

Chapter 9

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Introduction	173
What becomes visible?	178
Degrees of visibility	179
Visible for whom?	180
Making the visible invisible	180
Invisibility of the obvious	182
The Future is invisible	183
Conclusion	183

Chapter 9

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

"The world is like a dancing mist – if you want to see it you must move with it."

(Achebe, 2003a)

Introduction

*Everything is broken
Even people don't look anymore,
their eyes are broken and empty; and shut,
everybody's back is facing the future
somebody – please say a prayer.
homes walk into each other
and the darkness does not break
it giggles in the sky like a frightened dog,
and mothers stare their babies in the eye
while fathers stare their wives above their foreheads, Somewhere,
and the children's eyes are sleepy
somebody, say a prayer.*

(Serote, 1997)

When ideas, hopes, concerns, arguments are made visible, a different kind of conversation is enabled, and new possibilities open up. For more distant audiences too, the project can (potentially) make visible the lives, plight and hopes of the community; the wisdom of the community and its definition of 'relevant science education'; the capacities of adults and children; the shortcomings of schooling as it currently operates; the necessity for government and Tribal Authorities to address not education by itself, but education, health, unemployment, services, structure and infrastructure together.

Exploring knowledge in this rural community means particularly *acknowledging* what is happening here. Seeing, being aware and speaking up. Moving forward always means recognising where you are. And knowing where you come from (Armah, 2005).

“We all live in a world we did not create ... so we need to understand the causes ... but most of the time we move too fast to notice.” (Armah, 2005)

Research brings things to light which would otherwise remain hidden. This is the purpose of research and as such, revelations are assumed to be productive and to contribute to freedom and empowerment. Even the negative currents in the psyche or society may be better dealt with if acknowledged. It is not clear whether such an assumption is valid for all uncovering of the hidden. In revealing information, ideas, hopes and disagreements, everyone (including the researchers) is made vulnerable. There can be something comforting in the fog of forgetting or in the mist that cocoons all from outside eyes.

This is a familiar image of the Ixopo hills: the rolling thick mists hide the valley in the morning. Softly the sun breaks through showing huts square and round, distant cattle herds - and a wondering observer. All-enshrouding mist is common in the valley – it appears suddenly and the vast distant landscapes disappear. Later, almost as unexpectedly, they reappear. Or perhaps they appear anew, having changed beneath the blanket. Should researchers know what happened beneath the blanket? On a larger scale, from New York and London, Pretoria, Durban, even Ixopo, this village is invisible with or without its blanket, even in full sunlight.

Figure 9.1 View of the valley



Metaphors of dense mist, alternating with limitless African bright sunlight, have been strong in our visits to the rural community. At times the research process has been obscured, at other times a clearer perspective comes into view. Sometimes senses of buoyant warmth quickly change into damp despondency. Our interaction has been characterised by constantly wanting to find out what is going on. In our prolonged involvement we have been conspicuous in our efforts to question, observe and record. But often, also holding back on probing and recording out of respect and not wishing to be over-intrusive. Revealing and highlighting beliefs, concerns and actions (our own included) has had immediate (and probably long-term) effects on all participants.

Seeing can be a means of collecting, consuming and exposing. Hence we have window shopping, voyeurism, inspection, scrutinising and examining. Seeing can also respectfully acknowledge, as in the traditional Zulu greeting, *Sawubona*: 'I see you'. Lewis-Williams' has studied the role of 'seers' (traditional sages) before the 'domestication of the mind' (Lewis-Williams, 2004:24). Here seeing is associated with wisdom. Seeing can also be a complete experience just in seeing. The Ghanaian writer, Armah, presents this beautifully in 'The Healers'. Densu asks his friend, Anan, what makes him happiest.

His answer was prompt. "Seeing."

"Seeing what?" Densu had asked.

"Seeing. Just seeing," Anan had said.

(Armah, 2000:29)

Information, dilemmas, talents are hidden even from the community for reasons of simply not seeing, not knowing where to look or not wishing something to be disclosed. Meaning is also hidden from community members by familiarity., "...nothing calls for greater circumspection than the familiar." (Kruger, 1995:84). Much about rural life is hidden of course from the wider South Africa because of its isolated location and historical marginalisation.

"We see things that were far from us now they are near."

(Woman participant, C30e, 2003)

No doubt, making the invisible visible can be liberating, empowering and inspiring. During the science festival, the *Inkosi* bubbled with delight in seeing a baby chick hatch at the festival, (the first time she had seen this, or !!). Farmers expressed surprise that a hen can lay without a cock. A parent commented: "Now we believe there is HIV/AIDS" (C30e,

2004). Another instance of public acknowledgement was of the role of Ms Mbhele, the Secondary School teacher who had been involved throughout the project: her efforts were mentioned by a number of people.

At the festival, farmers stood proudly besides their tables of eggs or chatted excitedly to visitors looking at the photos of their chickens. The funders enthusiastically acknowledged the new insights into 'their' community. Heifer witnessed the fruition of 'our' side (the educational aspect) of the farming project that they had put so much into. Student learning – and the students themselves – were clearly visible in their posters and drama. The primary school teachers' efforts were clear in the polished performances of their young pupils. On other occasions, more risky revelations were accepted respectfully. In showing the secondary school a video of 'data', we played the teacher focus-group interview (with their permission). I was nevertheless nervous as students are not usually party to staffroom discussions. I need not have been concerned: this was received with appreciation and teachers seemed pleased with their contributions being made 'public'.

Throughout our project all of us felt at times exposed by expressing our hopes, ideas and concerns. Teachers had us in their classrooms, and confided concerns about their own skills and career plans. Principals invited us into the schools, offices and staff rooms. Newly created chicken farmers welcomed us into their huts (where they kept the cages). They revealed their sales or lack of them. Children made visible their talents, ideas and personal stories. They also took us on walks through their village introducing us to their grandparents and siblings. The *Induna* took me to the *Inkosi's* kraal guiding me and inducting me to cultural practices. These instances were building not only knowledge but relationships, in the trust and willingness to share understanding.

This was not a one-way process for the researchers. For everyone, at some stage, there were unexpected revelations of new ideas, fresh perspectives or simply the experience of being able to acknowledge what is there. As one of our community researchers, Sihle, observed:

"You live a day at a time, and you think you know, but you don't. There is much information in this community that I didn't know was here."

Another of our researchers added:

"The existing knowledge is invisible; it is not expressed and discussed. What the Project has done is make the invisible visible."

Visibility and the lack of it, like sightedness, can be near and far. The far away worlds of cities, technology and wealth are over the horizon for this community. Villagers are dependent almost entirely on radios and visitors from the towns to learn about life beyond the village. Youth, especially, keenly anticipate computers that will connect them with information of other worlds. This isolation makes a mockery of democracy's 'right to information'. Access to information and opportunities to critique and comment are limited. Being empowered to ask questions, attain basic literacy and communicate in more than one language all facilitate participation in a wider community.

Democracy is dependent on getting access to knowledge – which includes access to inner knowledge. Where cultures operate knowledge-restricting taboos – as in denying the existence of HIV/AIDS. The AIDS NGO volunteers wrote a poem expressing this poignantly; "...her mother mysteriously perished ... but no one dares to name it..." (Woza Moya CD, 2003). Education in science should not just preserve culture but also examine, reform, reinvent it or seek healing constructions for new events (such as AIDS) within traditional frameworks. This is not a straight-forward process: while expecting education to conserve culture, elders also acknowledged that some aspects of culture are holding the younger generation back. The *Sangoma* asked: "How can sex education be addressed when we are not allowed to talk about it?" Teachers asked: "How can children question parents while working on projects?" Both these taboos were easily dissolved when the underlying purposes of social integrity and respect were preserved. This is what we came to call: making the invisible visible.

The invisible in this research project included student and community aspirations for the future and for education. Discovering these goals and hopes for education is central to our research and community engagement. Our first understanding after the community workshop in 2002 was that the community and students wished to have an education that would provide skills to address poverty: this was clear and uncontested. Groups of community members produced (in English and Zulu with help of facilitators) posters of things they wished their children to learn. This was followed by a display of posters and lively discussion and questions. Almost immediately mists of doubt arose: everyone was asking: How would we do this? What did science mean? Who would be involved? Where would resources come from? An elder spoke up saying this was a good project that would take time. He appealed for patience and focus. The Education Department Representative also supported not only the focus but the possibility of broadening the concept of science

curriculum. The community named the project 'Sisonke Masihlangane' – (We are working together, let's meet) - and set up a management committee. This pattern of meetings, data, questions, doubts, plans, problems and slow progress, continued.

What becomes visible?

Of course, most of this report is about 'what became visible'. I present some general examples of seemingly isolated or random insights to illustrate the phenomenon of 'seeing'. Some instances were very individual and some common to many of us. A few inherent ideas or discoveries emerged clearly as a result of the research. A few things were created.

A simple example of someone from the wider community becoming known was the vet who visited the school. A student was surprised: "I learnt about sick animals and that there is such a thing as a doctor for animals..." One group of students reported another instance that you might expect to be obvious for school-going children: "We learnt about education." And I would have thought this obvious for a farming community: "We learnt how to take care of animals." Some experiences that were acknowledged were affective more than cognitive: "Our community is a good place to live." Some insights were simple yet profound: "A computer does what it's told." Other insights were in line with set goals. Teachers said after the festival: "We now know the importance of science"; "We see children's concern about AIDS and their awareness." Other insights they mentioned were that "motivation comes from within and that learners can be encouraged to be creative – they learn well this way." The talents and knowledge of many students and community members became apparent. It was a surprise for teachers to find out the students had strong opinions (which had never been expressed) about their schooling: "It is good for learners and teachers to communicate; for students to communicate with one another; to get knowledge of the past". Students spoke out against corporal punishment, teachers not teaching and learners who smoke and get drunk at school. Encouragingly there were also changes in perceptions: "At first we didn't accept AIDS is there. Now we believe there is HIV/AIDS."

Some positive things were hidden by being taken for granted, not being pointed at: strong culture, commitment to improving life, creativity, joy. Most importantly for us was the

formation and exploration of the community's conceptions of relevant science curriculum. These things were hidden through not yet being formed or articulated.

Soon we realized that the invisible also included tensions: personal, political and organisational. One principal was not always in agreement with the other, the *Induna* and *Sangoma* said the community worked well together. Some community members and NGO workers said "No, the community doesn't work together". Many people said that there were no longer political tensions. Then one day a hitchhiker (who did not know me) volunteered that the community believed the lack of infrastructure was due the government being ANC and the community IFP. This is reiterated by Adele Gordon (1997) who claims that rural communities depend on political will for equitable budget resources to be delivered. When I checked this with some community members, they conceded that it was probably a common perception. An NGO manager who had lived with the community for many years advised me: "there are layers and layers... I often don't understand." So much remains invisible to the outsider, even to insiders.

Degrees of visibility

Visible and invisible are extremes. Something partially visible is whispered about: an apparition. Coming in from the outside, as strangers, we are partially visible. This gave rise to some suspicion of our motives, some confusion about what our role was. After an interview with the *Induna* he asked: "Why are you asking these questions?" then went on to say he was happy to answer and approved of our explanations. And one principal asked an outside Zulu-speaking researcher what we were *really* getting out of this project.

Visibility, as an idea, is not simple. A conversation is visible, a plan is more visible, and a plan enacted is more visible again. The community decided early in the project that relevant science education should address poverty. We all worked on this through community-based projects and school-community cooperation. An idea can be invisible because it is not yet formed; it is latent but has to be nurtured before it can be seen. So there was work involved in turning plans to actions and outcomes.

Visible for whom?

In talking about 'visibility' there may be an implication that we are all seeing the same view and that the picture is now clear. But unless we enter Plato's realm of Forms or the Zen state of 'seeing', what we see is partial and coloured by our own lens.

Making the *visible* invisible

There are some things hidden deliberately: AIDS, corruption, abuse, fear. Some things were hidden by being too far away: Western science, information to succeed, the rest of the world.

There are probably these aspects in all societies and individuals: things we would rather not see. In early 2003 one teacher, who was doing gender training and was partly involved with Woza Moya AIDS NGO, said "There is no rape in this community." At the time I was impressed. I formed a view of an unusually (in the South African context) moral, gender sensitive society. With time, contradicting stories emerged. Because there are consequences of knowing, distortions and selections are bound to arise, purposely and not. For example, the community's perception that school programmes had little value in the community was the starting point of our project, even as the community described the secondary school as a good school; neither the local committee nor ourselves could persuade it to involve itself deeply in the project — even though "the community works well together". There are invisible currents here. For example, the school and its relationships with the community may be 'good' in the social sense of relationships, or they may be 'good' in the sense that they deserve respect, even as they deserve criticism. Things that are visible can sometimes be treated as invisible.

Why make the hidden seen? There are a number of instances where revealing a situation leads to better being able to deal with it. No teacher, principal or community researcher said they knew of anyone with AIDS. One principal told us that if someone dies of AIDS the family 'changes the story', for fear of being ostracised. The students' posters and drama are changing this, as are the Woza Moya songs and poems:

"I am HIV positive - I am not ashamed of being positive. I am ashamed of my Africa, of my people, Church, family, county, government for being ashamed of me being positive. Fighting one enemy is enough."

(Woza Moya CD, C42b)

Another example was the teachers confiding that they were confused about Outcomes Based Education. This allowed us to proceed from a perspective of facilitating understanding. Further, the principal discussed his dilemma over corporal punishment which led to our discussing alternatives. If he had denied any problem no new options would arise.

Making knowledge or experience visible is a basis for empowering action. When we asked the NGO workers why it was hard to facilitate change they replied that even 'if people want a thing they let others go first', people prefer to see how something will work. This is happening with the chicken farmers. After people saw some success and progress, there were increasing requests to participate. Showcasing the farming at the festival promoted this.

Thirdly, enunciating understanding helps others to see new perspectives. One participant of an NGO said after reading one of our articles on the research project: "It's a very different perception, it was hands-on but also had lots of space around it ... what I don't have. You could see things and explain things that I can't: I was amazed." Indeed so much of the data offered by the community led to this experience for us.

It is not clear how new ideas find expression in the community. In a hierarchical structure children cannot talk openly to elders, students cannot question teachers, teachers do not disagree with the principal. Children found a way out by performing a play: 'stop abuse, protect yourself from AIDS'. Students asked us: "Why are we doing this? What are you asking this for?" They did not question the traditional curriculum thus. A teacher I met out of the formal context complained the principal is authoritarian; in the interview context such opinions were not expressed. In the wider knowledge context, computers may provide one means for opportunities to find information and communicate more openly.

Invisibility of the obvious

The fish, we are told, is unaware of the water it swims in. When an experienced researcher challenged me at a conference demanding that I confess to my prior assumptions, I innocently claimed I had none! Well, this is another instance of being oblivious to the ever-present! (On the other hand *her* assumptions of my position were also present ... and so on and so on...) In the life of community too, some things become invisible out of familiarity.

Apart from the obvious difficulty this presents for data creation, it also has in some instances deeper consequences for people and community. An instance is Sihle's interviews with community members. He asked: "Please, describe a typical day." The response was typically: 'I wake, bath, eat breakfast, take cows to graze, come home, eat, sleep.' Probing often seemed inappropriate. Who cooks? What did you eat? Whose cows? How many? Graze on which land? What is it like watching cows? Whom did you meet? What did you discuss? What about your family? Why, why, why? I discuss this disjunction of researcher interest (obsessive inquiry perhaps) with seemingly cryptic responses in Chapter 10, 'Indigenous Knowledge'. In this case the difficulty was for my data rather than for the community.

An example which could impact on the community concerns the shortcomings and 'irrelevance' of the secondary school's programmes. This is a long-entrenched structure and has become invisible through familiarity. Or is it through lack of agency to effect change? Perhaps like the landscape's beauty, or the school's weaknesses, poverty, struggle and waves of hopelessness have somehow become invisible too, even as their presence is known.

It is difficult to see what is not there to be seen: noticing the negative spaces. For example, it only occurred to me after about a year into the project that I had seen no visual arts – either in schools or homes: few paintings, sculptures or craft artefacts. What could be the meaning of that? The problem of not being able to see what is not there was a problem for our research: parents who work away from the village, locals who did not come to meetings, children who did not participate in our activities and the festival, and teachers who withdrew.

The future is invisible

In rural life the future is invisible, and hardly speculated about. This is different from city life where plans, goals, forecasts, anticipated scenarios are not only part of media broadcasts, personal planning, financial reports, but our forward-driven rush propels us right out of the present a lot of the time!

At one of the planning meetings for the project, we asked the participants to imagine life ten years hence, as “Lindiwe grows up”. Participants worked first in small groups, then as one. Consensus emerged quickly: electricity and water would be more available, and the road might be tarred, but poverty would still be a problem. Lindiwe would be educated in traditional and Western knowledge, deeply committed to the community, entrepreneurial and providing leadership in income generation, health and community development. In short, the future would depend heavily on those who were now children. Groups had no difficulty visioning the future when asked – a collective community future. It seemed harder for students when asked about their individual futures. A session on probing career interests yielded little.

The adults’ ease and enthusiasm of forming visions sits alongside their traditional reverence for the past, elders and ancestors. The Committee Chairman observed that children who have been educated seem more able than adults in the community to “Look forward and look back”. Today’s youth, he argued, are better able to think in terms of the future and change. And yet, as one of our young community researchers noted, there is a tendency too to “live just a day at a time”, which would explain the difficulty youth have of clearly determining their own future goals.

Conclusions

Is it the role of research to reveal everything that can be revealed? So far I have chosen to leave some things where I found them: they will not be reported on. There are decisions about what is simply gossip, who may get hurt from information, and breaking confidences. In the main, bringing issues, understandings, the obvious: ‘that which is’, into the open as a resource for all has had empowering consequences.