Narratives of agency: the experiences of Braille literacy practitioners in the Kha Ri Gude South African Mass Literacy Campaign

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In this article, we locate the *Kha Ri Gude* South African Mass Literacy Campaign within the context of the problem of illiteracy and exclusion in South Africa, while concentrating on various post-apartheid initiatives designed to give visually challenged adults the opportunity to become literate. We shall provide a detailed account of focus group sessions organised in 2012; the aim of these sessions was to explore the experiences of blind literacy practitioners who were charged with the supervision and coordination of Braille literacy classes for blind, illiterate adults. We suggest that the way the practitioners expressed what being involved in the Campaign meant for them for an extended period (three years or more) gives us a glimpse of how, through their roles as literacy organisers, they were able to engender agency among blind adult literacy learners and themselves.

Keywords: Kha Ri Gude Literacy Campaign; adult literacy; South Africa; inclusion; human agency; quality of life of blind adults; focus groups; (re)construction of stories

Introduction

The South African Constitution recognises the right of persons with disabilities to be identified as equal citizens of South Africa, and expressly prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability (1996, chap. 2). However, persons with disabilities continue to experience barriers to accessing certain essential services, including education (Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities 2012, 3). The plight of the blind in accessing education had been seriously hampered in South Africa prior to 1994 because the apartheid schooling system failed to provide optimal learning opportunities for the disabled in general, and the blind in particular.[1] In present-day South Africa, it is recognised that, when barriers to their inclusion are removed, persons with disabilities are able to participate fully in societal life (Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities 2012, 3).

South Africa was one of the first countries to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007. The Convention (article 24) refers specifically to the rights of the disabled to education and states that persons with disabilities should be guaranteed the right to inclusive education at all levels, regardless

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of age, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity. The Convention further states that persons with disabilities should

(1) be granted free and compulsory primary and secondary education;
(2) have access to general tertiary education, vocational training, *adult education and lifelong learning (our italics)*; and
(3) receive the necessary support to ensure effective education.

As part of the post-apartheid programme for redress, the Kha Ri Gude Literacy Campaign was established in 2008 to address the problem of illiteracy in South Africa. In accordance with the South African Constitution and the emergent discourses on the rights of persons with disabilities, the Campaign took a definite inclusive stance in developing its strategy for providing literacy in Braille and also basic orientation and mobility skills for blind, illiterate adults. The Campaign is based on the recruitment, training and deployment of teachers, including teachers who themselves are disabled, to teach literacy and numeracy to blind adult learners.

The dearth of information on literacy programmes catering for adults with disabilities

Groce and Bakhshi point out that there is a significant lack of published information regarding the provision of adult literacy education to disabled adults in developing countries. They indicate that the literature offers 'few examples of discussion of how adults with disability have been included in general literacy programmes, nor discussion of the fact that adults with disabilities may present specific educational demands within such programmes' (2011, 1160). They note that in their extensive literature search, they did find some case studies describing 'local initiatives to provide literacy skills to disabled adults', but that these tended to be small, poorly funded programmes that were not linked to larger, more sustained literacy initiatives (2011, 1158). Nevertheless, despite the relative dearth of literature, they were able to identify recent initiatives 'at providing literacy outreach to specific disabled populations', and they referred specifically to the Kha Ri Gude Campaign in South Africa, which they describe as follows:

> … in 2008, the government of South Africa launched the Kha Ri Gude Campaign to foster literacy for 4.7 illiterate South Africans, focusing on illiterate adults from groups that have traditionally not been reached well by standard education. Among the targeted groups, disabled citizens have specifically been identified, with 60 sign language teachers included in the initial group of educators, the development of Brailled materials and further plans for outreach efforts to accommodate adults with a range of disabilities (Kha Ri Gude Literacy Campaign 2008, as cited in Groce and Bakhshi 2011, 1159).

Groce and Bakhshi regard the significance of the Kha Ri Gude Campaign as pointing to the promise held by 'larger scale initiatives' (such as this Campaign), and as offering a possible exemplar to the global community of how 'literacy initiatives for disabled adults can be incorporated into large scale literacy campaigns' (2011, 1159). They suggest that 'the results of these efforts should be followed closely by the global disability community' (2011, 1159). Following Groce and Bakhshi's further plea for research to 'identify innovative and inclusive approaches to providing basic literacy skills both as part of general literacy campaigns as well as through disability-specific adult programmes' (2011, 1166), the research as reported upon here offers an

account of how the Kha Ri Gude Campaign as a large-scale programme opens possibilities for the inclusion of blind illiterate adults. This article also provides an account of what could be called the 'social work' involved in making the Campaign workable at the level of practice.

As Groce and Bakhshi (2011) argue, there has been a lack in both the practice of, and research around, literacy provision for people with disabilities. In our article, we try to address this gap in the literature by providing a story, based on practitioners' accounts, of the operation of the Kha Ri Gude Campaign, concentrating on how it made (and is continuing to make) provision for blind illiterate adults. It should be noted that the South Africa Campaign was influenced by the adult literacy campaign in Venezuela (which was supported by Cuba). The Venezuelan campaign specifically focused on adults with disability, and particularly on adults who were visually impaired. Nevertheless, research on the effectiveness of the Venezuelan campaign in reaching its target populations has been inconclusive (Ortega and Rodríguez 2008).

In this article, we go into some depth in offering an account of the Kha Ri Gude initiative 'from within', that is, in terms of the self-conceptions of the key practitioners who were participants in activating the processes designed to cater for illiterate blind adults. Our research questions were: how did these practitioners experience their work within the Campaign? And what did they believe were the impacts of their work? Before we proceed with this, we offer some contextual background to the Campaign as a whole. Thereafter we indicate how our research forms part of a larger research project assessing the impact of the Campaign. We then provide an exposition of how we organised this part of the research (with blind supervisors/coordinators), how we analysed and interpreted the focus group discussions and how we consider the significance of the 'results'. But to offer some idea of our manner of theorising, we wish to first clarify the status that we give to the theoretical concept of 'agency', and how this relates to the expressions of the focus group participants.

The concept of agency

The concept of agency – which is posited in this article to enable us to appreciate how social systems are ultimately re-produced through social processes (or what can be called 'social work') – is a theoretical construct that cannot be simply 'read off' from the way in which focus group participants spoke about their experiences. Here we support Bendasolli's (2013) account of the leaps that are made when deciding to apply any concept, which he argues are more akin to abduction than to (analytic) induction. The process is abductive in that, in order to make sense of the data, certain concepts become posited, and this involves what he calls a 'reconstruction process' (paragraph 41). That is, the abductive process of invoking (and/or reformulating various concepts) involves a choice/judgement that is not considered to be induced from the data, but is more a matter of re-positioning the data to arrive at what are hoped to be insightful statements. This amounts to trying to explain the data with reference to the concept that is invoked. (See also Romm 2013a for an elucidation of abductive or retroductive reasoning as seen from a constructivist perspective; and see Midgley 2011, 7, for an exposition of the various ways in which one can define the concept of agency and its theoretical and practical implications.)

The concept of agency as used here serves not only to explain or illuminate parts of the testimonies of the focus group participants, but to foreground the possibility that this more or less implicit self-understanding of participants *can be rendered more explicit* for

them and for others in the Campaign (and in other similar endeavours). The concept's theoretical significance is thus not without practical import. It is noteworthy that Dr Obert Maguvhe (Director of Special Needs for the Campaign), when seeing this article in draft form, commented that our focus on the revelations of the practitioners in terms of the concept of agency is 'relevant for improving mass literacy practice for the blind and partially sighted' (personal ongoing communication, 2013). He felt that, by stressing this, the article points to certain intervention possibilities that can be used in the training of supervisors and coordinators (by focusing on their role as change agents).

Our thematising of the concept of agency in our account is also linked to a specific paradigmatic orientation that can be said to underlie the research. In this regard, we follow a constructivist argument which, at the same time, emphasises the need to take into account how research itself can make a difference to the unfolding of social outcomes (cf. Romm 1997a, 2001, 2002, 2010, 2011, 2013a; McKay and Romm 2008; Mertens 2010; Hsiung 2012).[2] In embracing such a position, we understand that social realities are constructed by participants together with researchers engaging with these participants in processes of social interaction. As Romm further elucidates, 'researchers are then tasked to take into account the manner in which research framings can . . . [affect] the way in which participants and wider audiences envisage social life' (2013b, 665). In other words, theoretical directions that are brought to bear in research processes (for example, as starting points to pose guiding questions for participants to think about, as well as to interpret their stated expressions) are recognised as carrying with them certain social consequences (as possibilities for action that can become envisaged). This recognition on our part informed our way of organising the focus group sessions and our analysis of, and thoughts on, the 'results' of these sessions.

Some contextual background to the Campaign

The provision of literacy as a development goal in South Africa

Since 1994, the post-apartheid South African government has promulgated a suite of policies and legislative frameworks to support adult basic education and affirm its role in the process of social change and development. There has been an acceptance that adult literacy and basic education are essential for development because they enable adults to expand their life choices; this is particularly so for those who have had no or little basic schooling. Literacy is regarded as the foundation for justice and equality and as contributing to the core values embodied in the (1996) South African Constitution (McKay 2007, 285). McKay (2012a, 2012b) points out that post-1994 policies were intended to bring about a new dispensation in which redress and the prohibition of all forms of discrimination across the country's institutions – including discrimination on the grounds of disability, health status, gender, race categorisation and geographical location – would be paramount. Surty (2012, 2) states, similarly, that the post-1994 policies needed to deal with all forms of division emanate from our divided past – not least through the system of education.

The Kha Ri Gude South African Mass Literacy Campaign was launched in 2008 against this backdrop; its intention was to address the legacy of apartheid and the backlogs of illiteracy. It had as part of its plan, *inter alia*, a definite focus on disabled adults who, as children, had been denied basic education/schooling as well as those adults who had developed visual challenges in later life and who needed to become literate in Braille (Ministerial Committee on Literacy 2007, 18).[3]

Within the Campaign, the provision of literacy for the visually impaired and the blind was conceptualised not as an 'add-on', but as core to the planning and budget, taking into account the specialised equipment[4] needed and the expensive time, opportunity and accessibility costs of providing tuition for the blind. To cater for the needs of the blind learners, the Campaign draws upon the community of blind adults who are Braille literate – particularly those who are unemployed – and recruits and trains these adults so that they can teach Braille literacy to illiterate blind adults.[5] Across the whole Campaign, each 'volunteer educator' (VE) receives a monthly stipend for his or her contribution.[6] The VEs are supported by supervisors, whose primary role is to train them and to motivate them and their learners; the coordinator's task is primarily to train and support the supervisors and do on-the-spot checking of learning situations (Department of Education, South Africa 2008, 21–22).

Adapting the cascade model

The Campaign is organised using a cascade model, which has been adapted to accommodate blind educators who are supervised, trained and supported by supervisors and coordinators who are themselves blind. The cascade model generally used in the Campaign entailed a ratio of 18 learners per educator. Groups of 10 educators are supported by a supervisor who is overseen by a coordinator.[7] These ratios, which are used in the rest of the Campaign, were drastically reduced for blind learners. The educator:learner ratio was reduced from 1:18 to 1:3–5 blind learners. Furthermore, the ratio of supervisors to educators was reduced from 1:10 to 1:5, and the ratio of coordinators to supervisors was also 1:5. Moreover, the complexity of teaching Braille necessitated that the duration of tuition be extended from 6 to 9–10 months for blind learners.

Maguvhe (2012a) indicates that recruiting blind learners was not as easy as recruiting sighted learners. As he states:

> The population of blind learners is small and dispersed. In order to recruit this target group it was necessary for the blind educators and supervisors to visit places frequented by the target group of illiterate blind adults such as pay points where people receive monthly disability grants, churches, local government offices, and also to make use of the range of community radio stations to broadcast that Braille literacy classes were being held at various points across the country. . . . The organizations for the blind also played an instrumental role in spreading the word. (2012a)

Despite these difficulties, the Campaign has reached relatively large numbers of blind adults wishing to become literate. Over the years, the numbers of blind learners who became part of the Campaign increased from about 300 to about 1500 per annum. The Campaign made a concerted effort to recruit learners who were blind and illiterate. Recruitment mainly took place at the pay points across South Africa where disabled persons gathered to collect the monthly disability grant. Recruitment was also carried out at the various branches of the South African Council for the Blind. The Council helped to identify blind adults who had come to them to seek assistance.[8]

Literacy materials attuned to development

In the interest of directing its programme towards a developmental agenda, the Kha Ri Gude Literacy Campaign uses a thematic approach to inform its teaching of reading, writing and numeracy and to embed this teaching within a social context. The materials

are designed to optimise the social, economic and developmental opportunities of literacy by ensuring that issues related to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are presented across the curriculum. To this end, there are specific lessons on health, HIV/AIDS, gender, democracy, human rights and environmental awareness (McKay 2012a, 15). It is understood that none of the MDGs can be achieved without the full and effective inclusion of persons with disabilities and their participation in all stages of the MDGs processes. The MDGs framework, tools and mechanisms provide several opportunities to address disability in the MDGs (United Nations 2000).

McKay (2010) points out that the Campaign core materials were organised using the following organising themes in order to contextualise the learning around developmental outcomes: learning to learn, my family, my home, the world of work, living a healthy life, the environment, our communities, South Africa and the world around us.

In keeping with the South African Constitution's provision for equality of languages and for ensuring the right of all citizens to a basic education in the official language of their choice, the Campaign developed its core literacy and numeracy manuals in all 11 official South African languages – Tshivenda, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi, Setswana, Xitsonga, Sesotho, Afrikaans, siSwati, isiNdebele and English. This meant that all materials needed to be adapted and then produced in Braille in all of these languages. Learners begin to learn to read in their mother tongue; then English is introduced as a First Additional Language after about six weeks of the learner's starting class.

Collaborating for quality

One of the quality assurance measures put in place, required all educators to meet with their supervisors for a 'quality meeting' at least once a month. One of the tools developed for the Campaign to encourage participation is a weekly/monthly journal which provides educators with guided reflection ideas (McKay 2012c). Educators are expected to bring this journal to their monthly meetings with their supervisor, where the journal serves as the basis for the discussions that take place. Educators are guided to talk about learners' progress or lack thereof, about their teaching experiences, problems they have encountered, successful lessons presented or observed, and any other issues including any social issues that they need to explore. Together, the educator and the supervisor discuss learning, class-based, or social problems and possible solutions to these problems. The use of narratives has thus formed part of the practice of Campaign educators from the start. Often their discussions refer to barriers or obstacles that the learners faced in attending classes. For example, McKay (2012c) cites a blind learner being prohibited from attending class by his family (because he became 'too wise' about the quantum of his social grant). In this case, it was agreed that a coordinator would speak to the family about the importance of the learner becoming more independent. (As we shall see, the issue of families being reluctant to encourage participation was one of the themes that also emerged in the focus group discussions.)

McKay (2012c) states that one of the functions of the guided reflection process is to enable the agency of the educators, by supporting the educators in their attempts to solve the problems identified. This view is also expressed by Hanemann (2011, 7), who indicates that agency was supported through the 'Campaign's participatory system of training, monitoring and strategic planning which allows for exchange and

mutual learning as well as for continuous improvement of the Campaign structure and practices'. (This theme also found expression in participants' stories concerning their contribution to the development of the Campaign.)

We shall now proceed to discuss the research, firstly by explaining its link to the wider research project.

The wider research project

The focus group sessions conducted for this study form part of a larger impact assessment of the Kha Ri Gude Campaign that the University of South Africa (Unisa) was asked to undertake by the Department of Basic Education. Ethical clearance was obtained from the College of Education's ethics committee for all components of the evaluation. Various researchers at the university (mainly from the Department of Adult Education and Youth Development: ABET) are involved in this evaluation.[9]

The authors of this article decided, also, to concentrate on examining the intended inclusivity of the Campaign, and to this end we arranged the focus group sessions with those supervising and coordinating the blind literacy component of the Campaign.

The organisation of the focus group sessions with blind supervisors and coordinators

In this section, we spell out our methodological approach to this focus group research. To this end, we shall elucidate our rationale for choice of starting questions (as a means by which to lead into the discussion), our ethical considerations, our sampling method and our way of checking for 'validity'.

Our starting questions

Our intention, in setting up these focus groups, was to explore the supervisors/coordinators' experiences of their roles within the Campaign, including what they felt might have changed as a result of the Campaign classes. (For the purposes of this discussion, we did not distinguish between supervisors or coordinators, simply because many of the coordinators had previously been supervisors – indeed many had started as VEs.[10]) The focus group method itself entailed the researchers prompting the practitioners to speak by asking questions drawn from a loosely constructed interview schedule. (Each of us facilitated a session, with the other acting primarily as note-taker.) The questions that we asked were as follows:

(1) What were your expectations when you joined the Campaign?
(2) How have you experienced the work so far?
(3) How do the learners feel? Have you noticed any changes?
(4) Do you think that the learners are regarded differently by their families and communities since they started attending classes?

Question 1 was meant to enable practitioners to narrate some expectations that they had brought with them (or that, looking back, they remembered). Question 2 was intended to encourage them to focus on how they had experienced their work (or could 'call up' as important moments). Question 3 was meant to prompt participants to provide some 'snapshots' of how learners initially felt when joining classes and whether, through the

course of their participation in the literacy classes, there had been changes in their lives. (As shown below, through asking the practitioners to narrate some 'before and after' experiences they were able to think of situations that pointed to the learners' and their own sense of agency.) We also asked the participants (in Question 4) to discuss whether they believed that the learners were now regarded differently by their families and communities (since they had come to classes), since this would also give us an indication of a possible change in their family and community involvement. (This issue is also outlined in the United Nations Convention, which refers to the intention to remove barriers that hinder the full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.)

These questions were mentioned at the beginning of the focus group sessions as the kind of issues that we wanted to explore – and we indicated that we wanted participants to share their experiences when they responded to our questions. Although we are aware that some advisors suggest that one should ask individually sequenced questions in focus groups (so that participants are not overloaded), we felt that the questions were sufficiently related to each other to enable participants to keep them in mind and discuss them generally (rather than participants having to answer one question at a time). Also, this approach gave participants the opportunity to focus on what they found important in the 'list' of questions and catered for the flow of discussion, rather than asking participants to give us answers to rigidly, pre-defined questions. This strategy was also suited to the context: we were aware that facilitators would not be able to signal, by sight, to the participants that they were ready to move on to a different question on the list. During the focus group sessions, the practitioners narrated and co-narrated their stories, building on each other's stories or using the stories of their peers as a prompt for them to narrate their own experiences.

Ethical considerations

In line with Unisa's Ethics Policy, the ABET Department at Unisa obtained formal permission from the government's Department of Basic Education to carry out this research.

During the process of organising the focus groups with the blind supervisors/coordinators, we also obtained consent from the Director of Special Needs for the Campaign (Dr Maguvhe, who himself is blind). Consent for the focus group participants to volunteer to participate in research was initially requested via Dr Maguvhe. We ourselves (orally) informed the participants that we were bound by the university's research policy, which requires that participation of individuals must be based on their freely given and informed consent. We stated that we respected their right to refuse to participate in the planned sessions and to change their decision or withdraw at any stage without having to give any reason. We informed participants of the intended use of the research (to report on the impact of the Campaign in terms of their experiences). We indicated that their responses would be used in a manner that guaranteed their privacy and confidentiality (i.e. we made it clear that no individual could be identified and that the responses would be used to improve the literacy programme and to inform other programmes directed to blind adult learners).

In explaining, to our participants, the research method that we would be utilising, we took cognisance of the fact that they were regarded as being a vulnerable group of participants in terms of Unisa's Ethics Policy. Hence we assured them that we would be taping the discussion: this was a way of safeguarding their anonymity. We

recognised that specific requirements for handling the research needed to be met because a participant could easily be identified simply by listening to his or her voice. Indeed, this was our primary reason for not recording the focus group sessions on tape; instead, we simply took notes in order to record their experiences.[11] We were especially sensitive as far as ensuring their anonymity was concerned because we wanted to ensure that participants would not feel that the discussions compromised them in their work or that they were being evaluated in terms of their coordination abilities.

The process of selecting participants (sampling)

For our research, we chose a sample of experienced literacy practitioners. The sample was drawn from a larger group of literacy supervisors and coordinators (nationwide). We selected the participants at the end of the annual national training workshop for blind Campaign managers (i.e. we asked for participants at the end of this three-day workshop). In this workshop, blind coordinators and supervisors were required to develop their strategic plan for 2012, and Dr Maguvhe was responsible for facilitating discussions on, *inter alia,* the monitoring and evaluation of the blind persons of the Campaign. Dr Maguvhe (2012b) explained that supervisors and coordinators were required to attend the workshop of 14–17 June 2012.[12]

The focus group sessions were organised (towards the end of this workshop) whereupon we asked all of those who had been involved in the Campaign for three years or more whether they would be willing to join a conversation about their involvement in the Campaign. This was after we had explained our ethical position and our research role at Unisa. Fifteen Campaign managers indicated their willingness to participate. It turned out that this was the sum total of all of those who had been involved for three or more years. (One of these people was not herself blind. She had a blind sister, and so had learned Braille and became involved as a Braille literacy educator in the Campaign.) In short, all the supervisors/coordinators who had been extensively involved in the Campaign indicated to us that they wanted to participate in the research work. The participants were divided into two groups of eight and seven participants. The gender division was more or less equal in both groups, with each group consisting of about half men and half women.

We chose not to ask those who had been involved for less than three years because we wanted to speak to people who were more experienced. As far as this method of sampling/selection is concerned, we concur with Onwuegbuzie and Leech:

> If the goal is … to obtain insights into a phenomenon, individuals, or events … then the researcher purposefully selects individuals, groups, and settings that maximize understanding of the phenomenon. (2007a, 111)

Our purposive sampling of people who had spent a prolonged time working for the Campaign can thus be justified in these terms, since we required a longitudinal overview.

Checking for 'validity'

During the focus group discussions, one of the researchers facilitated the discussion, while the others took notes. Immediately after the sessions we looked at the notes

and added information as we remembered it while, at the same time, looking for themes. Because of the problems associated with sending textual documents for checking by the participants, we agreed (beforehand as researchers) that we would check our understandings *in situ* by restating/summarising (at various points in the discussion) what we had heard, and asking the group to indicate whether the researcher had understood what was being expressed. In summarising what certain participants had stated when recounting their experiences, we also asked others to indicate whether they felt that they had had similar or different experiences and whether they wanted to add anything to others' accounts. Our compilation based on the focus group sessions was sent to Dr Maguvhe for perusal. Although he was not able to identify the participants, Dr Maguvhe was able to attest to certain events and the context. He indicated that he was 'intrigued by revelations made by practitioners, and the background you provided to their activities' (O. Maguvhe, personal ongoing communication, 2013). He also felt that our research could be used as a basis for improving the Campaign.

We have specifically placed the word 'validity' in our heading in quotation marks to signal that we were not on the look-out for 'accuracy' of understanding (as if this ever can be attained). In keeping with our constructivist philosophy, we believe that so-called member checking in interviewing or focus group research is an opportunity for both the 'members' and the 'researchers' to *re-engage with the gist of what was said earlier* in the discussion. This is in line with Cho and Trent's (2006, 327) remark that member checking (whether used in individual or focus group encounters) can operate within a range of epistemological outlooks. As Romm (2010, 259) puts it (referring to Cho and Trent's statement), member checking within a constructivist epistemological paradigm 'can be seen as part of the process of developing enhanced intersubjective understanding as a dialogical process'. 'Validation' of perspectives/stories was, in this case, a communicative encounter that occurred *in situ* – as the stories were being developed. It is also worth noting Murdoch, Poland and Salter's caution that 'member checking' with individuals is not an appropriate way of proceeding in focus group research, since the focus is on the gist of the (*collective*) discussion (2010, 582).

Analysis of the focus group discussions in terms of categorical themes

As mentioned above, during the sessions we took detailed notes (in shorthand) while people were speaking; and it is on the basis of these notes that we shall now discuss the thematic categories and subcategories that we created. These categories and subcategories were created by both researchers looking together at the mini-stories as told and then discussing how these mini-stories could be categorised.

As Evans indicates (2006), one of the characteristics of focus group research is that the discussion can be 'difficult to analyse' (157). She suggests that 'the researcher should . . . identify themes or issues that arose from the discussion and locate material in the transcripts [or notes] which relate to the themes or "codes", which can be considered in depth' (2006, 161). To proceed with our analysis, we examined the various stories as recounted by participants and located two main themes: empowerment and agency of the practitioners and empowerment and agency of the learners. We admit that in our dealings with the material from the focus group discussions, we did a certain amount of interpretation, but we were also careful to do justice to the expressions of the various participants and took care not to lose the spirit of what participants said (individually and collectively). We do not pretend that other

researchers examining the data would come up with the 'same' set of categories, but we do suggest that these categories are one way of opening a window on people's perspectives. Readers are also invited to consider to what extent the *in vivo* texts (taken from our scripts) can be seen as 'representing' the themes.

Our style of analysis is also akin to what Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011, 552) call a 'narrative style' which, in this case, is in the form of a thematic analysis. (They note that there are other styles of narrative analysis, such as chronological, logical, etc.) We identified the following themes and subthemes.

Thematic category 1: Empowerment and agency of the practitioners
Subcategories:

- 1.1 Sense of making a difference to people's lives via their work
- 1.2 Sense of 'doing good' (in terms of non-monetary criteria)
- 1.3 Sense of contributing to the development of the Campaign

Thematic category 2: Empowerment and agency of the learners
Subcategories:

- 2.1 Empowerment and learners' agency at home with their families
- 2.2 Empowerment and learners' agency in the workplace and in their communities

In order to try not to unduly decontextualise statements we provide, in our exemplars of the themes (below), some of the surrounding 'story', while italicising the part most relevant to the category. In our categorisation of statements connected with 'empowerment and agency', we define empowerment (as do Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011, 350) as a sense that one has more power to 'take control'. In this understanding of empowerment, the concept is closely linked to that of agency (as defined in the Introduction to this article).

Category 1.1: Sense of making a difference to people's lives via their work
Many practitioners expressed a sense that, as a result of their work in the Campaign, they had been (and still are) making a difference to people's lives. For instance, one participant from Focus Group 1 (FG1), who indicated how she first started as a VE, noted:

> A friend of mine [in the Eastern Cape] who had heard about the Campaign picked up the phone and asked me to become a volunteer educator. She told me that I had to recruit or collect blind people and teach them Braille. These were people who knew nothing about Braille but wanted to read and write in Braille. *I feel that I changed their lives by being able to teach them this*.

Another participant (from the same focus group) stated:

> I met one day with a person I know from the South African Council for the Blind. He told me about the Kha Ri Gude Campaign and gave me forms to fill in. I am so glad I joined. *I feel that I changed the lives of many people* – and after that I met a coordinator and we pushed for Kha Ri Gude across the whole province [North Western Province].

Similar sentiments were echoed in FG2. For instance:

> When I started in 2009 [in Gauteng] there was a person called Ntombi who told me about Braille and how to use the machine. When I started I was very shy: I did not want to talk to people. He told me I should not be shy and I must not be negative because this could discourage people. Then I became far more confident *after I started helping people and I realized I could help them*.

Another participant stated:

> *The Kha Ri Gude has played a huge role in the lives of peopl*e. I started as a voluntary educator because I had passion for this and I like to facilitate. I teach in blind special schools: I teach Braille there. *This was an opportunity for me to improve my facilitation skills and work directly with the community*.

One participant pointed to the challenges in reaching people and her efforts to do so:

> In 2008 in August I joined a workshop in Pretoria. I went for two days to the workshop and to learn Braille. I revealed skills to myself and became confident. *Before it was very difficult for me to reach other people* [but now it has been easier for her to reach out]. But I find that learners in the province are still short of teachers and that is a challenge. I still want to go to more ABET centres around the Eastern Cape.

And another participant summarised his experiences with 'changing lives':

> *It has improved the lives of visually impaired persons*. We now have 250 learners that we are attending to and 8 educators [in his Province].

One participant highlighted how he had become a role model in showing people that it is possible to 'do what they want to do' if given a chance. He also indicated the appreciation that he had received from learners:

> Now people take me as a role model and they believe that if you give someone a chance then they can do what they want to do. Many people in Kha Ri Gude say to me, '*Thank you, you revived my life.*'

Category 1.2: Sense of 'doing good' (in terms of non-monetary criteria)

The sense of the practitioners that they were 'doing good' was expressed in many of their stories. As one participant (from FG1) stated:

> I was wondering: 'Will I manage? How will I assist people?' I never experienced this before – having to sit with a blind person and try to teach them. [She herself is not visually impaired, but became a teaching assistant.] My sister, who is visually impaired, told me about the programme and how I could deal with it and that it would teach me Braille. This was a huge experience for me – it is to God's praise. Now I can communicate better with my sister. She understands now that I am there for her. So Kha Ri Gude means a lot to me personally – *as a helper it is not only about money but about experience*.

Another added to the previous participant's story:

> We also went into old age homes where we introduced the Campaign and the programme and we visited the social workers to also come on board. *This gave the elders reason*

to live. They have started reading magazines and bibles. I say 'Thank you to Kha Ri Gude.'

In FG2, one participant offered the following story:

> There was a man who was sleeping in the town – he had no house and no food. We took the man to be put in the Braille class and we gave him a place to stay and he is not in stress anymore. His family want to take him back now because they think they can get his disability grant. We told them that you are wanting to steal from him – it is your father. Everyone is part of the community – when I visit the old man I feel happy. *I know I did something and God will be pleased with that.*

Category 1.3: Sense of contributing to the development of the Campaign

Participants' stories also pointed to their involvement in the growth of the Campaign. One participant, who mentioned that he is involved in the Kwa-Zulu Natal deaf and blind society, recounted that he heard about the Kha Ri Gude and had 'jumped at the opportunity to deliver training in the community where vision is impaired and where learners live'. He noted:

> At first it was not as well coordinated as it is now. Now it runs far more smoothly. And we have been able to add resources. As the process developed, we were able to offer extra support – for example, we were able to train some volunteer educators in the use of machinery. And this training became beneficial to them.

Another participant from the group explained how, as part of her role in the Campaign, she had managed (with two other practitioners) to convince the families of some of the learners, since they were initially suspicious of the Campaign agenda:

> *I was glad because we managed to convince the families* – me and two other supervisors. We had four educators. There was criticism around the Campaign. They thought that we were trying to make money. *I must thank Dr Maguvhe because he told us we must do the work properly so then people will respect us and that is what we are doing.*

She explained how she has been contributing to the growth of the Campaign:

> We started with two supervisors and four educators. Now we have thirty [blind] educators and three supervisors. *When we speak about Kha Ri Gude now people understand and we continue to do advocacy.* For example, we reach people through the churches. We call people and we say, 'Is there anybody who knows Braille who can assist such people with their challenges?' We still have to move more into the Northern Cape. People need Braille. But when areas are apart and scattered it makes it more difficult. This is a challenge we still have to meet.

From FG2 the following extract serves to indicate one practitioner's sense of contributing to the development of the Campaign. As she recounted:

> I heard about the Campaign via Dr Maguvhe. There was a talk about ABET education. *The question was how we could do outreach to reach the people who were scattered at a distance.* He [Dr Maguvhe] said there was an opportunity to make sure the blind people can participate to reduce their illiteracy. He wanted me to be an assistant in a supervisory role because we were not moving in the whole province and he wanted a better gender balance with not only males but also with empowering blind women too.

> *The time was short and he wanted me to participate in running a programme in the Free State. He took two people as supervisors. Then after we set this up we came to Pretoria and he said we must recruit blind people in different areas. That is, we must encourage people with matric or a matric exam to assist in the team. Their responsibility was to get good teachers. And from there the programme grew.*

And another extract aptly describes the participant's feeling that the Kha Ri Gude Campaign has 'worked' through the advocacy efforts that were undertaken, and through people realising that it is a community-owned project:

> This programme is owned by the community. *We did advocacy and now the people are behind us.* They look for us. They tell us they are learners. This is a viable tool to impart knowledge to the visually impaired and to change their lives.

We now turn to the thematic categories that we developed to record practitioners' understandings of how learners were faring at home with their families, at their workplaces and in the community (compared with the situation 'before').

Category 2.1: Empowerment and learners' agency at home with their families

Some of our 'interview guide' questions asked practitioners to consider the experiences of their learners 'before and after' their Kha Ri Gude involvement. In relation to this question, some of the participants provided statements about the learners previously being trapped by their low status position in families and how this situation changed as a result of Kha Ri Gude. The following extract from FG1 indicates one account of this:

> Our society sees people in different ways. Some are too protective of people with disabilities: they just keep them in the yard. When we went to visit the community some family members were against the Campaign. But we were providing a challenge for them [that is, for the families]. [She went on to indicate how they had convinced the families to see the learners differently, that is, with less 'protectiveness'.]

In FG2, our questions about learners' experiences elicited similar responses, and we again focused on how learners had escaped the passive role of 'being kept in the yard'. As one participant summarised:

> One of the things that worried me, which is why I became interested in joining the Campaign, was that blind people could not move more freely around; they were in the yard and had no friends and no visitors. We asked them if they are interested in learning more and so they became learners.

Category 2.2: Empowerment and learners' agency in the workplace and in their communities

Practitioners provided examples of learners finding work and/or becoming more involved in the community subsequent to becoming Kha Ri Gude graduates. One practitioner in FG1 offered the example that some of the learners

> . . . *learned how to operate a switchboard*. That is, they took a course in using the telephone and they completed this successfully. So they got [call centre] jobs thereafter. They were interviewed and they indicated that they knew how to use a switchboard and how to take messages. That is, they take messages in Braille.

Practitioners also pointed out that the learners became more involved in the community by often becoming VEs themselves:

> Some of the learners in our first and second groups were very serious about learning Braille and so they in turn became voluntary educators. *The Kha Ri Gude Campaign provides a medium for visually impaired people who are now Braille literate to be taught facilitation skills so that they themselves could find learners and train them.*

In FG2, some stories focused on learners' involvement in churches (as part of community involvement):

> I also know someone who was in Kha Ri Gude and is now doing level 2. *He is a priest in the church.* He now wants to read more in order to read the Bible.

And another practitioner recounted:

> . . . with people who did not go to school who joined the Kha Ri Gude programme . . . one of these people who never went to school was a radio presenter and he could not write or read. Then he joined the programme and can now play adverts and can read Braille and can write. *He also got a group together within Kha Ri Gude and instead of them sitting at home they are now reading Braille together, also in the churches.*

Some thoughts on the 'results' as recorded above

Manifestly, the guiding questions asked by the two facilitators (of the two groups) will have influenced people's manner of recounting their involvement. It will also have influenced the type of 'information' (relating to memories of activities and events) that they decided to share with others in the group and with the facilitators. As Harding (2006) states, when asking participants during individual interviews to 're-member' events, we can regard memory as 'a multi-authored, textual and contextual event'. In other words, memory is not simply a recollection, but is a process of 're-membering the past and figuring one's place in it, [and] is vitally caught up with processes of identity formation and transformation of self in the present and future' (2006, para 2.4). This implies that visions of favoured ways of being-in-the world are brought to bear in the process of re-membering: people's *re-membering of stories which they tell thus point to what they consider as valuable 'ways of being' in the world*. One could argue that, more so than in individual interviews, people's decisions as to what to share with others during focus group sessions are a function of the interaction context, that is, the context where they interact with other individuals in the group as well as with the facilitator. This context *shapes their stories to express what they value and what they want to bring to the group (i.e. as being of value).*

This can be regarded as one of the group effects that cannot be discounted when considering the 'information' offered by the various participants. In other words, the emergence of a group dynamic whenever any collection of individuals assembles for a common purpose – in this case the purpose of sharing experiences – cannot be discounted (cf. Farnsworth and Boon 2010). However, if we regard focus group research as not meant to try to 'uncover' individual experiences, but as a *process of people constituting constructions in a shared context*, then the constructions offered can be seen in the light of what emerged as significant to people as part of the social context that was set up (that is, the focus group context). With regard to focus group encounters, Hollander contends that

> The participants in a focus group are not independent of each other, and the data collected from one participant cannot be considered separate from the social context in which it was collected. (2004, 631)

In short, following Hollander (2004) and Farnsworth and Boon (2010), we do not claim that the information/mini-narratives that emerged during the focus group sessions can be said to 'mirror' people's (memories of) experiences (prior to their being part of the focus groups and (co-)constructing accounts where they looked backwards as well as forwards in relation to their involvement in the Campaign). What we do claim is that the meanings told in the form of mini-stories expressed during the sessions offer a sense of their reviewing in this (focus group) context their felt involvement in the Campaign. Part of this meaning making was their having (and now highlighting to themselves and to others) an experience of themselves *as agents making a difference to the outcomes that took place and are taking place* during the unfolding of the Kha Ri Gude Campaign.

The 'social work' required to develop the Campaign

Many of the participants recounted that they had at times encountered some resistance – for example, of families who kept Visually Impaired Persons (VIPs) in the yard (with VIPs thus becoming socially isolated). They also said that some people in the community were initially suspicious of their motives, believing that these were (merely) money related. These participants therefore had to do 'social work' in the community – via their examples of doing 'good work' – they had to create respect in the community for their work. Stories of how recruiting took place also expressed their active involvement in finding learners, as well as the processes by which some of them moved from being an educator to becoming supervisors/coordinators of a group of educators.

These recollections on the part of participants offers us a pointer to the way in which the Campaign indeed gathered momentum through participants' commitments and their sense – expressed by some – that they were doing 'God's work' (work that would be regarded as pleasing to God – e.g. category 1.2). Participants made it clear that at least they were making a vast difference to the quality of people's lives (category 1.1).

The discourse used by many of the participants – which expressed their sense of 'doing good work' – points to what Bhola (2005, 55) refers to as one that does not fit easily into an 'economics of growth' agenda as a justification for the 'education of adults'. Instead, it is a discourse that points more to a concern with the quality of life; this is what is regarded as important as far as the participants are concerned. (Bhola notes in this regard that justifications that can be put forward for wanting to achieve 'education for adults' as a global goal are by no means monolithic. He suggests (2005, 65) that, in order to give globalisation a 'human face', we need to pay attention to alternative discourses.)

The idea of participants being given a chance to do something meaningful for themselves and for others featured prominently in many of the mini-stories – alongside a sense that learners often expressed gratitude (as, for instance, iterated strongly by the one participant in FG2 who mentioned that many people in Kha Ri Gude say to me 'Thank you, you revived my life' – category 1.1). The idea of 'changing lives' was a theme that recurred in many of the mini-stories. This, it seems, was one of the spurs that encouraged them to want to do more – that is, to take their work into other provinces and other areas in specific provinces (category 1.3). These kinds of

motivation drove their activities to 'do the work well'. While doing this work, their own confidence increased, as did the confidence of others. Indeed, some people's confidence levels increased to the point that they were able to seek, and find, employment. Also, as these participants noted, changes in the learners' status in their families and the wider community were also effected (categories 2.1 and 2.2).

Further reflections

In the approach that we adopted in this research, we do not pretend that we have striven for a form of research that is value-free. We agree with those who have criticised the attempt to bracket values and concerns from the process of 'scientific inquiry' (cf. Romm 1997a, 1997b, 2001, 2002, 2007, 2010; Collins 2000; Kenny 2002; Ladson-Billings 2003; Gregory and Romm 2004; Demerath 2006; McIntyre-Mills 2008; McKay and Romm 2008, 2010; Naidoo 2008). We have tried to make transparent the ways in which our research framing might have influenced the 'data' generated, and we have also admitted that our interpretations/accounts of these 'data' were influenced by our focus on agency.

In this case, we suggest that asking people in the focus groups to talk about their expectations when joining the Campaign (and whether and to what extent these had been met) provided them with an opportunity to recount what they considered important to them, and to share their experiences with others in the group and with us as facilitators. Whether the various participants would have highlighted this if we had framed the questions differently, or if the interactions in the group had been different, is a question that is impossible to answer. But we contend that the mini-stories that *did* emerge and that *were generated* via the questions (and within the social context of the focus groups) can still be regarded as enhancing our insights into people's sense (now reinforced) of their agency and its impact during their involvement in the Kha Ri Gude Campaign. These insights can be said to provide interpretive lenses that aid theorists, and practitioners, to reflect upon the development of human agency.

Our role as facilitators

Reflecting on the character of focus group discussions in terms of the handling of power relations, Belzile and Öberg (2012) remark that focus groups as a methodological device provide less opportunity than individual interviews for researchers to 'take control' of the ensuing conversation. As they put it: 'This shifting of power may be considered a strength in that it allows participants to take greater control over the topic of conversation' (2012, 463). In this case, therefore, we might suggest that via the focus groups as a research approach, participants created a flow of communication that emerged from what was *significant for them to share*.

The appropriate style and degree of researcher/facilitator intervention in focus group processes is a subject of continuing contention (cf. Romm's discussion, 2010, 248–251). Suffice it to say that we believe that, in this case, the conversations took a momentum that existed outside any undue control on the part of the facilitators, since people drew on each other's stories and built these up further when referring to their own experiences. In this way, participants as well as the facilitators were offered a 'flavour' of the meanings that the different participants ascribed to their involvement in the Campaign, through their storytelling around this involvement.

Concluding comments: transferability of 'results'/insights

We would like to emphasise that we do not regard the account that we have created/narrated above as offering context-free 'general' statements regarding, for instance, the agency that makes inclusively oriented campaigns socially workable. As far as the generalisability of any of the insights is concerned, we suggest, along with Henwood and Pidgeon (1993), that any contextual insights (in this case, about the South African Literacy Campaign in relation to blind people) may be considered *as transferable to other contexts, insofar as comparisons can be made across the different contexts*.

Henwood and Pidgeon (1993) specify that working within an 'interpretive' tradition means that researchers cannot presume to create generalisations about human behaviour that transcend specific contexts of social action. However, it is possible to speak of *transferability*, once this is understood as referring to the idea that findings (interpretations) might be applicable 'in contexts similar to the context in which they were first derived' (Henwood and Pidgeon 1993, 27). Of course, to define 'similarity' itself requires a level of reflection, as also explained by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007a, 2007b). Onwuegbuzie and Leech do not shy away from using the term *generalisation*, as long as the language is qualified to include 'a process of reflection'. They cite Greenwood and Levin (2000):

> As surmised by Greenwood and Levin [2000], … generalizations of any interpretations [made in relation to a context of social action] to another context should be made after first being adequately cognisant of the new context and how this new context differs from the context from which the interpretations were generated, as well as reflecting on the consequences that such a generalization may have. Therefore, generalization represents an active process of reflection. (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007a, 118)

What we would suggest here is that readers be invited to create comparisons across (campaign) contexts with which they are familiar and to consider similarities and differences about the ideas of agency as expressed in this article. This suggestion is in line with Collins's (2000, 38) advice to invite authors – professional researchers and others – to 'write into' one another's stories in terms of additional experiences/insights/interpretations that can be shared. This would be another avenue for meeting Groce and Bakhshi's (2011) call to develop further explorations around 'innovative and inclusive [and workable] approaches to providing literacy skills' (1166).

Notes

1. During apartheid South Africa, Black people were politically excluded from free and compulsory education and schools for educating blind learners who were Black were few and far between.
2. Mertens points out that many constructivist-oriented researchers are situating their work within the broader framework of the pursuit of social justice, which implies embracing a transformative agenda. They can thus be said to embrace a transformative paradigm (along with a constructivist orientation). She notes that this points to 'the permeability of the paradigmatic boundaries' (2010, 21).
3. However, the Ministerial Committee on Literacy (2007, 13) pointed out that it is difficult to obtain data giving the total figure of illiterate disabled persons, and specifically the data of blind illiterates in South Africa. While the 2001 South African National Census indicates that there are 157,719 visually impaired adults who had never attended school, these data are not disaggregated into types of visual impairments nor does the data account for adults who had become blind later in life even if they had previously been visually literate (Department of Education, South Africa 2007).

4. This includes ping pong balls and egg boxes (to simulate the six dots used in Braille), Perkins Braillers, talking calculators, tactile shapes and large-print books for the partially sighted.
5. The campaign has, *inter alia*, been able to play a role in the alleviation of poverty in communities through its deployment of VEs: each year about 40,000 unemployed educators have been deployed across the campaign, 8% of whom are people with disabilities (http://www.kharigude.co.za/index.php/new-news).
6. VEs must have a matric and they are trained by supervisors in becoming literacy educators (Department of Education, South Africa 2008).
7. By 2012, 2.8 million illiterate learners had been enliterated by the Campaign, with teaching delivered by 40,000 educators, who were managed by approximately 4000 supervisors and 400 coordinators (Department of Basic Education, South Africa 2012). The programme of assessing the knowledge and skills of learners has been integrated into a continuous monitoring and evaluation assessment strategy that provides evidence in the form of a Learner Assessment Portfolio. The same standardised assessment instrument was adapted for Braille and is used to assess blind learners. The moderation of all Campaign assessments is overseen by the South African Qualification Authority, which moderates a 10% sample of learner assessments across all 11 official languages. Special verifiers are trained to moderate learners whose medium of instruction is Sign Language (McKay, Forthcoming).
8. Learner retention for blind adult learners was about 85% country wide. See http://www.education.gov.za/Home/KhaRiGudeWorkshop/tabid/857/Default.aspx. Dr Maguvhe estimates a pass rate of about 90% for blind adult learners since the inception of the Campaign (Maguvhe, personal ongoing communications,2013).
9. The research design includes focus group sessions with Kha Ri Gude graduates and VEs; interviews and focus group sessions with Kha Ri Gude supervisors and coordinators; visits to projects undertaken by Kha Ri Gude learners; analysis of sections of graduate portfolios (and particularly learners' 'letter to the Minister of Education' that they are asked to write at the end of their course); and analysis of statistical data pertaining to, for example, the different geographical regions where learners are situated, their ages, their gender and their employment status.
10. The details of their specific roles can be found in the VEs' handbook, which explains to VEs what they can expect from supervisors and coordinators (Department of Education, South Africa 2008).
11. Interestingly, in her account of what she calls 'an Indigenous storywork methodology', Archibald indicates that in order to honour a relational style of interaction with the participants, she 'stopped using the tape recorder early on in our research relationship. Instead, I took written and "oral and heart memory" notes after discussions' (2008, 377). In our case, we also relied on notes, but ones that were taken during the discussions. It is also worth mentioning that Liamputtong (2011) too refers to research situations where 'the researchers . . . may decide that tape recording the group discussion is too intrusive . . . , hence note-taking may be adopted' (85).
12. This workshop directly preceded the training and retraining of between 260 and 280 blind educators across the country in anticipation of the 1500 blind learners who were enrolled for Braille literacy in 2012. In a media release, Dr Maguvhe mentioned that the literacy campaign had already changed the lives of thousands of formerly illiterate blind people who have been able to regain confidence in their abilities. He added that 'We are hoping to equip trainers here with the skills that will see an improvement in teaching. Hopefully the work put in during this process will show in the Learner Assessment Portfolios of adults who enrol in the programme' (2012b).

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