Editorial Special Issue
Community-Based Research for Social Change

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Research can be defined as one of various ways of knowing or understanding. Academics construe the idea of knowing and understanding as a process involving systematic inquiry aimed at collecting data and interpreting the information. Conventional views of data interpretation could create the impression that researchers are highly qualified specialised academics whose research projects are constrained by firm disciplinary and academic boundaries. This idea suggests that research is mostly meant for the researcher and that the participants are assigned a passive role largely calculated to prevent them from deriving any benefit whatsoever. Bearing in mind that the fundamental goal of knowing or understanding denotes co-learning, it often happens that recommendations and decisions are published without ever involving the participants. Small wonder then that academic research is criticised for its lack of social impact in the real word (Schucksmith, 2016). Social impact is particularly important given that we live in a complex and rapidly changing society, one in which researchers need to explore new educational pathways for improving and sustaining life (Wood, 2014). The question therefore arises as to how researchers in the 21st century can acknowledge complex societal challenges while simultaneously committing to and creating a community of equal partners that centres around the needs and perspectives of the participants with whom they collaborate.

The key to answering this question could lie in action research. It is widely recognised that action research concentrates on the process of inquiry and recognises the importance of forming a relationship between people, actions, and knowledge (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; McNiff, 2013; Wood, 2019; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Involving participants in research is not a novel idea. In fact, many decades ago, researchers such as John Dewey (1938) called for research to be linked to social reality and to be applied in real-life contexts. In this shared process in which participants are allowed to improve the understanding of their own practices, researchers are transformed into "actors for change" and co-researchers/participants become students and "shapers of meaning" (Pettit, 2010, p. 821). In contrast to hierarchical, researcher-initiated research, one of the first steps in community-based participatory research (CBPR) involves questioning the privileged position of researchers (Wood, 2019). According to Wood (2019), in this in-tandem process, the needs and perspectives of participants are considered because research is conducted *by* and *for* participants and not *on* participants.

It becomes clear therefore, that conducting research should not, in itself, be the ultimate goal but should rather be seen as a means of achieving a collaborative goal for all participants (Lee & Barnett, 2013). CBPR is increasingly recognised as a promising action-oriented method that involves a team approach in which the complex dynamics of power and participation are valued among scholars and community members and across disciplines (Lee & Barnett, 2013). All participants are acknowledged as equal members in a research project, all with important voices, and all collaboratively working

together to accomplish social change (Olshansky & Zender, 2015). These ideas are summarised by Israel et al. (1998) as being the key principles of CBPR:

- Recognising that the community is the unit of study

- Building on the strengths already present in the community

- Continually facilitating collaboration and partnership in each phase of the research

- Integrating knowledge and action

- Promoting the alleviation of social inequality of co-learning

- Using an interactive process

- Focusing on wellness and an ecological perspective of health

- Partnering in the dissemination of research findings

These eight principles constitute the theme of this special edition entitled, *Community-Based Research for Social Change*. Our specific focus is on the unique strengths that individuals bring to research. The special issue emanated from the COMBER Conference—entitled, *Extending the Boundaries of Educational Research*—held from 20 to 22 November 2019 at The Roots in Potchefstroom. Apart from research in all fields of education, the 102 attendees also focused on research in the social and health sciences with a view to bringing about positive change. The articles accepted for publication bear testimony to how the abovementioned key principles of CBPR can be applied in efforts to promote collaborative, transformative, and democratic educational research for, and as, social change. This special issue provides a platform for the publication of research articles focusing on participatory methods/methodologies and community-based research (CBR) from all fields of education as well as the social and health sciences. The overarching message of the articles is clear: the very act of engaging in research with a view to effecting positive change may well prove to be educational for all involved.

In the first article, "On Responses of Higher Education and Training With(in) Society Through Research, Teaching, and Community Engagement," Hanlie Dippenaar, Elize van Eeden, and Irma Eloff identify specific associations with the core higher education training activities and illustrate how this combined focus has effected positive change. Their article presents reflections on the nuances of community engagement as a trend that has emanated from research by scholars in the field in South Africa (and in collaboration with international scholars) since the late 1990s up to 2020. It focuses on the nexus of research, teaching and learning, and community-engagement. The research was conducted in three phases. In Phase I, purposeful sampling was used to identify the published work of leading South African scholars who had engaged with the call to adopt a more transformative and collaborative approach to research. In Phase II, the scope of the sampling was broadened to include research in multiple disciplines. Phase III of the sampling was broadened chronologically to include research since the 1990s, and limited to the social sciences in order to conduct a trend analysis that considered both historical context and growth directions in community engagement in the social sciences. The golden thread through the study is the importance of a form of collaboration with communities—one that would, however, differ in focus and vision from faculty to faculty.

The above reflections are followed by the article, "Learning To Facilitate Community-Based Research: Guidelines From a Novice Researcher," in which Andri Schoonen, Lesley Wood, and Cornè Kruger commit to effecting social change by integrating knowledge and practice in their paper. Her coauthors

assisted Andri to create a living educational theory to learn how she could adhere to the foundational principles of participatory research. The aim was to guide Andri towards improving her role as a facilitator when employing CBR. She explains in the paper, how she learnt to facilitate a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) project by means of critical reflection on self and process. The claims to knowledge she shares are twofold. First, she has come to know how to improve her facilitation skills, and, second, she has learnt to use continual critical self-reflection to guide her actions to conduct more ethical CBR, which is underpinned by the principles of PALAR. This article is sure to guide other researchers as they strive to improve their facilitation of CBPR groups to become more confident, critically reflective, and ethical researchers.

Moving along, we meet Rowan Thompson and Busisiwe Alant who applied the CBPR principle of building on the strengths already present in the community in their article, "Finding and Defining Champions in a Rural Adult Education Intervention in Limpopo, South Africa." In their paper, the authors disclose the outcomes of a community-based information communications technology (ICT) and basic adult education (BAE) nutrition training intervention for out-of-school young mothers (YMs) in a resource-limited rural village in Eastern Limpopo. The study demonstrates the feasibility of implementing an effective, limited resources training course for a marginalised group of YMs in a rural setting. With limited funding and having had to rely on the generosity of volunteers, the course had to be abandoned, however, ICT resources were secured for future use in the Mulamula Education Centre Project (MECP) building with library, hall, office, and ICT teaching area as a BAE venue (Thompson, 2016). "Champions" from the YMs group could fill roles required to sustain the MECP and they were willing to learn to become future trainers. To sustain a training programme requires funding for the local training of staff, administrative staff, technical maintenance, site maintenance, and security. This study points to champions acting as catalysts to enable YMs and their older-women mentors to fill different roles in the development and delivery of community-based BAE. The message is clear, namely, that emergent community leaders from YM groups need spaces of this kind to develop and that developing leadership skills—or life skills—within a peer group is easier than having to work alone. Providing such opportunities in rural communities remains a challenge but is not impossible.

The next group of academics demonstrate how to use interactive processes as CBPR in their paper on a collaborative book-creation project, Dithakga Tša Gobala. For the paper, Adrie Haese and Elmarie Costandius employed participatory research to investigate whether and how the development of wordless picture books in local communities might help parents engage in cognitively stimulating activities such as shared reading or storytelling. The authors explain that the literary genre of wordless picture books is an under-researched one in the South African context. They argue that such books can be used to spark both a culture and love of reading because they can be enjoyed by readers of various backgrounds, language preferences, and literacy levels. Stories sourced from two communities were used to create a series of wordless picture books that were then circulated in the communities. Initial results indicated that not only did the project have a positive impact on the participants' self-concept and their relationship with reading, but that the books were also positively received by the wider community. The results indicated too, that the books were easy to use, created positive parent-child experiences, and encouraged imagination—and that the content of the books was relatable. The findings suggest that wordless picture books are a valuable genre in the South African reading landscape and that a participatory model for creating relevant, local content for reading is not only viable but also beneficial for communities and other stakeholders.

In their article, "Shifting Gears: Lessons Learnt From Critical, Collaborative, Self-Reflection on Community-Based research," Luiza de Sousa, Anette Hay, Schalk Raath, Aubrey Fransman and Barend Richter reflect on their learning experiences as novice participatory action researchers. The researchers explain that they come from natural science backgrounds, grounded in a positivist paradigm, and used to employing more traditional, objective, and research-driven methodologies. In

this paper, they explain how they used participatory action research to collaboratively explore how teachers could integrate climate change issues into their teaching and learning. They used reflective diaries to record their journey through the action research cycles. A thematic analysis of their diaries was supplemented by recorded discussions between the participants. The findings revealed that while it was challenging to begin thinking in a different paradigm, they came to appreciate the value of the action research process that enabled teachers to integrate climate change issues into their teaching in a participatory way. They also conclude that their collaborative reflections may be of value to other researchers from similar scientific backgrounds who wish to learn what shifts in paradigm, methods, and processes are needed to be able to conduct CBR in a participatory way.

In the final article in this edition, entitled, "Enhancing the Management of Performance of Departmental Heads in Primary and Secondary Schools: PAR as a Practice-Enhancing Process," Veli Nhlapo presents a participatory strategy for enhancing the management performance of departmental heads (HDs) at South African primary and secondary schools. Studies on HDs tend to be steeped in a traditional mode of inquiry that raises issues and makes recommendations in the hope that these recommendations will be implemented. Using a participatory action-research methodology steeped in the critical emancipatory paradigm, an eight-point participatory strategy to enhance the effectiveness of HDs was developed. The strategy entailed mobilisation, assembling a research group, developing rules of engagement, collaborative planning, holding workshops, implementation, reflection, and refining the implementation plan. The findings of the study illustrate the ontological and epistemological potency of PAR as a practice-enhancing methodology. It became evident that the success or failure of a PAR study depends on the ability of researchers to descend from their proverbial ivory tower and see themselves as equal partners in research groups. This article summarises the eight principles of Israel et al. (1998) by demonstrating the importance of fostering social justice and by highlighting the ontological and epistemological potency of participatory action research as a practice-enhancing methodology.

All the above papers suggest ways of doing research with participants with a view to addressing the needs, and to acknowledge the voices, of the community. They remind us that research can contribute to this end by employing a team approach that includes all participants, as Lesley Wood (2019) described in her book, Participatory Action Learning and Action Research: Theory, Practice and Process. The book offers a concise yet analytical interpretation of the transformative, collaborative, and democratic PALAR approach. In my review of the book included in this issue, I describe how the readers are taken on a professional PALAR journey in which Wood's deep knowledge, understanding, and passion in serving communities are portrayed. This book offers more than the mere understanding of PALAR as a methodology. It comprises an authentic and critical reflection from the perspective of a researcher in Africa, showing readers how PALAR is also a philosophy, a theory of learning, and a facilitation tool for a much-needed transformative research approach.

This special issue concludes with a conference report by Stef Esterhuizen on the Raised Voices conference. This was a virtual conference in which all voices/opinions were welcomed. Held virtually on 24 and 25 October 2020 and involving 173 delegates from 32 countries, the online attendees interrogated both theoretical and practical presentations of action research.

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