

Book Review

Timmis, S., De Wet, T., Naidoo, K., Trahar, S., Lucas, L., Mqgwashu, E.M., Muhuro, P. and Wisker, G. 2021. *Rural Transitions to Higher Education in South Africa*. London: Routledge.

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Rural Transitions to Higher Education in South Africa is a groundbreaking contribution to global education scholarship, in addressing, through a decolonial framework, the multifaceted hurdles rural students face in higher education in the post-apartheid era. The book critically examines the barriers to entry, navigation, and achievement in higher education, providing nuanced insights into the systemic challenges and suggesting pathways towards more equitable academic environments. The argument is not only timely but necessary, filling a significant gap in the contemporary literature by focusing on an often-overlooked group: poor black students attending rural universities in a country still healing from the deep scars of apartheid.

The book's relevance is rooted in its context - a region in the Global South where historical injustices continue to shape educational trajectories. It brings to light, in a nuanced way, the intersections of marginalisation and provides a platform for voices that have gone unheard for too long. The participatory research approach, involving students as co-researchers in three rural universities, is a testament to the book's commitment not just to telling stories about rural students, but also allowing them to narrate their own experiences, thereby challenging traditional hierarchies in academic research. This methodological choice says much about the book's ethos, emphasising the importance of hearing directly from those whose lives are the subject of study. It disrupts conventional top-down research paradigms and embodies a democratic and inclusive approach to academic inquiry. This aspect of the book is inspiring, highlighting the potential of participatory research to bridge the gap between academia and the communities it seeks to understand.

The adoption of a decolonial framework signifies a deep commitment to uncovering and addressing deep-rooted historical and systemic inequalities within educational systems. By engaging with concepts such as coloniality, decoloniality, and epistemic reciprocity, the book not only critiques existing power dynamics, but also advocates a re-imagining and restructuring of educational practices to promote inclusivity and equity, particularly for marginalised rural communities in the post-apartheid context. This analytical approach emphasises the importance of recognising and valuing diverse epistemologies and experiences in shaping more equitable educational landscapes. A notable aspect of this decolonial perspective is its recognition of the



potential for further development. It recognises that while progress has been made in promoting decolonisation in education, there is still room for growth and refinement of this framework.

The narratives in the book intricately combine individual struggles with active self-determination, portraying students from rural backgrounds as they confront educational barriers. These stories implicitly echo Yosso's idea of 'community cultural wealth' (Yosso, 2005: 69), showing how students draw on their particular strengths and cultural resources. This concept, though not directly quoted, permeates their stories of resilience, suggesting that their victories are not only personal triumphs but also affirmations of their collective cultural assets and identities. In this respect, a key concept addressed in the book, and which is deeply rooted in African philosophy, is Ubuntu. Ubuntu embodies the idea that *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (82) (a person is a person through persons), emphasising the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals within a community. While the relevance of Ubuntu in contemporary South Africa is a subject of criticism among scholars, it remains a powerful and guiding principle for the student co-researchers. Likewise, the book's metaphorical use of the Sankofa bird, native to Ghana, further underlines the importance of looking back in order to move forward strategically. This symbolises a critical reflection on Ubuntu, linking it to concepts of decoloniality, decolonisation and curricular justice. This reflective process aims to reposition and refine the application of Ubuntu in the context of higher education, aligning it with the goals of decolonisation and equitable curricular practices.

A critical exploration within the book is its concerns in the ability of higher education institutions to meet the needs of rural students. As one student aptly puts it, 'You have to change, the curriculum stays the same' (Timmis, et al., 2021: 117). This statement succinctly captures the sentiment that while students are required to adapt to the existing curriculum, the curriculum itself remains unchanged and fails to reflect the experiences, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of rural students. The text goes beyond simply highlighting this dissonance and delves into the question of whether universities are adequately equipped to address the particular challenges faced by these students. It critically examines existing support structures and their effectiveness in providing the necessary resources and guidance. The book also argues for the creation of more responsive and adaptable educational environments that can better cater for the diverse needs and backgrounds of rural students.

This book is the result of collaboration between British and South African universities and was funded by a British organisation. As such, this has added a layer of complexity to the book, highlighting the challenges of cross-continental research partnerships. This dynamic raised important questions about power, legitimacy, and equity in academic collaborations, particularly when navigated in the context of North-South relations. The book examines the implications of UK-based funding and offers a reflective stance on how academics can navigate and respond to these challenges, thereby contributing to a more equitable research landscape.

The book is a call to the educational community to engage more deeply with the realities of marginalised students. Its strength lies in its ability to combine rigorous research with a deep sense of empathy and respect for the subjects of its study. The book challenges readers to

consider their own positions and privileges in the academic ecosystem and to think critically about how research can be conducted in a way that empowers those it seeks to understand.

This book provides a valuable addition to the discourse on education, marginalisation, and social mobility. Its framework and analysis, combined with a ground-breaking methodological approach, makes a compelling case for the need to listen to and amplify the voices of rural students in higher education. An inspiring and coherent work, it sets a new standard for participatory research, offering a model that respects and values the contributions of all participants in the research process. Essential reading for anyone interested in the intersections of education, inequities and social change, this book offers both a deep understanding of the challenges faced by rural students in South Africa and a hopeful vision for a more inclusive and equitable future in higher education. Moreover, the book embarks on a mission that goes beyond academia. It constitutes a valuable part of the ongoing healing process, contributing to a more inclusive, just, and compassionate society.

Reviewed by

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