

Levelling the Playing Fields in PAR: The Intricacies of Power, Privilege, and Participation in a University–Community–School Partnership

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Abstract

When academics, who occupy a traditional position of power and privilege, engage with community members whose thinking, attitudes, and responses have been shaped by ongoing sociohistorical oppression and disadvantage, democratic participation is not easy to attain. Yet, unless community members feel able to participate freely, the valuable local knowledge they bring to the project will be lost and the learning will again be based on theories that may have little relevance for them. We explain how power relations can be leveled through the utilization of specific strategies within a participatory action research design. Seven community members and five teachers collaborated to develop a program that the community members would later use to educate parents about how to better support their children academically. Informed by a qualitative analysis of visual and textual data generated in several working sessions for this project, findings indicate that, while the flattening of power relations is an ongoing and complex task, specific strategies can be used to “level the playing fields” and negotiate the intricacies of power, privilege, and participation.

Keywords

adult learning, community development, democratic participation, participatory action research, power relations

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Introduction

As researchers working in the field of community engagement in a developing economy, we embrace participatory approaches to adult learning and development. We proceed from epistemological and ontological standpoints that are based on notions of inclusion, democracy, and respect for local knowledge emanating from lived experience of the specific context and culture. Unless this knowledge informs the basis of the development of educational material and programs, it is unlikely that learning will be judged useful by recipients. This is in contrast to the “expert” knowledge more usually imposed by the academy due to an overreliance on conventional training which in turn inhibits sustained learning (Erasmus & Albertyn, 2014). Transmitting knowledge in a top-down way leads to dependency and does not encourage the mind shifts needed for transformation on a deeper and more sustainable level (Mahlomaholo, 2013). Our focus is to generate such knowledge in partnerships with participating members of communities who wish to expand their capacity to improve their own learning and development. Like Burns and Worsley (2015), we view the education system from a holistic perspective, and aim to support people to effect sustainable change by ensuring the research process creates space for active participation, holistic learning, and relationship building. Burns and Worsley (2015) also stress that participation is necessary to (a) ensure the knowledge generated is fit for purpose and benefits the people intended and (b) promote ownership of learning and development and motivation for sustained change. Yet as academics working with community members in South Africa whose thinking, attitudes, and responses have been shaped by ongoing sociohistorical oppression and disadvantage, we are aware that it is no easy task to encourage equal participation (Nhamo, 2012). In fact, the very assumption that participation means the same to all stakeholders is an imposition of our Western values on the process, as Wamba (2016) reminds us:

Seldom do we reflect on the diversity of perspectives on participation. The process of participation is not universal and is contingent upon contexts and different cultural norms and assumptions. One challenge of participatory approaches is that they keep evolving in the light of problems of applications and adapting to specific contexts. “Cultural” participation, also referred to as African socialism by scholars studying societies in sub-Saharan Africa, is very common (Amizande, 2013; Chachage & Cassam, 2010). However, this form of participation is imbued with power asymmetry, gender considerations, and absolute deference to the elders.

As researchers, we thus have to constantly reflect on the question of how our ascribed positions of power and (White) privilege affect the involvement of people who do not usually self-identify as knowledge producers. Given the history of South Africa, we may not be able to eradicate the effects of years of racial and social divisions, but we are convinced that we can use our positions of privilege to help community members find their own voices to bring their knowledge to the table to ensure that the outcomes of any learning are more likely to be sustainable, relevant, and useful for the wider community.

In this article, we discuss a specific aspect of a larger research project we facilitated to show how we consciously attempted to address the question of what we were doing to hinder/promote the participation of community members in the learning process. The aim of this larger research project was to enable teachers (five) and teaching assistants (TAs; seven) from a peri-urban, impoverished community to collaborate in the development of a program to help parents better support their children with schoolwork. The project utilized a participatory action research (PAR) methodology, aimed at encouraging full involvement of community participants in cocreating the knowledge needed to sustain improvement in their identified concerns. Such engagement requires the development of democratic and trusting partnerships between academic researchers and community participants (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). In theory this may appear simple, but in practice the establishment of such relations requires a complex understanding of the deep-seated social and cultural issues that shape the thinking, attitudes, and responses of community participants within the project (Smith, 2015). As two White, middle-class academics, whose role was to facilitate the research process, we were aware that both the community members and teachers accorded us with superior knowledge and expertise; similarly, the community members deferred to the teachers, and within the community members, the younger ones were deferential to their elders, which inhibited them from voicing opinions. The success of the PAR project thus depended on each participant being able to contribute to the project, while still respecting community norms around age and position-related status. Guided by a critical reading of power (e.g., Bourdieu, 1994; Foucault, 1997; Freire, 1990; Gaventa, 1991; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008), we discuss our insights into the complexity of PAR and power relations, gleaned from a qualitative analysis of data generated in the initial four sessions, during which we aimed to create a culture of collaborative engagement in pursuit of participants' identified goals.

We begin by explicating the theoretical framework that guided our thinking about power, privilege, and participation, before explaining the qualitative methodology adopted to generate and analyze the data. The emergent themes are then discussed in relation to relevant literature, supported by direct quotations from participants. We conclude with some reflections on the significance of the findings to inform future community-based research and projects for adult learning and development.

Linking Power, Privilege, and Participation to PAR

As proponents of a critical and humanizing pedagogy, we agree with Freire's (1990) belief that the knowledge of the people deserves respect. This requires knowledge to be democratized by acknowledging that there are multiple ways of knowing (Hall & Tandon, 2016) and that those with academic qualifications do not necessarily know better than the layperson. The perspectives of the disadvantaged and marginalized provide valuable information that helps ensure that the knowledge generated is relevant and useful. From a Freirian perspective, knowledge should be seen as a tool to create a more democratic and just society, rather than a means of perpetuating the power of the academy that legitimizes only Western ways of knowing. As academics,

we wished to add support for the growing acknowledgement that community members can create valid knowledge to address a problem that they had in fact identified themselves. We wanted to assist participants, and particularly the community members, to unlock their potential to become producers of valid, contextualized, and relevant knowledge that they could use to educate the wider community, rather than going in with a ready-made program, based on theories of parental support developed by outside “experts.” The relevance and effectiveness of parenting programs within contexts of social and economic adversity have been questioned (Makgopa & Mokhele, 2013; Mncube, 2010). People who feel their knowledge is respected are more likely to participate and thus claim their power to influence the process.

Gaventa (1991) proposes three strategies for PAR: (a) the reappropriation of knowledge (recognition that communities know best how to improve their own circumstances); (b) the development of that knowledge (through specific strategies to foster the awareness of community members of their capacity to contribute to learning); and (c) the involvement of people in producing their own knowledge (by participating in discussion, decision making, and dissemination of findings). In any given relationship, there are multiple and interrelated layers of power referred to as visible, hidden, or invisible (Gaventa, 1991). Visible power is similar to what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1994), as power vested in the dominant actors in a given situation (e.g., academics, teachers) by dint of their socially accorded authority. Over time, barriers (hidden power) are created that hinder people from engaging (e.g., community members believe local knowledge is not as valuable as the knowledge teachers possess) and this acceptance of visible or symbolic power leads to recognition of it as normal and incontestable. Thus, people adjust their behavior accordingly (e.g., community members abdicate responsibility for their children’s education to teachers)—this is what Gaventa terms invisible power. In this case, although the teachers may not be doing or saying anything to actively wield power, the internalized beliefs of the community members accord them with such power. Thus, to challenge this monopoly of power and unmask sources of hidden power, participatory methodologies are needed to raise consciousness of the “power within” (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008, p. 175). Rather than see power as an oppressive construct, Foucault (1997) tells us we should be aiming for a productive and relational form of power which exists only through action, dialogue, and democratic practices. Power is thus viewed synergistically: by broadening the power base, all gain and benefit, rather than one party having to cede power to the other.

PAR views power as existing within a network of social relationships that either enable or constrain action (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008). In communities such as the one in this project, the relationship between school and parents is a typically constraining one in that teachers are considered to be more knowledgeable than parents about the education of their child and so lack of parental involvement is a real problem (Lemmer, 2007). Ideally, parents and teachers should work together to educate the child, yet often they seem to be delivering contradictory messages regarding behavior and what is to be valued (Wood & Olivier, 2011). Parents who feel knowledgeable, have the capacity to assist the child academically, and generally become involved in

the schooling experience. The benefits of parental support are widely documented (Booth & Dunn, 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Okeke, 2014), yet parents from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are often functionally illiterate or have low educational qualifications, have inadequate child-raising support and often lack confidence in the school, stemming from their own negative experiences under Apartheid where Black education was regarded as a tool of oppression (van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). Thus, they feel disempowered and abdicate responsibility for educating their child to the school. Context and cultural differences further complicate teacher–parent partnerships (Sheehey, 2006).

Power leads to privilege and the creation of “uppers” and “lowers” in society (Chambers, 1997, p. 57), forming multiple layers that are difficult to define and change without making a deliberate effort to “hand over the stick, sit down, listen and learn” (Chambers, 1995, p. 34). A leveling of power relations necessitates increased participation to enable not only the development of knowledge but also the confidence to share it and skills to apply it (Nelson & Wright, 1995)—which requires participation. Unless this happens, powerless groups tend to buy into, and hence reinforce and perpetuate, the myth of privilege and power, rather than questioning it (Scott, 1990). A PAR approach is thus aimed at helping participants investigate and change reality, rather than just replicate it. Our aim was to shift the mind-sets of participants to enable democratic participation and knowledge creation. We recognize that we cannot abdicate our symbolic power, but we can try and use it to democratize knowledge creation by continually asking ourselves what we are doing that gets in the way of the participants expressing their knowledge and what we could be doing to help participants reappropriate and develop their knowledge.

Method

Within the larger PAR design, we adopted a qualitative approach to capture and describe the essence of the participants’ experiences (Merriam & Tidsell, 2015) of power relations within the project. The site for the study was a primary school in a peri-urban, socioeconomically challenged community in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. It had been an Afrikaans-medium school before 1994, serving a predominately colored community, but now it was dual-medium Afrikaans and English, with over 50% of the learners being Black African and thus having to learn in their second language. This project arose out of a need identified by the teachers and TAs in this school to equip parents to support their children academically. Seven TAs, who were all mothers from the local community (five African; two colored), were invited to work with the seven teachers they supported in their classrooms to develop a parent support program that would be contextually relevant and based on the researched needs of the community members. Two of the original teachers had to withdraw for personal reasons, leaving two African women and three colored. Although the teachers did not live in the same community as the TAs, they did have lived experience of life in similarly socially, economically challenged contexts. Data for this article were generated through two main sources: (a) transcripts of recorded project working sessions

during the first cycle where participants focused on generating and analyzing data to determine what parents needed to learn in order to better support their children at school and (b) an open-ended questionnaire which requested participants to reflect on their own level of participation and decision making and what helped or hindered it. The questionnaire was administered to participants by a teacher who was not part of the project at a meeting where we, the university partners, were not present.

Data were thematically analyzed (Creswell, 2013) independently by the authors, before reaching consensus on final themes. Trustworthiness of the data was enhanced by triangulation of data generation strategies (open-ended questionnaires; reflective discussions); by comparing the findings to relevant literature; and by independent transcription and recoding of data (Padgett, 2008). Ethical clearance for the project had been granted by both universities, ensuring that the tenets of voluntary, informed consent and confidentiality of participants' identity in publications were adhered to and that the benefits to participants were deemed to outweigh any risk of participation.

Discussion of Findings

Three main themes emerged where perceptions of power and privilege appeared to influence participation and subsequent learning and development of the community members and teachers within the project. The themes were in the areas of language, knowledge generation, and culture and perceived status. In the ongoing analysis of the data, we kept in mind critical questions advocated by Gaventa's conceptualization of power, such as: Who is not participating? What are the barriers? What can we do to reduce such barriers? The themes are discussed below in relation to relevant literature and supported by direct quotations from the data.

Language as a Determinant of Participation

Language is widely recognized as an important determinant of power, both in its verbal forms (Rojo, 2016) and in a more abstract sense (Wakslak, Smith, & Han, 2014). The symbolic power of language is especially important in a country where English is generally regarded as the language of the "educated" and African languages are correlated with poverty, ignorance, and other such negative associations. Yet we had to use it as the common language, which in itself posed a threat to participation, since we were the only native English speakers, with five of the community participants and two of the teachers being isiXhosa speaking and the rest Afrikaans first language speakers. None of the isiXhosa speakers could speak Afrikaans, therefore English was the only language we all understood and could converse in. However, there were varying levels of fluency and we noticed in the first contact that some of the isiXhosa speaking participants were hesitant to express themselves in English. After highlighting this point at our next session, we asked them how they thought they could address this issue. They decided to invite another member of the community to interpret into and from their language. This person was a fellow volunteer and known to all. They explained that it was important that the interpreter is someone they trust:

We trust N, because she understands us and we know she will not laugh at us and judge us. She also used to be there and so she is helping us. (TA 2)

From this, we learnt that participation did not only hinge on the fluency of the speaker but also on how confident they felt to share their ideas and opinions. By using a trusted interpreter, participants could first “try out” their contribution, without fear of being ridiculed. The interpreter engaged in discussion with them to construct the final contribution and did not just translate word for word. This realization helped us focus more on nonverbal language and accompanying emotions of the participants. We became more sensitive to their communication, or lack of it, and adjusted our responses appropriately. We found a humorous way for anyone in the group to indicate they did not understand something. One of the participants said something in isiXhosa, and when we asked for a translation, she said “I have just left the room to have a cup of tea”(TA 5), meaning that she might as well go and do this, since she does not understand what is going on. After this, we all used the phrase “Just gone for a cup of tea now!” when we did not understand what was being said. This turned a potentially threatening situation into a fun one, and allowed participants (and us) to admit they did not understand without feeling exposed or embarrassed.

I was able to say “I am going for a cup of tea”—we laughed and I did not feel stupid. (TA 3)

The teacher participants also advised us to check three times if everyone understood what we said, since we tended initially to use terms the participants were not familiar with—for example, we were told we were using too many technical terms when we were discussing research generation strategies to help them decide how to gather data from the wider community to inform the design of the manual. We also asked a Dutch volunteer in the school, who was well known to, and loved by, the participants, to sit in on the sessions and interrupt us when she thought that participants were confused or “lost.” This was very helpful to us, as she could also assist in facilitating the activities done in smaller groups. Since one of us could speak Afrikaans to a degree, modeling was used to show that it was okay to make mistakes and speak with a “foreign” accent—they found this very funny and it helped ease tension around the use of language.

The value of the iterative process of data generation and analysis was highlighted when we listened to a tape after one session and heard clearly how a community member was silenced by a teacher when she was trying, in a halting manner, to explain her group’s vision for the project. The teacher interrupted after a few sentences and finished the explanation; the community member did not speak for the rest of the session. We had not even been aware of this until we listened to the tape. Although the teacher was acting out of compassion because she did not want the community member to feel embarrassed, in fact she had created a source of hidden power (Gaventa, 1991) which would act as a barrier for the community member to participate in the project in future. After this experience, we were very alert for such events and could take immediate action to allow the less confident speaker to have their say. We also had a discussion with participants around this issue, to raise awareness of the need to be patient with

each other and how good intentions can actually hamper participation and contribute to unequal power relations.

Ironically, our attention to the aspect of language resulted in us feeling “left out” and powerless at times as we could not understand what was being said. We turned this into a learning experience for all, as it allowed us to model to participants how to ask for clarification. It also helped us become sensitive to how participants felt. We learnt that it was not enough to set norms about interaction in the sessions but also to constantly monitor them as we worked together.

We also became very aware of what Wakslak et al. (2014, p. 44) refer to as “abstract language” and made a concerted effort to use techniques such as clarification and reflection, without making any evaluation or judgment of opinions. Our attempts to model effective communication seemed to be helpful to participants:

I like that you listen and then reflect back, this is good practice for us to learn. It will help us later in the community when we teach them. It helps us to dialogue and listen. (TA 4)

I was too shy in the beginning, but now after working in groups, I say when I do not understand. (TA 6)

Language is a complex issue and will always be a mediator of social power (Thornborrow, 2014) but our experience in this project has highlighted again the importance of building in explicit strategies to try and minimize the negative effects it can have on participation. Language is equally powerful as a mediator and determinant of the validity of knowledge.

Knowledge and Participation

We were very aware of the hidden and invisible forms of power that legitimized our academic knowledge as the most valuable form of knowing. Years of racial, social, and economic oppression have tended to socialize community members into viewing themselves as having little to offer in the way of knowledge. Based on our experience of working with teachers in South Africa (Wood & Olivier, 2011), we also knew that they tended to position parents as illiterate, dysfunctional, and unable to offer anything of value to the school. Disrupting such ideas was at the heart of this project which required teachers and community members to work together to develop a parenting program based on local needs and knowledge. From the very beginning, we thus made an effort to emphasize that the knowledge needed to make this project a success resided in the participants and particularly in the community members, rather than in us.

In the first session, we used an affirmation exercise to allow participants to make explicit what attributes they possessed that could benefit this project. Each participant had to draw themselves and indicate what skills (arms and legs), knowledge (head), and values/assets (heart) they owned that could be used to reach the outcomes of this project. After presenting their drawing, other participants told them what assets they saw in them that they had not mentioned. This was a lengthy exercise but it was one they were talking about for months afterward (see Figure 1):



Figure 1. Making local knowledge explicit.

The best exercise was when we had to draw ourselves—after that I felt I had something good to give to this project that I did not know before. (TA 3)

The very fact that community members and teachers were working in collaborative groups on the same task helped level out power inequalities:

In the groups I was free to speak in my own language without fear of being interrupted or corrected. They listen and show interest about what I am gonna say and that makes me feel happy and wanna say more about what we are talking about. (TA 5)

We work as a team and always consult before we take any further step or changes. Everyone is special at Luniko. (Teacher 1)

The participants named the project and composed the logo through a participative and democratic process of vision crafting. They were split into four groups composed of teachers and community members and mapped their collective vision, which they presented to the larger group. Then, one member from each group came together to form another group to integrate all the ideas into one logo. The same process was followed for naming the project and mapping of their perceived learning needs and this helped everyone feel they had contributed. In response to the question of how they thought they had influenced the process, answers included

I am part of Luniko and teamwork makes everyone's idea important and valued. It makes things smooth if we become cooperative [*sic*]. (TA 6)

After each session we have our reflections so that we give input on what we went through, whether it is right or wrong. (Teacher 5)

However, the domination of Western knowledge and ideals is a reality in South Africa and so changing mind-sets is an ongoing process which we will have to continually monitor. This is closely linked to perceptions of status and culture.

Addressing Status and Culture as Barrier to Participation

In a society like South Africa where there were (and still are) clear divisions along racial and gender lines, culture and status are inextricably linked. Apartheid meant that anything associated with African culture had little status; race was ranked in strict order, with Black at the bottom; followed by colored, Indian, Asian; and White at the top. In both Afrikaner and non-Western cultures, women are ascribed a lesser status and younger people are not accorded the same respect as elders (Wamba, 2016). All the participants in this project were women; five of them were ascribed higher status due to their positions as teachers; and the ages ranged from 20 to 65 years, therefore the cultural constraints on full participation were a reality in this project. We had to work hard to level the playing fields so to speak, starting by introducing ourselves by first names and ensuring the teachers were also known by their first names. This simple tactic seemed to make a big difference in how the participants viewed us and each other as it was highlighted as something that made them feel free to say what they wanted:

The ways you call members like there is no Mr or Mrs or Sir. The members use nicknames and feel free to speak any language. (TA 7)

To counteract the perceived higher status of the teachers in relation to community participants, we had to stress several times that this project was not about training parents to teach their children subject content but about how to support their child through better communication with the teacher; taking an interest in what the child is doing; making sure they get to school on time and do their homework. We explicitly stated that the community participants were the ones who know what it is like to live in conditions of adversity and what is permitted and/or preferable in their culture and that the rest of us would have to learn from them. This role reversal seemed to make the community participants feel that they had something worthwhile to contribute. In response to the question of what made it easier for them to participate, they gave answers in the following vein:

L and M said they did not know about the community and asked us questions. (TA 4)

We are all the same—and the TAs are the steering wheel. (Teacher 3)

When setting norms in the opening session, we first discussed who should establish them and for what purpose to enable everyone to feel that they had a say in how the group should function.

We also had to shift our perspectives on certain things, such as punctuality. Our Western understanding of respect ties it to good timekeeping but this is not how the community members understood it. For them, a participant who had just had a baby a few weeks before and who came an hour late for a session, was actually being very respectful because she had made the time to come in spite of the demands of a

newborn. We had to change our attitudes and learn to thank the participants when such things happened. We also had to respect the tradition of starting with a prayer at each session, which often led to personal issues being aired, requiring us to take time to listen, empathize, and offer emotional support before moving onto the “business” of the project.

We thus strove to find value in the local knowledge that participants brought to the project and used it as the foundation on which to build trust, relationship, and commitment. For participants who live in harsh circumstances, it was important to create a culture of love, belonging, respect, and compassion within the project as they had expressed such values as the driving force behind their involvement (see Figure 2).

As facilitators of this project, we may not be able to abdicate our symbolic power and privilege, but we do strive to use our influence to encourage the formation of a democratic and humanizing space for collaboration. Through employing strategies to minimize the barriers of language, status, and culture to participation, we involved participants in the process to enable them to reappropriate and develop (Gaventa, 1991) the local knowledge they possess that was essential for the design of a contextually relevant parenting program. For example, they shared their knowledge about the challenges parents face: they are fearful of looking ignorant in front of their children, because they themselves do not have enough education to help them with homework; they are often so preoccupied with financial and other challenges that they ignore their children; their own harsh upbringing means that they first have to heal themselves, before they can help their children; that simple things like washing before coming to school on time is challenging, since the whole family has to wash out of one basin and the primary school child, as lowest in the hierarchic family order, has to wait until last. This contextualized knowledge will help them design a program that addresses such challenges—and it is knowledge that external “experts” would not have been privy to. The articulation of such contextualized knowledge is important in relation to Foucauldian notions of power (Foucault, 1980).

It is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, with which it operates at the present time. (p. 183)

In much of his work Foucault explores and develops the Power/Knowledge relationship, claiming that rewriting and reorganizing of knowledge carries with it the rewriting and reorganizing of power relations. Discussing the epistemic location of knowledge generation strategies, questioning what counted as “serious,” and who had the authority to speak “seriously,” his deliberations resonate closely with the work on this project. Foucault (1977) claims that all questions of knowledge are really questions of power, epistemic, social, or intellectual governance, raise for us both practical and philosophical questions which we continue to address as the project progresses. Further publications will report on the design, implementation, and evaluation of the program.

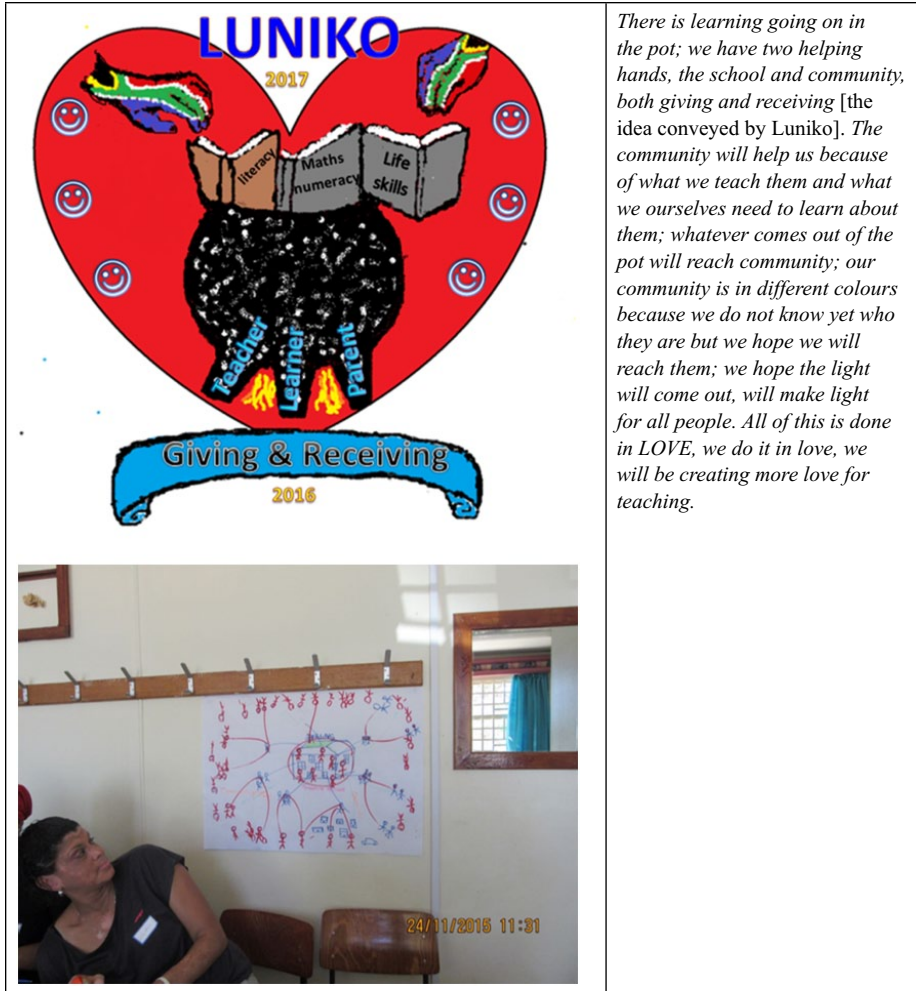


Figure 2. Luniko logo and explanation.

Conclusion

Our aim in this article was to explain how power relations can be leveled through the utilization of specific strategies within a PAR design. Although we think we succeeded to an extent in minimizing the barriers to participation created by perceptions of power and privilege, we acknowledge that it is a very challenging task. Enabling authentic participation between university researchers, teachers, and community members takes hard work and constant attention to the impact of language, status, and culture on relations. This necessitates spending time, particularly at the beginning, on building up trust and foregrounding the value of local knowledge and active participation for the success

of the project. In Foucauldian terms, this foregrounding of local knowledge is in, and of itself, a key element of the participatory process, and has the potential to redress the potential power asymmetries (Chachage & Cassam, 2010) within the project.

Finally, as recipients of external funding, we are responsible for adhering to specified timelines for outcomes. In truth, our determination to make this a truly participative project renders us powerless most of the time—the real power over the success of the project lies in the hands of the participants. Although this is a foreign feeling for us as “privileged academics,” it is exactly what PAR strives to do and so we embrace this learning. We are more determined to take a backseat so that the participants can enhance their capacity for self-directed learning and development. By sharing this knowledge, we hope to encourage other researchers to commit to making community-based research truly a participative practice by negotiating the intricacies of power, privilege, and participation.

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