Chapter C2

Rurality and Social Justice in Multiple Contexts: Deliberations Revisited

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Overview

In this final chapter the key themes that have emerged from the preceding chapters of the two volumes are synthesised. Drawing from diverse rural schooling and higher education contexts in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and South Africa, the chapters provide an overview of challenges and promising narratives of rurality and social justice in schools and higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa. Scholarly research has demonstrated the gross inequalities and injustices which confront rural education as compared to urban counterparts particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. With the dawn of a postcolonial dispensation within the continent, a distributive justice approach has dominated

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interventions destined to steer the fortunes of rural schools as well as rural students in higher education. A distributive justice approach is driven by a neo-liberal egalitarian conception of justice wherein institutions assign rights and duties and distribute benefits and burdens through social cooperation (Rawls 1971). In the context of rural schools in Africa and elsewhere, distributive justice has been conceived with the hope of modelling an urban imagination of the rural, that is, to speed up the development of rural communities so that they catch up with their urban counterparts. While not claiming to be representative and exhaustive of all the myriad and diverse rural places in which schools are located and higher education institutions draw their students from, the chapters grapple with pertinent social justice issues that have historically hampered and still continue to confront and impact rural education provision. Working through conceptions of multiple ruralities and distributive justice (Rawls 1971), recognitional justice and associational justice (Gewirtz 2006b) these chapters do not subscribe to a consensual orientation of rurality and social justice. Indeed, the principles of justice and conceptions of rurality adopted in these chapters demonstrate the contested nature of a discourse as shaped by “competing norms and external constraints” (Cuervo 2016, p. 4).

A persistent line of thought running through the various chapters is that the terrain of rurality and education in Sub-Saharan Africa appears to have reached a juncture where a reconceptualisation of rural education and social justice issues are urgently required. Thus each chapter interrogates rurality and social justice and their intersection with other categories such as history of colonialism, access, participation, achievement, parental involvement, gender, disability, social mobility, research knowledge and curriculum and space. Anchored on the notion of a socially just and equitable education, the two volumes on rurality and social justice in schools in Sub-Saharan Africa and rurality and social justice in higher education attempt such a reformulation of rurality. The key themes which recur in these two volumes are shifting conceptions of rurality, multiple and complex ruralities, expanded notions of social justice, as well as contested spaces. This chapter pulls together the key arguments in these volumes.
Shifting Conceptions of Rurality, Education and Social Justice

The fact that societies are socially unjust is not contested. Social inequality exists in all parts of the world. In the majority of countries in postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa the injustice has a historical social engineering executed through systems of racial separate development. Even though the inequality is unanimously agreed upon, identifying, analysing and prioritising dealing with unfairness is hotly controversial. Consequently, we find rural education in Sub-Saharan Africa located on the periphery and often completely absent from social justice agendas. If attention to the rural is made, it is often driven by assumptions of rural uniformity. This rural education oversight is often propelled by erroneous assumptions of rural which are derived in comparison with the urban. For a long time colonial images of rurality have dominated public and policy directives in education in Africa. Particular acceptable norms became the standards by which the rural and its people were identified and defined. Even to this day we find such narratives powerful and not serving the rural in any meaningful manner. Though articulated within an American/Western context, we find Theobold and Wood's (2010) observations relevant to the African rural education circumstances that, “somewhere along the line rural students and adults seem to have learnt that to be rural is to be sub-par, that conditions of living in a locale creates deficiencies of various kinds including educational deficiencies” (p. 19).

The negative messages about the rural self are channelled by the dominant culture through the public media. Even curriculum and research text convey negative messages of rurality and schooling in these places.

Similarly, the few successful rural graduates who enter higher education carry with them what we would call ‘a rural baggage’ which makes it practically difficult to navigate both the social and academic culture in an urban university. Such messages convey deficit conceptions of rurality and rural identities became embedded in the construction of rurality and schooling.

Research and development about the rural has proceeded on similar assumptions of deficit. In the main there is nothing of significance that
can be drawn from the rural. Development assistance is parachuted from outside with the hope that it will impact change and move the rural schools forward. The call to adopt strength-based paradigms and conceptions of the rural has been anchored by Moletsane (2012). There is something about the rural which has escaped the imagination of the present modern discourse. How can we capture and utilise this rural strength? Corbett (2013, as cited in Corbett 2015) restates rural positioning as strength, thus, “how might we tap into the innovative, improvisational traditions that have marked rural living where people have always had to figure things out for themselves and develop multiple skill sets?” (p. 18).

For example, Mbhiza in this volume reframes parental involvement in education in ways that show rural innovation against odds. This is empowering because dominant narratives have portrayed rural parents as basically unsupportive of the children’s educational welfare.

Against these powerfully entrenched narratives of rurality and schooling the various chapters in these two volumes attempt to reframe rurality and education in both the schooling and higher education sectors in Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, some rural dwellers have successfully shed the negative connotations of rurality, but the very act of dismissing these stereotypes becomes part of their identity.

The chapters all reflect in different ways the need to shift our conceptions of rurality from colonial and conservative stereotypes to an appreciation of rurality as locations in space and time made up of unique attributes and opportunities. Understanding the above shifting conceptions has significant implications for curriculum policy development as well as epistemic pedagogical relevance. As argued by Ndile in these volumes, overcoming injustice would entail dismantling institutionalised obstacles through appropriate policies and their effective implementation that prevent some peoples from participating or benefiting on a par with others as full and equal members of a social system.
Engaging with Multiple and Complex Rural Spaces in Schools and Higher Education

Public and even research discourses are filled with homogenous and erroneous assumptions of rurality and poverty which generate broad-brush policy approaches which have failed to adequately inform our understanding of the most deprived rural communities in South Africa. The dominant definitions of rurality have privileged deficit paradigms of rurality (Moletsane 2012) characterised by conservatism, disadvantage, remoteness, isolation and poverty underdevelopment. The various chapters in these volumes attempt to demystify such narrow categorisations of rurality. Rurality is indeed heterogeneous, dynamic and complex. Rural people are confined in a specific and bounded geographic material place, but time, space and resources compel them to experience the rural differently. There is life sustained in rural areas at times independent from urban authority. Corbett (2015) is informative when he argues that,

In the current circumstances, there are multiple forms of rural community and multiple parenting and career strategies that need to be considered not en masse, both in terms of ‘thickness’ as Pat Thomson (2000) put it referring to the specifics of this family, this child and/or this community. (p. 19)

The heterogeneity of rurality warrants that consideration of social justice should be aggregated to the smallest unity rather than treating rural people as homogenous and essential blocks. Targeted intervention can reach the deserving category of people. In the quest for rural social justice in education, the complexity and multifaceted nature of rurality with its diverse community composition needs to be foregrounded. The chapters alert us to also consider rurality as composed of women, people with disability, and people living in flood-prone areas. Also, in Sub-Saharan Africa, different historical trajectories and education policies bear distinct imprints on education provision in rural areas. Thus, to perceive the rural one as amorphous is reductionist and robs the rural space of its potential power.
As we focus on the specifics of the local and rural, we are also oblivious of the danger of completely isolating the rural from the rest of the world. We recognise that the rural is also integrated into global processes and forces that transform virtually every space on the globe today, albeit on an unequal footing.

**A Space for Rurality in Higher Education: Broadening the Horizons of Social Justice**

The notion of rurality is gradually gathering force as a conceptual tool articulating and leveraging social justice in both the schooling and higher education sectors. The rurality discourse bears undertones of inclusion and at times subversion. Essentially, rurality is framed to contest the current curriculum structures, spaces and policies in higher education which were largely designed with a misrecognition of the rural. In general, there is a clarion call for higher education to respond to the needs and challenges of Africa. As noted by Dhunpath, Amin and Msibi (2014, p. 1), “Higher education, from this perspective, has to shape, plan, design and produce human capital and knowledges that are relevant to Africa.” We extend this call to the needs and challenges of rural contexts in Africa which broadly encompass multiple deprivation and poverty. This discourse is partly a response to the diversity which currently characterises schooling and higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

A persistent and emerging concern is how higher education has often alienated rural students, making it difficult for these students to access the knowledge and, subsequently, graduate. If we examine transformative efforts in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa in the postcolonial period from Gewirtz’s (2006a) social justice perspective, we can conclude that issues of recognitional and associational justice are still to be addressed with respect to rurality in higher education. The chapters grapple with the complexity embedded in attempts to recognise the rural attributes and affordances which rural students bring with them in the higher education pedagogic encounter.
From a perspective of rurality and social justice there are two issues evident in the context of higher education. One is the growing proportion of black students from the remote rural schools who due to democratisation of higher education have now gained expanded access and participation in the previously exclusive education system. The second issue is that higher education has not acted in a responsive manner to the emergent demography of black rural students. Dhunpath and Vithal's (2012) postulation is informative in this regard when they argue that,

... while university student bodies have grown and diversified rapidly, we ask whether universities have been responsive to these changes or whether they are unprepared in remaining unchanged in their staffing and ways in which they construct their academic programs and curricula, and whether their deeply entrenched cultures, rituals and traditions inhibit meaningful access to higher education. (pg. 2)

The consequence of that lack of response has been both the social and epistemological exclusion of the rural black students in higher education. Low throughputs and graduation rates manifest largely on the black rural students. The chapters in these two volumes provide some practical and pedagogical suggestions as to how higher education should attend to the confounding above issues in order to provide spaces for recognitional and associational justice. To move beyond distributive justice, the chapters in these volumes offer some insights and proposals as to why and how that should be pursued.

Subversive Discourse and Practice: Rural and Social Justice Imperative for Higher Education

The participation and success of rural students in higher education is globally acknowledged. Commonwealth Australia (2019) notes that as a result of the greater academic, geographic, social and financial challenges they experience, Regional Rural Remote students are much less likely to undertake and complete tertiary study. Most of the ideas and proposals
offered in the above chapters have not yet made notable inroads in higher education.

The authors present these ideas not as prescriptive dossiers, but as possible contenders to current normative higher education curriculum structures. A rural gaze into issues of access, participation and achievement is suggested by Hellen Agumba, calling for reconfiguration of higher education institutional landscape in order to expand access and success of rural students. Without this rural gaze, higher education will remain underprepared to engage productively with rural student clientele. What is significant in these accounts is the subversion and deconstruction of the notion of underpreparedness which has been disproportionally apportioned to rural students. Without a modicum of self-introspection higher education will for a long time to come remain underprepared to deal with rural students. Phefumula Nyoni’s and Joseph Hungwe reconceptualisation of extended curriculum programmes and colonial neologism echoes the same idea that nothing is wrong with the rural students, they are not deficient in any way but higher education programmes like the ECP might be. According to Nyoni, the gaze needs to shift to examine the personal and professional baggage that lecturers bring into the academic spaces, for they shape the emergent relations and norms of social justice. Gwavaranda suggests that research in higher education would be more relevant if it is informed by rural African relational and communitarian epistemology, while Amasa Ndofirepi and Felix Maringe suggest the potential of *ukama* ethical values in knowledge production in higher education. Elizabeth Ndofirepi and Felix Maringe grapple with issues of student experiences in higher education spaces. Rural students create social spaces and networks which become useful for their survival in a marginalising learning environment. Mapukata, Masinire and Nkambule suggest that training of professionals should be decentralised to rural areas.
Social Justice: An Indigenous Africa Perspective

Thinking beyond Western modernist perspectives of social justice is probably what should drive research and pedagogy in higher education. A few chapters in these volumes have provided very significant points of departure in thinking about justice and rurality in higher education and in rural communities. Normally we frame social justice in modernist Eurocentric terms as all other chapters in the volumes have done. A few chapters have used indigenous African concepts of justice to think about teaching and knowledge production in higher education. They are arguing that Western concepts of justice are inadequate in providing educational justice in an African university. At this juncture of research knowledge/curriculum decolonisation sweeping across academia in Africa and other non-Western worlds, indigenous conceptions and application of justice become useful in thinking about some practical ways of decolonisation knowledge and pedagogy in higher education. This becomes a potentially promising research thrust which requires further exploration.

The proposals and rural insights in the above chapters steer an uncomfortable orientation to the current structural arrangement in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, in the current context of higher education which is coaxed with a pervasive neoliberal mantra, the proposals and insights will remain as isolated pockets of change initiated by the collective agency of individual staff and students. The two volume book provides the bedrock in the form of theory and practices that pervade education in both basic and higher education on which researchers and stakeholders can navigate and derive new insights to further contribute to the knowledge funds of educating rural and disadvantaged citizens of Africa and the world at large for social justice values of egalitarian and democratic citizenship.
References

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