

Creating Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies in South Africa: Realities, Lessons and Prospects

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ABSTRACT Current educational and other research finds that it is no longer desirable, appropriate or useful to define urban in terms of rural or the other way round. To do so is to create a competitive relationship between them, to the disadvantage of rural areas. Such thinking also generalises situations that are actually very different from each other. Furthermore, a “one size fits all” approach to policy and its implementation makes it possible to overlook and disregard important aspects of the lives and the needs of the different rural communities. The realities faced by people in rural areas cannot always be addressed by policy made elsewhere and for everyone. It is very important to bring schools and communities much closer together. The Tirisano document placed schools in the most important position by viewing them as ‘centres for community life’. The situation where schools are dissociated from the communities is a complicated and challenging reality for both. However, one reason why it should take place is that it creates a key link between education and development. Emerging voices puts this matter most clearly. It points out that although integrated rural development policies are in place, they do not make any reference to education even though it is accepted that education lies at the heart of poverty reduction and rural development. Emerging voices further found that children [in rural areas] do not have their constitutional right to education realised, and their rights within education or through education are also limited. Through a literature review and participatory rural appraisal, the paper presents realities, lessons and prospects with a view to contributing to the creation of sustainable rural learning ecologies. Amongst the findings, the out-migration from rural to urban areas seems to continue unabated. There are incidents of incongruities between desirable and presented learning programmes during certain eras and a perception that one’s utopian reality may only be realized in an urban setting. It is the researcher’s view that the creation of such would circumvent the effects of rural brain drain by enhancing sustainability and rural development. In brief, the paper addresses realities, lessons and prospects pertinent to the research question: How do we create sustainable rural learning ecologies?

INTRODUCTION

In the course of history, seldom has the greatness of a nation long survived the disintegration of its rural life. For untold ages man by nature has been a villager and has not long survived in other environments. Many studies of the subject which has been made in many countries have revealed that as a rule city families survive for only a few generations. Cities continue to grow and thrive only as they are constantly replenished by the movement of people from the rural areas. So long as a nation’s rural life is vigorous it possesses reserves of life and power, which nourish, nurture, promote and sustain humanity. When for a long time cities draw the cream of life and culture from the villages [rural brain drain], returning almost nothing, as has been the case in some parts of South Africa and the world, the current rural resources of culture and energy become depleted, and the strength of the nation is most likely to be shaken and stirred. Excellence in teaching and learn-

ing in rural contexts remains a challenge for all sectors and levels of the educational endeavour. The foregoing was realized by Andress (1919) in as early as the beginning of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the situation seem not to have abated. Urban and metropolitan schools, colleges and universities may unintentionally structure their learning programmes in such a manner that they neglect rural attributes and resultantly ostracize or marginalize learners/students from rural environments. To complete the loop, these institutions are more likely to fail in preparing graduates for decisive contribution to sustainable rural learning ecologies.

According to the Department of Basic Education (2010) just over half of South Africa’s children (54%) live in rural households. This translates into almost 10 million children. In South Africa these children are made vulnerable by the fact that service provision and resources in rural areas lag far behind urban areas. Access to education suffers the same fate as access to other services in rural areas. Children living in

rural areas on farms are less likely to attend school than children living in urban areas. Attendance in the commercial farming areas is 14% lower than attendance by children in urban formal areas. Access is more problematic in rural areas because children in these areas are often subject to multiple vulnerabilities and deprivations. For example, child poverty is far higher in rural areas than in urban areas (two-thirds of children living in poverty live in rural areas); children in rural areas living with a disability face greater shortages of educational facilities than those in urban areas; there is a more severe shortage of infrastructure and learning resources such as libraries in rural schools; children in rural areas are less likely to have their enabling documents such as birth certificates required for school enrolment; child labour is a common feature in the lives of almost all rural children, who spend some time each day - both before and after school - on domestic and agricultural chores such as herding cattle or fetching firewood or water. Children in deep rural areas are more likely to be engaged in economic work of three hours or more per week than their urban counterparts. It would be worthwhile to examine rural realities in South Africa

Rural Realities in South Africa

The government of South Africa views “rurality” as “a way of life, a state of mind and a culture which revolves around land, livestock cropping and community.” Rural areas include all traditional communal areas, farmland, peri-urban areas, informal settlements and small rural towns where people have a number of possibilities to live from the land. Rural development is about enabling rural people to take control of their destiny, thereby dealing effectively with rural poverty through the optimal use and management of natural resources. It is a participatory process through which rural people learn over time, through their own experiences and initiatives, how to adapt their indigenous knowledge to their changing world (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2010, 2012). It should be pointed out that the new South Africa inherited a skewed agrarian structure. South Africa’s ‘dualistic’ agrarian structure comprises around 35,000 large-scale, mostly white-owned commercial farms, occupying the majority of the country’s agricultural land and produc-

ing almost all marketed output, and a much larger number of small-scale, black farmers, livelihoods after Land Reform in South Africa 141 largely confined to the ex-Bantustans (approximately 4 million), located in around 2 million households (Aliber 2009: 4; Aliber and Hart 2009: 4). This latter group is quite diverse, both in scale and orientation; most produce mainly for subsistence purposes and as a supplementary source of food, and a smaller number (around 200,000) mainly in order to generate monetary income (Aliber and Cousins 2013). The South African ‘rural’ conversation obviously also includes deficiency scripts (Bundy 1988; Moore 1984, cited in Ebersöhn and Ferreira 2012), especially of poverty as a legacy of apartheid (Ebersöhn and Ferreira 2012). Generally, rurality is conceptualised on the basis of what rural areas ‘do not possess’ and in many cases ‘will never possess’. One inescapable point of reference is recognition of the extreme differentiation within rural South Africa. Hlalele (2012: 111) concedes that difference is an inherent, inevitable and indispensable feature of social existence and education, and argues that rural education needs to embrace difference, shape demands and model social benefits in accordance with the realities of a particular rural setting. This implies that social justice should be perceived as a humanising process – a response to human diversity in terms of ability, socio-economic circumstances, choice and rights.

According to the National Development Plan (Republic of South Africa 2012) typologies have been developed that differentiate, for example, between the small market towns, agri-villages, informal settlements, farm villages and scattered homesteads in commercial farming areas, and the peri-urban informal settlements, villages, and scattered homesteads in former homelands. This is a useful approach that points to the need for differentiated planning responses in relation to varying settlement types. However, there are other dimensions of differentiation. For example, some rural areas have declining or stagnant economies, while others have local economies that are growing even faster than those of large urban centres. Some areas are receiving migrants and densifying, while others are sources of out-migration and have declining or static populations. Some rural areas are well positioned in relation to nodes and corridors of development across southern Africa while others are extreme-

ly marginal. There are also huge differences in terms of the types of economic activity and the levels of poverty across areas.

A pervasive lack of a whole-systems perspective in dealing with rural education is evident. Williams and Nierengarten (2010) state that in addressing rural realities, mandates need to consolidate, collaborate and cooperate. This implies that rural imperatives need a community aligned and should draw from various sources. For example, efforts to provide cooperative and collaborative staff development for teachers in rural areas may be negatively affected due to distances, and therefore appeal to transportation costs. However, promoting a positive view of education in rural areas and encouraging innovation and initiative in the provision of rural education services; and providing a framework for the sharing of concerns, issues and experiences relating to education and training in rural areas may address injustices affecting rural inhabitants. Some of the most important challenges to understanding rural education are that there is not a lot of rural education research, there is limited awareness of rural diversity, and there are multiple definitions of rurality. Also, rural schools are usually the biggest employer in their areas.

The Need for the Creation of Sustainable Rural Learning Ecologies

There have been some disputes around the notion of confining the learning process to time and space. The researcher subscribes to Barron's (2004, 2006) notion of learning as an activity that takes place within, between and across contexts (constituting a learning ecology). A supportive ecology may be construed as an environment that fosters and supports the creation of communities. It is further defined as an open system, dynamic and interdependent, diverse, partially self-organizing, adaptive, and fragile (Looi 2001:14). An apposite learning ecology should be construed as an environment that is consistent with how learners learn. Barron (2006:195) defines a learning ecology as a set of contexts found in physical or virtual spaces that provide opportunities for learning. It encompasses different activities, material resources, relationships, and the interactions that emerge from them. The ecology is extended to include the following characteristics of a learning ecology;

a collection of overlapping communities of interest; cross pollinating with each other; constantly evolving; and largely self-organizing. In more formal education environments, the concept of self-organizing gives way to a more structured process for knowledge transmission where the role of an educator is to facilitate learning (Siemens 2003). Visser (1999, cited in Siemens 2003) adds that the learning ecology involves a setting in which learning communities come into being, evolve, die, regenerate and transform. Using an ecological metaphor, the learning environment is likened to the biosphere, and the learning ecology is to learning what the biosphere is to life. Therefore, it should be comprehensible to assume that learning generates and builds upon complex and diverse networks or webs of human existence. To sum up, Seepe (2004) reminds us of the African social philosophies such as Ubuntu. Ubuntu presupposes not only a conscious, deliberate, internalized, and pervasive focus on the self in the environment, and the self in the community from an African perspective, but to the extent to which these develop an ecological awareness, or self-as-part-of-environment.

Paradigm

The study is couched within the Critical Emancipatory Research (CER) paradigm. The quote by Fals Borda later in this paragraph signifies a paradigm shift from a conventional and positivistic one that places the 'powerful' researcher at the centre of the research, to one that seeks to present collective research ownership. In my opinion, these notions of power which may have been constructed over time and continue to enjoy some support in some quarters may be deconstructed due to their, in my opinion, cosmetic nature. The quote by Fals Borda below provides an eulogy to and epitomizes such deconstruction:

"Do not monopolise your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers. Do not trust elitist versions of history and science which respond to dominant interests, but be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them. Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret facts, but recover local val-

ues, traits, beliefs, and arts for action by and with the research organisations. Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals” (Fals Borda 1995).

Cosmetic conceptions of power are neither natural nor inevitable, but are, as Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010: 215) correctly point out, “merely political mechanisms, which could be arranged in other ways”. Hayward (2000) affirms that the mutable nature of power can lead to political freedom whilst Lybeck (2010: 94) deplors the inability of scientists to deconstruct the dynamic social reality that is in front of them because this inhibits the actual study of that reality. According to Horkheimer (1982: 47), such scientists/researchers “...experience everything only within the conventional framework of concepts. Any object is comprised under the accepted schemata even before it is perceived. This, and not the convictions of men constitutes the false consciousness of today. Today the ideological incorporation of men into society takes place through their biological preformation for the controlled collectivity. Even the unique becomes a function and appendage of the centralized economy.” The choice is informed by CER’s objective to engage the marginalised so that their voices can be heard and respected (Dold and Chapman 2011: 512). Furthermore, CER advances the agenda of human emancipation regardless of status and strives for the attainment of peace, freedom, hope, social justice and equity in its all forms (McGregor 2003). CER’s engaging nature which allows for a deeper meaning and for multiple perspectives to be considered (Mahlomaholo 2009: 34) will help the participants to better understand the challenges they face in creating sustainable rural learning ecologies. Its empowering and transformative agenda (Nkoane 2012: 99), affords the participants an opportunity to own the problem and process, and to provide solution(s) to the challenge and also to provide the conditions that will make the solution work. Moreover, it will help the participants to identify possible threats and thus implement measures to evade them [participants] as part of changing their situation.

METHODOLOGY

Approach

Conventional research has often suffered from the drawback of not adequately incorporating and taking cognizance of the subjects of the research process. This tendency seems to be more pronounced in rural areas where researchers may be likely to lack of time and resources as contributory factors. The criticism can therefore be levelled that many research investigations in the rural areas in the past, and even today, tended to be of an ephemeral and superficial nature, leading to what has been described as ‘rural development tourism’ (Chambers 1994). According to Petropoulos et al. (2003) such research is often characterized by a wide range of biases, such as tarmac bias, roadside bias, project bias, gender bias, dry-season bias and professional bias. Such biases often prevent the true identification and assessment of rural development problems, as well as marginalizing the views of rural people and inducing a bias based on western preconceptions and accessibility limitations. Through inappropriate methodologies with their attendant biases, the true nature and extent of rural education is, in essence, often hidden from the ‘rural development tourist’ and, consequently, appropriate measures of support and funding often fail to reach the ‘hidden poor’ (Chambers 1994).

With the huge variety of languages, cultures, and educational systems found within the African continent, it was never the intention of critical research to assert a universal research methodology. What is apparent though is the need for the development of culturally sensitive and reflexive methodologies. The current study is primarily qualitative but both basic and critical. A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. The researcher in this study was interested in understanding and interpreting the meaning participants construct (Merriam 2009) in respect of their (participants’) contemporary learning ecologies. The critical aspect of the approach to the proposed study speaks to the second primary question. According to Merriam (2009), the goal of critical inquiry is to critique and challenge, to transform and to empower. Patton (2002) states that what makes critical research critical is that it seeks not just

to study and understand but to critique and change society. The current study was found to be appropriate for Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methodologies. PRA is an approach which aims to incorporate the knowledge and opinions of rural people in the planning and management of development projects and programmes (Vesterager et al. 2013: 138). PRA, used mainly in Development Studies, involves the community in the process of programme planning right from the beginning. With PRA, the needs and problems of the people are identified, defined and prioritised while opportunities and solutions existing in the community are discovered. Segments of the community who are most affected by these problems and needs can also be selected during PRA. According to Chilisa (2012: 237) Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a family of research approaches and methods that enable the disenfranchised, dispossessed communities of the third and fourth worlds to share and analyse their indigenous knowledge, life experiences, and conditions with a goal to plan and act. It began in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to urban-based professionals' biased perceptions about people living in the rural areas in the developing world. The goal was to initiate a participatory process that facilitates communities' ownership of the research process and outcomes. Grenier (1998: A42) emphasizes three fundamental principles of PRA, which are:

Culturally Sensitive and Responsible Behavior and Attitudes: PRA requires the researcher to be flexible, creative, patient, respectful, and willing to listen to and be taught by rural people.

Visual Representation of Information and Ideas: PRA requires researchers to present information, ideas, or data in visual forms such as pictures, drawings, maps, charts, models, and graphs to increase participation by the illiterate, the poor, the exploited, disadvantaged women, children, and those with disabilities.

Multiple Methods: PRA uses numerous research techniques that resonate with the colonized Other such and local histories, folklore, songs, poetry, dance, and so on. It also combines quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure meaningful participation of the researched in the inquiry process. For example, PRA has been used to develop culturally appropriate survey questionnaires to increase precision in sample surveys by engaging local people in the design.

Data Collection and Analysis: Merriam (2009) reminds us that any type of research that falls under the category of critical research is participatory. The empowerment of participants through their involvement in design and implementation is central and collective action as a result of the investigation is a crucial element. For each of the primary and secondary aims in this study, data triangulation was applied. Data were collected through document analysis, observations, and interviews (conversations with a purpose; one-on-one and collective). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher is of the view that observation lends itself to this. In addition to investigator observation, participants may be asked from time to time requested to record certain observations. The researcher believe that the absence of the official investigator may to some extent enhance free and more authentic participation. Data analysis in qualitative research remains largely mysterious (Bloomberg and Volpe 2008; Marshall and Rosmman 2006). Guided by the research aims and questions, the researcher used the open coding. Open coding is appropriate when researchers are open to anything possible. As the researcher traversed data records (observation, documents, interviews) notations were made next to bits of potentially relevant data relating to research aims. Apart from literature review which was mainly done at libraries, all other data collection endeavours observed prescripts of participatory rural appraisal. Documents consulted include the Census reports (2001 and 2011), Ministerial reports (Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (MCRE) 2005; Emerging Voices (HSRC) 2005); National Framework for Quality Education in Rural Areas. Conversations with a purpose were held with one Community Liaison officer, Education District official, three teachers from three different rural schools, parents, one school principal, one local municipality official. These conversations were tape recorded and are stored within the prescripts of the code of ethics for research.

DISCUSSION

The outmigration from rural areas has not abated. Many rural areas continue to experience a decline in inhabitants (Alliance for Excellence in Education 2010). The majority of the rural emigrants are generally the working group with

a fairly higher level of education and who were most likely, to contribute a lot more than the youth and the aged. The aged were found to have strong links with the place and space and therefore less likely to move. In some cases the youth move, some returning over weekends, in search of better education. The fact that many rural learning ecologies do not have secondary schools, mainly as a result of fewer learners, was also confirmed. One of the parents said: *“Unlike me, my children deserve a better education so that they can have a better future. I will do everything in my power in order for them to realize their dreams. However, I am worried that they may not come back to stay here. The way I see it, the education they get here does not prepare them for meaningful contribution to rural development. They are not taught how to milk.... and plough... read and write ...they can”*. In many districts, schools with a lower number of learners are either closed down or amalgamated.

The “ideal” rural teacher can teach multiple grades or subjects, organize extracurricular activities, and adjust well to the environment and the community (Brown 2003). Changes of having such a situation are better in areas where the teachers stay in the particular rural ecology (Personal observation in one rural Swedish ecology). It is extremely difficult to find teachers who fit in with the rural community and will stay for a long period of time because of this. Usually the teachers who end up staying are either from a rural background or have previous experience with rural communities. Bull et al. noted over two and a half decades ago (1989) that disciplines such as law, medicine and architecture introduced changes in the programmes to address the availability of staff that will service and impact the rural areas. To their (Bull et al.) surprise, only the education profession had resisted such changes. In the researcher’s observation, that status quo largely continues to prevail. For multi-campus teacher education programmes, it is expected that the student who did a course on any of the campuses should be subjected to the same course content, leaving very little or no room at all, for flexibility and diversification in respect of a particular learning ecology. Exposure of student teachers to rural learning ecologies appear as ‘funded projects’, for example the Rural Teacher Education project at the University of Kwazulu Natal.

As with rural teachers, rural learners should be in a position to make decisive contributions to sustainability and development in the community in order to get accustomed to the environment and feel a sense of shared wealth. Families and communities are crucial to the educational progress of rural youth (Brown 2003). In order for rural communities to succeed, they must allow members to have good paying jobs, access to health care, quality education, and strong community ties. Additionally, rural communities need programs to build a stronger sense of togetherness. Social interaction affects the behavior and development of relationships among groups of people with the same territory. Shamah and Mac Tarvish (2009) observed that rural residents often see the skills necessary for their own success as unique from the skills that are valued in urban environments. In Learning to Leave, Corbett (2007) describes the ways this disconnect emerges in Nova Scotia and why it is a critical issue that must be given greater attention. His work reveals that rural schools generally teach students in ways that build an urban skill set through emphasizing mastery of academic skills necessary in structured office professions.

Responsive Curricula: Here the notion of content versus context comes to the fore. In some instances there is a match between the two whilst instances of mismatches have also been recorded. One example was provided by a community member and teacher in one of the Swedish rural ecologies who stated that “...there was a stage where many learners in one of the high schools in my area had a predetermined goal of perpetuation the family farming legacy and school programme was not responsive to that. The learners concerned indicated how irrelevant the content they were learning at school was. The content did not only address the glaring need of the local economy at the time, but was also oblivious to their intended careers and wishes.”

Internal Versus External Locus of Control: Locus of control is a social psychology concept that refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they can control the events that affect them. Whilst external locus of control attributes outcomes of events to external circumstances, internal tends to attribute outcomes of events to their own control. There is also evidence in clinical research that internality correlates negatively with anxiety, and that internals

may be less prone to depression than externals, as well as less prone to learned helplessness. Whilst these concepts were originally meant for understanding individual behavior, they also apply to collective behavior. For example, in the village of Muyexe [one of the inter-agency development project the South African government has embarked upon] the community resorted to their own wisdom and innovation when the bakery faltered on delivering bread for learners. The community resorted to their traditional furnaces/ovens to provide bread for the children. These furnaces/ovens are made out of mud and they have a space/compartments for fire. An example of external locus of control observance may be found in the words of this Diyatalawa resident: "We will do everything the department requires us to do, as long as it alleviates the squalor we live in."

Limited Knowledge/Awareness About Rural Realities: Historically, rurality and rural education have been marginalised bodies of knowledge in South Africa and little is known of the focus of the various studies and the state of rural education and rural education research (Nkambule et al. 2011: 341). Over and above what Nkambule et al. (2011) suggest, that is, little is known about rural research, the little knowledge that authorities have seem to take a long time to be acted upon. One of the problem areas in rural education is multigrade teaching. Ms Tsakani Chaka, Researcher at the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD), presented a study into teaching literacy and numeracy in multigrade classes in rural and farm schools in South Africa to the Parliamentary Monitoring group on 6 March 2012. She noted that in 2005, the Ministry of Education released a report on rural education which specifically noted multigrade teaching as a challenge in rural and farm schools. This research followed up on the position at the moment, and analysed data as well as carrying out six case studies, in the North West province, using interviews with principals, interviews with teachers, lesson observation, documentary analysis (work schedules, lesson plans, time-tables, learners' work), interviews with , the interview with provincial and district officials, as well as with teacher trainers. About 27% of schools had multigrade classes, and this involved about 4% of the learners. The multigrade system, although in fairly widespread use, was not actually formally recognised. Most of the schools that had

these classes were poorly resourced. There was no curriculum adaptation, and the planning requirements were the same as those of the mono-grade classes. Teachers' exposure to suitable teaching strategies was limited, there was no specific teacher training on multigrade teaching, and no specific support was offered to these teachers. The teachers faced high workloads owing to planning and assessment requirements. The learning materials were not always available in the mother tongue, and were not suitable for self-study. The continued neglect of the multigrade problems contributed to ongoing marginalisation of the poor, for whom multigrade schools were a reality. I wish to point out at this stage, that should PRA have been observed, the situation may have been different. It may have not been necessary to conduct research after research even though there is no difference after such.

Prospects

Mapping and Maximizing Inherent Assets in Rural Learning Ecologies: The inherent assets of rural schools and communities provide a strong foundation for progress. These advantages include increasing access to innovative technology, distance-learning and place-based learning opportunities, and high levels of volunteer support from parents as well as members of the ecology. Along with appropriate and adequate backing from state and national leaders, rural schools have tremendous potential to ensure that all of their students graduate ready to succeed in college and careers [including in rural ecologies]. It is thus possible to simultaneously utilize and enhance various resources/asserts. This also helps to minimize dependence on external resources and institutions. Interactions among stakeholders can be guided by the 'internal logic' and priorities of the learning ecology rather than these being externally determined. The learning processes will strengthen local institutions and civic capacity for collective action, ideally to move forward together toward a shared vision. Collective participation can facilitate local management of the shared vision, thereby strengthening civil society and increasing active involvement. Collectives that articulate and pursue their own goals and priorities are more likely to expand livelihood opportunities, and do so in a sustainable manner.

Mapesela et al. (2012) concur with sentiments of proponents who strongly advocate the enhancement of self-reliance. Internal challenges to the success of a self-reliance strategy stem from violations of the assumptions that: members share common interests and consensus is central to sustainability; inclusive participation and democratic decision-making within the community are necessary and possible; and sufficient autonomy exists for people to influence their learning ecology's future.

Providing Responsive and Demanding Educational Programmes: Many rural schools are already setting high expectations for every student and ensuring that all standards, assessments, and accountability systems reflect the high-level skills and knowledge all students need. To help meet these standards, an increasing number of rural schools are employing cutting edge technologies and other distance-learning opportunities to expand the availability and choice of rigorous programmes. Rural schools are pioneers in the expansion of local place-based learning, rigorous, hands-on learning opportunities that provide real-world relevance to improve academic performance. Despite these innovations, however, too many rural high schools still lack the funding, personnel, and technological infrastructure to provide students with rigorous high-level coursework, a vital prerequisite for career success.

Recruiting and Retaining Highly Effective Teachers (Grow-Your-Own-Timber!): Successful rural high schools are able to ensure an adequate number of high-quality teachers to boost academic success. Unfortunately, too many rural communities struggle to find and keep effective teachers. Even though rural teachers generally report a higher level of job satisfaction than their urban and suburban counterparts, rural communities have a higher number of less-qualified teachers and often lose their most experienced employees to higher-paying posts in nearby suburban and urban areas. Despite these ongoing challenges, however, an increasing number of rural communities are addressing these difficulties head-on with advanced technologies and distance learning that allow teachers to expand their professional development opportunities, as well as "grow-your-own-timber" programs that encourage talented young people to stay and teach in their home communities.

Building Viable Models of Community Support and Partnerships: Rural communities play a vital role in the success or failure of their local schools. High-performing schools tend to depend on local community-based services, businesses, and other non-academic partners to stretch limited resources and support a common vision for change. Rural high schools often have the benefit of small, tight-knit communities to help guide school improvement efforts and participate regularly in school activities. Unprecedented and widespread reliance on technology may also allow rural schools to engage local stakeholders in educational goals and outcomes more broadly than ever. Unfortunately, some rural ecologies may still lack the tax base, stable local economy, and sufficient social and community capital to invest adequately in sustainable endeavours. In areas that have lost a large number of young people and highly educated professionals to better paying jobs in nearby cities, retaining broad-based community support is also an ongoing challenge.

Provide Space for Appreciation and Better Understanding of Rurality: In the researcher's opinion, there seems to be a reasonable expectation that rurality as a way of life has not, at least in some quarters, been fully understood, valued and appreciated. This may be evident in the notion of thinking that one's life is complete if it is in an urban area. Eppley (2009: 9) states that rural teachers have a special obligation to awaken students to the concept of sustainability and to help them develop and nurture a sense of place. This is an urgent requirement of the rural highly qualified teacher and has little to do with test scores and certifications, and everything to do with nurturing students and sustaining communities.

Creating and Sustaining Learner Support Networks: Strong rural schools ensure that all learners have access to rigorous and option-based courses of study and connect young people with a broader range of social supports to address problems inside and outside of the classroom. The establishment and perpetuation of multi-modal, multi-sectoral networks and partnerships for learners in rural ecologies are more likely to contribute to the development of such ecologies. In many rural learning ecologies the absence of career and lifestyle information may impact negatively on demands of sustainability and development.

Harmonizing Content and Context: Robinson et al. (2004:3) found that localised curriculum of the rural schools that utilised local environment as curriculum, lead to positive motivation, interest and participation. Shibeshi (2006: 12) suggested that policies and strategies addressing the education needs of rural people should accommodate the needs of rural people in their diversity (agro-ecological, geographical as well as socio-economic and cultural) through a range of modalities. These include distance education; non-formal education programmes; school feeding programmes; strengthening early childhood care and education; establishing feeder school clusters; promoting multigrade classroom learning; rethinking teacher education, development, recruitment and retention strategies; and promoting vocational education for rural development and sustainable livelihoods.

Building Rural Community Resilience and Capital: Wright (2012: 49) states that communities must be resilient to be sustainable. Resiliency results as relationships among community members develop. It is the “bridging social capital” between heterogeneous groups, referred to by Putman (1995, cited in Wright 2012). It may be reasonable to expect that close interpersonal connections usually develop in smaller and rural communities because they are places where individuals know, share with, and care for one another. Rural schools mirror these qualities, and have a responsibility to help develop these healthy relationships through getting to know the groups and individuals within their community, and sharing with them a collective sense of purpose. At this stage, it may be worthwhile to mention the gratifying instance where the Muyexe community resorted to their own capital when bread was not delivered for the children at school.

CONCLUSION

In this paper the researcher critically discussed the realities, lessons and prospects in respect of the creation of sustainable rural learning ecologies. We need to observe that the effects of sustainable rural learning ecologies on food security, rural development and poverty reduction for the present and future generations depends not only on the number of years spent in school, but on the relevance, quality and most importantly, utility.

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