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Teachers for rural schools – a challenge for South Africa

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Poverty is rife in many African countries and this has serious implications for the provision of quality education. Rural schools face severe challenges that are unique to their environment. A lack of parental interest in children's education, insufficient funding from the state, a lack of resources, underqualified teachers, and multi-grade teaching are some of the barriers to effective education. These challenges can be attributed to numerous sources, from within school structures and from the external environment, including local communities and education authorities. After 25 years of democracy, educational standards and learner performance in rural schooling has shown little improvement. This study illustrates the complexity and inter-connectedness of the problems faced by teachers in South African rural schools. Using qualitative research within the interpretivist paradigm, this article explores the perceptions and experiences of teachers in rural schools located in White River in the Mpumalanga province. This grounded-theory research focuses on effective teaching and learning. The findings reveal that most rural schools do not have water, sanitation, or electricity, and classrooms are in a terrible state. These issues have serious implications for effective teaching and learning.

Keywords: deployment; education level; education quality; recruitment; rural schools

Introduction

Many historically disadvantaged rural schools in South Africa have found educational changes to be more challenging than affluent schools and have also struggled to maintain such changes (Msila, 2010). This contributes to the perceived concerns that South Africa's rural areas are marginalised and under-resourced (African National Congress [ANC], 1995).

The South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) (hereafter The Schools Act) added another dimension to the problem for rural schools by decentralising education to communities. The Schools Act prescribes that School Governing Bodies (SGBs) should ensure that learners are provided with quality education through effective and efficient governance. The SGB comprises the principal, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, and learners of secondary schools. However, the majority of members on the SGB should be parents. To deal with the complex financial issues and tasks brought on by decentralised school governance and management, SGB members should develop a wide range of knowledge, skills, and capacity. In the case of rural schools, governance structures usually comprise of people who have limited knowledge and skills to effectively govern schools (Polischuk, 2002).

Public schools in rural areas are categorised by various factors that negatively impact on the provision of quality education. Rural areas are generally remote and relatively underdeveloped. As a result, many schools lack the necessary physical resources and basic infrastructure for sanitation (Mulford & Johns, 2004; Peters & Le Cornu, 2004), water, roads, transport, electricity, and information and communication technology. The deprived socio-economic status of parents in rural areas places learners at a disadvantage. Due to financial constraints, provincial governments are unable to provide rural schools with the necessary financial support to contribute to learners being provided with quality education. Moreover, educational authorities cannot provide schools with much needed physical and human resources, which places a severe burden on parents who are required to supply their children with necessities such as stationery and cleaning materials. Parents in rural South Africa mostly do menial work, have a lower level of education, and usually do not attach much value to schooling. As such, these parents cannot afford additional items that teachers require, which impacts negatively on teaching and learning in these schools.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996b), the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996a), and related regulations and policies on equity indicate that every South African learner should have access to learning and teaching, similar facilities, and equal educational opportunities. This is sadly not the case. Poverty and unemployment that result in the problems mentioned above, directly influence the roles of teachers and the quality of education available to learners in these circumstances.

In most instances, teachers in rural schools are subjected to multi-grade teaching where they are required to teach different subjects and different grades in one class. Undoubtedly, this has serious repercussions for teachers in terms of planning lessons for each day and each period, balancing their time to teach different grades, conducting assessment tasks for learners, and maintaining discipline. Teachers usually resort to teaching abridged curricula and rarely adapt the curriculum, use contextual examples, or link the curriculum to local needs (Aziz, 2011; Eppley, 2009; Taylor & Mulhall, 2001). This article focuses on problems encountered by teachers in rural schools and the negative impact it holds for South Africa.

Teachers in rural schools experience numerous serious challenges. Most of the children don't attend school regularly as they are forced to work on farms, and they are not encouraged to attend school. Learners who do attend school often find the curriculum not relevant to their lives and find that their learning is not supported at home. The economic constraints of governments to provide free basic education to all its citizens and the low socio-economic status of parents are serious barriers preventing children from receiving a high standard of education and experiencing quality of life. This is particularly true in Africa and other developing countries around the world, where the majority of people live in poverty and do not have access to quality education. Although governments are increasingly concerned with issues of teacher development, the focus is often more on urban schools, resulting in rural schools being neglected. Scholars, education authorities, and practitioners in underdeveloped and developing countries might thus be interested in this study as many of these countries experience similar problems.

Theoretical Framework

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals of 2015, focusing on the eradication of poverty and providing basic education to all, have not been completely achieved by many African countries. Progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals in education is hampered by an inadequate supply of qualified teachers, a lack of financial and physical resources, ineffective development programmes that enable teachers to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills, and a lack of efficient leadership and management structures.

Governments find it more difficult to supply quality education services in rural areas, and various factors weaken the quality of learning and teaching in South Africa's rural areas. Firstly, teachers prefer to teach in urban areas, and as a result rural schools are left with many vacant positions or experience long delays in the filling of vacancies. Rural schools often experience a shortage of well-qualified or experienced teachers (Hedges, 2002), as experienced teachers move to more desirable schools. Secondly, it may appear that teachers in rural schools teach less than those in the urban areas, however, as mentioned previously, teaching multi-grade classes can be much more demanding (Akyeampong & Lewin, 2002). Furthermore, travelling to visit a doctor, collect one's pay or attend in-service training may involve long journeys, which result in a teacher being absent from school and teaching time being lost. As transport difficulties often make supervisory visits from district officials to isolated schools less frequent, there is little to prevent a gradual erosion of the school year (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Thirdly, the quality of teaching in rural areas may be of a lower standard.

Rural teachers often have less access to support services, and fewer opportunities to attend in-service courses. In some cases they struggle to access books and materials (Bernard, 2002). As parents in rural areas are generally less educated, they are less likely to monitor learning and teaching at the school.

A high-quality education system can be achieved if it has a core of good teachers. However, good teachers prefer teaching in urban schools, and this poses serious challenges for education authorities. To address the issue of appointing good teachers in rural schools, education authorities must invest substantially by providing financial incentives to good teachers. However, government has tried this approach but was not entirely successful. The education authorities realise that the focus should be on teacher development, but provincial education budgets are barriers to appointing specialists/experts from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and tertiary institutions who are prepared to go to rural areas to provide teacher development.

Children in rural areas find it difficult to engage in education due to the lower quality of educational provision, which results in lower educational attainment (Taylor & Mulhall, 2001). However, much of the solution lies in the supply of adequate numbers of appropriately trained, motivated, and engaged teachers in rural areas.

Wallin and Reimer (2008:34) suggest that "while rural parents and educational stakeholders believe schools should serve the interests of the local community, conflicts still exists around the purpose of schooling." For families to survive, poor parents subject their children to child labour. This contradicts Wright's (2007) view that rural schools should serve a crucial role in rebuilding communities and active industrialised societies.

While the Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996a) requires that schools and learners are developed on an equal basis, historical inequalities in rural communities in Mpumalanga, for example, cannot be addressed overnight.

Justification for rural education

Education requires significant investment, but any country can reap huge social and economic benefits from such investment in education. Development in a country is determined by the level and growth of its human resources to which investments in education contributes greatly (Brown & Swanson, 2003). It is thus important that all learners, in rural or urban settings, benefit from quality basic education to promote accelerated development in rural South Africa. It is essential that education is at the forefront of rural development "to curb the pervasiveness of extreme poverty and malnutrition in rural areas, break the poverty-induced cycle of rural life, and build the human capacity needed for rural development" (Lewin, 2004:56). For example, in

2000 representatives from 155 countries agreed to Education for All (EFA) (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2008) to universalise primary education and reduce illiteracy by the end of the century. However, fifteen years later, in 2015, many countries were far from reaching their goals, which were intended to meet the learning needs of all learners.

The quality of education offered in many rural schools is poor, therefore, many parents are unwilling to invest as they are uncertain about the quality or value of their children's education. Consequently, low learner enrolment and high dropout numbers are widespread in many rural schools in Africa.

Method

This study was conducted at rural schools in White River, Mpumalanga, and a qualitative exploration was done of the reasons why teachers did not wish to teach at schools in the rural areas of South Africa, and also to establish what could be done to improve this situation. Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004:36) define methodology as "a coherent group of methods that complement one another and have the goodness of fit to deliver data and findings that reflect the research question and suit the purpose." Qualitative research "seeks meaning and contributes to theory development by proceeding inductively" (Miller & Brewer, 2003:193).

This study employed a generic qualitative research approach to the subject. Merriam (1998:11) defines "generic qualitative research" as a study that aims to "discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or perspectives and worldviews of the people involved." This approach is followed in this study as it facilitates an in-depth investigation into how teachers/principals feel about teaching in rural areas and enables the researcher to obtain "rich and detailed descriptions" (Merriam, 1998:4) from the teachers' perspectives.

Qualitative methods were used as the main objective of the research was to understand the reasons why teachers did not select to teach at schools in rural areas, and how this impacted on the development of rural schools. This research was interpretively orientated. Creswell (2014) indicates that the purpose of interpretive research is to understand complex situations and the subject of human experience. Researchers are afforded an opportunity to discover how participants understand the challenges and problems at rural schools from their own lived experiences rather than from theoretical knowledge.

The interpretive approach is concerned with understanding the world from participants' subjective experiences – in this case, through interviews and observations. However, Henning et al. (2004) state that the interpretive approach assumes that knowledge is constructed by descriptions of peo-

ple's self-understanding, meanings, reasons, values, beliefs, and intentions, and not only by investigating phenomena.

Participants were chosen using purposeful sampling, which is selecting participants based on their experiences and knowledge. Eight teachers and four principals were selected from different primary and secondary schools in a single district of White River. Teachers with more than four years' teaching experience were interviewed. The sample was gender representative, as males and females have different perceptions of teaching in a rural area.

The participants were from historically black primary and secondary schools situated in rural areas. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main tool for data collection. Such interviews allow for in-depth investigation and free participant responses. Interview questions were aimed at respondents' experiences of the challenges and problems they faced to get teachers to teach in rural areas and referred to examples of lived experiences and perceptions that they shared.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by means of coding (Creswell, 2009). Coding involves going through the data and identifying and assigning codes to key concepts (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Once the data was coded, it was categorised and analysed to identify themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Themes are recognised by the key issues identified from the codes gathered.

To ensure dependability and transferability, a reflective journal (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) was maintained. A peer debriefer was also used to enhance the credibility of this article. To expose the researcher's thoughts and finding, the debriefing process was in the form of a discussion of the research and findings with a colleague who was not involved in the research.

Findings

In presenting the findings, codes were used to identify the respondents. Codes P1 to P4 were used for the four principals and T1 to T8 for the eight teachers. Qualitative data from the interviews is presented with references to observations and literature control, where appropriate.

The following themes were identified:

- Attractiveness of rural schools;
- Poor teachers' status;
- Poor career opportunities;
- Lack of qualified teachers;
- Curriculum challenges;
- Poor infrastructure and facilities;
- System and administrative problems.

Attractiveness of Rural Schools

It is difficult for schools in rural areas of South Africa to attract qualified teachers, because of a lack of available financial resources. Brown and

Swanson (2003:61) is of the opinion that the “ideal rural teacher at the basic level must be prepared to teach multiple grades or subjects, organise extra-curricular activities (although minimal) and adjust well to the environment and community.” It is difficult to find teachers who are prepared to do all this and fit into a rural community.

According to respondent P3, “*conditions of service, incentives for teachers in rural areas need to be reviewed to make teaching in our areas more attractive.*” It is very difficult to find teachers who fit or adapt to the rural community setting, and they do not stay for a long period of time. T4 acknowledged that “*usually teachers who end up staying are either from a rural background or have previous experience with rural communities.*” The availability and quality of accommodation (Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002), availability of leisure activities, classroom facilities, and resources (Towse, Kent, Osaki & Kirua, 2002) are some of the teachers’ concerns.

P1 asserted that “*teachers see rural areas as a stumbling block for professional advancement.*” Teachers in rural areas have fewer opportunities to become involved in professional development (Hedges, 2002). Hedges (2002:358) states that “there is a profound fear among newly-trained teachers with a modern individualistic outlook that if you spend too much time in an isolated village without access to further education, you become a ‘village man.’”

According to T6 and P2, school administrators should have adequate knowledge of rural backgrounds to ensure that teachers appointed at rural schools will fit into the school and community and will stay in the job. P4 indicated that rural teachers also faced persistent neglect: “*Politicians and professional educators have focussed their attention on urban education, leaving many to assume that all is well in rural schools.*”

The lack of qualified teachers at most rural schools in Mpumalanga is a result of teachers’ unwillingness to stay in rural areas due to social, professional, and cultural isolation. Inan (2014) argues that low salaries, a lack of access to professional opportunities, and the responsibility to take on multiple duties, are major challenges for teachers and affect their decisions to work or stay in rural areas.

Due to the size of rural schools and communities, fewer teachers apply for positions and teach in rural areas. Furthermore, the teacher turnover rate in rural schools is high (Lowe, 2006), which compounds principals’ challenges to retain teachers at these schools.

Poor Teachers’ Status

Teaching as a profession is most undervalued in many African countries. Teachers are not paid particularly well, and in many cases people who cannot find other work become teachers. Teachers are

forced to find additional income to augment their salaries, which seriously impacts their overall performance (Starr & White, 2008). According to T6, “*in the rural areas here, teachers will take to a small type of farming with vegetables and a few cattle.*”

P3 believes that principals “*feel dislocated and alienated from debates about policy-making.*” Principals feel marginalised and ignored by education authorities. Teachers also crave professional contact and support. According to P5, “*many teachers do not feel supported by the education system at both state and district levels.*” The majority view is that education leaders have very little understanding about rural school life and how to address teaching and learning challenges (Morgan, Atkin, Adedeji & Sieve, 2006).

P1 was of the opinion that “*district and central education officials feel antipathy towards rural schools.*” T8 shared the view that the district and officials “*have no understanding of being a teacher or a principal, let alone a rural school teacher or principal and that is a criticism*” [sic]. A great deal of emotion is evident in these statements. The commentary refers to veiled modes of sanction, punishment, inducement, and concern (Starr & White, 2008).

Poor Career Opportunities

T1 said that “*career advancement and opportunities for further study are often unavailable or very difficult to come by in rural areas,*” and opportunities for promotion are very slim (Brown & Swanson, 2003). According to P6 “*delays in the payment of teachers’ salaries can sometimes extend up to three months.*” These are some of the reasons for the lack of motivation, desperation, and discontent, which result in the incredibly poor quality of education (Ingersoll, 2001).

Participants regard the availability of promotion posts at schools in rural areas as an important factor to relocate to and remain at rural schools. Apart from prestige and self-esteem, management positions also imply increased salaries and allowances resulting in, according to T4, “*teachers going to rural areas because of opportunities such as promotional posts.*” As such positions and benefits are not available or adequate, teachers are not motivated to relocate to rural areas (McEwan, 1999).

Teachers expressed a strong preference for urban settings, which may be attributed to various reasons. T8 said that “*one major factor could be that the quality of life in rural areas may not be as good as in urban areas.*” The quality of classroom facilities, accommodation, and school resources is also a major concern (P2; Akyeampong & Stephens, 2002; Towse et al., 2002).

A further problem relates to health. Teachers perceive that living in rural areas results in greater exposure to disease with less access to health care.

According to T3, “*teachers also see rural areas as offering fewer opportunities for professional advancement.*” Hedges (2002) is of the opinion that urban areas offer easier access to further education. T8 said that “*we [don’t] have many opportunities for professional development activities.*”

Teachers find it more difficult to secure their entitlements from the district offices. Hedges (2002:364) describes the reluctance of teachers to accept rural positions as follows: “There is a profound fear among newly-trained teachers with a modern individualistic outlook that if you spend too much time in an isolated village without access to further education, you become ‘a village man.’ This term strongly conveys the perceived ignorance of rural dwellers in the eyes of some urban educated people.”

According to P3, “*there is a need for school administrators to have an adequate knowledge of a rural background before posting teachers who can fit into the school community, and who will stay in the rural area.*” Brown and Swanson (2003:114) confirm that “problems in supporting newly-qualified teachers and a lack of career development opportunities in rural settings often combine to make the teachers’ effectiveness difficult in comparison with their urban counterparts.”

Lack of Qualified Teachers

There is no doubt that many countries, including South Africa, faces serious challenges of teachers’ qualifications, supply (Monk, 2007), and teacher’s deployment. P2 was of the opinion that “*areas have qualified teachers who are unemployed or even underemployed, while rural areas have unfilled posts.*” This pattern of simultaneous surplus and shortage (Mulkeen, 2005) is strong evidence that the problem of teachers in rural schools will not be solved simply by training or producing more teachers. T2 stated that “*the lack of qualified teachers in our rural schools is simply because many teachers do not want to stay in rural areas due to social, professional, and cultural issues or isolation.*”

Lewin (2004:83) argues that “low salaries, lack of access to professional opportunities, and the responsibility to take on multiple duties are major challenges confronting teachers and affect their decisions to work or stay in rural areas.” T1 said that “*we do not get many applications from teachers, especially young teachers, to teach at our schools.*”

T7 stated that if “*they receive an application the teacher uses it as a stepping stone to leave sooner or later.*” One of the major problems facing rural schools, is attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers. In most rural schools, the learner-teacher ratio is much higher than in urban schools, there is a high turnover of qualified teachers, and rural schools tend to appoint more unqualified teachers. T8 said that “*another problem at our*

rural schools is that the more experienced teachers normally take the smaller classes and then leave the larger classes for the young, not so experienced teacher. The young teacher soon leaves because of the pressure of teaching a larger class.”

The quality of teaching in rural schools may be poorer than in urban areas, as “*parents and teachers have lower expectation[s] of what rural learners can achieve*” (T2). Many teachers in rural areas are not properly trained and are unfamiliar with the latest trends in teaching methods. Rural teachers receive less in-service training or support from the provincial departments of education. The disparity between rural and urban schools is not new, but rural schools and districts in these areas really struggle to appoint well-qualified teachers who are able to teach effectively.

Curriculum Challenges

Research shows that schools’ location, poverty, and people’s minority status are closely associated with certain curriculum priorities (Alexander, 2002).

According to Alspaugh (1998:43) “learners from rural schools are offered fewer educational opportunities than learners in urban schools.” Rural schools offer less, present fewer electives like art and computers, and have fewer advanced placement offerings. P2 said that “*if we want teaching and learning to improve, more emphasis must be placed on curriculum delivery because this is the lifeblood of schooling.*” According to Harley and Wedekind (2002) rural schools lack material provisions such as physical space, electricity, running water, proper toilet facilities, textbooks, and it appears that issues in the curriculum are almost overshadowed by the more pressing need for resources for effective learning and teaching.

T5 said that “*urban schools are much more resourced and we do not get specialised staff to teach computers, for example.*” According to Mulkeen (2005) curriculum structuring and planning are difficult in rural areas. Rural schools are not often visited by district officials, and according to T3 “*we do not see subject specialists to assist teachers.*” T4 said that “*that is why we experience a higher absenteeism in our rural areas because the atmosphere is more relaxed and visits by district are less frequent.*” As people from the local community are less educated and feel less able to challenge the authority of teachers, they do not monitor teachers and do not place a great premium on education. The school’s needs at both local and district level must be addressed for curriculum planning to be effective. Important here is that it must be articulated in educational policy as well. By reviewing curriculum planning and coordination schools may identify and create approaches within new programmes that could be applied in other areas. P4 mentioned that “*teachers do not work together*

to plan curriculum matters, because they are not properly trained or workshopped.”

P1 said: “I try to promote collaboration with urban schools and to encourage mutual responsibilities among rural teachers, but without any success, and I have serious shortcomings as instructional leader in the school.”

Preparation and writing daily lesson plans form a large part of a teacher’s work and being organised in a classroom (Pitsoe, 2013). Although many activities precede the design and implementation of lesson plans, some teachers do not follow the guidelines in the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Many teachers focus on planning and completing lessons in the quickest way possible, which does not result in quality teaching. Furthermore, many Heads of Department lack knowledge about the instructional programme and cannot advise/mentor teachers on how to plan or improve their teaching.

Many learners in rural areas perceive English as a foreign language, as they only hear the language in school, and for most of the teachers English is their second language. The use of English as a medium of instruction is therefore a barrier to teaching and learning. T6 said that “it is a bad system that does not make mother tongue instruction the norm in public school[s].”

Sahin and Cokadar (2009) state that the preparation of teachers in rural areas is limited, and it is important to develop a better understanding of the circumstances in which teachers and learners in rural areas live before one can decide what and how to teach.

Poor Infrastructure and Facilities

Facilities in rural schools, especially in primary schools, are mostly in an unacceptable state. Many buildings were erected using mud blocks many years ago. In some areas classes are still being held in the open during summer and when it rains, learners are crowded into a few classrooms. Many schools lack the essential infrastructure to function as safe, efficient, and effective schools.

Most rural schools have no water, sanitation, or electricity. These services need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. T7 said that “the physical state of classrooms is very poor; the floors are full of holes, roofs and ceilings are broken and the facilities are in a poor state of repair. If it rains the roofs leak and classrooms are always wet.” Windowpanes are broken or missing and those classrooms that have doors cannot be locked, which creates a security risk. Few schools are fenced in, which makes it easy for intruders to enter and vandalise the school. Textbooks need to be transferred to the few classrooms that can be locked. It then takes up time during the first lesson of the day to get these textbooks to the respective classrooms where the books are needed. T3 said that “too much

time is taken up with the distribution of textbooks every day.” In two of the schools that participated in this research, furniture was stolen and classrooms were often used as toilets – especially those classrooms that could not be locked. It is unimaginable that teaching can take place under these conditions. It is clear that this is one of the major reasons for the prevailing crises in the education system.

System and Administrative Problems

In rural areas system failure also undermines teacher morale and hinders the learning and teaching process (Baleghizadeh & Gordani, 2012). Teachers, like P2, said that they “feel neglected by the authorities and perceive that they are treated unfairly regarding access to promotion, transfers, and benefits.”

P3 said that “in our areas learners are sometimes more open to child abuse, as teachers has [sic] authority.” Many cases of learner abuse are never officially reported in rural areas – especially in situations where rural teachers are influential members of the local community. The level of sexual abuse is high and is highest among teachers with the most teaching experience. According to P4 the “disciplining of teachers is often limited by cumbersome systems designed to deal with such difficulties.” Poor communication with schools in rural areas slows down these processes even further (Heeralal, 2014).

Relatively few teachers are dismissed for discipline offenses. T5 said that “sometimes undisciplined teachers from urban areas are transferred to rural areas, where they are prone to further misbehaviour.” Evidence indicates that teachers in rural schools face greater challenges, which are incompatible with their urban counterparts.

The working conditions in rural areas continue to leave a lot to be desired. Beyond a general improvement in the welfare of teachers, those working in rural areas deserve better circumstances and teaching conditions, especially if the education system is to attract qualified and reputable teachers to return to the profession. This is particularly true if these teachers are willing to work at rural schools in subjects with a shortage of teachers.

In summary, findings of this study reveal that one of the most serious challenges facing rural schools is the employment and retention of qualified teachers with good teaching records. Teachers are reluctant to work or stay in rural areas due to the lack of access to professional opportunities and taking on multiple duties without proper financial compensation. The challenges of teaching in rural schools in South Africa are often left unattended by policymakers and others. If these challenges are not attended to as a matter of urgency, there is little that the country can do to change the overall education picture.

Recommendations

This study offers recommendations to improve the conditions and challenges faced by teachers in rural schools in Mpumalanga and in other rural areas around South Africa. We need to find solutions to meet the goals of EFA by making recommendations to improve the conditions of teachers and teaching in rural schools.

- Given the importance of supporting newly-qualified teachers, and the lack of career development opportunities in rural settings, a need exists for career development incentive packages for rural teachers. This should include scholarships for certified teachers working in rural areas to seek advanced training. In addition, these teachers should be granted access to distance learning, seminars, and workshops.
- Research has shown that the most important school-related factor to boost learner achievement, is quality teachers in classrooms (Lewin, 2004). The state must put policies in place and policymakers must implement incentives to retain quality teachers in rural areas.
- The teaching environment is a major factor in determining the learning process and learner performance. Rural schools' ability to produce quality learners lies in the creation and maintenance of a good teaching environment. Government must fill this gap to meet the challenges that face rural schools and must be actively involved in upgrading and developing rural schools. Their commitment to education in rural schools can be shown through the provisioning of adequate financial and human resources to these schools.
- Rural societies in developing countries are organised in such a way that the implementation of policies or programmes is only successful if the relevant community is involved and participates. The government should therefore involve communities in teaching and improvement of schools. Active members of the community must be elected onto school governing bodies where they would be in a position to monitor teaching and the possible deterioration of school facilities. Furthermore, community members on school governing bodies can recognise teachers' accomplishments and invite them to participate in different activities. A school-community orientation programme can support new teachers to rural areas to overcome their feelings of isolation, acquire a sense of community and security, and develop professional competences for rural service. Community support for rural schools, in terms of the provision of school buildings and other infrastructure can assist to create empowering environments to assist in promoting quality teaching and learning in rural schools.
- A strategy to target the recruitment of teachers for rural schools should be pursued. The retention of teachers in rural schools must start from the time that student teachers are admitted into training programmes. All teachers should receive professional training and should be able to teach students from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, universities can play an important role in offering cost-effective distance-learning courses that enable teachers in rural areas to keep up to date with teaching methodologies and practice. Efforts should be made to target candidates from rural backgrounds or those who possess

personal characteristics and/or educational experiences that make them better suited to cope with the challenges of living and teaching in rural areas to recruit teachers to teach in rural schools.

Conclusion

Teachers are required to provide quality education to rural learners so that they develop into informed participants in their communities and engage in the development thereof. However, learner achievement in rural schools has become incredibly poor and varied, depending on the rural school attended. Therefore, government and policymakers need to put strategies in place to improve the working conditions of teachers and the teaching at rural schools to improve learner achievement across the rural areas of South Africa.

All stakeholders interested in developing rural education should do everything possible to provide learners in rural areas with good, quality education. These attempts should be based on information and dialogue on education reform strategies. The promise of the best interest of the child and learners' right to good quality education must ensure that all learners have access to quality education – also those in rural areas. However, that will never materialise if certain geographic segments of the population are not equitably served by the education system.

Authors' Contributions

Pierre du Plessis was the lead researcher who conducted the interviews and analysed the data. Raj Mestry worked on the literature review and the conclusion of the article.

Notes

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