

Chapter 32

Language, Participation, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Research in Mqatsheni, South Africa

Constance Khupe

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This chapter is informed by findings from a science education interpretive study carried out in collaboration with an isiZulu-speaking community. Indigenous languages constitute intellectual and cultural resources that are important for local communities and for the society. The author argues for the recognition of indigenous languages as part of the call to decolonize research methodologies. The chapter positions research among indigenous peoples in the context of social justice and human rights, and shows how language fits in the transformation agenda. Drawing from findings from a research study carried out with a community in rural KwaZulu-Natal, the author asserts that the inclusion of indigenous languages in research frameworks contributes to meaningful participation, strengthens collaboration and facilitates the generation of authentic data.

INTRODUCTION

Research among indigenous people has not always been conducted following methodologies that recognise local languages, knowledges and cultural protocols. The recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and IKS research in South Africa and elsewhere in the world comes from calls for social justice, human rights and transformation. Smith (1999), Odora-Hoppers (2002), Louis (2007), Chilisa (2012) and Mertens, Cram and Chilisa (2013) have been among the leading advocates for research methods that are aligned with local cultural contexts – a shift from IKS research that is extractive, to one that is more participatory and that allows for balance of power between academics and participating communities. Languages play a crucial role in the oral transmission of indigenous people’s ways of knowing and ways

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of living. As South Africa and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa seek a place for IKS in education, health, and other service sectors, it is time the languages of the participating populations became drivers of appropriate research methodologies, and a central aspect of IKS research frameworks.

The role of language in research among indigenous communities is yet to be adequately explored in those African contexts where the home language of local population groups is not the conventional language of research. African languages have over centuries stored and orally passed on culture, knowledge and histories. Research suggests that communication in participants' home languages is an acknowledgement of local culture and protocols which provides space for authentic participation and the generation of authentic data (Khupe, 2014; Louis 2007). In post-colonial Africa, English and other languages of colonial origin are both privileged and dominant. They are the languages that enable access to opportunities, for instance, in education and in employment. The use of the home language of participants in research among indigenous people acknowledges those languages as valued and valid, and constitutes an expression of willingness to create parity in the research process between researchers and participating communities.

This chapter argues for IK research that recognises and is inclusive of the languages of indigenous people. The chapter is based on findings from science education research study carried out in and with the people of Mqatsheni, in KwaZulu-Natal province. The purpose of the study was to explore and document IK of the community so as to contribute towards school science and IK integration as is intended in the school national science curriculum. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What IK can be identified from interaction with participants in Mqatsheni?
2. What constitutes the worldview that informs the community's IK?
3. What aspects of the participants' knowledge could be included in school science, and how?

BACKGROUND

In the past, research among indigenous communities was conducted in the context of colonialism – where academic researchers assumed superiority over communities. Research purposes only suited the agenda of researchers, who, to a great extent, viewed participant communities as deficient in resources and in knowledge, and hence had little regard for their reality and possible life priorities. Both the processes and outcomes of the research studies portrayed the worldview of researchers at the expense of the communities that hosted them (Chilisa, 2012). By presuming authority over communities, researchers often disregarded cultural protocols, language and intellectual property rights of indigenous people (Odora-Hoppers, 2002). As a result, researchers would offer solutions to problems which, in many cases, proved both inappropriate and not appreciated, because, instead of empowering communities, the solutions at best created dependence, and at their worst drew distrust and even anger among indigenous peoples (Odora-Hoppers, 2002; Smith, 1999). Advocates for indigenous methodologies have continued the call for methods that are inclusive of, and are carried out in a manner that seeks to restore dignity through building respectful relationships with participants (Chilisa, 2012; Cram, Chilisa & Mertens, 2013).

In the South African context, the recognition of IK came at the dawn of democracy in 1994 and there has been a lot of research interest in this subject since then. However, a lot of the research still follows conventional, researcher-centred frameworks. A shift towards greater alignment of research purposes, methods and outcomes with community needs, interests and aspirations could make research in under-privileged communities more relevant.

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