

Editorial: Participatory Methodologies and Educational Research

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Current challenges faced by individuals, families and communities increasingly require communities to seek amongst themselves for solutions to problems and support to overcome adverse circumstances. Schools, faith-based organisations, community institutions, health centres and other community-based facilities typically take the lead in finding solutions to the problems communities face. This tendency in turn requires that the findings of research be applied to practical problems to facilitate social transformation. As such, this asks for participatory research, where community members or stakeholders in communities collaborate with researchers in addressing needs and enhancing resilience and well-being in societies. This idea is emphasised by Currie, Kinga, Rosenbaum, Lawb, Kertoyc and Spechtd (2005), who state that researcher-community partnerships should generate knowledge that informs communities and results in improved service delivery, better interventions, and community development.

The question inevitably comes to mind as to which role educational researchers may fulfil in facilitating such processes of social change. In South Africa, specifically, schools are viewed as nodes of care and support, where children can receive much needed assistance and support – material support, as well as emotional, social and spiritual guidance. Teachers and school principals are typically valued as key figures in communities, who potentially possess the power to make a difference in people’s lives. In addition, by involving other community members, such as parents, health workers, faith-based leaders, and other community officials, a focus can be placed on capacity building and community leadership development.

Participatory methodologies create a pathway for such partnerships which may address social challenges by empowering communities, while building on existing knowledge. By becoming partners in knowledge generation and sharing, researchers and community members thus become part of a community of practice, which can bring about social change based on co-learning and capacity building in the group (Dalal, Skeete, Yeo, Lucas & Rosenthal, 2002). This special issue presents examples of how participatory methodologies can contribute to knowledge generation in the field of education, not only in terms of the role that teachers may fulfil as research partners in community development, but extending to the manner in which other community partners may take on power in addressing challenges and facilitating social change. The collection of twelve articles represents participatory researchers’ arguments, ideas, and innovative ways of pursuing social change by conducting research with stakeholders in the education arena.

The discussion commences with three articles focusing on the manner in which participatory methodology may facilitate community development and social change. In the article *Starting with ourselves in deepening our understanding of generativity in participatory educational research*, Van Laren, Mudaly, Pithouse-Morgan and Singh take a reflexive stance in discussing how university researchers' engagement in participatory educational research can facilitate generativity. In support of this argument, Wood and Zuber-Skerrit position participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as a way of developing capacity for community-based research by *inter alia*, researchers in education, to ensure that newly generated knowledge translates into practical community improvement. They present their ideas in the article *PALAR as a methodology for community engagement by faculties of education*. Theron continues with the discussion on how knowledge generation can facilitate social change in her article, *Community-researcher liaisons: the Pathways to Resilience Project Advisory Panel*. She emphasises the potential role of community advisory panels, which may partner with researchers, and how such partnerships can support social change.

After focusing on the role of higher institutions and participatory researchers in supporting social change, the next four articles in the issue foreground the role of pre-service teachers and teachers as potential agents of change in the education sphere. In the article *Social transformation starts with the self: An autobiographical perspective on the thinking style preferences of an educator*, Du Toit posits that educators in all educational settings, such as schools, universities, and Further Education Colleges should be agents of social change. To this end, he provides an autobiographical perspective in support of the professional development of educators, who may in turn facilitate social transformation in the micro-education societies they teach. In support of this idea, Esau proposes how action research and practice can assist pre-service teachers to become more critically reflective and argumentative as teacher-researchers in the article, *Preparing pre-service teachers as emancipatory and participatory action researchers in a teacher education programme*. An example of such practical involvement of teachers is provided in the article *Masihambisane, lessons learnt using participatory indigenous knowledge research approaches in a school-based collaborative project of the Eastern Cape*, where Meyiwa, Letsekha and Wiebesiek explain how they have been utilising the Reflect process in involving teachers in planning, researching and developing learning and teaching materials in rural schools in the Eastern Cape. The contribution by Ferreira, Ebersöhn and Botha focuses on another example of how participatory research was utilised, in collaboration with teachers in the Eastern Cape, to develop an HIV and Aids plan in their article, *Using participatory action research to develop an HIV and Aids school plan*.

These examples focus on how schools and teachers may be involved as participants in developing and researching specific school-related material and addressing relevant needs. Another example of how role-players may be involved in research and

add to current debates in the field of participatory research for the sake of social change follows in this issue. In the article *Parents as partners: building collaborations to support the development of school readiness skills in under-resourced communities*, Pitt, Luger, Bullen, Phillips and Geiger present an example of how parents were involved as research partners in supporting their children's development towards becoming school-ready, working parallel with teachers – the other group of partners in the study.

The issue continues with examples of specialised approaches and techniques that have been used in participatory research. In their article, *What can a teacher do with a cellphone? Using participatory visual research to speak back in addressing HIV&AIDS*, Mitchell and De Lange demonstrate how cellphones may be used when following a participatory visual approach in facilitating change – in this case by teachers addressing HIV and Aids-related issues among youth. Next, Francis contemplates the value of Forum Theatre, a participatory improvised theatre form, in explaining how he relied on this approach in understanding how 15 to 18 year-old learners experienced and responded to heterosexism and heteronormativity. Francis reports the findings of his study in the article “*You know the homophobic stuff is not in me, like us, it's out there*”. *Using Participatory Theatre to challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity in a South African school*. For Romm, Nel and Tlale, participatory research provided a vehicle to involve teachers in a series of discussions for the purpose of implementing and reflecting on the implementation of inclusive education. They specifically discuss the value of focus groups in facilitating mutual learning amongst participating teachers in their article *Active facilitation of focus groups: exploring the implementation of inclusive education with research participants*. Finally, the article *Sexuality educators: Taking a stand by participating in research* foregrounds the manner in which Beyers' relied on an experiential participatory approach in supporting Life Orientation teachers who teach sexuality education.

Based on the arguments captured in the articles of this special issue, it seems clear that researchers can take the hands of teachers and other community stakeholders in generating knowledge that may bring about social change. In this manner, the utilisation of participatory methodologies in the context of education is emphasised, thereby creating a platform for further discussion in this area of interest. Even though the compilation of articles is by no means comprehensive and representative of all strands of thinking on the role that participatory research may fulfil in educational research, it provides an array of scholarly thinking that may link to other ideas and contribute to scholarly debates in this field.

References

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