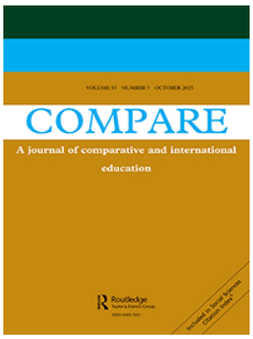

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Reconceptualising social (in)justice for research in rural South African schools: the roles of space, place and collective response

Rupert Higham [a], Martin Mills[b] and Liesel Ebersöhn[c]

[a]UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, IOE, London, UK; [b]School of Education, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia; [c]Centre for the Study of Resilience, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Many theories of social justice overlook the importance of space and place. In analysing education in the rural Global South, they do not capture the complexity and situatedness of issues such as cultural and linguistic hierarchies in the language of instruction, and rural flight and individual life trajectories. We propose a new theoretical framework for understanding (in)justice, developed through a project to improve children's literacy and wellbeing through community engagement in primary schools in rural South Africa. We argue that combining structural, agential and spatial perspectives and incorporating the indigenous theory of 'flocking', will help us better hear and understand the distinctive experiences of rural children and adults, and support their agency in addressing the injustices and opportunities they face.

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Social justice; rural South; whole-child education; student agency

Introduction

This paper is developed out of our collaboration on an ongoing project related to social justice: *Schools as Enabling Spaces to Improve Learning and Health-Related Quality of Life for Primary School Children in Rural Communities in South Africa*. The project aims to improve both children's academic achievement and their wellbeing, social relationships and health-related quality of life, alongside their families, school staff and wider communities in rural South Africa. The funders and half of the research team are from the Global North, the other half from the Global South. We acknowledge these gradients of development (Gruenewald 2003) when partnering globally for knowledge generation and social justice. Our geopolitical, linguistic, sociocultural and disciplinary diversity has revealed both limitations in our previous theorisation and a pluriversality (Mignolo 2013) of understandings that have led, for us at least, to new and valuable shared frameworks for understanding social justice in rural school contexts.

Our aim is to set out our thinking in developing a conceptual framework to support this project. For us, as with Connell (1993), social justice permeates all educational issues;

CONTACT Rupert Higham rupert.higham@ucl.ac.uk UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, IOE, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL, UK

however, members of the team come from different traditions. Some have been concerned with tackling structural injustices, while others have been more concerned with enhancing capabilities. Through dialogue, it became apparent that the context of our research demanded we engage with the concepts of space and place, especially in relation to the 'rural', and with the *collective* good. The outcome is the framework presented below; we hope it stimulates further consideration of how to support the flourishing of young people and their teachers in rural communities of the Global South.

We begin with a review of key concepts from two theorists with different perspectives on social justice, Nancy Fraser and Amartya Sen and relevant others with whose work we have previously engaged (see, for example, Higham 2021; Keddie and Mills 2019; Mills and McGregor 2014). We reflect on how each demonstrates both the power and limits of theories of structure and agency in the rural South African context. This leads us to support Roberts and Green's (2013) claim that these, like many other social justice theories, have demonstrated a 'geographical blindness' and a default metrocentric outlook by ignoring the dimensions of space and place. To address this, we draw on Freire and others' descriptions of social justice as responsive to distinctive structural and agential aspects of rurality. We also draw on Ebersöhn's (2019) theory of *flocking*, and work on creative responses (Unger 1997; Woods 2017), to give further depth and precision to theories of structure, agency and space in the South African context. We present these in a unified conceptual framework, then use it to analyse two social justice tensions we have identified in rural school settings in South Africa: language of instruction and rural migration. In conclusion, we suggest this eclectic model better enables locally situated, emergent, shared and changing understandings of, and responses to, social injustices.

Social justice, structure and agency

In this section, we explore how 'structure' and 'agency' (Giddens 1979) inform the proposed mechanisms of, and responses to, social injustice. We present them as distinctive analytical perspectives, recognising events both as structurally constrained and as agentially influenced by unique human beings. Drawing on the South African context, we seek to 'examine their *interplay* in order to account for the structuring and restructuring of social institutions such as education' (Archer and Morgan 2020, 184).

Fraser's structural perspective

Social justice theories which emphasise the importance of 'structure' generally identify groups (e.g. 'the ruling class', 'the patriarchy') and/or institutions (e.g. schools and the media) as being responsible for perpetuating injustice. This is evident in Fraser's concept of 'parity of participation' as a definition of justice which:

> . . . requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction. (Fraser 2009, 16)

In the current project, we are seeking to identify and work with teachers, school leadership and community members to dismantle the institutional obstacles preventing many in rural South Africa, especially children and young people, from achieving high-quality literacy, wellbeing and health outcomes. To better facilitate parity of participation in this context, Fraser would argue, we should separately examine what she calls economic, cultural and political justice, although as she acknowledges they are often intertwined. However, as her early work, notably in debates with Iris Marion Young (see Fraser 1995a, 1995b, 1997; I. Young 1997), demonstrated, different types of social justice can at times be incompatible – provoking what she called 'social justice dilemmas'. We highlight some of these in the discussion in the context of researching in rural South Africa.

Fraser's original framework consisted of economic and cultural justice (Fraser 1995a, 1995b). *Economic justice* is inhibited by what Fraser calls 'maldistribution' of wealth and human resources. In rural South Africa, while structural support exists to counter maldistribution – monetary incentives and pre-service practicums to encourage people to teach in rural schools (Masinire 2015) – the demand for teachers still far surpasses supply. Children studying subjects such as science and mathematics (Muremela et al. 2021) are often being taught by unqualified teachers; in geographic areas that are hard to staff, there are extremely high ratios of students to teachers also (Moletsane et al. 2015; Mphahlele and Christian Maphalala 2023). Similarly, students' academic outcomes are lower in rural communities than in more urban settings; post-apartheid, student performance in rural schooling has only improved slightly (Plessis Pierre and Mestry 2019). These structural injustices of maldistribution impact children living in families with low income, few job opportunities and limited availability of services, such as transport, sanitation, electricity, clinics, libraries and schools (Plessis Pierre and Mestry 2019). In Fraser's model, addressing these injustices would require a redistribution of funding so that the schools serving these children have the resources necessary to meet the educational needs of all the students. However, material poverty, alongside lack of resources such as qualified teachers, does not tell the whole story; many children in these communities experience diverse forms of discrimination.

Cultural justice is negatively affected by discrimination related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, language, age and size. Fraser calls this injustice *misrecognition*. For example, gender and sexuality, both perceived and actual, affect some children's and teachers' sense of safety at school (Bhana and Pattman 2009); race affects students' schooling outcomes; lack of accessibility within school facilities can make life very difficult for people with restricted mobility. Cultural injustice can also occur when children, teachers, school leaders and family members fail to see or hear themselves in the curriculum such as when local languages play a subservient role to national languages, or when local 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez 2005) are displaced by attempts to deliver prescriptive centralised understandings of 'powerful knowledge' (M. Young 2007).

Fraser (2007, 2009) later introduced a third dimension to her framework. *Political justice*, Fraser argues, requires people or groups to have a voice in relation to key decisions impacting upon them; when denied, the injustice of *misrepresentation* occurs. Examples in education include children (and/or their carers) having limited say in what is studied in classrooms, on school policies and rules, or in the conduct of disciplinary processes. Similarly, when teachers are required to implement mandated curricula and

school policies with scant opportunity to exercise their own professional judgement, they are being denied political justice.

Key decisions affecting many rural communities are made in distant urban areas. The South African policy framework does allow for local knowledge to be central in school-based decision-making on issues, including language of teaching and learning (Churr 2013). Parents, caregivers and prominent school-community members are elected as members of School Governing Bodies (SGBs), affording opportunities for people and groups to feel less alienated in schooling. However, as we explain later with the case of decisions regarding instructional language, studies in Western Cape (Bayat, Louw, and Rena 2014) and Kwazulu Natal (Pakade and Chilenga-Butao 2021) found that the limited relevant knowledge base of SGBs to govern schools collaboratively affected schools' contribution to the creation of a more socially just society.

While post-apartheid South Africa has instituted significant anti-discrimination legislation, its schools still reflect a range of injustices related to class, gender and race and lack of political representation on the part of teachers, parents and children (Ramabulana and Maluleke 2023). This is especially so for rural schools, where difficulties associated with cultural justice and economic justice often intersect: lack of resources, poor access to services and isolation from where education policy texts are developed (Ferreira and Ebersöhn 2012).

Fraser's structure-oriented framework highlights 'institutionalised obstacles' as injustices and enables the making of social justice claims – for example, to provide schools serving high-poverty communities with greater funding than those serving more middle-class communities, to set targets to boost the employment of teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds, and to create processes whereby students can become involved in curriculum decision-making processes. In South Africa, the new National Framework for Rural Education (Rural Education Directorate, 2022) provides pathways to removing structural obstacles to social justice. Tenets of *redistribution* are visible in the coordinated supportive services (education, health and social welfare) that aimed at enabling functional childhoods in rural spaces – despite those services being scarce and widely dispersed. *Recognition* is evident in its reframing choices on curriculum development, language of teaching and learning, as well as everyday practices at school, around local sociocultural identity – self-esteem and a sense of 'pride of place' – rather than shame at being identified as 'rural'. *Representation* is evident in the focus on the role of Ubuntu, the Afrocentric value of connectedness (Letseka 2013) in forging strong school-community partnerships.

For Fraser (1995a) there are two different ways in which injustices can be tackled: through affirmative and transformative remedies. Affirmative remedies seek to ameliorate the immediate pain of injustice. This could be, for example, through the deployment of welfare policies such as unemployment benefits to ease the impacts of maldistribution, or to support same-sex marriages by addressing misrecognition. However, while each of these approaches makes a difference to individuals' lives, in each instance, capitalism and heteronormativity are left intact – and will continue to perpetuate injustice. Transformative remedies are those that seek to undermine existing structures through new economic, cultural and political structures. This would include, for example, forms of socialism whereby all major public services (including schooling) would be in public hands without any form of privatisation which privileges and reproduces wealth. But for

many, the immediacy of oppression requires more urgent, practical and localised responses that may nonetheless go beyond the affirmative. Here we turn to Sen.

Sen's agential perspective

As with Fraser, Sen recognises institutionalised obstacles to social justice as *injustices*. However, his Capability Approach (CA) focuses on increasing the individual and collective *agency* of those directly affected as the primary way to overcome them. Sen describes capability as 'a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being' (1993, 30); what constitutes value can and must be shaped by people themselves 'rather than simply being shaped or instructed how to think' (Walker and Unterhalter 2007, 30). The CA, therefore, is committed to developing 'the choice, ability and opportunity people have to pursue their aspirations' (Frediani, Clark, and Biggeri 2019, 4) by focusing on the local conditions, culture, relationships and resources that enable them to respond to the challenges they face. In doing so, the CA reinterprets the primary role of organisations with social justice aims as enabling this ground-up process, and only secondarily on improvements as indicated by top-down, standardised and comparable outcomes, such as GDP and academic grades, set and monitored by outside agencies. Sen takes issue with what he calls 'transcendental approaches' to social justices based on the pursuit of an ideal social state:

> . . . the greatest relevance of the idea of justice lies in the identification of patent injustice, on which reasoned agreement is possible, rather than in the derivation of some extant formula for how the world should be precisely run. (Sen 1999, 287)

This concise quotation somewhat caricatures the positions of theorists such as Fraser, who present no such precise formula; yet it usefully warns structural theorists against presuming that their own frameworks for achieving social justice should necessarily guide ground-level interpretations and responses.

Sen's notion of 'patent injustice' recognises that it is usually easier and less controversial to identify and agree that something in society is unjust, than to agree on what would constitute a just alternative. Gotoh and Dumouchel (2009) point out that the word 'patent' can itself be critiqued as smuggling in external, pre-conceived ideals in the form of values and/or criteria presumed to be self-evident rather than requiring justification. They respond by distinguishing Sen's notion of 'basic capability' (1979, 367), understood as a means of subsistence, as much easier to identify as deficient than the more expansive notion of 'best capability', relating to freedom of definition and choice of values and actions. However, we argue that this implicitly prioritises a material focus on externally defined 'basic capabilities' that, while potentially useful for crisis management – or 'affirmative' responses in Fraser's terms – threatens to deprioritise participant agency with respect to more complex systemic injustices that must be addressed to achieve lasting change. Instead, we understand 'patent' as relating to the immediate, informed judgement of those who experience or witness injustice, but without limiting its scope of action.

Nussbaum (2000) explores an additional difficulty for the CA: that people's sense of what is desirable and possible can be substantially shaped by their material and cultural contexts, so that marginalised groups develop 'adaptive

preferences' (31) that can accommodate their lower status and build on limitations to their ambitions (Walker and Unterhalter 2007). Sen recognised this danger of loss of agency through social conditioning or 'persistent forms of exploitation and injustice' (Frediani, Clark, and Biggeri 2019, 15). His response was to assert that people have the capacity to see beyond their immediate circumstances and constraints when encouraged to do so from a more generalised stance of critical distance. Building on his work, Clark, Biggeri, and Apsan Frediani (2019) and Biggeri et al. (2006) have sought to demonstrate empirically that participatory approaches to exploring values and preferences, such as in thinking through what constitutes poverty across multiple contexts in South Africa, enable people to identify what constitutes a good life and what they most require to achieve it (see Clark and Qizilbash 2008).

In asserting people's right to work towards distinctive visions of value at a local level, Sen emphasises the vital role of education in broadening horizons, enabling dialogue and debate, building critical literacy and enabling collective organisation. As Walker and Unterhalter explain:

> The CA foregrounds the basic heterogeneity of human beings as a fundamental aspect of educational equality and connects individual biographies and social and collective arrangements. (2007, 9)

Sen further challenges Fraser's structural model by arguing that equalising resources 'need not equalise the substantive freedoms enjoyed by different persons, since there can be significant variations in the conversion of resources and primary goods into freedoms' (1992, 33). He implies that the provision of resources to address maldistribution should not circumvent the bottom-up processes whereby people decide what is of value and what they will need to enable it. Moloi (2019) takes this position further in a critical reflection on the recent history and performance of the South African education system, which adopts a position equally scathing of union protectionism as it is of policymakers:

> The state in dysfunctional schools cannot be remedied by spending more money on education. Educators and learners should rather be empowered to liberate themselves from a dehumanising condition. (2019, S6)

Moloi here argues that self-liberation requires teachers to build localised, de-colonial and anti-racist forms of critical theory and epistemology (2019). However, we suggest this position risks rejecting the potential utility of additional resources for educators who may see themselves as lacking spaces and opportunities to begin such work.

Cilliers and Bloch (2018), in their ethnographic case study of a peri-urban settlement in Potchefstroom, South Africa, suggest that a middle way may be possible in negotiating resources. The community, having initially been denied the right to provision of water, began to construct their own system – thus changing the facts on the ground, leading to talks and eventual provision from local government. They call it an 'insurgent claim to citizenship . . . not only to physical life, but to political life' (2018, 37), whereby they seek to lead change and garner more governmental support on their own terms, building collective agency in the process.

In summary, we suggest that the CA's focus on strengthening ownership of the processes and directions of tackling injustice partially challenges, but can be reconciled

with, Fraser's demands for redistribution, recognition and representation. The CA's emphasis on the diversity and distinctiveness of people and their contexts, however, requires us to undertake a deeper exploration of the crucial concepts of space and place.

Space and place as a social justice consideration

Since the 1970s, critical theorists in Geography, such as Harvey and Soja, have used the concept 'spatiality of justice' to help us 'make better theoretical and practical sense of how social justice is created, maintained and brought into question' (Soja 2013, 2). Green and Letts (2007), located in Australia, have argued that in education mainstream social justice theories have been 'geographically blind' due to their failure to engage with the concept of space, which at the time they considered to be 'one of the most under-examined concepts in educational theory and practice' (58). For example, they argue that the Australian school system ' . . . was conceived and organised on the basis of what can be called a *metro-centric* model' (59), standardised around both urban administrative education structures and the curriculum of wealthy urban schools. Within this model, the challenge of rural education was to overcome the 'problem' of distance and the 'threat' of difference. This dimension, which Soja terms 'spatial justice', deepens our structural analysis of injustice.

However, before we move into the ways in which geography matters in terms of social justice, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by 'rural'. There are many instrumentalist definitions, including relative distance from cities and large urban areas, population size and industry (usually agriculture). This view is often found in educational research (see Pini and Mills 2015) and is at times useful for determining the needs of a community. However, as with Pini, Moletsane, and Mills (2014, 455), we see rurality as 'socially constructed, hybrid, imagined, relational, heterogeneous, dynamic and contested'. As such, we agree with Halfacree (2017, 34) that 'the quest for any single, all-embracing definition of the rural is neither desirable nor feasible'. Consequently, we consider the material, cultural and political implications of being positioned as 'rural'.

Rural communities in many locations suffer from maldistribution. For example, Nordberg (2020) sets out the differences between transport, housing and services available in rural and urban communities in Finland. Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012) note that, given the frequency and intensity of challenges in rural spaces – especially the distance to resources – teachers in South African rural schools take longer and need to navigate more obstacles than their urban counterparts in providing support to students.

Roberts and Green (2013) also draw on the Australian context to exemplify what Fraser calls misrecognition. The 'Bush myth', they argue, superficially glorifies rural areas as characterising the rugged, creative individualism of Australian culture, while also representing both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who live in them as 'backward' and anachronistic. They argue that such injustices usually homogenise the rural and frame it as in deficit to the urban. Nordberg (2020) also highlights the misrepresentation of rural communities that fuels maldistribution, detailing the historical move towards centralisation of political power in the hands of Finland's urban majorities. He advocates recognising rural misrepresentation through democratic and bureaucratic structures as spatial injustice, and prioritising the delegation of authority back to rural areas. However, romanticising the rural can be equally problematic; as

Cutler (2023) indicates, being gay in a rural community in many locations brings with it challenges not necessarily faced in more urban areas.

The literature above demonstrates how a spatial justice perspective can strengthen our understanding of how structural injustices work. It can also, we argue, enrich our understanding of agency by focusing more precisely on the desires, needs and material constraints of people in distinct rural communities. The liberatory education theory and practice of Paolo Freire is helpful here:

> . . .one cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. (Freire 1970, 84)

Freire's breakthrough educational work was in rural Brazil, where he helped agricultural workers become literate in 45 days through a 'problem-posing' methodology that came to be known as *conscientization*.[1] It started with participants describing their experience of their communities in their own words, then writing them down, thus acquiring written language through a process of analysis and action for change (Elias 1975). Freire's explicit framing of this approach, with its focus on the ownership and use of land, in the language of cultural and political revolution saw his approach quashed in Brazil and more widely marginalised as unrealistic, subversive or both. The continuing global trend towards urbanisation of resources, culture and political power makes revolutionary approaches such as Freire's, regardless of their efficacy, ever less likely to be viable in rural communities.

Sen's Capability Approach offers a less confrontational theoretical framework – one of the equitable economic development through increased human agency – while sharing three of Freire's radical premises. First, that people, solely by virtue of their humanity, are entitled to make collective decisions about the life, values and growth of their communities. Secondly, that they already have the capacity to make such decisions when the opportunities are presented (Sen 1993). Thirdly, as Freire's work demonstrates, this applies equally to rural communities who need not and should not be framed as deficient and subservient by urban-centric politics and cultures. The CA retains a focus on what Freire termed 'gain[ing] confidence and abilities to alter unjust conditions and structures' (1997, xi) by offering a more workable model for amplifying rural communities' rights and demands for participation, and for enabling ground-up, agential activity towards desired futures. Consequently, Frediani, Clark, and Biggeri (2019) have advocated methods that embed CA into research methodologies such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers 1994) to ensure that appeals to agency and participation are not tokenistic or circumscribed by aims and metrics designed in and for urban contexts.

Distinguishing 'space' and 'place'

A further useful development of the spatial justice perspective in education is the distinction between *space* and *place*. Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane (2008) denote space as the physical presence in a setting and, citing Budge, denote place as ' . . . connectedness; development of an identity culture, interdependence on land, spirituality, ideology and politics, as well as activism and engagement' (Budge 2003 *in* Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane 2008, 100). Similarly, in

a comparative study of three urban schools in the UK, US and South Africa, K. Riley (2013) argues that schools become *places* through being inflected with positive relationships based on mutual recognition and respect across diversity, rooted in their community contexts; the feelings of safety, being recognised and being valued in such places constitute 'belonging'. Drawing on extensive evidence from participatory research in primary schools in South Africa, US and the UK, Riley (2022) claims that belonging is emotionally foundational for children's and adults' agency, both in the immediate school context and beyond, since without it they feel alienated and powerless. *Space*, therefore, encapsulates the combined significance of geographical/cultural/political factors on shared perceptions, judgements and actions; this complements Fraser's threefold typology of injustices. By contrast, *place* is a situated, relational and affective concept rooted to cultural identity that enriches our use of Sen's concept of the capacity for meaningful action.

Nonideal and locally situated perspectives on tackling injustice

The prospect of transforming the economic, cultural and political systems to create a new world where all participate as 'peers in social life' is overwhelming and hard to imagine becoming reality. While we value utopian thinking and projects designed to build socially just futures (Levitas 2013; Wright 2020), we also acknowledge Sen's (2009) argument that injustice is easier to define, recognise and respond to than justice. For example, when we observe children in rural communities with worse health outcomes and lower educational achievement levels than their city counterparts, we know that injustice is occurring; yet there are unlikely to be shared conceptualisations, and agreement on the realisation, of concrete visions of social justice among all relevant parties in the short to medium term. In such situations, it is imperative to tackle the immediate effects, partly in ways that in Fraser's (1997) terms would be affirmative, not transformative. This accords with what Robeyns terms 'nonideal theory':

> . . . in cases in which we are not in a fully just society, we need [nonideal] theory to guide us for two important tasks: first to be able to make comparisons between different social states and evaluate which one is more just than the other; and, second, to guide our actions in order to move closer towards the ideals of society. (Robeyns 2008, 346)

We suggest that this focus on social justice theory as guidance for thoughtful, timely action rather than as a template or destination can overcome the challenge to local agency posed by earlier distinction between 'basic' and 'best' capabilities. Nonideal theory better aligns with Sen's description of human rights: 'not as laws, but as a *discipline* which creates ethical understandings that act as 'grounds for law, almost "laws in waiting"' (Sen 2005, 2918). It similarly presents social justice as a *project* of moral, strategic, situated, partial and provisional responses to experienced injustices; the engagement itself develops both new shared values and directions, and the capacity of local people to act on them.

We also accept Unger's recognition that humans, while 'context-shaped', are disposed to be 'context-transcending' through their unique perspectives, social and moral imagination, and capacity for creative disruption of the *status quo* (Unger 2004, 14). This research project starts from the premise that rural schools in South Africa can be fertile spaces for collective, creative

responses to community experiences of injustice even though the conditions of 'basic capability' may be seen as not being met. To better understand how this can happen, we now draw on relevant theory that has emerged from southern Africa.

In *Flocking Together* (2019), Ebersöhn sets out a nonideal theory of collective response to injustice developed in rural and urban southern Africa, underpinned by extensive research within a Participatory Reflection and Action methodology (Chambers 2010). Flocking is a structural and agential response to hardship and structural injustice that responds to collective distress by (i) redistributing (scarce) resources more equally; (ii) using indigenous knowledge to respond to distress and promote collective wellbeing; and (iii) making the most of democratic representation by leveraging existing relationships and their associated resources to mediate the effects of hardship. In this way, flocking is both place-based and agential, instantiating Afrocentric values, beliefs and practices. It is not an outsider-led 'rescuing' initiative (which may be discarded once donor funds or research interest are withdrawn), but an insider-led normative mechanism to improve quality of life for a majority:

> The Ubuntu cultural perspective predicts a collectivist formation that gives a blueprint for flocking together; to gather to know about need; to cluster to share mutual resources. As the need for support increases, so the flock of connectedness expands to draw in additional people with their associated resources. (Ebersöhn 2019, 2)

Relationship Resourced Resilience theory (Ebersöhn 2019) compares adaptive capability to a honeycomb (see Figure 1): cells of social resources (collective groups, socio-

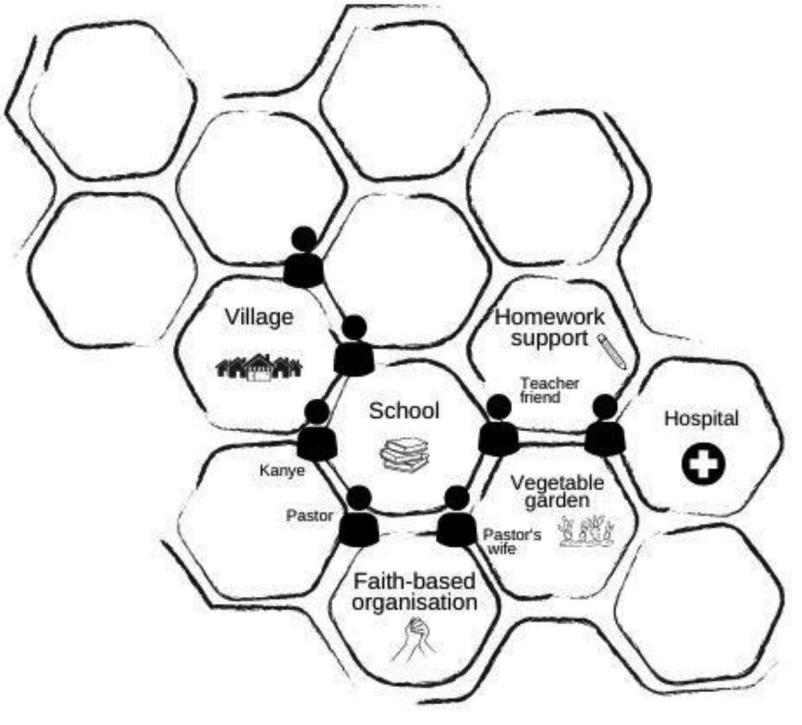

Figure 1. The honeycomb structure of social resources described by relationship resourced resilience theory (Ebersöhn 2019).

cultural values, beliefs and practices, emotional support, economic), connected and reinforced through its tightly-knit relationship-structure and capable of rapid local responses to hardships through an adaptive cultural practice of sharing. It stresses the need to strengthen such systems within dynamic rural contexts, informing regional and national strategies. We see rural schools as critical spaces in these contexts, both as connecting structures and enablers of individual and collective agency.

Presenting and testing our conceptual framework

Figure 2 captures the key elements of the conceptual framework outlined in this article, and represents their relationship to each other and the central issue of the response to social injustice. Inevitably, with simplification comes a loss of detail. However, we hope it demonstrates how the divergence between structural and agentic perspectives might be bridged and enhanced by the concepts of space and place, and of creative emergence.

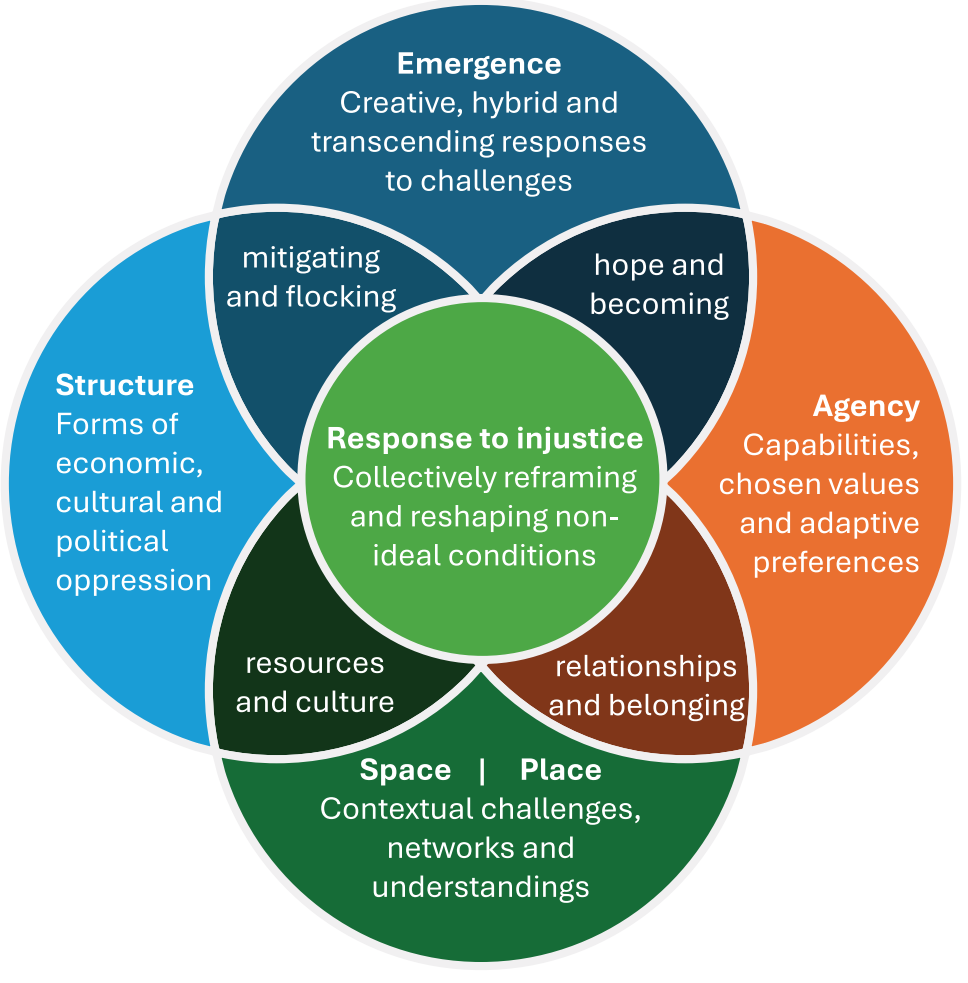

Figure 2. A proposed conceptual framework for understnading the response to injustice.

Both of these have elements that are more structure-aligned (e.g. resources and mitigation) and agency-aligned (e.g. hope and belonging). Although rooted in theory, the framework presents an action-oriented understanding of social injustice.

Below, we test the value of this conceptual framework by using it to reinterpret two social justice tensions identified in rural school communities in South Africa, highlighting how this shapes our research intentions.

In our project's context, the material, cultural and political inequalities are evident: the North-West province has been categorised as a space of extreme poverty since 1996, with multidimensional poverty being higher in rural areas (World Bank Group 2018). Census data show larger class sizes, and much higher use of school nutrition programmes, than the national average (Department of Basic Education 2024; Hlalele 2014). Challenges associated with poor facilities, high school fees, a lack of books, teacher absenteeism, a lack of teachers, poor quality of teaching and teacher strikes, are comparable to other provinces (Department of Basic Education 2024). Conducting ethical research in such communities requires recognition of the distinctive forms of both oppression (e.g. poverty and racial discrimination), and value (Ebersöhn 2019; Sen 2009) that constrain and enable people's well-being. Urban-based researchers must acknowledge and negate the dangers of seeking to 'rescue' those living in rural areas (Roberts and Green 2013, 766), thereby serving to compound the lack of rural voices in their own solutions to injustice, and to overlook the many rural places where other approaches are already improving quality of life.

Tackling injustice: linguistic and cultural hierarchy

In many rural provinces worldwide, people speak a local language not widely used in governance or the media; in North West South Africa, this is Setswana. Determining the language of instruction often provokes social justice tensions. The South African language-in-education policy stipulates the use of home language for teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase (Grades *R*-3) (Department of Basic Education 2017). However, a commitment to social mobility and fears about geographical reach has led to politicians privileging colonial languages and neglecting African languages (Kretzer and Kaschula 2020). Further, while parents, caregivers and local community leaders can determine the language of teaching and learning in schools via elected SGBs (Churr 2013), most opt out 'their' school from using a local language – even when predominantly spoken by teachers and students. Such decisions often stem from the economic justice claim that social mobility is dependent on learning in English (Churr 2013). However, a failure to promote local language constructs local cultures as deficient, privileges the already dominant and places an additional burden on local language speakers; as such, it is an act of cultural injustice. Counterevidence on the achievement and progress benefits of collaborative linguistic diversity models, including translanguaging (Vogel and García 2021), is less prominent in many of the discourses available to SGB members.

For our project, our developing understanding of social injustice requires us to elicit local people's varied perceptions of the value of their language and culture. Participatory methods such as photovoice-led focus groups enable dilemmas to emerge and be discussed from multiple perspectives, such as choice of teaching language. We intend to co-create an approach to literacy education that promotes children's discussion of

ways in which they, and their families and friends, negotiate challenges, culminating in children co-authoring stories about their lives. Here, we will draw on the success of the Nal'ibali Reading Clubs in promoting reading for pleasure and socio-emotional development (Cilliers and Bloch 2018), but also reposition children as writers as well as readers, and as agents in their localities.

We argue that these responses to injustice, agreed through systemic community dialogue and enabled in part through research and government funds, represent new, practical and emergent solutions to the dilemmas of linguistic hierarchy. They draw on the richness and diversity of local languages and cultures without retreating to parochialism or isolationism. They weaken the structural barriers of maldistribution (access to publishing) and misrecognition (undervaluation of local language) in a way that is agential, place-based and creative.

Tackling injustice: 'Should I stay or should I go?'

Young people in rural communities are often represented as facing a stark choice between staying in their home communities – often with very limited prospects for good paid work – or moving to the urban fringe, leaving family and community behind in the hope of better employment prospects and wider life experience. In the South African context, however, Smit (1998) argues that a rural-urban continuum better denotes understandings of rurality, where mothers and fathers may work in urban spaces to financially support their children in rural spaces, cared for by extended families. The rural thus constitutes both a place to escape to improve one's standing in society, and a haven, a custodian of identity, to return to for a sense of belonging. At the same time, the way in which people in rural places maintain quality of life – the depth of social ties and the capacity to share material resources in rural communities that can nourish those who live in them – are not conventionally measured, and therefore often ignored (Ebersöhn 2019). The lived perspective of the rural-urban continuum (Smit 1998) is that staying in a rural community or moving to the city is not an either-or choice; many South Africans with origins in rural villages traverse the economic and cultural benefits of employment in rural spaces and a *heimat*, or homeland, in a rural space. However, this is a tension not often faced by those with urban origins, and there are specific injustices related to space that rural young people face.

A further tension is that the focus of the current educational system in South Africa is, as elsewhere, largely on individual examination performance, which represents a successful transition to adulthood as a personal achievement marked by subsequent financial independence, generally recognised through income. This often requires moving to urban areas, thereby denying many communities of key workers with ties to the local community in the health, education and construction sectors. However, this does not mean that these young people are pulled away fully from communities. For example, the practice of Black Tax (Carpenter and Phaswana 2021; Magubane 2017) – the responsibility to financially support extended family – means that young adults retain strong collective bonds based on sociocultural identities. Young people share money they earn with an extended kinship group, and are thus pulled towards places (often urban) of employment, as well as towards places of family bonds and economic and social support. We again see the social justice

dilemmas facing schooling: should it have as its focus supporting the individual to maximise their financial opportunities – or enhancing the well-being of the local community? The complex reality above, we argue, is better understood using the Capability Approach to frame young people's emergent and flexible senses of identity and agency.

In our current project, we intend to use photovoice to address these complex issues and the dilemmas they create, ensuring that local participants are represented through their experiences and in providing new and innovative solutions. We already know from Ebersöhn's (2019) theory of flocking that within local communities in South Africa individuals are pragmatic in responding to local injustices. For example, in relation to hunger – an insidious reality of relentless structural injustices and rural and urban spaces – people regularly work together to mobilise what they have available (land, labour, agricultural knowledge, time, seeds, access to village markets) to cultivate crops which they can share and/or sell to enhance community well-being. Through representation, our research will seek to elicit new and innovative (to us) remedies to these dilemmas of maldistribution and misrecognition.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have sought to illustrate how existing theories do not adequately provide a theoretical framework for understanding educational injustices in the context of rural South Africa. Exploring the two tensions above through both our presented conceptual framework, and a focus on policy, culture and practice in South Africa has highlighted contrasting perspectives that demonstrate how *space* and *place* matter.

While Setswana is an official national language of South Africa, its limited use in schools in the North West appears to be a clear case, in Fraser's terms, of misrecognition and misrepresentation of its speakers in rural areas: children and adults may well come to believe that learning in a colonial language is necessary to progress successfully in education and work, and to increase their political influence. Yet the situation on the ground is in some ways the reverse of what a generic social justice analysis would predict. Structurally, the government's language-in-education policy actively encourages the use of Indigenous languages, recognising and representing their value at the central level; agentially, locally elected School Governing Bodies have the devolved power to denote the language of instruction. Despite this, SGBs routinely override government recommendations by stipulating the use of English. Structure and agency frameworks are adaptable enough to suggest reasons for this apparent contradiction: SDG members' long experience of linguistic hierarchy prior to the current language policies; lack of collective confidence in the possibility of leading change; their lack of access to information and examples of powerful alternatives, scarcity of human resources and capacity to adapt and implement them. But these explanations are not complete, and do not readily present solutions. While Sen advocates participatory appraisal methods to elicit and develop community values and aims, the developing approach of our current project is more closely aligned with Freire: reframing literacy education as an agential exploration of lived experiences and challenges to be addressed locally

and globally. This conceptualises rural schools as *places* of belonging, shared identity development and emergent, agentic purpose.

The 'stay or go' tension also looks very different in the context of North West South Africa. Research on Black Tax suggests deep and long-established patterns of human and monetary movement between rural and urban spaces. Here, we conceptualise the school as a *space*: a community resource hub, linking children's learning to their individual and shared needs and ambitions in the pursuit of greater social justice.

Our project will draw on structural and agential perspectives, refined through the lenses of space and place, to test our non-ideal theory of social *injustices* by focusing on enabling agential, situated responses in rural communities. Our analysis above has identified two further lenses that contribute to our understanding and operationalisation of this complex conceptual framework. The first is the Afrocentric lens of 'flocking' as a rural practice: rooted culturally in Ubuntu, and historically in maldistribution, misrecognition and misrepresentation, it focuses on pragmatic solutions that make use of what is available to assist one another without chronic dependence on unreliable outside assistance (Ebersöhn 2019). The second lens highlights the emergent, spirited creativity of unique human beings in response to challenge. Woods (2017) describes this as 'developmental justice', in complementary contrast to social justice theory's focus on suffering and inequality:

> The other side of the coin centres on humanistic potential, the positive and optimistic view of humanity, in which each person carries seeds of growth, creativity, and goodness . . . the vital, animating summons of social justice. (322)

Our hybrid conceptual framework recognises schools in the rural global South as having the potential to be what Unger calls 'formative contexts', fostering children's and adults' capacity to imagine and work towards more just ways of living. It helps to identify generative and enabling factors in tackling social injustice: first, to increase resilience and find practical solutions to more immediate problems; and secondly, to reshape the underlying dispositions, agency and imaginative scope of children and adults in rural areas. We intend to reconcile our framework with emerging data from the project in due course.

Note

1. Conscientization is ' . . . the process in which men [sic], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives, and of their capacity to transform that reality through action upon it' (Freire 1970, 221–22).

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ORCID

Rupert Higham http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9363-4269

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