Taking note of obstacles research partners negotiate in long-term higher education community engagement partnerships

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the challenges that teachers negotiated in a rural school (thwarted by rurality in an emerging-economy context) to remain partners in a long-term research project. We use the generative theory of rurality to theoretically locate the challenges and thematic analysis of six years' Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) data with South African teachers ($n = 9$) in a rural school. Insights may contribute to knowledge about partnerships with marginalised-school partners. Knowing which obstacles teacher-partners had to overcome to continue in a project, may inform the conceptualisation and implementation of enduring partnerships.

Keywords:
Higher education-community engagement
partnerships
Challenges related to community
engagement
Rural schools
Teachers
Generative theory of rurality

1. Introduction

1.1. Research for social change through partnerships

Social scientists often integrate a quest for social relevance and immediacy into their research agendas. This is particularly the case in emerging-economy countries, such as South Africa — currently the most unequal society in the world (OXFAM, 2013; The World Bank, 2012) — where resources are limited and not easily accessible, risks are high and the desire for feasible and innovative solutions drives many a scientific inquiry. A call to democratize research is one methodology discourse which challenges one-sided structures of constructing and negotiating power in research partnerships (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; De Lange, 2012; Knowles & Cole, 2008) and strives to enable academic engagement as well as contribution to community life and taking up social responsibility. Democratizing research and research for social justice (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, & Slamat, 2008; Rosner-Salazar, 2003; Stanton, 2008; Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2006) carries with it the ambit of mutuality: knowledge generation in the scientific domain and improved functioning in the work and/or personal lives of civil society partners. Such research agendas therefore often presuppose partnerships with marginalised communities where benefits may occur and where there is the greatest need, and insights may be scaled to other comparable settings by means of knowledge

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dissemination. Such ideals ground the research partnerships. The realisation of partnerships is however thwarted by obstacles — both in the haloed halls of the academe and in the harshness of living and working in, for example, an unequal society. In this article we share the barriers which teachers in a specific marginalised context, a rural school in South Africa, had to negotiate in order to persevere in a long-term community engagement collaboration with educational psychology scholars in a study investigating resilience in high-risk schools. One characteristic of this research partnership is teachers' continued participation, with some intermittent attrition. We wanted to understand the stressors that teachers in this rural school had to cope with to persist in the on-going partnership with university.

Increased pressure to bridge the gap between higher education and society is a phenomenon in research agendas globally. In the United States, leading work in this field includes Boyer's *Scholarship reconsidered* (1990) and his follow-up article *The scholarship of engagement* (1996), in which he reconceptualises scholarship as discovery, integration, application and teaching; and Cherwitz's Intellectual Entrepreneurship programme (2004), which connects intellectual resources with communities to address community problems collaboratively. This challenge led to the establishment of the Committee on Engagement in 2002 to provide strategic advice to the CIC (chief academic officers) on different matters involving community engagement in the United States. The goals were to conceptualise the meaning of engagement, benchmark strategies for community engagement, identify measures of performance and advise on collaborative opportunities which could be included in the CIC strategic plan (Bloomfield, 2005).

Globally, growing numbers of colleges and universities have committed themselves to efforts to revive and prioritise community engagement in their local communities. Recent policy documents in Australia (DEST, 2002; Nelson, 2002) support the current international debate about the role of universities, by expressing growing support for higher education—community engagement (Winter et al., 2006). Similarly, in Europe there is a rising demand for researchers, university administrators and policy makes to be more aware of the important role of the range of levels of regional engagement by universities (Boucher, Conway, & van der Meer, 2003). Although liberal arts colleges and state universities initially took the lead in promoting community engagement in the United States, research universities are increasingly providing leadership on this issue. Research universities' exceptional students, financial resources and well-equipped research facilities position them to play a vital role in community engagement and change (Stanton, 2008, 2012). Tertiary institutions have valuable human, financial, organisational and intellectual resources, placing them in a key position to promote significant community engagement and development (Smerek, Pasque, Mallory, & Holland, 2005). For example, Gibson (2006) highlights the link between a university's intellectual resources and communities' challenges, by focussing research on the production of socially robust knowledge.

In the transforming society of one of the most unequal societies in the world, South Africa, universities have been called on to become active partners with communities (Bender, 2008a, 2008b; Hlengwa, 2010; Lazarus et al., 2008; Osman & Petersen, 2010; Petersen, Dunbar-Krige, & Fritz, 2008). Kruss (2012) highlights the importance of reconceptualising university interaction with external social partners, by extending their knowledge to benefit a wide range of external social partners. A South African education sector policy paper (White Paper, Department of Education, South Africa, 1997) outlines a programme for higher education transformation and lays the foundation for making community engagement an integral part of higher education, by emphasising one of the aims of higher education, namely to encourage and create an awareness of social responsibility through community engagement and development. Lazarus et al. (2008) point out that the release of this policy document shifted the focus in the debate on community engagement in South African higher education. Hence, community engagement has become an essential portion of teaching and research with a more profound sense of context, locality and application. Bender (2008a, 2008b) highlights the potential of community engagement to rejuvenate academia, redefine scholarship and engage communities in a valuable discussion about the role of higher education. The social purpose and research agenda of tertiary education institutions is therefore expanding, so that universities are more socially responsive to the needs of a transforming society (Hall, 2010; Subotzky, 1999).

1.2. Power and politics in higher-education community engagement partnerships

Social responsiveness and community engagement often heighten awareness of power and politics in partnerships (Nhamo, 2012; Petersen et al., 2008). Holland (2005) states that all too often, tertiary institutions assume that in a university-community partnership, the role of the university is to teach and the community partner's role is to provide a set of social issues that need to be explored and addressed. As a result, academics often enter a community from what may seem to be a privileged and controlling position, resulting in a skewed power relationship in partnerships (Butin, 2003; Holland, 2005). Factors such as demographics, race, culture and language often lead to differences between university and community perspectives. This is sometimes seen as a challenge to ensuring mutual benefits for both partners. Petersen et al. (2008:127) warn that academics often tend to forget the link between "their world" and the "world of the people". Bringle and Hatcher (2002) advocate moving away from a "charity model", where resources and surplus are given from one community to another, towards a "justice model", where resources are regarded as mutual and shared among members. The current literature focuses on establishing long-term partnerships with communities, where community engagement activities are characterised by social justice and care as essential elements. Through this process, a new platform could be developed to foster engagement with communities which would translate into long-term partnerships with mutual benefits for the communities and for the higher education institutions (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Hlengwa, 2010; Petersen et al., 2008; Rosner-Salazar, 2003; Stanton, 2008, 2012).

Another trend in participatory methodology debates relates to the challenge of partner expectations and the attrition of community partners (Harper et al., 2004; Israel et al., 2006). Foremost amongst such research-partnership barriers is the additional responsibilities and time constraints associated with the role of community partners (Bennell, 2004; Israel et al., 2006; Israel, Schultz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Kegeles, Rebchook, & Tebbetts, 2005; Lantz, Viruell-Fuentes, Israel, Softley, & Guzman, 2001; Yoo, Butler, Elias, & Goodman, 2009).

Gaventa and Cornwall (2006) argue that the issue of power is dominant to participatory methodologies as a relationship of domination in the control and the production of knowledge. Knowledge is an essential aspect of power and determines the explanation of what is perceived as important in research. Actors can affect the boundaries of power through access to knowledge and participation in its construction, use and dissemination. Within rural contexts particularly, Van der Riet and Boettiger (2009) found that the relative difference between knowledge, power, capacity and access to resources of a researcher and that of the research participants is always apparent. They further contend that under such conditions, it becomes a critical challenge to maintain equal

participation and collaboration between researchers and participants. In some cases, one might find that community members have little say over the research process, with researchers having control and power over the whole research process. Within the context of participatory research partnerships in a rural community context, we aimed to create symmetrical relationships between the researchers (higher educational institution) and the participants (teachers viewed as co-researchers) where both voices were equal in knowledge creation and dissemination.

1.3. Rural education and rural community engagement

Community engagement in rural settings presents unique challenges world-wide, which have to be acknowledged and addressed. The different economic, educational and social contexts of rural communities make these settings significantly different from their urban counterparts (Bauch, 2001; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Bauch (2001) highlights the deeper level of poverty in rural communities as opposed to urban settings in the United States. In South Africa, many rural and urban communities regard financial pressure and poverty as a challenge (Bennell, 2004; Smit & Fritz, 2008). However, it seems that rural communities are more limited in supportive resources and often live in more deprived living conditions (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Due to these financial challenges, community partners in higher education-community partnerships often expect financial benefits for their participation (Cox & Seifer, 2005; Nhamo, 2012), which could lead to contradictory expectations which are not always met. Other challenges associated with community engagement in rural settings are the long distances and lengthy time spent travelling to these geographically remote settings (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Balfour, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2008).

Although research in the field of rural education and rural community engagement has had significant accomplishments over the years, internationally it is still considerably smaller than most other branches of educational research (Arnold et al., 2005; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Bauch, 2001; Coladarci, 2007). Kilpatrick (2009) indicates that a holistic understanding of a specific rural context is a prerequisite for effective community engagement and empowerment in rural communities. In South Africa, the 2013 state of the nation and state of provinces addresses by the President, both have a strong focus on rural development. It is therefore imperative to focus on the factors that could be expected when engaging in higher institution−rural partnership initiatives. It is vital to investigate the challenges in rural settings in order to promote successful partnership initiatives between rural communities and tertiary education institutions.

Many lessons learnt in higher education−community engagement partnerships to date have remained at case study level and have not been documented or shared (Holland, 2005). There is a need to create forums where partners in higher education and communities could share their experiences and knowledge, aimed at shared learning and more effective future partnerships (Cox & Seifer, 2005). Although the context of each such partnership differs, many studies report that effective university−community partnerships share specific core characteristics (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Holland, 2001, 2005). Holland (2005:12) argues, however, that it is important to refocus scholars' attention on more challenging questions, such as: "How do we actually achieve the elements and characteristics of effective partnerships?" When responding to this challenging question, it is critically important to be aware of and address possible challenges and barriers.

This paper specifically focuses on the challenges and barriers that the teachers participating in a longitudinal community engagement project in South Africa encountered. Its aim is to respond to the current debate on higher education−community engagement partnerships. At a practical level, the authors highlight the challenges that these teachers encountered. An awareness of possible challenges for rural teachers participating in higher education−community partnerships could guide future partnerships and potentially translate into mutual benefits for the communities and the higher education institutions. At a theoretical level, this paper focuses on the emerging scholarship on rural community engagement partnerships and rurality (Balfour et al., 2008), by highlighting the challenges inherent in a long-term community engagement project between a higher tertiary institution and a rural school.

1.4. Background of reported study

In this article we report on some data from a long-term (2003−2012) collaborative partnership project, STAR (Supportive Teachers Assets and Resilience) between teachers in high risk schools with high levels of adversity, and educational psychology scholars aligned with the Unit of Education Research in AIDS, University of Pretoria (Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012). The purpose of STAR was to investigate school-based resilience processes in high-risk, low-resource school settings, using the asset-based approach (Kretzmann, 1992) as the theoretical lens and Participatory Reflection and Action (Chambers, 2008) as a methodology to design the collaborative intervention. The asset-based tenets mean that STAR positions development in terms of the existing resources, strengths and assets in each teacher, school and community, even though a scarcity of resources may dominate the context. The fidelity of STAR (Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012; Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2011) indicated that, despite continued significant adversity, an outcome of this strengths-based intervention was the participants' ability to sustain their promotion of school-based resilience initiatives.

STAR started in a pilot phase with ten teachers from a primary school in an urban informal settlement in a South African province (Eastern Cape), consisting of several interrelated studies (Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012). We draw on data from the second phase (2005−2007) where we replicated the pilot project in two other South African provinces (two urban primary schools in Gauteng, as well as a rural secondary school in Mpumalanga, which is the focus of this article) (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2011). Dissemination research followed in 2007−2011, where teachers from the first two phases were trained as STAR facilitators who in turn, trained teachers in six neighbouring schools (two schools in each of the three South African provinces).

We conducted STAR intervention sessions in the classrooms of the respective schools at three-month intervals over a one-year time frame. The assumption of the STAR intervention was to facilitate teachers' acquisition of asset-based competencies in order to provide school-based psychosocial support within their school-community contexts. The reported study within the framework of STAR consisted of seven sessions and three broad phases (pre-intervention, intervention and post-intervention). Table 1 provides a summary of the seven sessions conducted during the intervention phase of our study.

The purpose of session 1 was to establish rapport with participating teachers and to create cohesion in the group. The project was introduced to the group and the goals and voluntary participation explained. Secondly, this session focused on what each community "looked" like and which resources and potential resources existed in each community. The research team facilitated the participants' awareness of available and potential resources within the various communities. Each group was asked to construct a community map, by compiling an outline of the community (in

Table 1
Summary of the sessions conducted during the intervention phase of the research study.

| Workshop/intervention session	Goal/Objective
Pre-intervention phase	
1	Mapping the community as well as the resources within the community
2	Identifying assets/resources, potential assets/ resources as well as challenges in the community
3	Identifying needs and potential ways of addressing them
Intervention phase	
4	Initiating school-based initiatives
5	Developing an action plan in terms of the identified projects and initiatives
Post-intervention phase	
6	Monitoring the progress of the projects and planning the way forward
7	Final reflection and application in future

writing and/or by means of pictures). Thereafter, each group was provided with one disposable camera and was requested to take photographs of landmarks to be included in the community maps they had constructed. The participants had the opportunity to add the developed photographs to their maps during session 2 (see Photograph 1 to view an example of a community asset map).

Session 2 of the intervention focused on the identification of assets/resources, potential assets/resources and challenges within the community. Groups were provided with small pictures of cows, calves and snakes, and requested to categorise the various components of their community maps as challenges, resources or potential resources. For this purpose, participating teachers pasted symbol pictures on their maps, namely *snakes* next to the challenges faced in their community; *cows* next to the assets and resources which were utilised in the community at that stage; and *calves* next to potential assets and resources (see Photograph 2 to view an example of a community asset map with the picture symbols).

Session 3 focused on ways in which the assets (cows) and potential assets (calves) could be utilised in order to address the identified challenges (snakes) within the various communities. Participating teachers were provided with the community maps

Photograph 1. An example of a community asset map.
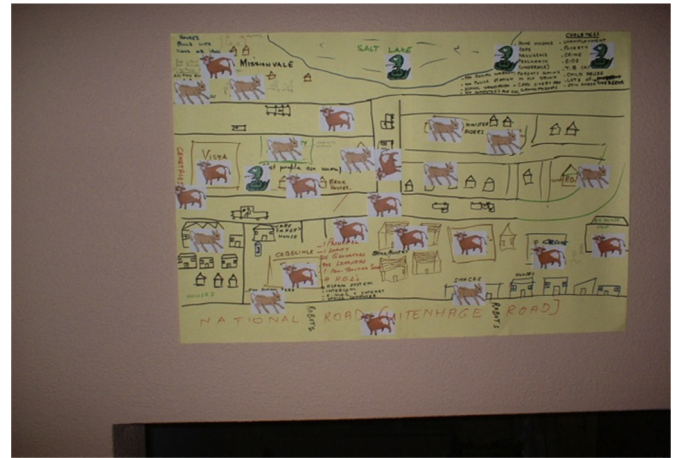
Photograph 2. Participating teachers' community asset maps with the picture symbols (cows, calves and snakes) that were constructed during session 2.

constructed in the previous sessions. Each group received a poster with a picture of a snake and a poster with a picture of a knob-kerrie.[3] The groups were asked to work from the community asset maps they had created, and list challenges the community faced on the separate poster of the snake. Secondly, each group was requested to identify ways of addressing identified challenges, by focussing on resources (assets and potential assets) available in the community. These potential solutions were listed on the poster with the knobkerrie, symbolising potential ways to "kill the snakes". The groups were encouraged to make use of small-group discussions in guiding their mapping activities (see Photographs 3 and 4 to view participating teachers' snake and knobkerrie posters).

Session 4 focused on the identification of potential school-based projects that could initiate psychosocial support. During this session, each group was provided with their snake and knobkerrie/gun posters constructed during the previous sessions. They were asked to briefly review these posters in terms of the content included. The participants identified (on the knobkerrie posters) the potential but unutilised resources and assets (calves) in the community and listed them on a separate cardboard sheet. They brainstormed and identified potential projects they could initiate in order to address some of the challenges listed on the snake posters, by turning calves into cows, in other words by utilising unused resources and assets. Each group was given an opportunity to share their ideas, and write these down on a sheet of paper. In the second part of Session 4, three intervention projects were selected as focus in each school. The participants indicated their preferences in terms of the projects they would like to be involved with and divided themselves into three task teams. Each task team identified a task team coordinator. Photographs were taken of each project team.

Session 5 focused on planning the identified projects in terms of action steps needed for initiating the projects. Each task team developed an action plan and strategies for reaching their goals. They had to formulate their planning for each project using the five Ws (and one H) approach: What? Who? How? When? Where? Participants allocated tasks and responsibilities to each team member and decided when the planned action would be taken. They presented their action plans on a poster. Each poster had a line with a picture of a calf on the left and a picture of a cow on the right.

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[3] A short wooden stick with a knob at one end, used by South African tribesmen as a traditional weapon: knob + -kerrie (from Nama kieri 'knobkerrie'), suggested by Afrikaans knopkierie.

Photograph 3. Participating teachers' poster with a snake that symbolises the challenges that the community faced that was constructed during session 3.

A movable arrow was used to indicate to what extent the project objectives or action steps had been attained as the study progressed. Each task team had the opportunity to present their action plan to the rest of the group, who could then ask questions and provide input. Each participating teacher also formulated a personal declaration of commitment to the group and project. The session was concluded by requesting the groups to initiate the projects before the next series of sessions (approximately three months later), by putting their formulated plans into action.

During session 6 a discussion was facilitated on the progress of the initiated projects. Each group had the opportunity to reflect and report back on the implementation of their action plans and the progress of the project. They were asked to use the arrow on their initial action plan to indicate to what extent the planned action steps and strategies had been completed. Each task team then had the opportunity to revise their planned actions and strategies where needed, and to present their adjusted action plans and future strategies to the rest of the group. Session 7 focused on final reflection and application in future. The potential value of the projects was discussed and accomplishments reinforced. The way forward was planned and future possibilities were explored.

Photograph 4. Participating teachers' poster with a knobkerrie that symbolises ways of addressing the challenges faced by the community, that was constructed during session 3.

1.5. Theoretical framework: rurality

Coladarci (2007) states that there is no single definition of "rural" and Arnold et al. (2005) comment on the inconsistent definitions of "rural". Moreover, Balfour et al. (2008) assert that it is important to avoid static definitions of the concept of rurality. The notion of rurality appears to be deep-rooted in current discourses about space, place and society in the Western world (Cloke, 2006). Although the exact classification dedicated to this notion is often context-specific, the concept of rurality is prevalent in people's minds and the everyday practises of the modern world (Barley, 2009; Cloke, 2006). The distinction of rurality is often made by contrasting it to urban. It seems as if the power of the notion of rurality is in its overarching ability to connect different situations under one conceptual banner (Cloke, 2006).

Different theoretical frameworks emphasise different images of reality, and therefore also direct rural research to diverse pathways. We should also be aware of the ever-changing circumstances of rural life, rural settings and the rural political economy, which jointly comprise significant shifts in the manifestation of rurality (Cloke, 2006). Some of the changing narratives of rural studies have been framed around the use of different theoretical perspectives to make sense of and define the essential characteristics of rurality. Cloke (2006) highlights three fundamental theoretical frameworks which influence the construction of concepts of rurality. The first theoretical framework can be viewed as the functional concepts of rurality, focussing on the identification of the functional elements of rural existence so as to present and estimate the overarching concept of rurality. The second theoretical framework of rurality involves the use of political and economic concepts to elucidate the nature and position of the rural. The third theoretical framework comprises the social constructions of rurality and depicts the postmodern and post-structural ways of thinking, particularly as regards the role of culture in socio-spatial distinctiveness.

Marsden (2006) argues that regardless of the theoretical and conceptual growth in the area of rural research in recent years, we still ought to consider a revised political economy of rural space; one which highlights the unique characteristics of rural life, without conceptually separating it from broader social-science theoretical and conceptual movements and understanding. Balfour et al. (2008) developed the fundamentals for the generative theory of rurality and contextualised the theory in relation to current research concerning rural lives, and elected theoretical frameworks of space, place and time in relation to rurality and globalisation. They advocate a dynamic and generative theory of rurality, which is an active collection of forces, agencies and resources evident in lived experience and social processes. As movement between the rural and urban is flexible and dynamic, Balfour et al. (2008) reason that the rural is rural in terms of its diffusion from the three dynamic variables present to address its challenges, namely forces, agencies and resources.

In this article, we view the challenges experienced by rural teachers in higher education—community engagement partnerships through the lens of the three dynamic variables of the generative theory of rurality (Balfour, 2012; Balfour et al., 2008), as shown in Fig. 1. Although we discuss these variables in greater detail later in this paper, we now present an overview of our understanding of these variables.

The first variable is force, which includes space, place and time. Space is defined as "both that which is inhabited and that which is moved within". The dynamic process therefore occurs "between and within rural and urban centres, suggesting that any journey out of the rural is also a journey inward, in which identity and roles are questioned in relation to the experience of rural-urban contrasts" (Balfour et al., 2008:100). There are six habits that define a sense of
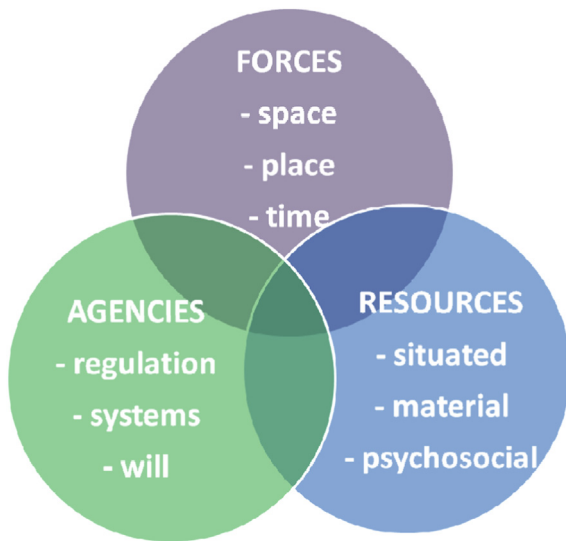
Fig. 1. Dynamic interplay between the key variables in generative theory of rurality (Balfour, 2012; Balfour et al., 2008).

place: "connectedness, development of identity culture, interdependence with the land, spirituality, ideology and politics, and activism and engagement" (Budge in Balfour et al., 2008:100). Gruenewald (2003) refers to five "dimensions of place" that shape the development of a socio-ecological, place-conscious education, namely the perceptual, sociological, ideological, political and ecological dimensions. The third force of rurality is the time it takes to move from place to place in space (Balfour et al., 2008), which is prominent in our reported study, because not all of the participating rural resided in the community where they taught.

The second variable, agencies, includes regulation, systems and will. Agencies are the abilities to define the relationship between forces and access to resources. As agencies may also refer to the "agencies" of the community, they can be expressed as systems of regulation (Balfour, 2012; Balfour et al., 2008). The third variable of a generative theory of rurality is resources, namely material, situated and psychosocial. The effective use of resources depends mainly on the influence of agencies and forces and the extent to which these may restrict their availability and deployment (Balfour et al., 2008).

2. Methodology and methods

Interpretivism (Patton, 2002) guided our meaning-making during the implementation of the PRA-grounded (Chambers, 2008) STAR intervention. Combining interpretivism and PRA foregrounded the importance of sharing power between the researchers and the participating teachers (Nhamo, 2012). PRA-directed activities and focus groups resulted in spontaneous discussions about the participants' experiences (Anderson, 2002), and we drew mainly on the data obtained from this range of interviews. The informal conversational interviews, unstructured face-to-face interviews and focus-group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To a lesser extent we also included observational data, especially that based on the tenets of observation-in-the-context-of-interaction (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000), which we documented in research diaries, field notes, photographs and audio-visual recordings (Walsh, 2007). Data sources were thematically analysed and synthesised by following constructivist-grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2000).

In the STAR dissemination research phase, we again selected schools ($n =$ four, $3 =$ urban, $1 =$ rural) for purpose and convenience (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). We deliberately selected schools where there was significant adversity, as indicated by the teacher-reported prevalence of poverty (unemployment of parents and high incidences of health care needs, especially needs relating to HIV and Aids), as well as observations of limited provision and access to services in the school communities. For convenience, we selected schools where access was possible. In the case of the rural school, for example, a teacher randomly contacted the STAR principal investigator and announced interest in a partnership between the university and the school. School principals directed purposeful selection of teachers who, to their knowledge and experience, would be suitable for steering the school's support initiatives. About ten teachers per school were selected as participants. Table 2 provides demographic information on the participating teachers in the rural school, e.g. home language, age, gender and qualifications as well as the grade and learning areas they taught.

Although the participating teachers' mother tongue was not English, they were all conversant in English, which they used professionally as the language of teaching and learning. We therefore conducted the research activities in English. To assist with known difficulties in cross-language research, a co-researcher, proficient in the participating teachers' home languages, was present during the intervention and data-collection sessions to translate and clarify (Temple, 2002).

To increase the credibility of our study, we searched for negative cases and considered alternative explanations for findings (Mason, 2002; Seale, 1999; Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003), and defended our results and explanations by comparing cases with one another as well as with the current literature (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2002; Seale, 2002). Characteristic of PRA, we also used member checking in each intervention phase to enhance credibility (Seale, 1999). Our prolonged engagement in the research field encouraged us to continue fieldwork until the data were saturated, and prevented us from making premature conclusions (Patton, 2002). To acknowledge and reflect on researcher bias, we made use of research journals to contemplate our experiences, perceptions and assumptions. By presenting an audit trail (Janesick, 2000; Seale, 1999), we attempted to achieve dependability and confirmability in the reported study. Apart from the research team's discussions and consultation of researcher journals, we also employed the strategy of reflexivity to account for our meaning-making during the research process.

The participating teachers knew of the aim and limitations of the study, which we discussed orally and also explained in written

Table 2
Summary of the particulars of participating teachers in the rural school.

Participant	Gender	Age	Home language	Qualification(s)	Learning area
1	Male	37	SiSwati	Teacher diploma, BA degree	Grade 11–12: Mathematics, Biology
2	Female	31	SiSwati	Teacher diploma, BA degree	Geography
3	Male	32	SiSwati	Teacher diploma, B Ed degree	Agriculture
4	Male	40	SiSwati	Teacher diploma	Life Orientation
5	Female	35	SiSwati	Teacher diploma, B Ed degree	Physics and Technology
6	Female	34	SiSwati	BA degree	Life Orientation
7	Female	54	SiSwati	Teacher diploma, B Ed degree	Business Sciences
8	Female	38	SiSwati	Teacher diploma	Business Economics, Typing
9	Female	40	SiSwati	Teacher diploma	English

format in English. We obtained ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the University of the University of Pretoria, adhering to the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, safety in participation, privacy and trust (Gibbon, 2002). During the research process, we shared research findings with the participants, inviting them to co-present at international conferences, giving copies of a book disseminating STAR insights to each participating teacher, and sharing news of graduating students who were co-researchers in STAR with the teachers. The teacher-participants were core members of the research process (Fritz & Smit, 2008; Hole, 2007; Janesick, 2000).

3. Results

It appeared from the thematic analysis that the teacher-participants faced many challenges which hindered their involvement in the research project. The two major challenges relate to contextual barriers, and work-life demands. The contextual barriers reflect hardships and expectations synonymous with living on the margins of an unequal society. The work-life demands are typical of teachers in rural schools who have to navigate between professional responsibilities and personal expectations. The contextual barriers that the teachers had to overcome to continue the research partnership include poverty and a lack of broad community involvement. Work-life demands that were obstacles for prolonged engagement include the long distances between spaces of work and home job-related responsibilities and time constraints, as well as partner expectations and attrition.

3.1. Contextual barriers which teacher-participants faced to remain in a research partnership

3.1.1. Community engagement partnerships are difficult to sustain because of poverty

Poverty was obvious from the long-term observational data. Photographs (Photographs 5—8) capture the community setting. The dire scarcity of resources is evident in the infrastructure of dirt roads and basic housing. The goats reflect the agricultural livelihood typical of this rural setting. Resources, although scarce, are observable in fences, as well as telephone and electricity lines. Economic activity can be seen in the form of a small shop as well as informal entrepreneurship — where mothers sell homemade meals and sweets outside the school gates.

Poverty was also mentioned in teachers' descriptions: one teacher noted parents' unemployment and lack of job opportunities

Photograph 6. Rural secondary school, Mpumalanga.

in their isolated community by stating "…around here where we are situated a lot of parents are not working" (Participant 9, Line 42—43), and another lamenting "We are from a poor community" (Participant 11, Line 372).

It also became apparent that this context of scarcity of necessities drove expectations of financial, material or infrastructural gain: "We are teachers and we live in a situation where whenever we do something we expect to get something in return, perhaps those are some of the cases and maybe the reason why some have left" (Participant 24, Line 554—557); "… to get funding, as you say we are from a poor community which means that what we do we should get something now" (Participant 11, Line 369—373). When teachers contemplated psychosocial support initiatives, the lack of and need for finances also dominated their thoughts: "We will need to obtain funds for such a project" (Participant 10, Line 446). It appeared that teachers did expect donations for their efforts to implement research-related strategies: "Now that classroom we were provided which needed some touch ups and touch ups will need money and the school in its budget, you know we're living on a very stringent budget, so wouldn't provide some few cents for us to work with the centre" (Participant 24, Line 803—806).

Although the context of poverty was very much on their minds and it drove agendas to attract funds when they donated effort, the partners also demonstrated agency. This is illustrated by a teacher saying: "… such that we also go and work on overdraft, we borrow

Photograph 5. Primary school in an informal settlement, Eastern Cape.

Photograph 7. Urban primary school, Gauteng.

Photograph 8. Urban primary school, Gauteng.

money from these other departments to say we can't cope. So that is how we got stuck with the whole idea of the human resource centre" (Participant 24, Line 815—817).

In line with our results, Bennell (2004) argues that increased financial pressure on schools is a growing concern and demotivation for many teachers in Africa, especially in schools that are not fully compensated by the government and where the income from school fees is low. Smit and Fritz (2008) assert that teachers may find poverty a challenging factor beyond their control, which could influence teachers and the education system, and consequently their involvement in partnership initiatives. Similarly, Bauch (2001) highlights that schools in rural areas have a higher level of poverty, a lower median family income and lower funds than schools in urban areas.

3.1.2. Community engagement partnerships struggle when there is no community involvement and communication

In debriefing sessions after the site visits, the research team often reflected on the teachers' hope that parents and community leaders would assist with school-based action plans. Similarly the research team reflected on the teachers' despair when such help either did not materialise, or lapsed. Teachers said the lack of parental involvement was due to the agricultural nature of livelihoods: "Most of the parents here were saying that they are busy at their fields so they won't be able to come to the school afterwards" (Participant 9, Line 260—263).

Sometimes parents did become involved in supportive strategies, but later ceased their involvement: "… the number (of parents) started to decrease" (Participant 24, Line 722—723). Teachers cited material or financial gain for such attrition: "As indicated, most people are unemployed in this area, we were saying that with the gardening project it will be easier for these people to get something into their pockets in a long run because they will be selling the vegetables to the outside world, especially in developed areas — that at the end of the day those people would come down here to get vegetables and in that way it was going to put little cash into their pockets (Participant 11, Line 68—74); "I think they thought maybe somewhere somehow they were going to get direct cash from the project, so now when they realised that there's no money coming to their pockets, because these people are not working, there's no work around here, so immediately when you call them for a project, they think that maybe they are going to give us cash. So for them to persevere becomes difficult" (Participant 10, Line 26—30); "Ja, as my colleagues have indicated, people thought

that by coming here something will immediately get into their pockets, that was maybe what was at the back of their minds, but then seeing that nothing is getting into their pockets, they lost interest and became demotivated" (Participant 11, Line 84—89); "… the parents … they thought that when they put in work something will come out of it immediately, but nothing came out because it was not immediate that you will get something out of the whole thing, we were still building up. So now the number started to decrease" (Participant 24, Line 719—723).

The lack of parental connection and involvement in schools is often a typical challenge in school—community partnerships (Oullette, Briscoe, & Tyson, 2004; Smit & Fritz, 2008). Kretzmann (1992) states that school—community partnerships were deteriorating throughout the United States in the early 1990s. He believes that schools are increasingly becoming more professionalised and therefore inclined to distance themselves from their local communities. As a result, many public and private schools in urban and also rural areas in the US lost their powerful position as an important resource in the community (Kretzmann, 1992).

Today, rural schools are often seen as the "social centre" of small communities where parents and community members take an active part in school events, and where close relationships with parents are more prevalent (Barley, 2009; Bauch, 2001). Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk, and Prescott (2002), mention that their research in Australian rural communities showed that schools provide a key opportunity for community interaction. They found that social capital can be built by utilising and mobilising schools' resources and opportunities. Although the participating rural school in the present study did manage to involve parents and community members in the partnership initiatives, the school struggled to sustain their involvement, because the parents and community members reportedly expected financial gain from the projects, which did not materialise. This relates to the high level of unemployment and poverty in the participating rural community. Another possible reason for lower participation of parents in the participating rural school is that parents in rural communities often place less value on schooling, as they are less likely to be educated themselves, and therefore are less prone to become involved in partnership initiatives through the school (Mulkeen, 2006).

In line with our results, the literature shows that rural schools are particularly limited in supportive resources (Barley & Beesley, 2007), and typically have a high level of poverty, lack of resources and often deprived physical living conditions (Bauch, 2001; Dass-Brailsford, 2005). For these reasons, the partners in the rural school expected financial benefits from the partnership initiatives, which did not materialise and resulted in the attrition of some partners. It should be noted, though, that the data were collected from participants who were *retained* in the projects. The deductions made are therefore based on the interpretations of colleagues who gave possible reasons for not continuing the partnership. It should also be noted that the participants had never been placed under the misconception that they would benefit financially from participating in the intervention study. Nevertheless, the participants seemed to anticipate that they would receive some financial gain through their asset-based initiatives taken during the intervention study.

In support of the present study's results, Nhamo (2012) states that unrealistic expectations are one of the key challenges in higher education—community engagement partnerships in South Africa. Many studies found conflicting expectations, specifically about financial benefits (Cox & Seifer, 2005) and the quest for and management of financial resources (Holland, 2005) as core challenges in community engagement partnerships. Similar to the results of our study, many community partners are often motivated to enter relationships with higher education institutions in the hope of

expanding their access to resources, which is not always realistic. Community partners who have inflated expectations may be disappointed by the end result, which could restrict future partnerships (Cox & Seifer, 2005). Holland (2005) argues that community partners often expect university partners to raise more funds, increase their impact, utilise academic knowledge to enhance economic stability, improve schools, enhance community health and safety and support community capacity. It is also important to note that higher education institutions often initiate the partnership and therefore the university's goals and interests usually tend to shape the design of community engagement partnerships (Seifer, 2004). Cox and Seifer (2005) warn against the potential mismatch between the tertiary institution's mission and the community's expectations. If the service or resource needs of a community do not align with the university's role of generating and disseminating knowledge, the higher education institution is unlikely to deliver what the community expects. It is therefore vital for partners to examine divergent expectations and goals so that they can establish common ground where collective work will be mutually beneficial to all the parties involved (Holland, 2005).

In view of the above, community partners often regard higher education institutions as wealthy organisations with many resources. Given the differences in power and wealth between tertiary institutions and resource-scarce communities, these perceptions are often valid. So community partners often enter partnerships with the motive of expanding their access to resources (Cox & Seifer, 2005), which again relates to the importance of managing the expectations of all the parties involved. It is particularly important for communities to develop their own internal capacities, rather than relying on the partner to provide capacities. If this is not achieved, higher education—community engagement partnerships run the risk of widening the power and resource gap between communities and higher education institutions (Cox & Seifer, 2005).

3.2. Work-life demands the teacher-participants negotiated to remain in a research partnership

3.2.1. Community partnerships are challenging when partners' spaces of work and family are far apart

This subtheme is a link between the contextual and work-life themes. Teaching in a rural school in a resource-constrained country such as South Africa often means that teachers do not live in the village where they teach: "Our main challenge as you see us here, we work here but we don't stay here we stay there, that is a challenge" (Participant 24, Line 787—789). The implication is that teachers spend many hours in transit: travelling to and from home and school. Besides the vast distances between the work and home settings, resource constraints also mean that teachers do not have their own cars, that public transportation is limited and that travel is time-consuming because of gravel roads, potholes and seasonal flooding on low-water bridges.

Early in our planning of meetings and intervention sessions, we realised that teachers found it difficult to be available after school hours, as they had to travel relatively far from the school to reach their homes. Their rural placement and demands of travelling impacted on both the community-engagement and by implication the research partnership. "We are hoping to get through the challenges that we are facing, that we work here, we live there, we just come here at 07:30, we leave at 14:30 or 14:40 we're gone" (Participant 20, Line 928—931).

The existing literature confirms that the distance between schools and homes is a potential contextual barrier in the education sector. For example, Balfour et al. (2008) refer to such difficulties of access, specifically in rural communities, owing to the long

distances and time spent travelling as well as transport problems. Rural schools face a unique set of challenges, largely as a result of their geographical remoteness (Arnold et al., 2005). De Lannoy (2009) states that the difficulty of distance is exacerbated by the poor condition of roads, expensive or unavailable transport and potentially unsafe conditions on the roads. Murphy and Angelski (1996/1997) also found that teachers in rural areas often terminate their contracts owing to community isolation, the distance from their support networks of family and friends, and the financial cost of travelling. This correlates with the situation of the participating teachers in rural schools who had to travel far to the rural schools where they taught, and also resulted in greater attrition in the number of participants.

Consequently, some of the participating teachers accepted other positions closer to their homes or simply for career advancement: "It was a better opportunity for him and now he is closer to his family" (Participant 8, Line 100). This resulted in the attrition of group members in the participating rural school. The literature shows that rural schools often face difficulties with recruiting or retaining qualified teachers, because teaching conditions in rural schools are unique and many teachers are not always sufficiently prepared (Arnold et al., 2005; Barley, 2009). Mulkeen (2006) concurs that teachers often prefer to teach in urban areas and therefore rural schools may be left with vacant posts.

3.2.2. Job-related responsibilities constrain participation in higher education—community engagement partnerships

Being a partner in a research project places an additional burden on teachers — already thinly spread because of professional duties. It was quite clear when we documented participant attendance that professional demands on the participants' time and efforts made it hard for teacher-participants to be present at all intervention sessions and follow-up discussions. Teachers found it extremely tough to be fully committed teachers as well as completely dedicated implementers of research initiatives: "Now you know we are overwhelmed at the school because maybe on daily basis … so it will maybe be a burden to an educator to look at the two books, I want to see my learners, and at the same time I want to change the way they are living in the community … maybe the problem lies with not having enough time" (Participant 9, Line 296—301); "You see when I was working with X with that group, sometimes it calls for you as a teacher, at the same time you have to be with the learners and at the same time you have to look at the group there because they used to come here during the day when we are teaching — so having two different groups at the same time is a problem, I learned that as an educator it is demanding of one" (Participant 9, Line 268—273); "It's a matter of maybe … that we don't have too much time really, to sustain even the group" (Participant 11, Line 381—382).

Despite juggling their roles and time to be both a teacher and a research partner, the teacher-participants seemed determined to remain dedicated to both duties, and a core group motivated one another to persevere: "We wish to continue it's only time, sometimes we ask each other, 'what is going on', people tell me 'there's no time', we are then under a lot of pressure, but actually we would wish to take it further and almost the three of us we still have that vision' (Participant 11, Line 352—355).

The theme of increased job-related responsibilities as barrier to partnership initiatives is often prominent in research partnerships at an international level (Bennell, 2004; Israel et al., 2006, 1998; Kegeles et al., 2005; Lantz et al., 2001; Yoo et al., 2009). Likewise, the results of our study are consistent with recent studies that focused specifically on teachers as community engagement partners (Nhamo, 2012). Bennell (2004) as well as Griffith et al. (1999) found that teaching is a stressful occupation and that an additional

workload and related time constraints often put additional stress on teachers, which may have a negative effect on partnership initiatives. Furthermore, Mulkeen (2006) agrees that teachers from rural schools often have to travel far, so the additional hours after school could adversely affect the quality of partnerships and initiatives.

3.2.3. Partner expectations and attrition of community partners form a barrier to higher education–community engagement partnerships

In all the participating schools, at one time or another, some teacher partners left the partnership: "We were ten and some of the leaders, some of the lady colleagues also left the school and others decided not to go on … So again that group faded away" (Participant 24, Line 553–555); "… but the only problem is she is now left alone, the others are no longer here" (Participant 9, Line 15–16).

The reasons for the attrition of teacher partners varied. In the first subtheme we presented data indicating how teacher-partners' expectations of gaining resources seemed related to the scarcity of the resources in their personal and professional lives. At times their expectations were also contradictory about the expected outcomes of community engagement partnerships: "We are teachers and we live in a situation where whenever we do something we expect to get something in return, perhaps those are some of the cases and maybe the reason why some have left" (Participant 24, Line 554–557). We also explained how commitment to a research partnership added more duties to an already full workload as teachers' responsibilities: "You see when I was working with X with that group, sometimes it calls for you as a teacher, at the same time you have to be with the learners and at the same time you have to look at the group there because they used to come here during the day when we are teaching – so having two different groups at the same time is a problem, I learned that as an educator it is demanding of one" (Participant 9, Line 268–273). Some attrition was agency-related, such as lack of motivation and dedication: "I don't know whether to convince our colleagues…they are no more dedicated to our group" (Participant 11, Line 383–384); "I can see that they feel a bit demotivated with the fact that they are only a few group members left …" (Research journal, 28 August). There were also career reasons for attrition, as was the case with teacher-participants who accepted positions at other schools: "Mr X was a great asset to the group… We are all sad that he is leaving for his new position at the end of the month..." (Research journal, 12 October). In some instances, the reality that vast numbers of South African teachers are affected by HIV and Aids also lead to attrition, as members had to take over responsibilities of care when loved ones passed away, or when they themselves were ill or, in the case of one teacher-partner, passed away: "… there are more orphans and as there are more orphans our responsibilities at school and in the community increase" (Participant 24, Line 668–669).

Earlier we noted that the lack of school-community involvement truly disappointed the teacher-partners. They were especially distraught when partnerships with parents and school-community members had been forged, and then ended. When this break in collaboration occurred, the teacher-partners seemed especially demotivated to continue the research initiatives: "… difficult to move on with some of them having left … Yes … I don't know whether to convince our colleagues" (Participant 11, Line 378–384); "That one the beading project, I think what I can say is that the group is no longer effective now … the others are no longer here" (Participant 9, Line 10–15).

Other authors (Harper et al., 2004; Israel et al., 2006) also highlight the attrition of group members as a barrier in the context of participatory research initiatives. Similarly, Nhamo (2012) emphasises that members moving in and out is a key challenge to higher education–community partnerships. Other studies (Holland, 2005; Stanton, 2008; 2012) show that partnerships ought to be clear and focus on a mutually beneficial agenda, by identifying the ways that shared action can satisfy individual interests. Partners should also have a clear understanding of the resources, capacity and expected contribution of effort for each partner involved. This could contribute to realistic expectations for all partners and create a map of the different forms of expertise that each partner would contribute to the partnership. Bloomfield (2005) claims that research is often most successful when engagement is reciprocal, in the sense that participants benefit from applying the results in their communities, rather than merely being experimental subjects. A key insight at the Wingspread Conference on higher education collaboratives for community engagement and improvement, which focused on higher education's role in society, was the importance of building trust, removing misconceptions and creating informed and responsive partnerships among communities and tertiary institutions (Smerek et al., 2005).

4. Discussion

It seems that the context of an emerging-economy country, amplified in a rural setting, may be a quagmire for teacher-partners to navigate when they agree to be part of a research collaboration. In this study it appeared that even if teacher-partners 'bought into' collaboration, their personal and professional roles and responsibilities made it especially difficult for them to contribute their time to added research-related tasks. In this regard time for research-partnership roles was especially impacted negatively because of distances teachers travelled between home and school. In addition, poverty simultaneously pulled teacher-partners into the partnership and pushed them out of the partnership. On the one hand teachers and parents were motivated to be part of the partnership as a mechanism to access scarce services and/or opportunities for capacity development. On the other hand attrition was a result of unfulfilled expectations for personal financial gain (of teachers and parents) or infrastructural gain for the school. Teachers also struggled to remain vested in a partnership where parents did not also contribute to share the load (and gains) of partnership tasks.

It is particularly useful to revisit our chosen rurality lens (Balfour et al., 2008) as a way to understand how teachers in this study negotiated powerful contextual barriers (forces of place and space plus the variable of resource constraints) to remain active in a research partnership. As regards to the forces of place, this group of South African teachers had to traverse professional and sociopolitical responsibilities befitting their role as teachers in a transforming a young democracy. While adapting to their new roles in a community, they struggled to partner with parents and community leaders who had not yet been socialised to partake in civil responsibility actions synonymous with democratic values. As research partners, teachers also negotiated forces of space and time to continue the research partnership. They had to balance time in transit with time spent in the home-space, school-space and time spent on partnership-activities. Each of these spaces also made claims on teacher-partners' agency and resources – the two remaining rurality variables.

A research partnership with a marginalised school community, such as this rural school, also brought to the fore the rurality variable of resources, i.e. the lack of resources – with accompanying expectations from the research partners of financial, material or infrastructural gain. For this group of teachers (and parents) the research-partnership appeared to be a viable prospect to add to a

sparse resource pool. Owing to the lack of such benefits, agency also decreased.

Although the teachers in this rural school often expressed these challenges, they appeared to use the rurality variable of agency to cross between challenges. They seemed to regulate how they used the time and resources available between their professional and personal roles. The teachers who persisted in the collaboration stated that others (not themselves) misunderstood what was to be gained. Their will to continue the research partnership withstood possible disappointments despite the lack of material gain. Their will might have been reinforced by a vision of how their collaboration could contribute to a changing force of place. Research partnerships may benefit from gain-framed messages (Salovey & Wegener, 2003). In the particular research context a gain-framed message may be that participation could add to a changing post-colonial place. The partnership may be explained as a vehicle for partner involvement to understanding adaptation in one marginalised system (here a school-community), which in turn may add to positive socio-political and ideological changes in a transforming society. In this regard it was especially beneficial when the researchers showed teachers and parents examples of partnership products (a published book, graduate student dissertations). Researchers explained that the knowledge in the books was a result of participation between researchers, teachers and parents and that the books were used, for example to train other South African teachers.

We make three overarching recommendations for long-term research with partners in similar settings which might circumvent the related hurdles, namely conceptualising a partnership, communication to adapt a flexible research schedule and clear expectations during informed consent processes. During the conceptualisation of the partnership it might be beneficial to discuss how rurality forces (space, place and time) may pull and push partners away from a research partnership. Conversely, the implementation of the partnership could be visualised so that these same forces would draw partners towards roles. Initial participatory discussions to understand the context of the partnership and the life-world of partners therefore seem prudent during the proposal or conceptual phases. The forces in our long-term partnership flowed when we were able to consider the most appropriate times to meet the teacher-partners so that they would not miss their bus home, and when they did not feel that they were neglecting their duties at school nor their families at home.

Establishing such a flow obviously requires discussion. We recommend various modes of accessible communication channels: social media, texting, e-mails and shared telephone numbers. Conversation enables partners to share thoughts on pressing career needs, transport difficulties, venue changes and frustrations about the dwindling numbers of partners who share project-related responsibilities. In similar settings, research schedules can be flexible enough to accommodate rurality forces. In such research scenarios, communication and flexibility seem to be particularly essential research management tools to co-mediate the agency of partners who have to regulate roles, sustain their will to persevere with the additional burdens of a project, and juggle between the systems of self, career, family, community and project partner.

What is most important, however, is that the informed consent process (and associated agency variables) probably requires more than a piece of paper. It requires a deep conversation to clarify expectations and benefits. All rurality variables come into play when mutual gain comes into focus. Informed-consent conversations would require the researcher to demonstrate an understanding of a transforming place with demands on a partner. Such a discussion would necessitate listening to the spaces that make up the daily life of a research partner. It would require knowledge of

time commitments and the pressure to use resources. The lack of financial, material and infrastructure gain for research partners would have to be a deliberate discussion, with a sincere acknowledgement of lives lived with few resources. Gain could be explained in terms of contributing to place forces: introducing community members to the values associated with a changing democracy, or growing the economic place of a society in transition. Gain could also be explained as knowledge published in books to train future professionals, or models to implement through policy in similar contexts to that of the research partner. We could demonstrate knowledge gains and explain the use of co-constructed knowledge by explaining to teacher-partners that future South African teachers have been trained by using the examples of teacher-partners adapting to adversities in a post-colonial society, since the monograph resulting from the research collaboration was prescribed in several pre-service teacher training programmes.

We have pointed out the importance of dialogic activity and the change to both parties involved in the reported university-teacher partnership. In this regard, we highlight two relevant examples, which include an ethical and dissemination aspect. Although we initially guaranteed anonymity of all participating teachers, they pertinently requested not to remain anonymous but to be identified (by name and visually in photographs). Within the context of PRA, they became proud research partners and co-creators of knowledge and not merely research participants.

In this way partners from community settings can be acknowledged as both co-constructers and co-disseminators of knowledge. Our co-researchers acted as co-presenters of results at an international conference (Ferreira, Ebersöhn, Dyasi, Mtshiselwa & Loots, 2011). As the research partnership progressed the university-researchers became veritable wall flowers during the implementation phase of STAR. We observed how the teachers as co-researchers replicated STAR intervention workshops with peers in neighbouring schools. Power and roles were therefore shifted and a platform was established where both parties acted as co-researchers, resulting in mutual benefits for the community and the higher education institution (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Hlengwa, 2010; Petersen et al., 2008; Rosner-Salazar, 2003; Stanton, 2008, 2012). The partnership therefore did not only involve the creation of knowledge for the aim of expanding an academic discipline. The partnership was also about making it possible for individuals to obtain a better understanding of their own realities (Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012; Ebersöhn, 2012). We therefore argue that a research partnership centred around democratizing research in data generation and dissemination (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; De Lange, 2012; Knowles & Cole, 2008) may culminate in mutuality.

Even though this study presents findings to inform long-term partnerships between higher education institutions and rural schools, the study also has several limitations. The study presents adequate depth in data, but the non-equivalence in the sampling of the schools (e.g. one rural may have presented some skewedness when the data were interpreted). Adding another two rural schools might have contributed to more nuanced (balanced) interpretations, even though the data collected in this study were regarded as sufficiently rich and textured. Moreover, the fact that the data for the study were collected by researchers *from* the partner institution may have affected the data collected. The participants might have felt the need to retain the partnership and therefore might have been cautious about sharing their views. The maturity of the partnership in the long-term trust relationships between partners did, however, protect the study to some extent from this potential influence. Finally, the identity of the higher education institution being studied was not interrogated for the purpose of this study. Since higher education institutions have

unique identities that are established over time, it is not possible to say whether the findings from this study relate in particular to partnerships with *this* particular higher education institution, or whether the findings can be generalised to other higher education institutions.

5. Conclusion

What really matters when considering a community engagement partnership with teachers in an emerging-economy context, and in particular a rural school? Although poverty was identified as a challenge to higher education—community engagement partnerships, it could also act as a motivating factor to involve potential partners in community engagement initiatives. It is, however, important to keep in mind the potential challenges of power and politics and enable communities to develop their own internal capacities (agency, forces and resources). It seemed pertinent from this study that resources ought to be clarified. In addition, collaboration and relationships should be leveraged to make synergy, common goals and mutually beneficial outcomes possible. When partnering with teachers, their work responsibilities and related time constraints should be respected and managed proactively by clarifying the partners' demands on the time and outputs required. The involvement of the broader community should also be established and clarified at the outset of a partnership. In addition, expectations should be monitored in frank conversations throughout the partnership. Open communication about goals, expectations and needs is an integral part of successful higher education—community engagement initiatives, and could result in a lower attrition of participant numbers or have a positive effect on the implementation of partnerships.

Higher education-community partnerships in rural contexts take longer to make progress and move forward. Forewarned is forearmed, and higher education partners who are aware of the contextual, personal and professional difficulties that community partners may have to negotiate (especially in resource-scarce and rural contexts) may be able to engage in mutually beneficial empathetic and proactive discussions. It is the universities' responsibility to be socially responsive to the needs of a transforming society and to be aware of and proactively manage the challenges related to community engagement, even more so in young democratic societies moving against the post-colonial constraints of the forces of place and resources. This could improve the development of engagement and partnerships between tertiary institutions and communities. Although Jacoby (2003) argues that there is no standard formula for successful higher education-community engagement partnerships, there seems to be increasing convergence in the literature concerning the core elements that could potentially result in more effective partnerships (Holland, 2005). In the same light, we make the case that although each university-community partnership is unique, there is great benefit i n sharing experiences and knowledge gained that could potentially result in more successful future partnerships (Cox & Seifer, 2005).

It would appear that, especially in an unequal and rural society, barriers may be expected in a long-term partnership between teachers and university researchers. However it also appears that such barriers do not necessarily doom a partnership to collapse. Teachers' agency for continued commitment superseded their daily frustrations of especially limited time, expectations for monetary gain and feeling unsupported by school-community members. One reason for the continued participation and agency of the teachers could plausibly be ascribed to a research agenda to democratize knowledge generation for social justice. This research platform may be a holding space to socialise democratic values of shared power to make decisions and share acknowledgement of gains, which are so

unfamiliar in the post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa. Practising democracy (e.g. shared decision-making) in a research partnership may motivate teachers, despite obstacles, to remain active in a partnership. This motivation for agency may stem from satisfaction to be associated with a partnership which documents shades of inequality: both high risk schools spaces, as well as teacher innovations to adapt to risk. The teacher motivation to get around partnership-barriers may also stem from resistance to being apathetic and unquestioning of continued post-colonial inequalities — especially evident in rural South Africa.

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