



Eulogizing Sechaba Mahlomaholo as a Doyen of Social Cohesion in the Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

As a doyen of social unity, this paper drew on Sechaba Mahlomaholo's extensive academic life, to analyse his contribution as a champion of social cohesion in the sustainable rural learning research project (SuRLEc). The research initiative commenced in 2013 and concluded with the unfortunate demise of Sechaba Mahlomaholo in 2023. In the SuRLEc research initiative, Sechaba Mahlomaholo acted as the project coordinator, overseeing a group that included 28 PhD students, 22 MEd students, and 15 supervisors, all collaborating in a cohort format. This paper adopted Kearns and Forrest's (2000, 2001) social cohesion theory, based on Roy Bhaskar's critical realist philosophy, to explain how Sechaba Mahlomaholo promoted social cohesion to cultivate a sustainable rural learning ecology among a group of 15 academics at the University of the Free State. The context was the supervision of a cohort of 28 PhD and 22 MEd students. The analysis of the SuRLEc sought to document, comprehend, and demonstrate how Sechaba Mahlomaholo played a leading role in promoting social cohesion and establishing sustainable rural learning environments for postgraduate students, thereby enhancing their academic achievements. The paper's primary focus was on the seamless integration of the emotional and cognitive dimensions of the performers. A case was made that SuRLEc facilitated social cohesiveness in the supervision of post-graduate students. This suggested that the level to which students' academic achievement is valued through a socially cohesive learning environment affects their progress. Additionally, several recommendations were provided for those wishing to emulate Sechaba's Mahlomaholo's vision for social cohesion in sustainable rural learning ecologies research.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper sought to eulogise Sechaba Mahlomaholo as a doyen of social cohesion in the sustainable rural learning ecologies research (SuRLEc) agenda. The integration of different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa at the beginning of the twenty-first century appears to have influenced the long-term viability of institutions' efforts to establish inclusive settings that foster a

sense of belonging among all members.¹ Prior to 1994, the South African education system was characterised by exclusions, racial segregation, and racial stereotypes that grouped South African higher education constituents into socially and intellectually unequal racial groupings.² Historically, the consolidation of white (mostly Afrikaans) HEIs with other institutions perceived as less deserving, was considered as deliberate approach to eliminate racial disparities in South African higher education and promote fairness within the institutions.³ Aligned with the vision and mission statements of many organisations, this perspective provides hope for institutional settings characterised by unity and a spirit of collaboration. Nevertheless, according to Mahlomaholo, the prevailing notion of black individuals possessing limited intellectual capacity may have resulted in feelings of inferiority, inadequate recognition, and estrangement.⁴ This perception continues to shape their self-esteem and behaviour in newly amalgamated institutions.⁵

Tshelane and Mahlomaholo argue that the previous divisions that defined South African HEIs continue to influence the activities that both staff and students encounter in the current higher education environment.⁶ White individuals were perceived as the primary producers of information at their institutions and the leaders in applying this knowledge in their technical fields.⁷ Conversely, the education provided at black universities was specifically designed to prepare graduates for roles as instructors to white individuals and to teach a curriculum that was considered by the apartheid authorities to be sufficient for black students.⁸

Institutions worldwide, including those in South Africa, share common goals in establishing inclusive environments that promote a feeling of belonging and unity among all stakeholders.⁹ The effectiveness of such projects and programmes primarily depends on the extent to which the stakeholders in the institutions completely support the objectives of these initiatives and are willing to make substantial contributions towards achieving the established goals. Therefore, such initiatives should strive to establish environments that foster diversity and ensure students feel embraced. SuRLEc was established as a research project to promote social cohesion in the supervision of post-graduate students and to establish sustainable post-graduate supervision.¹⁰

Following his tenure as the research professor at the University of the Free State (UFS), Sechaba Mahlomaholo, who subsequently became the inaugural Black male dean in the school of education (SoE) at the UFS, noted the difficulty in fostering collaboration between the staff at Bloemfontein campus and Qwa-Qwa campus in the SOE. He contended that the primary factor contributing to this difference was language (with one group having acquired knowledge in English and the other in Afrikaans), culture, and the specific environments in which the two campuses were situated. The Bloemfontein school is situated in an urban environment, whereas the Qwa-Qwa campus is specifically located in a distant rural area in the Qwa-Qwa region.

¹ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments," 2012; Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments," in *ICERI2013 Proceedings* (IATED, 2013), 4614–23; Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Naivety of Empiricism versus Complexity of Bricolage in Creating Sustainable Learning Environments," in *ICERI2013 Proceedings* (IATED, 2013), 4690–99; Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined," *Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production* 22, no. 1 (2016): 9–26.

² Sechaba Mahlomaholo et al., *Attrition and African Learner Underrepresentation in the Grade 12 Top 20 List of the North West Education Department* (Potchefstroom, S. Africa: Platinum Press, 2010).

³ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Academic Network and Sustainable Learning Environments," *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology* 5, no. 2 (2012): 73–87.

⁴ Mahlomaholo et al., *Attrition and African Learner Underrepresentation in the Grade 12 Top 20 List of the North West Education Department*.

⁵ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁶ Molaodi Tshelane and Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments for Professional Curriculum Leadership through Information and Communication Technologies," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement Supérieur En Afrique* 13, no. 1–2 (2015): 193–212.

⁷ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

⁸ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

⁹ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments," *TD: The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 9, no. 3 (2013): 379–92.

¹⁰ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environments: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory," *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement Supérieur En Afrique* 13, no. 1–2 (2015): 229–43.

The post-graduate students at Bloemfontein campus were given the choice to pursue their Masters and PhDs in either Afrikaans or English. It is important to note that these two campuses do not have shared physical accommodations for the supervision of post-graduate students. This exacerbates the phenomenon of “othering” that students appear to have embraced. It is a fact that language and cultural differences in supervision prevent students from having the opportunity to interact and understand each other by sharing experiences and knowledge in the same environment. Instead, they learn in separate spaces despite being students in the same programmes and at the same institution. Hence, Sechaba Mahlomaholo made deliberate attempts to synchronise colleagues (supervisors from both Bloemfontein and Qwa-Qwa campuses) to explore opportunities for collaboration between the two groups and to improve student supervision at both campuses.

A strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis was conducted to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that facilitate or hinder collaborative supervision. A decision was then reached to establish two research syndicates, SuLE and SuRLEc, for the Bloemfontein and Qwa-Qwa campuses; respectively. Thus, the objective of this study was to offer a tribute to Sechaba Mahlomaholo, who played a crucial role in promoting social unity in the development of the sustainable rural learning ecology (SuRLEc) research project. The SuRLEc commenced in 2013 and concluded with the unfortunate death of Sechaba Mahlomaholo in 2023. In the Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments research project, Sechaba Mahlomaholo served as the coordinator for the SuRLEc, which comprised 28 PhD and 22 MEd students, together with 15 supervisors, working in a cohort manner.

This paper adopted Kearns and Forrest's social cohesion theory, based on Roy Bhaskar's critical realist philosophy, to explain how Sechaba Mahlomaholo promoted social cohesion to cultivate a sustainable rural learning ecology among a group of 15 academics at the University of the Free State.¹¹ The context was the supervision of a cohort of twenty-eight PhD and twenty-two MEd students.¹² The present study critically examines the various reasons, elements, concepts, procedures, and actions that facilitated the successful completion of studies by some pupils. To organise this debate, the article initially provides its theoretical explanation to establish a foundation for comprehending the approach used in the SuRLEc. Subsequently, an elaborate account of the sustainable project design, objective, emphasis, and execution procedures is presented, followed by the analysis, recommendations, and conclusion.

SOCIAL COHESION AS A THEORY

Social cohesion, derived from the Latin term “cohaerere” meaning to stick or be linked together, pertains to the togetherness and solidarity shown by individuals within a society.¹³ Expanding upon the influential research conducted by Tönnies and Durkheim, a cohesive society can be described as characterised by robust social interactions, a favourable emotional bond among its members and the community, and a strong emphasis on the collective welfare.¹⁴ Haider conceptualises social coherence as the cohesive force that unifies societies.¹⁵ The historical apartheid era in South Africa is widely seen as having hindered the nation's unity. The pursuit and ambitions for nation-building have been a central focus of South Africa's reform agenda from the inception of democracy. According to Kalolo et al., a

¹¹ Ade Kearns and Ray Forrest, “Social Cohesion and Multilevel Urban Governance,” *Urban Studies* 37, no. 5–6 (May 1, 2000): 995–1017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980050011208>.

¹² Mahlomaholo, “Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments”; Mahlomaholo, “Academic Network and Sustainable Learning Environments”; Mahlomaholo, “On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments.”

¹³ Mahlomaholo, “Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments.”

¹⁴ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft)*, *Community & Society (Gemeinschaft Und Gesellschaft)*. (Piscataway, NJ, US: Transaction Publishers, 1957); Emile Durkheim, *Suicide, A Study in Sociology*, ed. J.A. Spaulding and G. Simpson (London: Routledge, 1897), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203994320>; Zainab Aina Usman and Kehinde Oluseyi Olagunju, “Assessment of Social Cohesion Indicators and Rural Poverty Reduction in Nigeria,” 2017.

¹⁵ Huma Haider, “Rural Stakeholder Engagement in Social Cohesion, Reconciliation and Peacebuilding Projects,” 2019.

cohesive society is defined by the presence of shared values and a vibrant civic culture.¹⁶ It is further characterised by the absence of social disorder and the establishment of social control mechanisms.¹⁷ Additionally, a cohesive society should exhibit social solidarity and strategies to mitigate wealth inequalities. These strategies should be accompanied by social capital, social networks, civic participation, territorial belonging, and shared identity among its members.

Social cohesiveness, as defined by Camarero and Oliva, refers to the level of social integration and inclusion within communities and society as a whole, as well as the amount to which mutual solidarity is realised among individuals and communities.¹⁸ Although the concept of “social cohesion” is sometimes used with various interpretations, its fundamental components remain consistent and it encompasses considerations, such as social inclusion, social capital, and societal mobility. Social inclusion is the facilitation of conditions for individuals and groups to participate in society.¹⁹ Its objective is to enable impoverished and marginalised individuals to maximise the increasing global prospects. Social capital refers to the resources that arise from social collaboration among individuals working towards shared objectives. Societal mobility refers to the capacity of people or groups to ascend or descend in social standing, influenced by factors such as money, occupation, education, or other social variables.²⁰

Social cohesion is fundamentally driven by the pursuit of equitable justice across all domains of society. The notion necessitates the provision of equal rights and opportunities to all individuals, irrespective of their socioeconomic status. This entails ensuring that everyone, regardless of their level of wealth, is afforded an equitable playing field. According to Durrani and Halai, theories of social cohesiveness propose the implementation of appropriate procedures to govern social structures in a just manner for the advantage of all individuals involved.²¹ A study by Loader et al. clarified that addressing injustice involves removing institutional barriers that hinder certain individuals from fully participating as equal partners in social interaction.²² The authors Kalolo et al. maintain that social cohesion is based on the discussion of challenging and undermining structures that facilitate marginalisation and exclusionary activities.²³ Moreover, social cohesion is facilitated by a structured approach based on principles of respect, care, recognition, and empathy.²⁴ The inclusion of terms like “demands”, “mechanisms”, “disrupting”, and “subverting” in the aforementioned definitions implies coordinated efforts and appears to evoke revolutionary connotations. Likewise, Boarini et al. embrace a groundbreaking methodology towards social justice.²⁵ The authors contend that it effectively reverses socially constructed and sustained disparities in material living situations, therefore diminishing and ultimately eradicating the continuation of favouritism towards certain individuals to the detriment of others. The issue of responsiveness towards social justice is raised by Haider.²⁶ In their study, Loader et al. also argue that sensibility should disregard ethical considerations and instead focus on structural examinations of ethical issues, embrace an activist stance, and strive for affiliation with others.²⁷ With respect to the advancement of social justice, Van den Bos contends that individuals

¹⁶ Albino Kalolo et al., “Social Cohesion, Social Trust, Social Participation and Sexual Behaviors of Adolescents in Rural Tanzania,” *BMC Public Health* 19 (2019): 1–9.

¹⁷ Romina Boarini et al., “Reducing Inequalities and Strengthening Social Cohesion through Inclusive Growth: A Roadmap for Action,” *Economics* 12, no. 1 (2018): 20180063.

¹⁸ Luis Camarero and Jesús Oliva, “Thinking in Rural Gap: Mobility and Social Inequalities,” *Palgrave Communications* 5, no. 1 (2019): 1–7.

¹⁹ Yusuf Sayed et al., “Social Cohesion and Initial Teacher Education in South Africa,” *Educational Research for Social Change* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 54–69, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2016/v5i1a4>.

²⁰ Wouter Van den Bos et al., “Social Network Cohesion in School Classes Promotes Prosocial Behavior,” *PloS One* 13, no. 4 (2018): e0194656.

²¹ Naureen Durrani and Anjum Halai, “Dynamics of Gender Justice, Conflict and Social Cohesion: Analysing Educational Reforms in Pakistan,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 61 (2018): 27–39.

²² Rebecca Loader et al., “Developing Social Cohesion through Schools in Northern Ireland and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: A Study of Policy Transfer,” 2018.

²³ Kalolo et al., “Social Cohesion, Social Trust, Social Participation and Sexual Behaviors of Adolescents in Rural Tanzania.”

²⁴ Mahlomaholo, “Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People’s Education for People’s Power Reimagined.”

²⁵ Boarini et al., “Reducing Inequalities and Strengthening Social Cohesion through Inclusive Growth: A Roadmap for Action.”

²⁶ Haider, “Rural Stakeholder Engagement in Social Cohesion, Reconciliation and Peacebuilding Projects.”

²⁷ Haider, “Rural Stakeholder Engagement in Social Cohesion, Reconciliation and Peacebuilding Projects.”

must take action to diminish and eliminate oppression, regardless of how far we may feel from the personal responsibility for its implementation.²⁸

According to Camarero and Oliva, social cohesion theory incorporates the principle of social justice into the implementation of research aimed at instituting change.²⁹ The core of social cohesiveness theory is to examine how injustice and oppression influence individuals' experiences and perceptions of the world.³⁰ A social cohesion theory perspective focuses on power dynamics, justice concepts, and the interplay of the economy, race, class, gender, ideologies, discourse, education, religion, and other social institutions in shaping a social system.³¹ Thus, a critical inquiry should be linked to an effort to address the injustices of society. Mahlomaholo, argues that the cohesiveness of social theory lies not only in the examination and comprehension of society but also in the rigorous evaluation and modification of it.³² For Mahlomaholo, rather than being neutral, all social structures are seen as artificial constructs designed to favour one part of society over another.³³

The concept of social cohesiveness aims to reverse the socially constructed and sustained disparities in material living situations, thereby diminishing and ultimately eradicating the continuation of the differential treatment of certain individuals to the detriment of others.³⁴ In order to foster societal unity, it is imperative that we take action to diminish and eliminate oppression, regardless of how far we may feel from personal responsibility for its implementation. Regrettably, the methods of oppression remain mostly imperceptible, even to those who make efforts to uphold ethical standards in their lives and professional endeavours³⁵ The arguments presented in this paper reflect a perspective that prioritises a moral community, emphasising the importance of duty and care among its members as a fundamental component of social cohesiveness. Social activists promote the necessity of implementing social transformation in rural regions, connected to social justice, through a consultative, communal, participatory, and empowering approach.³⁶ These concepts of interconnectedness and accountability strengthen the principles of justice and equality, thereby broadening the core tenets of ethical behaviour.³⁷

Sustainable Rural Learning Ecology

Francis et al. advocate for the adoption of a flexible approach to education provision that prioritises serving rural communities.³⁸ Education programmes of this nature are expected to make a significant contribution by providing a highly trained workforce that is prepared to actively contribute to the development of rural areas. This, in turn, will help to reduce emigration, stimulate innovation, overcome social and geographical disparities, promote democratic participation, and support personal growth. According to Jacobs, the provision of education specifically designed for rural development can be considered a crucial factor in ensuring both sustainability and development in rural ecosystems.³⁹ Mahlomaholo asserts that there exists a wide range of conceptions about the notion of

²⁸ Loader et al., "Developing Social Cohesion through Schools in Northern Ireland and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: A Study of Policy Transfer."

²⁹ Camarero and Oliva, "Thinking in Rural Gap: Mobility and Social Inequalities."

³⁰ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Gender Differentials and Sustainable Learning Environments," *South African Journal of Education* 31, no. 3 (2011): 312–21.

³¹ Mahlomaholo, "Academic Network and Sustainable Learning Environments."

³² Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

³³ Sechaba Mahlomaholo and Vhonani Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual," in *The Intellectual: A Phenomenon in Multidimensional Perspectives* (Brill, 2010), 73–82.

³⁴ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 28, no. 3 (2014): 678–96.

³⁵ Mahlomaholo, "On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

³⁶ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

³⁷ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

³⁸ Pertti Alasuutari, "The Rise and Relevance of Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 13, no. 2 (2010): 139–55.

³⁹ Peter Jacobs, "Theme Issue: Sustainable Rural Development in South Africa: Rethinking Theory, Policy and Practice," *Development Southern Africa* 29, no. 4 (October 2012): 517–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2012.715437>.

sustainability.⁴⁰ He believes that investigating novel connections between rural education and sustainability hold the capacity to halt, or at the very least impact, the ongoing exclusion of rural education in terms of its contribution to a nation's future. Rural education, as described by Mahlomaholo, involves collaborating with other crucial human services, such as health, local government, and the commercial sector to tackle sustainability issues and revitalise rural education.⁴¹ Upon examining the potential of "ordinary" landscapes or communities in which we reside, work, and educate to revitalise methods of influencing the future, Mahlomaholo propounds that "sustainability promptly alters the perception of the normalcy of these landscapes" and creates new opportunities.⁴²

The Oxford Dictionary for Languages defines rural as "pertaining to or embodying the rural areas rather than urban areas". Broadly speaking, a rural area or countryside refers to a geographical region situated beyond urban areas. Rural areas are characterised by a sparse population and tiny centres of settlement. Rural areas, including agricultural areas and places with forestry, are often characterised by their absence of significant development. The definitions of rural for statistical and administrative purposes vary among different countries. Typically, these regions exhibit distinct economic and social dynamics as a result of their strong connection with land-based industries, including agriculture, forestry, and resource exploitation. Tshelane and Mahlomaholo define rurality as the natural or geo-physical characteristics of rural locales.⁴³ The South African government defines "rurality" as a lifestyle, mindset, and culture centred on land, livestock farming, and community relationships. For Mahlomaholo, they encompass traditional communal areas, agricultural land, peri-urban regions, informal settlements, and small rural towns where individuals have several opportunities to subsist on the land.⁴⁴

Mahlomaholo, provides a definition of learning as an activity that occurs inside, between, and across different settings, comprising a learning ecosystem.⁴⁵ Learning, according to Mahlomaholo, is a basic ability inherent in every individual.⁴⁶ Hence, an ecology can be defined as a setting that promotes and sustains the development of communities. Further, it is characterised as an open, dynamic, interdependent, diversified, partially self-organising, adaptive, and fragile system.⁴⁷ A learning ecology, as per Mahlomaholo, refers to a collection of situational factors present in physical or virtual environments that offer possibilities for learning.⁴⁸ It includes a variety of activities, tangible assets, connections, and the consequential interactions that arise from them. The concept of ecology is expanded to include the attributes of a learning ecology, which consists of a group of interconnected communities of interest, engage in mutual influence, undergo continuous evolution, and mostly operate autonomously.⁴⁹ In addition, Mahlomaholo asserts that the learning ecosystem encompasses a context in which learning communities are formed, develop, perish, regenerate, and undergo transformation.⁵⁰ By adopting an ecological analogy, the learning environment is compared to the biosphere, and the

⁴⁰ Molefi Motsoeneng and Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers," in *ICIE 2015 3rd International Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship: ICIE 2015*, vol. 120 (Academic Conferences Limited, 2015).

⁴¹ Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa."

⁴² Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

⁴³ Tshelane and Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments for Professional Curriculum Leadership through Information and Communication Technologies."

⁴⁴ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

⁴⁵ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁴⁶ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁴⁷ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

⁴⁸ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Education Researchers as Bricoleurs in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments," *Perspectives in Education* 32, no. 4 (2014): 171–83.

⁴⁹ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

⁵⁰ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

learning ecology is analogous to the relationship between learning and life.⁵¹ Hence, it is reasonable to infer that learning creates and expands upon intricate and varied networks or webs of human existence.

The SuRLEc theory encompasses societal transformation processes that include a minimum of three dimensions. Application of systems thinking, recognising interconnections, establishing relationships between functions, leveraging diversity, and generating synergy can contribute to the achievement of a more sustainable society than what is now observed or expected. Undoubtedly, it is of utmost significance that we comprehend the structures of communities and revert to thinking in terms of relationships and interconnections. Ecosystems are formed by interconnected networks, interdependence, adaptability, robustness, and, when considering these factors together, sustainability.⁵² Therefore, the study of ecosystems can provide valuable insights into humanity's pursuit of sustainability.

The Role of Sechaba Mahlomaholo in the SuRLEc Research Agenda

Drawing on Mahlomaholo Sechaba's social cohesion theory as a framework for overseeing the learning of postgraduate students and for analysing research data, 15 scholars convened in 2011 with the common goal of enhancing the success rates of MEd and PhD students.⁵³ The aim was to provide guidance on designing the methodology section, generating, collecting, and analysing data in a meaningful manner, driven by the study objectives and the literature perused.⁵⁴ Although all academics held PhD degrees in education, their areas of expertise were diverse, including mathematics, physical and natural sciences, economic and managerial sciences, psychology and sociology, history, and languages, among others. An academic network was established to aggregate various areas of expertise.⁵⁵ Several academic and professional partners from international and national universities, various government departments (such as those of education and social development), and numerous civil society groups (including non-governmental and faith-based organisations) took part in this network.⁵⁶ The objective of this networked initiative was to ensure the extensive involvement and support of all stakeholders in order to enhance the success rate of postgraduate students through their respective contributions.⁵⁷ While the initiative did not achieve complete success in obtaining the buy-in and support of all participants, it generated satisfaction among a small number of individuals who maintained their involvement through emails, Skype, telephone communication, and occasional in-person meetings.

Historical Relationships as a Catalyst for Student Supervision

The networked project, known as the SuRLEc research team, gained significant recognition and prestige when a considerable number of postgraduate students, who had previously studied under the same academics, developed a high level of confidence and trust in them. As a result, they approached the academics both individually and as a group, expressing their desire to be supervised by them in their studies.⁵⁸ Virtually all of the students who finally participated in the project were practising

⁵¹ Mahlomaholo, "Academic Network and Sustainable Learning Environments."

⁵² Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

⁵³ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined"; Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments"; Sechaba Mahlomaholo and Vhonani Netshandama, "Post-Apartheid Organic Intellectual and Knowledge Creation," *At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries* 78 (2012); Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁵⁴ Motsoeneng and Mahlomaholo, "Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers."

⁵⁵ Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa."

⁵⁶ Motsoeneng and Mahlomaholo, "Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers."

⁵⁷ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

⁵⁸ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

teachers, department heads, school principals, and government department executives.⁵⁹ A three-day workshop was scheduled on specified dates, during which strategic planning meetings were conducted to deliberate on the project's objective and strategy for implementation. Ahead of the meeting, the scholars compiled research papers outlining the components of postgraduate learning within a cohort. Additional written materials outlined the research process, starting from its conceptualisation, the development of the research topic, and the methodology for conducting a literature evaluation aligned with the study objectives and the literature.⁶⁰ The aforementioned materials provided instructions on how to derive conclusions and formulate recommendations from the research results. These were disseminated to everyone well in advance.

Arrangement of Workshops/Seminars

It is noteworthy that distinct roles were assigned to different groups of five persons to facilitate the conversations. The participants were required to arrange meetings prior to the three-day seminars to exchange views and develop a stance on their individual subjects.⁶¹ Each participant had a designated position and a specific contribution to offer during the scheduled three-day workshop and strategic planning sessions. On the specified day, each group was given time to deliver their ideas to the rest of the team using their preferred language and media, which included personal anecdotes, photographs, and video presentations delivered orally via PowerPoint. The initial workshop commenced with a review, discussion, and consensus on the objective of the project (the team), which was to establish enduring postgraduate learning environments that would enable all participants to learn effectively in a secure setting, with the assistance and guidance of the supervisory team and peers.⁶² Effective learning requires students to be capable of formulating research projects that may result in the completion of effective theses and dissertations. Thereafter, the team contemplated the distinctive strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges it encountered both individually and collectively in the pursuit of the overarching objective.⁶³ Out of the extensive list of problems produced, the five most crucial priorities were chosen. The team resolved to execute actions within specified time limits. Each priority was accompanied by relevant activities designed to facilitate the operationalisation of the associated goal. For instance, students and supervisors were required to monitor and report the status of proposal writing on a monthly basis for a period of up to six months.⁶⁴

Progress Tracking and Support

Each chapter of the theses and dissertations was consistently reviewed and improved monthly until the completion of the research, which took three to four years.⁶⁵ Individuals, and occasionally groups of individuals, were allocated specific responsibilities to guarantee the timely completion of each of those actions based on their priority. The team meticulously strategised the allocation of resources for each activity according to their respective priorities. They jointly devised methods for monitoring the advancement made in each activity towards achieving the specified priority. Two areas of consensus within the team were the specific responsibilities assigned to each supervisor and student.⁶⁶ For instance, it was mutually decided that the team would convene monthly to exchange pertinent literature on the several facets of the developing research. Members also concluded to exchange thoughts on the

⁵⁹ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments"; Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Post-Apartheid Organic Intellectual and Knowledge Creation."; Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁶⁰ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

⁶¹ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

⁶² Mahlomaholo, "Academic Network and Sustainable Learning Environments."

⁶³ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁶⁴ Mahlomaholo, "Naivety of Empiricism versus Complexity of Bricolage in Creating Sustainable Learning Environments."

⁶⁵ Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa."

⁶⁶ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments"; Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

development of empirical research during these monthly sessions. Furthermore, every participant consented to deliver a formal presentation. Subsequently, following the established protocols for doing formal research, their peers would provide a respectful and constructive assessment of the work.⁶⁷

Cluster Formations and Student Visits

In between the monthly meetings, the students would engage in collaborative reading and learning in groups of approximately five individuals in their different localities on a near-daily basis. Individuals had the freedom to seek explanation and support from any member of the supervisory team whenever necessary.⁶⁸ The supervisory team alternated between visiting the students at their residences and educational institutions where their research was carried out to offer assistance and, overall, to demonstrate the team's availability and concern for their learning and achievements.⁶⁹ Due to ethical concerns regarding fostering dependency, the team refrained from offering any material assistance. However, pupils were provided with guidance on the methods and locations to obtain financial support for their continuous research endeavours. The supervisory team inquired about the respondents' personal well-being, family dynamics, and employment circumstances, and, if needed, offered guidance and assistance in addressing personal difficulties as suggested by.⁷⁰ In several instances, it was imperative to contact them on their mobile devices to provide reassurance on the ongoing accessibility of the supervisory team during challenging periods in their personal and/or academic spheres. In addition, they were motivated to support one another as colleagues and it was underscored that the outcomes of all individuals relied on the achievements of other members of the team.⁷¹ Students, professors, and participants, as previously stated, formed a cohesive team that collaborated harmoniously to accomplish its shared objective. In times of need, individual supervisors were provided with support from both the students and other supervising colleagues. This support was characterised by trust, reciprocity, and genuineness.⁷²

Workplace Driven Research

To effect improvements on their ideas and methods of education, the supervisory team urged all students and one another as supervisors to conduct research in their respective professions.⁷³ The entire team's research was directed by design research methodologies which prioritised comprehending the problems and then investigating the solutions and the contextual factors that facilitate or impede success, with the ultimate aim of developing indicators of the success of the solutions tested in theory and practice. The significance of conducting research based on respect, which raised the research participants to the level of co-researchers and fully developed human beings, possessing the same status and stature as researchers, was emphasised.⁷⁴ A comprehensive and intentional operationalisation of the theoretical frameworks that underpin this approach, including Jürgen Habermas's Critical Emancipatory Research and Joel Kinchloe's Bricolage, was undertaken.⁷⁵ The team resided and engaged in interactions in accordance with the principles outlined in these ideas. The pupils rigorously examined real-world problems with utmost regard. Instead of imposing themselves on their research participants, they consistently drew upon the conversations in the staff rooms and

⁶⁷ Mahlomaholo, "On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁶⁸ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁶⁹ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁷⁰ Mahlomaholo, "Education Researchers as Bricoleurs in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments."

⁷¹ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

⁷² Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Post-Apartheid Organic Intellectual and Knowledge Creation."; Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments"; Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁷³ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments"; Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Early School Leavers and Sustainable Learning Environments in Rural Contexts," *Perspectives in Education* 30, no. 1 (2012): 101–10; Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁷⁴ Makesemese Rosy Mahlomaholo, Hilda Israel, and Sechaba M G Mahlomaholo, "Relationally Enhancing Teacher Education in Early Childhood Learning Environments towards Sustainability," *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research* 5, no. 2 (2023): 56–68.

⁷⁵ Motsoeneng and Mahlomaholo, "Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers."

other areas to stay educated about the concerns related to individuals in their specific environments.⁷⁶ Their mandate was to facilitate the deliberations on such issues and to empower participants to assist in formulating them into researchable subjects. In order to investigate matters of curriculum, teaching and learning, and educational governance from a variety of viewpoints at multiple levels and theoretical positions, they enlisted and formed teams of stakeholders that extended beyond the confines of classrooms and schools.⁷⁷

Collaborative Research Practices

The researchers dismantled the concept of the “expert” and reimagined it as a shared environment where all participants may actively engage and collaborate with other members to find enduring and sustainable solutions to the problem, as per Mahlomaholo.⁷⁸ According to Mahlomaholo and Mahlomaholo, it has long been acknowledged that individuals who have firsthand experience of the problem under investigation are the most qualified to identify the proper remedy for it.⁷⁹ The function of the student researchers, similar to their university counterparts, was to facilitate participants in tapping into their inherent capacity to address their issues. They facilitated the participants in assuming their appropriate roles as co-researchers, rather than just as subjects or objects of study.⁸⁰ These individuals, in their capacity as co-researchers, collaboratively established the agenda for the ongoing research. As recommended by Mahlomaholo, they assumed responsibility, enlisted resources, and effectively acquired the necessary competence.⁸¹ They were present from the inception of the research concept, throughout its implementation, and finally in the authorship of the report.⁸² They stayed thereafter beyond the designated study period, as the project had significance and facilitated the enhancement of their practical skills in real-world scenarios.

Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies (SuRLEc) Colloquium

Annually, the students, along with their team members and supervisors, organise a colloquium to which peers from the team's wider networks are invited.⁸³ These individuals would include colleagues from local and international academic institutions, as well as representatives from civic society and government agencies. The conference typically spans three days, during which all participants deliver papers and exchange their research findings in a comprehensive manner.⁸⁴ To effectively document all these actions and data for future generations, conference proceedings are published in a specialised, recognised journal that is often edited by guest authors and subjected to peer review.⁸⁵ All students and researchers aspire to have their names published, which serves as a strong incentive for them to enhance their performance in generating high-quality and publishable research. Out of the 111 papers presented at the colloquium in 2013, the team produced 48 guest-edited papers, which were subsequently published in three reputable journals.

⁷⁶ Mahlomaholo, “Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments.”

⁷⁷ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, “Post-Apartheid Organic Intellectual and Knowledge Creation.”; Mahlomaholo, “Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments.”

⁷⁸ Mahlomaholo, “Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments.”

⁷⁹ Makeremese R Mahlomaholo and Sechaba M G Mahlomaholo, “Creating Sustainable Posthuman Accounting Learning Environments: The Case for Green Accounting in South Africa,” *Research in Educational Policy and Management* 6, no. 1 (2024): 90–101.

⁸⁰ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, “Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci’s Organic Intellectual.”

⁸¹ Mahlomaholo, “Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa.”

⁸² Mahlomaholo, “Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments.”

⁸³ Mahlomaholo, “Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments.”

⁸⁴ Mahlomaholo, “Academic Network and Sustainable Learning Environments.”

⁸⁵ Mahlomaholo, “Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environments: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory.”

SuRLEc Postgraduate Students' throughput Rates

Since its inception in 2011, the initiative has successfully graduated over 40 Master of Education (MEd) students and twenty PhD students between 2013 and 2024. The annual success rate of students in other programmes is 50% lower than the current success rate in the Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments project. Educational institutions that excel in the nation are those that provide full-time employment to students engaged in research activities. The project has gained prominence, with supervisors from both local and foreign backgrounds being requested to offer their valuable insights into establishing sustainable postgraduate learning settings.⁸⁶

Implications of the Work of Sechaba Mahlomaholo in the Context of Social Cohesion

The SuRLEc initiative, spearheaded by Sechaba Mahlomaholo, equipped the students in discovering novel and constructive methods of engaging with their classmates, supervisors, participants in their individual projects, and the cultural elements of the learning material.⁸⁷ That allowed them to investigate and uncover the inherent strength inside themselves (refer to the preceding explanation). Their identities shifted from being individuals functioning solely within the framework of the natural order of reality to those representing a socially unified academic community.⁸⁸

Furthermore, they advanced to the stage of cooperative agents functioning at the practical level of the actual world, and finally as participants in the social order of reality.⁸⁹ The individuals formed a socially unified team with the specific goal of transforming their otherwise unpredictable circumstances. The impetus for this shift was their inclusion in the university team, which granted them the autonomy and accountability to take action and make valuable contributions to their own learning as well as that of their classmates.⁹⁰ Initially, they assumed the task of coordinating and guiding small groups but eventually evolved into prominent figures who supervised entire teams of teachers, students, and parents in their individual schools.⁹¹ These new responsibilities required them to engage in extensive reading, possess expertise in their subject area, and exhibit specialised knowledge to effectively engage with and critique current research practices and advanced scholarship in a specific field. This was necessary for successful negotiations with various groups of stakeholders.⁹² The development of this novel and influential academic identity was facilitated by the students' active involvement in a practical project as whole individuals who examined and assimilated knowledge from various sources and perspectives.

Numerous disjunctures in their lives and educational experiences prompted them to reassess their identity, abilities, and aspirations. Their physical and mental faculties were mutually supportive, preventing any collapse or submersion of one another. They had to assume several roles, including instructors, leaders, strategists, lobbyists, comforters, researchers, and more, as they collaborated with their university teams and local school communities to find enduring solutions.⁹³ They were social agents with the objective of transforming the relationships that led to the underperformance at their

⁸⁶ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Post-Apartheid Organic Intellectual and Knowledge Creation."; Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments"; Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁸⁷ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁸⁸ Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa."

⁸⁹ Bekithemba Dube et al., "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments in the Era of the Posthuman: Towards Borderless Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research* 5, no. 1 (2023): i-x.

⁹⁰ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Post-Apartheid Organic Intellectual and Knowledge Creation."; Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁹¹ Sechaba M G Mahlomaholo and Makersemese R Mahlomaholo, "Employability as Inclusive Entanglement in Relationalities: A Design in Sustainable Learning Environments," in *Intellectual and Learning Disabilities-Inclusiveness and Contemporary Teaching Environments* (IntechOpen, 2024).

⁹² Sechaba Mahlomaholo and Makersemese R Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Early Childhood Learning Environments for Emergency Situations: The Case of Sweden, Kenya and South Africa," in *Global Perspectives on Educational Innovations for Emergency Situations* (Springer International Publishing Cham, 2022), 25-34.

⁹³ Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Education in South Africa: Inequality and the Future of Marginalized Learners," *Journal of Educational Research* 13, no. 2 (2020): 123-40.

educational institutions. The individuals successfully recognised, labelled, and resolved the issues they encountered in the systems and societies to which they belong. They consistently demonstrated the ability to provide critical analysis, envision new possibilities, and make necessary adjustments from a well-informed standpoint.⁹⁴

DISCUSSION

Inclusive Participation in Research Practice

According to Dube et al., the South African education system before 1994 was characterised by exclusions, racial segregation, and racial stereotypes that grouped South African higher education constituents into socially and intellectually unequal racial classes.⁹⁵ The higher education system operated in a manner that shaped higher education institutions, including universities and technical colleges, based on racial categorisations.⁹⁶ HEIs existed exclusively for white students and staff, as well as facilities exclusively for black individuals classified as African, Indian, and Coloured. The conceptual framework underlying this separation was based on the notions of superiority and inferiority.⁹⁷ Institutions worldwide, including those in South Africa, share common goals in establishing inclusive environments that foster a feeling of belonging and unity among all community members.⁹⁸

The effectiveness of such projects and programmes primarily depends on the extent to which the stakeholders in the institutions completely support the objectives of these initiatives and are willing to make substantial contributions towards achieving the established goals. They should strive to establish environments that foster diversity and generate a sense of belonging among students. Mahlomaholo maintains that individuals at all levels, including research leaders, students, trainees, faculty, administrators, research funding agencies, policymakers, and governments, must consistently contribute to the development of an equity-based and anti-racist perspective to actively recognise and reduce its impact.⁹⁹ Therefore, it is essential for all persons to acknowledge the presence of systemic obstacles, acquire a comprehensive knowledge of these obstacles and their repercussions, and comprehend the responsibility of individuals at every level of the research ecosystem to overcome them. The existence of these obstacles is maintained and strengthened by both internal and external forces, necessitating deliberate and proactive education and involvement from all individuals involved in the system to challenge and eliminate them.

Intentional inclusive research involves actively including those who possess expertise in the subject matter being investigated. This research involves dedicating time to engage in consultations and acquiring knowledge from individuals who have the closest relevance to the issue or situation. Inclusive research extends beyond mere compliance with established norms.¹⁰⁰ It is imperative for researchers to demonstrate deliberate and genuine engagement with those who possess firsthand experience, whether as practitioners or those who have personally survived crime or become entangled in the legal system. According to Mahlomaholo, academics conducting studies in new communities must demonstrate genuineness and authenticity when communicating the project, its objectives, and its constraints.¹⁰¹ Given that some individuals may have unrealistic expectations regarding the outcome of the task, this is of utmost importance. The distinct requirements of different target groups while gathering data must be taken into account and researchers must be receptive to using a variety of techniques and strategies. Nonetheless, scholars must consider the supplementary expenses linked to

⁹⁴ Mahlomaholo, "Education Researchers as Bricoleurs in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments."

⁹⁵ Dube et al., "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments in the Era of the Posthuman: Towards Borderless Curriculum."

⁹⁶ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

⁹⁷ Mahlomaholo, "On Bricolage and the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

⁹⁸ Makeresemese Rosy Qhosola and Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Posthuman Adaptive Learning Environments for Pregnant Teenagers," *Agenda* 36, no. 1 (2022): 54–64.

⁹⁹ Motsoeneng and Mahlomaholo, "Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers."

¹⁰⁰ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

¹⁰¹ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

employing various techniques to engage rarely heard populations and include this in their study strategies.¹⁰²

Emancipatory Practices

Sechaba Mahlomaholo established a socio-habitat which was characterised by harmonious and cohesive collaboration among all members. This environment fosters the development of diversity and cooperation among both staff and students.¹⁰³ In his 2011 paper, Mahlomaholo argues that Nussbaum's concept of a politics of humanity, which asserts that all individuals should be recognised and treated with respect and that displaying contempt and humiliating others is unacceptable in a civilised society may be extended to rural communities and rurality.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, he contends that expressing disgust leads to dissatisfaction and detachment from people in society, since it eliminates the potential for constructive interaction.¹⁰⁵ Mahlomaholo, presents Nussbaum's argument that the fundamental concept of disgust is the perception of being contaminated by oneself.¹⁰⁶ This emotion signifies a refusal to accept a potential contaminant. Additionally, Mahlomaholo contends that shame is potentially associated with the act of demeaning others.¹⁰⁷ Hence, the absence of humane politics may result in instructors refraining from teaching in rural regions due to apprehension of being implicated or to evade the disgrace and contempt directed towards them by teachers in urban areas. Under the framework of a politics of humanity, Mahlomaholo, aimed to provide supervisors and post-graduate students with direct exposure to supervising and conducting research in rural settings.¹⁰⁸ In addition, he aimed to encourage them to contemplate their experiences in order to analyse their comprehension of research in rural areas and rural education, and to help them discern the significant outcomes of their actions.¹⁰⁹

Democratic Practices

The prevailing conception of black individuals as having little intellectual capacity may have resulted in feelings of inferiority, undervaluation, and alienation. This perception continues to shape their self-esteem and behaviour within the now consolidated institutions.¹¹⁰ The enduring influences of historical divisions in South African HEIs are evident in the ongoing effects on the experiences of both staff and students in the current higher education environment.¹¹¹ According to Mahlomaholo, white individuals were perceived as the primary producers of knowledge at their institutions and the leaders in applying this information in their specific technical fields.¹¹² Conversely, the education provided at black colleges was specifically designed to prepare graduates for roles as employees to white individuals and to teach a curriculum that was considered by the apartheid authorities to be sufficient for black students.¹¹³ Mahlomaholo contends that the misperception of black individuals as intellectually inferior stems from the misunderstandings held by their peers that black individuals are incapable of

¹⁰² Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa."

¹⁰³ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

¹⁰⁴ Mahlomaholo, "Gender Differentials and Sustainable Learning Environments."

¹⁰⁵ Mots' elisi L Malebese, Sechaba Mahlomaholo, and Moeketsi F Tlali, "A Socially Inclusive Teaching Strategy for Fourth Grade English (Second) Language Learners in a South African School," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1–8.

¹⁰⁶ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

¹⁰⁷ Motsoeneng and Mahlomaholo, "Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers."

¹⁰⁸ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

¹⁰⁹ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

¹¹⁰ Mahlomaholo and Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Posthuman Accounting Learning Environments: The Case for Green Accounting in South Africa."

¹¹¹ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

¹¹² Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Sustainable Empowering Learning Environments: Conversations with Gramsci's Organic Intellectual."

¹¹³ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

academic success.¹¹⁴ The existence of these attitudes and divisions led to the formation of IQ stereotypes between black and white groups of pupils and learners.¹¹⁵

Questioning the Status Quo

Qhosola and Mahlomaholo argue that it is intriguing to investigate how students actively build knowledge and use resources in their intellectual journey, rather than being instructed to simply replicate the knowledge of expert teachers.¹¹⁶ It is imperative to provide post-graduate students with the chance to challenge and disturb the existing state of affairs. By giving due consideration to the languages, histories, experiences, and voices of the students and incorporating them into our own knowledge, postgraduate study becomes a vibrant and interactive pursuit.¹¹⁷ This pedagogical practice at the postgraduate level generates opportunities for novel constructions of reality and the emergence of new possibilities for existence resulting from the interactions between supervisor and supervisee.¹¹⁸ The implementation of a social cohesion strategy for post-graduate supervision has the potential to empower and see postgraduate students as cognitive, logical, and multifaceted individuals skilled in knowledge production. The imperative is to transcend the constraints of conventional methods and establish enduring educational settings for postgraduate students that would empower, enlighten, and liberate. Mahlomaholo, advocates for freedom as a manifestation of human awareness, through which supervisors can motivate postgraduate students to actively pursue their own interests.¹¹⁹ This entails encouraging them to explore outside their established boundaries, to contemplate, envision, and formulate their own inquiries. This phenomenon can be considered as empowerment, as it enables students to engage in critical thinking and receive a platform to express their interpretations and comprehend their real-life encounters.¹²⁰

Heterogenous Teams of Participants

In their study, Qhosola and Mahlomaholo, found that welcoming environments prioritise the intellectual and social growth of students and acknowledge the enriching impact of the cultural diversity that learners bring to the educational setting.¹²¹ Under such conditions, diversity is not seen as a detrimental phenomenon but rather as a factor that enhances the academic achievements of pupils from various social, economic, and ethnic origins.¹²² Institutions worldwide strive to strengthen educational practices by fostering collaboration between students and staff to promote the progress of excellent education.¹²³ Mahlomaholo, defines collaborative pedagogical practices as iterative methods where teachers and students actively participate in reflecting on and expanding upon their shared experiences.¹²⁴ By engaging in these activities, both educators and learners foster diversity, expand their cognitive horizons, and pose intricate inquiries that reveal their inner selves.¹²⁵

¹¹⁴ Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa."

¹¹⁵ Motsoeneng and Mahlomaholo, "Entrepreneurship Education for Further Education and Training College Lecturers."

¹¹⁶ Malebese, Mahlomaholo, and Tlali, "A Socially Inclusive Teaching Strategy for Fourth Grade English (Second) Language Learners in a South African School."

¹¹⁷ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

¹¹⁸ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

¹¹⁹ Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa."

¹²⁰ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

¹²¹ Makeresemese Rosy Qhosola and Sechaba Mahlomaholo, "Creating Decolonial Sustainable Learning Environments for the Fourth Industrial Revolution in the Rural and Urban Higher Education Contexts: A Study of Inclusive Management Strategies.," *Alternation* 27, no. 2 (2020).

¹²² Mahlomaholo, "Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environments: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory."

¹²³ Mahlomaholo, "Design Research towards the Creation of Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments."

¹²⁴ Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

¹²⁵ Mahlomaholo, "Higher Education and Democracy: Analysing Communicative Action in the Creation of Sustainable Learning Environments: Part 1: Exploration of the Critical Relationship between Higher Education and the Development of Democracy in South Africa."

A Cat amongst the Pigeons

Mahlomaholo and Mahlomaholo, contend that the supervisor must oversee the effective acquisition of power dynamics where boundaries are being reconstructed and questioned.¹²⁶ further states that the nature of this new relationship between the supervisor and students should not be confused with that of a client and a supplier.¹²⁷ Rather, this novel relationship should be established based on the principles of liberty and friendship. Ideally, it should occur in dialogical settings or interactions with others that provide opportunities for what might be, should be, or is not yet.¹²⁸ The parties should create a forum for communication and explore opportunities to develop a new relationship that is not based on supplier and consumer or master and apprentice dynamics.¹²⁹ A pedagogic relationship should be established to facilitate transformation and empowerment for both parties, thus fostering a socially cohesive research team. Indeed, according to Salmon, who wrote "In memory of Prof Sechaba M. Geoffrey Mahlomaholo" under the SAERA, Sechaba Mahlomaholo was a highly esteemed and well-admired post-apartheid organic intellectual.¹³⁰ He guided our broader national academic community across various institutions in the pursuit of knowledge and in cultivating scholars to create successful postgraduate learning environments.¹³¹ According to the colleagues and students who collaborated with him, he was regarded as the most approachable supervisor, displaying a deep enthusiasm for students and their research endeavours. For effective and sustainable supervision of postgraduate students, Sechaba Mahlomaholo recognised his responsibility as a supervisor who does not view the student as an object or a mere tool to achieve goals. Significantly, both the supervisor and supervisee perform crucial roles in the development of novel types of knowledge.¹³² When seeing dialogical settings as a mutually agreed solution that enhances the autonomy of both parties, it becomes evident that empowerment is not exclusive to those in positions of authority.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The work of Prof. Sechaba Mahlomaholo offers several recommendations for those wishing to create social cohesion in sustainable rural learning ecologies research. First, workshops should fulfil multiple objectives. Ideally, they should function as a forum for supervisors to convene and acquaint themselves with one another, facilitating the pairing of seasoned supervisors with those who are still new to research. The other objective of workshops is to provide a forum for discussing their expectations about collaboration/teamship and to equip supervisors with knowledge about supervision in rural settings, therefore alleviating their concerns and entrenching the bond amongst the team. Therefore, supervisors must be offered practical expertise in the application of participatory research approaches.

Second, developing collaborative strategies for teaching reading in the second additional language (EFAL) to multigrade students, specifically in schools with just one instructor, in remote areas is crucial. The composition of the team should include parents, individuals from community development organisations, and other stakeholders who have a vested interest in addressing potentially socially unfair actions that prohibit learners from accessing educational opportunities. The responsibilities of members should be collaboratively established and linked with their interests and other obligations to the greatest extent possible. Active participation of team members is essential from the inception of the reading project, during the creation of the project plan, the execution, and the thoughtful discussions aimed at addressing inherent deficiencies that arise during the process.

¹²⁶ Qhosola and Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Posthuman Adaptive Learning Environments for Pregnant Teenagers."

¹²⁷ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

¹²⁸ Mahlomaholo and Netshandama, "Post-Apartheid Organic Intellectual and Knowledge Creation."

¹²⁹ Mahlomaholo, "Social Communication towards Sustainable Physical Science Learning Environments."

¹³⁰ Thomas Salmon, "In Memory of Prof Sechaba M. Geoffrey Mahlomaholo," SAERA, February 5, 2024, <https://www.saera.co.za/in-memory-of-prof-sechaba-m-geoffrey-mahlomaholo/>.

¹³¹ Tshelane and Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Learning Environments for Professional Curriculum Leadership through Information and Communication Technologies."

¹³² Mahlomaholo, "Creating Sustainable Teacher Education Ecologies: A People's Education for People's Power Reimagined."

Third, as their initial task, the team should undertake a situational analysis. The objective is to identify the intrinsic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) specifically related to the EFAL reading initiative. They should consider the political, economic, research, and technical (PERT) dimensions of the problem, and whether they are of internal or external origin to the project. This analytical procedure should assist the team in formulating a coherent plan for the implementation of reading instruction in EFAL including methodology, reading material, the teaching process itself, and the reflections on post-lesson presentations. Finally, the team should have a clear understanding of the criteria that should consistently elucidate the implementation of the strategy. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that the criteria should be subject to criticism in order to facilitate ongoing improvement.

CONCLUSION

In this eulogy, the prominent role Mahlomaholo played as a doyen in the field of education in general and the SuRLEC research agenda was examined. Through a collaborative supervision model, Prof. Sechaba Mahlomaholo initiated the creation of a space for academics at the rural Qwa-Qwa campus of the UFS to supervise postgraduate students. His propensity to facilitate workshops for supervisors augured exceptionally well for the promotion of social cohesion and enabling sustained supervision of post-graduate students. It further established that students should be at the centre of the research process with other members of the faculty playing a supporting role. His vision significantly contributed to promoting social cohesion and establishing sustainable rural learning environments for postgraduate students, thereby enhancing their academic achievements.

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