

Challenges Facing Learning at Rural Schools: A Review of Related Literature

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Abstract: - The standard of education at most rural schools worldwide has been reported as low, owing to the geography of the rural areas and the rural-based dynamics which conflicted with learning endeavours. The purpose of this study was to review literatures related to the challenges and difficulties that faced learning at rural schools, and explain the intensity to which these challenges influenced learning at rural schools. The aim was to make necessary recommendations on how the challenges can be dealt with so that they do not continue to deteriorate learning at rural schools. Different sources of literatures were reviewed, and data was analysed thematically and discussed within the context of learning at rural areas, which was the focus of the study.

The study found out that learning at rural schools was characterised by numerous challenges. Impoverished and malnourished conditions of learners in rural environments were a result of poor families who were often unemployed and unable to provide basic necessities for their families. Malnourished learners failed to grasp the learning contents due to lack of concentration. In addition, minimum parental involvement in learning alongside low value attached to education by rural parents and guardians, resulted in low learners' enrolment and high drop-out rates among rural schools, which then compromised the quality of learning. The shortage of resources, as diverse as human resources, buildings and learning aids also compromised the quality of learning at rural schools. School authorities should implement the necessary measures to minimise the detrimental effects of these challenges on learning at rural schools, to enable learners to learn optimally with improved school performance.

Keywords: Learning, learners, rural, rural areas, rural schools

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Victorian Auditor-General Report (2013), reveals that the provision of quality and accessible education to rural communities is a worldwide challenge. Despite this challenge, scholars have argued that limited research has been attempted in the areas of education in rural settings thus far (Gandara, Gutierrez & O'Hara 2001; Milanowski, Longwell-Grice, Saffold, Jones, Schomisch. & Odden, 2009; Wallin, 2009). In Canada, there is a relative lack of research within rural educational contexts (Wallin, 2009). In the United States of America, more than 30% of schools are in rural areas, yet only less than 6% of research conducted makes reference to rural schools (Hardre, 2008). This necessitate a need for research focusing on rural settings to address this research gap.

Rural schools serve large numbers of minority learners from families with little educational backgrounds (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2003). These rural learners are at risk for low motivation and lack of school success as their specific learning needs are rarely researched (Gandara, Gutierrez & O'Hara, 2001; Hardre, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009). Common factors influencing rural learners' motivation are home environments that are not conducive to learning, financial difficulties, shortage of teachers and lack of school buildings (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). The widening knowledge gap between the urban and rural schools is also due to technological developments, resulting in rural learners falling behind their urban counterparts (Lingam, 2012).

The locality of rural schools makes the deployment of technological infrastructures difficult to implement and costly. The results was that rural school learners did not enjoy instructional tools and facilities as learners in urban areas, which disparity causes unimpressive academic performance for learners at rural schools. Research on learners' achievement as this achievement relates to environmental factors shows that environment plays a significant role in shaping learner achievement (Hardre, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009). However, research is lacking that discusses these factors in more details within a rural context.

Poor learner performance at rural schools is also intensified by high rates of learner absenteeism and their inability to read and write effectively (Adedeji & Bamidele, 2003). Due to late exposure to schooling of learners at rural schools, their ability to grasp literacy and numeracy is usually compromised, as they are not exposed to schooling earlier enough when they are young and their ego and curiosity to learn is at the maximum. The deficiency regarding timeous exposure to teaching and learning shapes poor learner performance at rural schools.

In the last two decades across the continent of Africa there has been a growing anxiety about teaching in rural areas, where approximately 70% of the African population reside (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). The shortage of qualified teachers and poor conditions of teaching are the major factors affecting the quality of education offered in many African rural schools (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). Most parents in rural areas are less educated and have less ability to provide educational support for their children, and are therefore embarrassed to discuss school work with children due to their lack of knowledge (Legotlo, 2014; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008).

The standard of education at rural schools in Namibia has been low due to lack of qualified teachers, as good teachers were only teaching for about a year or two in rural areas and then decide to leave for urban areas (Namwandi 2014; NANTU, 2011). At the time of this observation, the problem of qualified teachers in Namibia was worsened by the merging of the four Colleges of Education with the University of Namibia in 2010, as the state does not guarantee full scholarships for student teachers admitted at the University of Namibia anymore, unlike in the past when student teachers at former Colleges of Education were fully funded by the state (Hanse-Himarwa, 2015).

There is evidence to suggest that education in rural areas is characterised by a lack of qualified teachers with learners lacking motivation, parental support and guidance (Hardre et al, 2009; Legotlo, 2014; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). Regardless of this characterisation, less research has been conducted on education at rural settings (Gandara et al, 2001; Wallin, 2009). This study focused on the state of learning at rural schools with the aim of contributing to the knowledge pool on improving the quality of learning at rural schools.

II. THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY

Quality learning has become the ultimate goal of many education systems across the globe. To realise this goal, more attention should be paid to factors influencing learning at places where learning is generally perceived to be compromised, such as at rural areas. Even though earlier scholars have revealed that learning at rural schools is faced with challenges, these challenges are yet to be detailed in a considerable depth for clear comprehension about their impacts and how they can be dealt with. Hence, a detailed explanation of the challenges facing learning at rural areas is necessary to sensitise educational stakeholders and prepare them to confront these challenges so that the negative effects of such challenges on learning are kept at minimum. This study focused on reviewing literatures related to learning at rural schools, with specific attention on challenges facing learning.

In the context of this review, the following question comes to mind; what are challenges facing learning at rural schools? In addressing this question, this review paper sought to name and explain the challenges confronting learning at rural schools as reported in related literature sources. The aim was to raise awareness about the difficulties learners were faced with at rural schools, and propose remedies against these difficulties, so that the quality of learning at rural schools was not compromised.

III. THE FINDINGS

The related literature were reviewed in search of answers to the question as outlined earlier. The data generated was analysed thematically, and generated themes which relates to persistent poverty, minimum parental involvement and shortage of resources as major challenges that faced learning

at rural schools. The themes were explained and interpreted as answers that the review sought to produce. These answers are presented next.

3.1 Persistent poverty

Rural teaching includes teaching impoverished and malnourished learners, which often led to interrupted school attendance and learners' academic needs not being met (Aziz, 2011; Epply, 2009). Impoverished and malnourished conditions of learners in rural environments were a result of poor families who were often unemployed and thus unable to provide basic necessities for their families.

Teaching malnourished learners placed an added challenge on already overworked rural teachers in ensuring effective learning (Ibadin, 2010; Monk, 2007). When learners were malnourished, they did not have the energy to concentrate during lesson presentation and grasp the contents being taught. Learners were sleepy and less active during lessons and this placed a mammoth task on teachers to keep them awake and make them learn what is being taught. This reduced teacher motivation and morale since optimal learning could not take place. As a result, malnourished learners coupled with unmotivated teaching staff eventually led to poor mastery of learning outcomes in rural schools.

Apart from the poor family background and learners' characteristics as factors hampering learning in rural schools, Loeb, Darling-Hammond and Luczak (2005) indicates that poverty can also be expressed in terms of the school context, for having poor school infrastructure and offering low teacher salaries. The state of poverty of schools led to massive teacher turnover which negatively affects learning at rural schools.

Inadequate funding to schools contributed to rural schools' inability to attract and retain qualified teachers for effective learning (Howley, Rhodes & Beall, 2009). Public schools get funding from central government for the procurement of educational resources. The funds were not sufficient to acquire sufficient instructional materials for all learners enrolled at a school. In some cases, learners shared instructional materials such as textbooks. Due to insufficient textbooks, teachers were forced to write summaries on chalkboards for learners to copy into their summary books. The time used for writing and copying summaries could be well used for explanation and assessment of subject contents. The inability of schools to provide enough learning materials because of shortages of funds has resulted in rural schools' inability to attract competent teachers for improved learning outcomes.

In addition, learning in critical subjects such as mathematics, science and special education was minimal as rural areas had difficulties in finding teachers specialising in these learning areas and instructional resources for these subjects (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves & Salgado, 2005; Paul, 2005). The supply of teachers of these critical subjects was scarce in

general, which was exacerbated by conditions in rural areas that were encountered as challenging.

It becomes clear that learning in rural school was hampered by poor families whose children attend school malnourished and who therefore were unable to learn successfully. In addition, parents' poverty levels causes an inability to raise sufficient funds to supplement government under-funding to schools in order to ensure sufficient resources and the attraction of competent teachers for improved learning at rural schools.

3.2 Minimum parental involvement

Most parents in rural areas were not willing to invest in the education of their children as they were not convinced of its quality (Shadreck, 2012). The lack of quality education in rural schools influenced parents' reluctance to allow their children to attend after-school education programmes as such programmes were not necessarily successful in producing the desired results in terms of improved learner performance. For example, rural parents in India were not likely to support learners' involvement in school programmes that took place in the evenings or during weekends as that interfered with taking care of family responsibilities (Cross & Burney, 2005). Parents did not want an opportunity cost where family responsibilities suffers in vain as after-school programmes usually did not produce intended results.

As most parents in rural areas were not well-educated and were not able to provide educational support to their children, they were embarrassed to discuss school work with their children (Legotlo, 2014; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). The result of parent indifference in many rural schools across the continent of Africa was then low learners' enrolment and high drop-out rates among rural schools, which then compromised the quality of learning (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). The learners enrolled usually achieved poor performance as influenced by their parents' unfitting understanding of the value of education.

In addition, parents were unlikely to support what they did not understand or value, which caused them to direct learners' attention to their priority areas pertaining to household chores and work to help support the family, or work in family businesses (Legotlo, 2014; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). Being engaged in household chores, limited time was available for learners to participate in opportunities designed to promote their learning endeavour, resulting in poor learner performance and a sustaining of limited opportunities for academic success (Cross & Burney, 2005; Epply, 2009; Howley et al, 2009). Despite their literacy level that seems not to appreciate education, parents should continuously be reminded that they have a moral obligation and fiduciary duty of providing emotional guidance and academic support to their children (Van der Merwe, 2011), which duty should also apply to parents of rural areas and where it should be utilised effectively.

It was clear that learning in rural schools was hampered by minimum parental involvement, intensified by parents' mistrust of schooling due to the poor quality of provisioning. Parents' mistrust was combined with their rating of an education as less important than household duties. Despite the low level of significance parents attach to education, scholars still emphasise the fact that parents have a fiduciary duty to support the learning process of their children, and not left everything in the hands of teachers alone.

3.3 Shortage of resources

As reported earlier, most rural schools were poor and characterised by lack of resources with regard to human resources, facilities and instructional materials (Ncube, 2013). Efforts by the School Boards to provide resources to rural schools were not always effective due to low level of education and high poverty levels among the rural parent population (Van der Merwe, 2011), which resulted in poor learner performance in rural areas due to disparities in school resources (Lingam, 2012). The lack of human resources was caused by low retention of good teachers in rural schools (Aziz, 2011), thereby diminishing learning achievement as a direct effect of teacher quality (Bauch, 2001; Carey, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Shadreck, 2012). All initiatives in educational development and provision rely on the availability of quality teachers with suitable pedagogical skills, knowledge and characteristics (Burnett & Lingam 2007), the absence of which culminates in poor mastery of learning outcomes.

Exacerbating lack of human resources at rural schools was the lack of school inspectors visiting rural schools for mentoring teachers and supervising their performance (Lingam, 2012). This causes deficiencies in mentoring and supervision areas at rural schools, with a cripple effect on learning outcomes. Apart from the lack of support from the educational department and due to their geographic isolation, teachers at rural schools did not have adequate access to professional development programmes (Hammer et al, 2005:35). This made it difficult for teachers to attend workshops and other professional development initiatives in order to capacitate themselves and render learning effective.

Lack of human resources at rural schools was caused by high teacher turnover due to unfavourable working conditions in rural areas (Shahidul & Karim, 2015). This situation was worsened by qualified teachers who prefer to remain in urban areas upon completion of their teacher training programme, which resulted in a constant lack of qualified teaching staff at rural schools (Burnett & Lingam, 2007). Many rural schools did not have sufficient buildings to accommodate learners of all grade levels which resulted in multi-grade teaching (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). Lack of qualified and skilled teachers and teachers qualified specifically for multi-grade teaching contributed to poor learner performance at rural schools (Lingam, 2012; Narsey, 2004).

Adding to the state of poor learning at rural schools was the lack of proper understanding of the concept of learning as this learning was carried out and perceived on the basis of the economic narratives of the rural environment (Ncube, 2013). The implication was that learner achievements in rural schools, which were by implication poor schools, were situated in poverty, thereby compromising learner achievement and efforts to uplift learning at these schools. Thus, rural schools have fallen short of the required resources, as these resources pertained to human resources, infrastructures and instruction tools and materials.

There was evidence that learning in rural environments was hampered by insufficient resources pertaining to human resources and physical infrastructure which, to a large extent, resulted in persistent poverty and diminished learning outcomes. Factors such as malnourished learners accompanied by minimal parental involvement worsened the success with learning. Despite the influence of these factors, quality education at poorly-resourced rural schools can be achieved by the morality of the school staff in fostering strong relation with parents and mobilising adequate resources for teaching and learning (Van der Merwe, 2011). Teachers have a moral obligation to educate the parent community on the importance of education and map out ways of how education stakeholders can collaborate to acquire sufficient resources for effective learning at rural schools.

IV. SUMMARY

Learning at rural schools was characterised by numerous challenges, owing to the locality of the rural environments. Rural areas were reported to be characterised by harsh environmental conditions, which has a ripple effects on learning. The review of related literature revealed that the major challenges that faced learning at rural schools, related to persistent poverty among rural families, minimum parental involvement and shortage of resources at rural schools. Most learners at rural schools hail from poor families that were unable to provide for the educational needs of their children. As a result, many rural school learners attended schools on empty stomach due to limited household nourishment.

Most parents in rural school attached low value to education, and thus were not supportive of the education of their children, diminishing learning ambitions for their children. Moreover, most rural schools lacked the required resources as these resources pertained to human resources regarding qualified teachers and monitoring personnel, building infrastructures as the classrooms were not enough to accommodate all learners, as well as instructional materials not sufficient to render learning effective. The combined pressure of these factors has paralysed learning at rural schools, and learners were not able to master curriculum outcomes as required.

V. CONCLUSION

Various scholars have reported learning at rural schools as not being effective. The lack of effective learning at rural schools was thus attributed to the host of challenges that were characterising schools at rural areas. These challenges, which relates to persistent poverty, lack of parental commitment and inadequacy of resources, needs to be noted so that educational stakeholders understand how these challenges influence learning, and how best these challenges were to be dealt with, so that their detrimental effects on learning could be minimised. In comparative terms, rural schools faced harsh learning conditions than urban schools, and learning at urban school was therefore less hampered owing to urban locality, a generally perceived better standard of living and a better understanding of education among parents and guardians of urban areas.

This comparison do not imply that urban areas were not faced by challenges, though did not form part of this study. Admission is made that urban areas too, have their own set of challenges unique to them, which other studies can dwell on. But in terms of family economics, localities, services provision and accessibility, urban schools enjoy these services better, which then placed rural schools marginally at disadvantages relative to learning.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above conclusion, the following recommendations were made for possible consideration and implementations:

- The government should maximize the school feeding programme and make it available to all schools in rural areas, in order to provide nutrition and enable learners to learn without hindrance.
- Guardians of learners receiving monthly social grants from the government should use the grant prudently to provide for the welfare of their children in different regards, such as clothing, nutrition and instructional materials.
- School authorities should frequently hold meetings and other gatherings, to sensitise parents and raise awareness on the importance of educating their children, and provide ways of how parents and guardians can contribute meaningfully to the education of their children.
- The government should ensure the provision of resources to rural schools, such as the timely deployment of qualified teachers, the construction of enough classrooms and the availability of instructional materials for effective learning.

The consideration of the above recommendations and their successful implementation thereof, will help to ensure successful learning at schools situated in rural localities.

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