# Southern African Rurality in Higher Education



## Towards curricular justice? Rural students' transitions to and through higher education in South Africa

*Sue Timmis, Sheila Trahar,*
*Lisa Lucas, Karen Desborough*

# Southern African Rurality in Higher Education



**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS**:

BRENDA LEIBOWITZ
University of Johannesburg

SUE TIMMIS
University of Bristol

**CO-INVESTIGATORS**:

EMMANUEL MGQWASHU
Rhodes University

PATRICIA MUHURO
University of Fort Hare

SHEILA TRAHAR
University of Bristol

LISA LUCAS
University of Bristol

GINA WISKER
University of Brighton

THEA DE WET
University of Johannesburg

KIBBIE NAIDOO
University of Johannesburg

# Research Questions

- How can the complexities of rurality be conceptualised in relation to higher education?

- What are the dimensions of rurality as experienced by students transitioning from home to university in the global south?

- How and in what ways do students negotiate the transitions from rural home, school and community and how does this influence their trajectories through higher education in Southern Africa?

  - What are the challenges for students from rural areas facing higher education curricula which remain imbued with colonialism?

  - What are the practices that shape approaches to learning of students from rural areas in universities in Southern Africa?

  - How and in what ways do digital technologies, social media and mobile communications influence rural students' higher education trajectories?

- How and in what forms might inclusive and living curricula be developed that build on the experiences of all students, including those from rural contexts in Southern Africa?

# Southern African Rurality in Higher Education

A little bit of history (and politics)
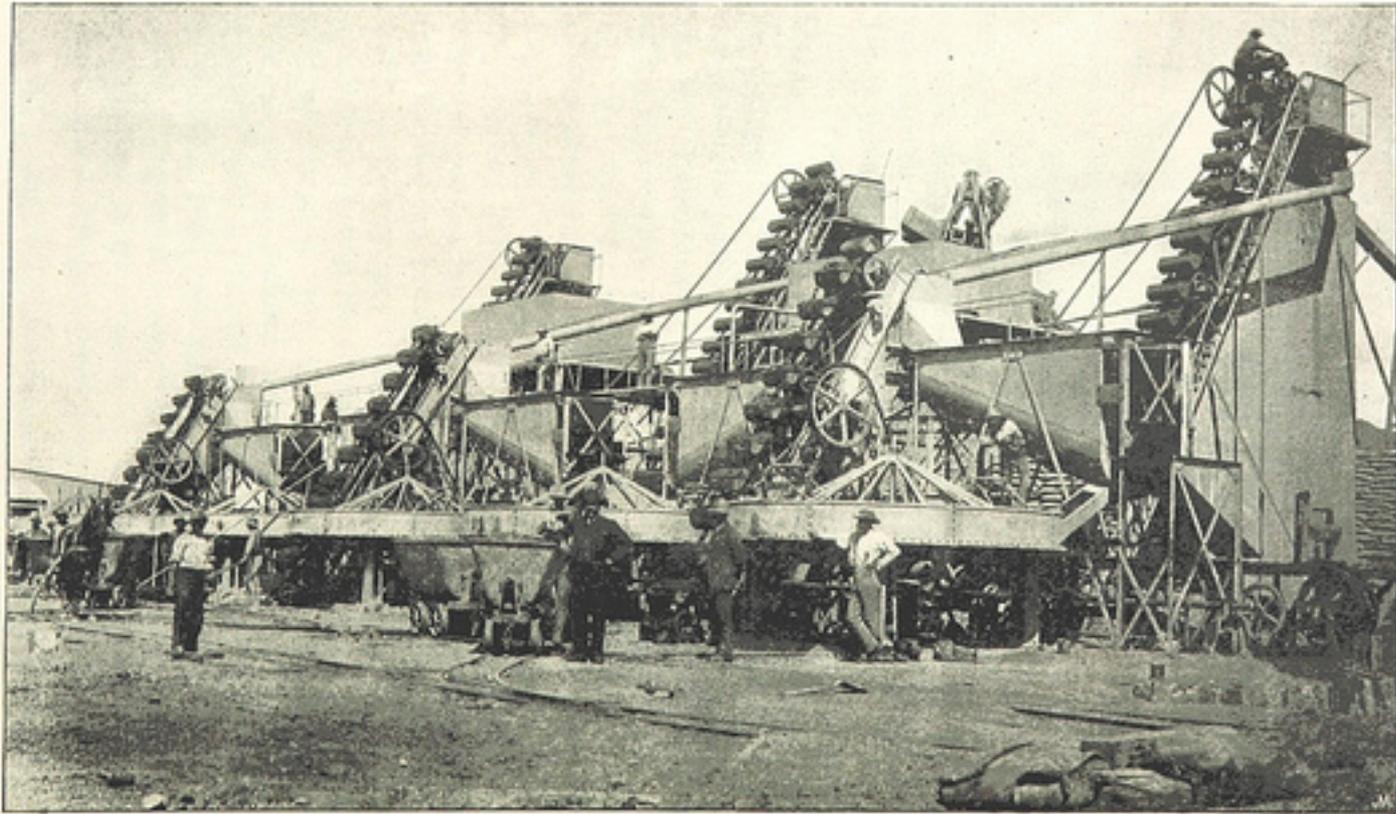


IMPROVED DIAMOND WASHING PLANT, KIMBERLEY MINE.

[To face p. 57.

1913 Land Act

1950 Group Areas Act

1964 Rivonia trial - Nelson Mandela and others sentenced to life imprisonment

1976 Soweto uprising after 600 killed in violent clashes

1994 First democratic elections under new constitution, Mandela elected president

Higher education in South Africa

# Higher Education in South Africa

- Policy imperative is transformation - improved access to HE by black students, women, disabled and mature students.

- Significant changes in admission policies to address inequalities since 1997

- Bursaries ,institutional grants and foundational programmes

- *Ten Year Plan for Africa 2008-18* - crucial role of higher education as a key driver of 'equity, social justice and democracy' in 2030 vision (Dept. Science & Technology, 2007).

- Continuing and significant lack of academic achievement of students from historically under-represented backgrounds (Cooper, 2015)

- Retention is a major issue at all SA universities – 32% of black students drop out in first year

- Commission on Free education in 2017 - Issue of high student fees is unresolved

The Fallists- #feesmustfall #rhodesmustfall #witsfeesmustfall

*The concept of rurality is demographic, geographic, cultural and contextual (Roberts and Green, 2013).*

*In South Africa, space is a deeply political matter due to the displacement effects of apartheid and rural students are one of the most marginalised groups, attracting little attention in widening participation research to date (Mgqwashu, 2016).*

**Figured worlds** (Holland et al, 1998, 2010)

**Figured worlds** (Holland et al, 1998, 2001)

Social encounters in which the positions of those taking part matter, they are socially and culturally organised and located in particular times and places.

They are historical phenomena which are themselves shaped by activities of participants

'a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52).
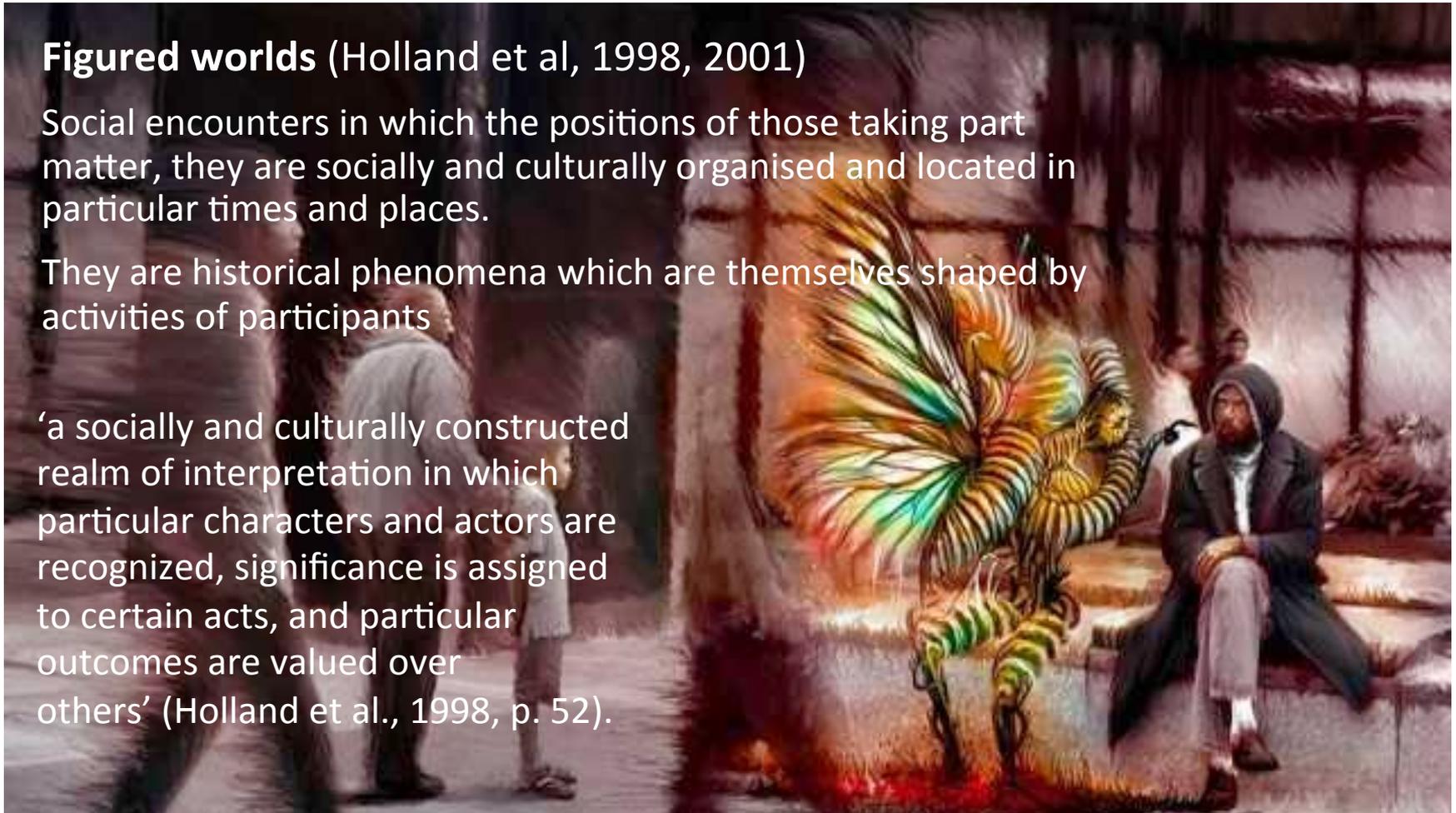
## Identity and agency in figured worlds

- How we act when encountering and participating in new 'figured worlds' gives rise to and shapes our identities

- Positional identities - *'day-to- day and on the ground relations of power, deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance – with the social-interactional, social-relational structures of the lived world' (p 127).*

- Figurative identities - *'the stories, acts and characters that make the world a cultural world' (Holland et al, 1998, p127).*

## Improvisation – the interplay of habitus and agency

- *"Improvisations are the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as habitus, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response. Such improvisations are the openings by which change comes about from generation to generation." (1998, pp. 17 -18)*

- Allows us to explore the influences of rural figured worlds upon the new worlds of higher education and the improvisations students make.

## Methodology

- Participatory research – 'co-researcher model of participation' in a 'community of inquiry' (Timmis & Williams, 2013)

- Participatory research – is a 'decolonising mode' (Bozalek, 2011), as it avoids a deficit positioning of students.

- Narrative Inquiry – helps in eliciting ideas and beliefs formed in contexts such as rural schooling.

- Data generation with co-researchers
    - Longitudinal (April to Dec 2017) at 3 sites (UJ, Rhodes and Fort Hare)
    - 24 students from STEM and Humanities at each site
    - Seven data generation sessions (plus external settings)
    - Data Collection Handbook (including forms, ethics & evaluation)
    - All co-researchers have an ipad – producing multi-modal artefacts (Evernote)
    - Workshops with SAULT Forum

- Data generation with Academics and Senior Managers

# Emerging Data: Indigenous knowledge practices and rural life

- Deep understanding of natural environment from early age

- Independence and responsibility for tasks – e.g. herd boy

- Collegiality, negotiation and collaboration in essential tasks

- Time management – home duties – school – home duties-homework

- Long distances to school, natural barriers

- Role of the church in rural life

## Emerging Data: Early educational experiences

- Few educational resources in rural schools.

- Lack of teachers, classes often without teachers. Students teaching themselves.

- Broader knowledge and skills, working life and responsibilities:

- *'...our culture can ground us and groom us into becoming better people ... there is a thing that you will never learn at school but then once you go to the mountain or there will be a traditional ceremony ... those effects can change a person's life completely...'*

- Huge determination by co-researchers to overcome challenges.



Traditional initiation
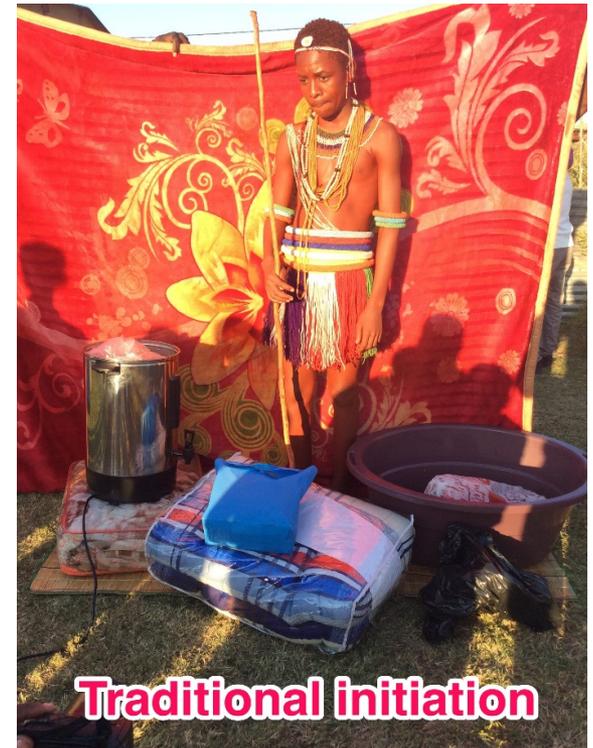
## Emerging Data: Applying to university/funding

- Limited knowledge about universities in rural areas and application process.

- Co-researchers faced technological barriers to applying since the application process is online.

- Some were unable to apply for a bursary, or had no knowledge of university bursaries, as there is little or no assistance in rural areas.

- Some had to drop out and re-apply due to funding difficulties/errors.

- Important role of parents/teachers/relatives/mentors encouraging HE participation.
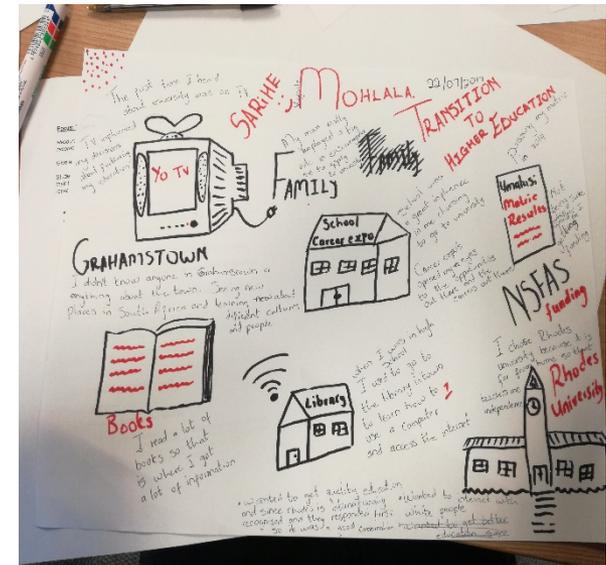
## Emerging Data: Early experiences of transitioning to higher education

- Technology - unfamiliar with devices, online cultures and systems at university. Also true of libraries for some.

- Language as a barrier, e.g. difficulty following English lectures or writing tests in English.

- Lack of knowledge/experience in pedagogic practices, e.g. conducting scientific experiments and using scientific equipment.

- Perception by co-researchers that non-rural students are more advanced and they often afraid to ask for help for fear of seeming 'stupid'.

- Perception by co-researchers of differential treatment of black and white students by white lecturers (patronising, finishing sentences, allowing white students to talk for longer).

## Transitions into new worlds

'…you know what the Dean said to some people at the beginning of the year when you wanna take CompSci? "You people will like not try to take CompSci … you don't even know how to switch on the computer" … You get there, they say "design your own game"…' (discussion group, R.U., 1 April 2017).

"you are so comfortable when speaking with people who can speak like the same language as you do, and then you come here it is different (discussion group, R.U., 1 April 2017).

"I'm studying Micro Biology and Biochemistry and.. You come to university and like our practicals most of the time we use things like microscopes and you have never seen a microscope in your life and never used one before, and everyone is so busy like you don't know what to do, you don't know what to touch….. " (discussion group, R.U., 25 March 2017).

## Digital strangers

'I used to go to town for internet café, that's where I will get more academic information. For instance, if we have a project or if we have research to do … it was difficult for me because I didn't know how to use it, so I had to take more time, hours I was paying for them to do my work.' (discussion group, R.U., 1 April 2017).

'I had no phone and I didn't even know internet and google, even a computer. I saw one when I went to apply [to university] … when you get to the internet café, **you ask strangers to assist you**.' (discussion group, R.U., 22 July 2017, F).

I didn't know anything about computer, I remember the first time **pressing a computer it was a horror movie**. I don't know how to explain it, I was in an internet café, I have to pay money … in fifteen minutes my R50 just gone. I didn't even know where can I start, what can I do?' (discussion group, R.U., 22 July 2017, M).

'…coming to UJ, I didn't know how to operate a computer, I didn't know … how to even make use of, like to even switch it off … like the tablet, I struggled … I thought my Ipad it was damaged ….' (discussion group, U.J., 20 April, 2017).

'You have to change and the curriculum just stays the same'

- **Epistemicide** – the murder of perceived subordinate knowledge

- A recognition that there is **an ecology of knowledges** and that all knowledges are to some extent incomplete

- **Intercultural translation** – searching for common concerns and underlying assumptions amongst cultures and developing hybrid forms of understanding

BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS

Epistemologies of the South

**JUSTICE AGAINST EPISTEMICIDE**

R
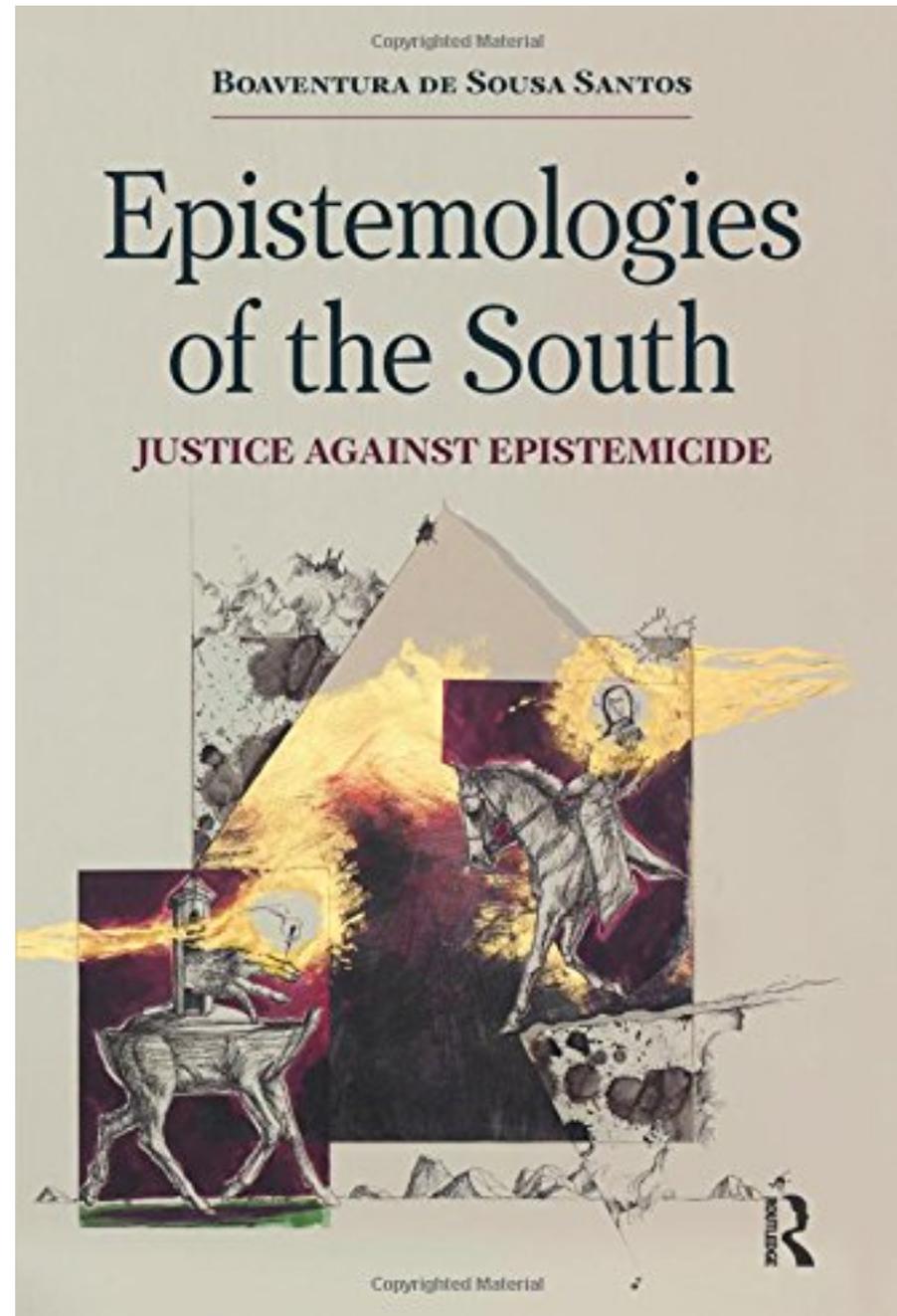
Decolonisation
versus decoloniality



- **Decoloniality** - dealing decisively with colonial vestiges in knowledge generation traditions and knowledge itself, psychological enslavement and a sense of unworthiness engineered for many centuries over the colonised through colonial institutions such as schools and universities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014).

- Mgqwashu (2016) - grand narratives, including that of "decolonisation" tend to silence "local narratives".

## Curricular Justice

- Connell (2017, p.6) argues that the 21$^{st}$ century university is 'highly unequal' and that "a Eurocentric curriculum prevails almost everywhere"

- The selection/compilation of 'knowledge' for a curriculum is "not done in heaven by a committee of epistemological angels" (Connell, 1992, p.137)

- "Curriculum is an official selection that structures knowledge in ways that privilege a particular construction of knowledge and the history of knowledge" (Peters, 2017, p.644)

- 'Curricular justice' – based on how "social effects are embedded in the curriculum-as practised" (Connell, 1992, p.138)

- The "counter-hegemonic curriculum must incorporate and rework the core of the hegemonic curriculum" (ibid, p.143)

## Why Curricular Justice?

- Attends to the voices of those who are exemplified in access and equity agendas

- Rather than reflecting the "*culture* of the least advantaged" (Connell, 2017:11, original emphasis), curricular justice  proposes a critique of culture, creating space for dialogue and for reframing learning as conversation

- This necessitates "re-making curricula in Northern as well as Southern universities" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012, p.13)

- Enables our research to have relevance beyond the immediate context  and relate to movements in other parts of the world  - *buen vivir* in Latin America  -  why is my curriculum white http://celestia.studentsunionucl.org/whats-on/general/why-is-my-curriculum-white - in the UK

## Next phases

- Data collection and analysis with co-researchers is on-going – with the development of a greater understanding of their experiences at university, including;
  - Pedagogic practices, language, technology, social interactions…

- *RQ4. - How and in what forms might 'inclusive' and 'living' curricula be developed that build on the experiences of all students, including those from rural contexts in Southern Africa?*

- Data Collection with Senior Leaders and Academics within the 3 Universities  in South Africa.
  - Interviews with Senior Leaders (involved in Teaching and Learning)
  - Focus groups with academics

# THANK YOU

Please visit out website

www.sarihe.org.za

Please follow us on twitter

@sariheza

# Southern African Rurality in Higher Education

# References

- Bozalek, V. and Biersteker, L. (2010) Exploring Power and Privilege Using Participatory Learning and Action Techniques. *Social Work Education*. 29(5) 551-572.

- Brown, C., & Czerniewicz, L. (2010). Debunking the 'digital native': beyond digital apartheid, towards digital democracy. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, *26*(5), 357-369

- Comaroff, J. & Comaroff , J.(2012) *Theory from the South: or, How Euro-America is Evolving toward Africa.* Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge

- Connell, R. (1992) Citizenship, social justice and curriculum. International Studies in Sociology of Education. 2 (2) 133-146.

- Connell, R. (2017) Southern theory and world universities. *Higher Education Research and Development*. 36 (1) 4-15.

- Czerniewicz, L., & Brown, C. (2013). The habitus of digital "strangers" in higher education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *44*(1), 44-53.

- de Sousa Santos, B. (2015). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge.

- Department of Science and Technology report (2007): '*Innovation towards a knowledge based economy: Ten Year Plan for Africa 2008-18*' (http://www.esastap.org.za/download/sa_ten_year_innovation_plan.pdf)

# Southern African Rurality in Higher Education

# References

- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., and Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

- Holland, D., & Lave, J. (2001). History in person. *Enduring Struggles: Contentious practice, intimate identities*, 1-32. https://sarweb.org/media/files/sarpress_history_in_person_chapter1.pdf

- Mgqwashu, E. (2016). Education can't be for the 'public good' if universities ignore rural life. The Conversation, 16 March 2016. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/education-cant-be-for-the-public-good-if-universities-ignore-rural-life-56214

- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2014). Global coloniality and the challenges of creating African futures. *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, *36*(2), 181.

- Peters, M. (2017) Why is my curriculum white?  *Educational Philosophy and Theory*.  47 (7)641-646

- Roberts, P. and Green, B. 2013. Researching Rural Places: On Social Justice and Rural Education. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 19(10) 765-774.

- Timmis, S. and Williams, J. (2013) 'Students as Co-Researchers: A Collaborative, Community Based Approach to the Research and Practice of Technology Enhanced Learning', in E. Dunne and D. Owen (Eds.) *The Student Engagement Handbook*, Practice in Higher Education. Bingley: Emerald. 509 –525.