/s, I will try to modify and improve certain aspects.

- I will monitor and evaluate [. . .] until some sort of satisfaction has been reached.

- I will constantly engage with [. . .] and give feedback to [. . .] regarding my findings.

Methodology

Regarding both the township and the rural projects, the research methodology used for collecting the data was qualitative and interpretive. Our projects foregrounded social issues concerning social justice in our attempt to empower these economically deprived quintile schools. Interpretivism aims to move away from obtaining knowledge through experimental manipulation of human subjects towards understanding by means of conversations with subjects. Social reality is viewed as socially constructed based on a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation of the internal, meaningful behaviour of people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The data collection techniques we used were our field notes, student reflections, video recordings, interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. In these research projects, the focus group technique was especially useful. The focus group technique is one of the most effective qualitative methods for studying ideas in group contexts. In particular, it can explore group interaction, attitudes, and cognition and arrive at a synergy of ideas because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). The data we received via the focus group discussions was audio recorded, and the transcriptions were timeously unpacked and rigorously discussed. This was time consuming because we also wanted to extrapolate the tone of the feedback discussions. During our feedback discussions, we invited the principal, the teachers, and representatives of the school's governing body to participate, and this ensured the trustworthiness of both PAR projects.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the research are discussed below to give an overall perspective on the developmental needs for academic and community research participation in South African township and rural school communities.

In both the township and rural projects, patient communication became essential as planned activities had to be altered and adjusted on a regular basis as a result of the constant changing of the schools' schedules and timetables. The challenge of adjusting planned activities prepares the researcher for the unexpected occurrences or misfortunes that rural or township learners have to deal with in their daily lives. In my own reflection, I realised that my efforts spent on teaching and preparation of evaluation and especially feedback for students, far exceeded the actual instruction time allocated for the project. Therefore, most of my gains (learning to know my students better) also exceeded the lecture time frame. Very often, I wondered whether the PAR project in the township was really going to make a difference to the crime statistics in South Africa. However, the motivation and enthusiasm of the university students and the learners of the schools gave me a sense of achievement. The career guidance lessons and motivational sessions with the Grade 11 learners in the Boland rural school exposed us to the dreams and visions of the Saron learners. It was gratifying to see the enthusiasm and commitment of these rural learners despite the challenges they faced in advancing and furthering their education careers. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data collection.

First, the township and rural projects successfully bridged the gap between the university and the schools. This was expressed by participants in both township and rural projects.

Participants expressed these sentiments regarding the ongoing township project:

- We sometimes think students live in their own world, but these students genuinely want to improve the situation of our township children . . . they want make a difference. (Participant 1)

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- I find it rewarding working in this township project. I learn to know them (community) and they learn to know me. (Participant 2)

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- As an academic and researcher, I now know how important it becomes for rural students to engage with university academics. They make the unknown and the dreams of certain career paths a reality. (Masters student, 2012)

The preservice teachers were able to articulate the steps in the action research process, and were able to describe how to use them in their everyday classroom practice. It was uplifting to see university students and school learners engage with each other regarding the future of crime prevention and community safety issues. The preservice teachers found working collaboratively made the project so much easier and more interesting. Whilst individuals were assigned specific duties, the common goal kept the preservice teachers attached and committed to the common cause. They reflected on, and demonstrated, how they were able to more fully understand their teaching for community improvement by engaging in this PAR project. Two participants confirmed that the PAR projects were not just words and sayings, but were words put into action:

- As future teachers, we got to understand the learners better by going into their households and meeting some of their parents. (Participant 3)
- I would never have engaged with the community on my own if we did not do this as part of our class group work action research assignment. (Participant 4)

Second, both the teachers and learners were immersed in the respective projects. In the township school, the playing of chess was linked as a Life Skills project. During the first activity performed during the study, it seemed that the project immediately captured the attention of the learners concerned—as recorded by Participant 5:

> *Very interesting! You have to be alert, think and concentrate. The learners were very attentive and hungry to learn how to link the game of chess to crime prevention. They were very eager to start the game of thrones . . . They could relate the strategy of the game to their everyday lives. My conclusion of today's lesson is that this is a game that gets you thinking, can boost your self-confidence and keeps you positive.*

The interaction between us, the teachers—and the enthusiastic involvement of the learners in demonstrating strategic moves—strengthened my perception that the learners of this school, branded as dysfunctional, had been empowered. The rural school project in Saron received positive feedback regarding the empowerment of the learners. On Wednesday 15 August 2012, at a teacher and learner meeting as a participant observer, I recorded the following input from learners:

- I never realised the importance of working together as a group.

- The life skills lessons are so interesting that it doesn't feel like school.

- Career guidance is essential especially in isolated places such as ours.

- In the other classes we must remain absolutely quiet, but here we can discuss and talk freely.

In both the rural and township schools, it became apparent that the learners were still lacking the self-confidence to question the singular voice of the teacher. Cullingford (1999), a qualitative researcher who has worked at a variety of schools, would have found reinforcement of his ideas in the experiences of both these rural and township learners; as he put it:

> When one studies children's experiences of school rather than the curriculum, management or teaching styles, some personal and consistent insights emerge . . . indeed one of the most fundamental insights that children have of school is their own powerlessness, their helplessness in the face of a given system. (p. 195)

Finally, it was evident that the township safe school project and the rural school's career guidance project were not without constraints. Because more students were working on the township safe school project, the feedback regarding this project was more in depth. This was also evident from the comments of my student assistant and from the feedback from the learners in their journals and teacher interviews. Amongst the comments of the student assistants were the following:

- Playing games in class is not real learning and cannot stop crime.

- If we as teachers must try to become so innovative at this school . . . the principal would have reprimanded us long time for ill-discipline.

- Time constraints don't allow us to always visit schools.

This last point was also emphasised in the focus group discussions as it underlined the idea that the PAR project needed to be small and manageable. Another limitation of the project was that the preservice student teachers (PSTs) involved were at different levels of understanding action research and, more so, PAR. This was evident in some of their comments and student diaries when we reflected on the various stages of our action research process.

Together, the community of PSTs, learners, and I as teacher–educator found new ways in which to think about township schools and schooling, that is, new ways in which to think about the work of teaching and learning, and specifically about teaching in an emerging economy such as South Africa. According to some of the PSTs, this collaborative participatory action research project gave them a reality check about what to encounter within schools, and also gave them a more critical perspective as future teachers and researchers.

Reflecting on the Significance and Implications of the Two PAR Projects

For all of us, and here I include the master's student, these PAR projects were significant because they provided us with evidence that action research, if done collaboratively and in a participatory way, can empower PSTs by giving them the necessary tools to become effective practitioner researchers. Also, the project enhanced the students' action research experience and bridged the theory–practice divide when we integrated the theory-based curriculum studies course with their practice teaching experience. Simultaneously, by implementing collaborative action research, we grew professionally ourselves. Such experiences help PSTs to be flexible in their teaching and to modify lesson content according to changing community contexts, which leads to a better understanding of the complexities of teaching (Butcher et al., 2003).

Regarding the significance of the projects for preservice education, analysing the final reports indicated to me that PSTs are capable of selecting and carrying out projects beneficial to their learners. The cooperative inquiry approach empowered each of us to challenge ourselves both personally and professionally in our quest to make the university project school- and community-based—beyond the ivory tower. Furthermore,

as trainee teachers, they indicated their enjoyment in choosing an issue that was significant for them as well as the satisfaction they derived from the implementation and analysis of their project; they also indicated that they intended to actively research their practice as in-service teachers. Most of all, the PSTs felt empowered and uplifted as future educators who will go on to work in, and influence, township and rural schools.

In collaboration with both the township and rural communities, our PAR projects significantly built trust and an understanding of research amongst the relevant communities. Historically, this has caused significant distress and has led to mistrust and misunderstanding of research within communities (Davis & Reid, 1999). It became obvious in the communities that we were not just outsiders coming in as academics from the ivory tower, but that we were giving of our professional selves to enhance their sites of learning.

My experiences in collaborating with these two projects confirmed my belief that a teacher's devotion to teaching can indeed motivate most students to learn actively with boosted confidence. In return for the teacher's dedication to teach, students provide fair and constructive feedback for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. As the old saying goes, "Example is better than precept." If teachers do mean what they say and set explicit examples, students will appreciate that and be willing to take responsibility for their own learning. For me, the township and rural PAR projects were indeed meaningful learning experiences for all the role players involved. Our action research projects were fruitfully conducted, generating benefits for me and my students—just as suggested in the field (Bartels, 2002; Kember et al., 2006).

Conclusion

As is evident from the two projects, my students and I became more aware of the day-to-day challenges that schools and communities face in the township and rural areas in South Africa. The students, as well as I, realised the value of participatory action research as not the only solution to solve the multiplicity of problems facing education, but certainly as means to support and transform the paradigms of service learning—so that the assets rather than the deficits of a community are strengthened in reciprocal and respectful community–campus partnerships. Finally, in nurturing and empowering our diverse communities, I believe we have moved beyond the confines of the ivory tower.

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