

Education for rural development: Embedding rural dimensions in initial teacher preparation

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In South Africa, rural education and development are issues of social justice, especially in places that were previously established as homelands. This article presents some of the tensions that are inherent in the conceptions of rurality, rural education and the possibility of sustainable rural education and development. We propose the notion of education for rural development as a useful concept for its potential for transforming and sustaining rural education. We describe the implications of education for rural development on teacher education change by focusing on the teaching experience (TE) programme.

Keywords: rurality, rural education, rural teaching experience

Introduction

In an editorial to a special issue of *Perspectives in Education*, Balfour, De Lange and Khau (2012: i) state that

in rural education, as opposed to education in rural areas, there is an opportunity to affirm community, to attend with special focus to the challenges that 'place' poses to rural education, and thus also to the quality and sustainability of rural life.

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In this article, we adopt a framework of rurality that acknowledges the distinctiveness, agency and strength of rural communities, but that has not yet emerged in research and development programmes that use the dominant deficit paradigms of rurality (Moletsane, 2012). We also acknowledge that earlier deficit notions of rurality have not served rural education. The first section of this article presents a conceptual analysis of rural education and development and their implications on teacher education. The second section describes a proposal for integrating rural education into a teaching experience (TE) component of a teacher education programme.

The context of rural teacher education in South Africa

Post-1994 South Africa witnessed a massive restructuring of the majority of teaching and technical colleges into fewer, larger and multidisciplinary tertiary institutions (Gordon, 2009). Concerns about the quality, cost and coordination of rural teachers' colleges were cited to justify the restructuring process. New challenges for rural teachers and learners also emerged (Gardiner, 2008: 22).¹ In addition, there is a strong orientation towards classroom skills in the teacher education curriculum (Gardiner, 2008). Where the rural is acknowledgement, there is "a deficit paradigm ... that locates responsibility for student failure outside the classroom" (Moletsane, 2012: 3). Such deficit discourses may be evident in the way in which teacher education programmes prepare individuals to seek ways of 'turning around' rural schools and rural communities (Wits Schools Turn-Around Project, 2013). Such programmes are informed by corporate technicist management styles (Harvey, 2011). As noted in the Ministerial Commission on Rural Education (MCRE) (DoE, 2005: 76), "models of school improvement from the developed world appear to have become the orthodoxies to the extent that their terminology is frequently invoked as prescriptions without reference to the source of the theory". Given the above rural teacher education context, the question is raised as to how best current teacher education programmes may serve rural schools and communities. We argue that the challenges of rural teaching and learning require solutions that take into account the opportunities and strengths of the South African rural context. Budge (2006: 3) observed that "there is something very powerful about the sense of place in rural communities that help them transcend the challenges", citing connectedness, development of identity and culture, interdependence with the land, spirituality, activism and civic engagement as examples. Given the silence on teacher education on issues of rurality and the current challenges of rural education, we propose a teacher education programme that responds specifically to these rural problems.

Defining rurality and rural education

Definitions of rurality are generally incomplete. For example, Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson & Shapley (2007) emphasise the notion of settlement or demographic features. In South Africa, as indeed in many less developed countries, the notion of rural is closely associated with "histories and structures that have created conditions

and circumstances of ‘oppression’, ‘deprivation’, ‘disadvantage’ and ‘deficit’” (DoE, 2005: 8).² Often, rural is formulated in comparison to the urban with strong assumptions of difference and deficit underpinning this binary. Such binaries present the rural place and rural education as objects of exploration awaiting philanthropic and exotic interventions. According to Halfacree (2006), rurality viewed in this way becomes a de-specialised cultural concept that is disembodied and not linked to a concrete geographical location. This view often ignores the opportunities and strengths that rural areas bring to development in terms of culture and cultural practices, indigenous knowledge systems and a deep sense of collective rather than individualised developmental approaches which tend to nurture greater community cohesion and identity (Odora-Hoppers, 2004). Instead, rurality should be understood in terms of concrete geographical location, mapped in terms of topographical attributes, social composition of people, forms of activities, nature of social relations, and relations with other spaces (Halfacree, 2006).

We desisted from homogenising rurality into a ‘one-size-fits-all’ definition of rural places, but rather accept the diversity of rural schools and the myriad of challenges and potentialities of each rural school context. Thus, we perceive this as not necessarily compromising broad generalisations of rural conditions, but as an opportunity to gain deeper insights into the highly contextualised nature of rural education issues and rural development. We define rural as space which sustains human existence and development outside the jurisdiction of metropolitan/city/town authority.³

The paradox of rural education and education for rural development

The post-94 democratic government in South Africa has paid less attention to the notion of ‘rural education’ (as opposed to ‘education in rural areas’). In addition and, arguably, as a result of lack of resources and poverty, the specific needs of rural schools have been consistently given low priority in terms of both policy and the level of governance that prevail in rural areas. The steady widening rather than the narrowing of the gap of educational opportunities between the majority of rural and urban schools in South Africa is obvious. This led the Department of Education to set up a MCRE in 2004 which formulated a new vision for rural schooling to address the widening gap between urban and rural schools (DoE, 2005). The purpose of MCRE was to ensure the provision of equitable education for rural and urban learners. This was a sound social justice imperative, but differences between these two contexts make it practically difficult and potentially inequitable to provide the similar education. While quality teachers are the touchstone for sustainable education and rural development, rural areas experience both quantitative and qualitative teacher shortages (DoE, 2005). The rural-urban divide creates enormous disincentives to being posted in rural areas (Gardiner, 2008). It is sobering to consider that the

majority of South African school-going age children are condemned to substandard educational provision (Modisaotsile 2012; DoE, 2010). Competing views about rural education have influenced government policy on the rural education problem.

From related literature, we identified three dominant conceptual ideas that compete for prominence in discourses related to rural education. The first is the concept of rural education, which is intricately related to the past injustices occasioned by the apartheid regime. Africans were subjected to an inferior education, whether in what was then termed townships or in underdeveloped homelands. Thus, rural education resurrects the past injustices of the homeland policy which was particularly invidious in relation to resource allocation and governance structures, and this conception of rurality has been denied space in the discourses of educational provision in South Africa (Seroto, 2004).

A second view is the notion of education in rural areas which the post-apartheid government of South Africa has adopted. It focuses mainly on the need to redress past injustices by means of programmes of rural regeneration and development. The view recognises the challenges of learning in these areas and acknowledges that poor performance, poor resources, poor staffing and low standards are not only a product of the past injustices, but also a result of the dominant characteristic of rural communities, that is, embedded in realities of poverty necessitating increased funding as a strategy to address the problem (DoE, 2005: 5). Despite the benefits especially in terms of equity redress, this notion fails to recognise the potential assets and strengths in rural communities beyond merely re-allocating funding to rural education (Moletsane, 2012). In particular, rural spaces have abundant untapped cultural and indigenous knowledge systems that have yet to find space in educational discourses and teacher education programmes.

Although it has a wide international literature base, the third notion of education for rural development has not yet found much space in the South African discourses on education. Rural areas, in general, manifest depressingly inadequate levels of development on various indices. For the notion of education for rural development to be meaningful, specific education policy directives need to be in place. Education and training are considered to be two of the most powerful strategies for rural development (UNESCO, 2002). However, as Seroto (2004: 29) underlines, “these are also among the most neglected aspects of rural development by governments and the donor community”. Creating education strategies with rural development in mind has the potential to democratise rather than restrict curriculum revision for all.⁴ As things stand, education is viewed, ostensibly, as providing an escape from rural poverty. According to Corbett (2007), there is a deep and established connection between formal education and the loss of well-educated and/or skilled members of rural areas. This ambivalent effect of formal education to rural development and sustainability is rarely articulated in rural education policy statements and rural education discourses; yet its ugly reality confronts rural schools, rural graduates as well as rural development and sustainability. Therefore, the current notion of rural

education does not align with rural development, as the potentially productive human resources leave to work in urban areas. There is very little of value in the rural areas to retain those who are educated there. In particular, young adult males with secondary education migrate to urban areas with a view to escaping the ravages of rural poverty (SACE, 2011). The challenge remains as to how to retain this productive group in the rural areas, in order to serve the rural communities. Rather than simplistic and nostalgic proposals that amount to developing local educational programmes that would effectively limit options for these graduates, we are persuaded by Corbett's (2007) ideas of regenerating rural education of ways that would sustain rural communities and development. Corbett (2007) suggests three levels of intervention that could entail education for rural development and sustainability, namely structural development of rural communities, curriculum revision for rural schools, and pedagogic transformation at teacher education institutions. According to Corbett (2007), education for rural development might consider the infusion of "place-based" educational initiatives into the school curriculum. Such curriculum revision cannot occur without a concomitant review of teacher preparation programmes. Teacher education programmes need to provide training in the core courses about education for rural development, with accompanying pedagogical principles and training that incorporate traditional community knowledge and skills to supplement the standard learning resources.

This article will elaborate on some of the transformative rural pedagogical practices and suggest how these could be taken up in a rural TE that we propose later. In the following sections, we outline some of the challenges of teaching and learning that have compromised quality education delivery in the rural areas.

Challenges of teaching and learning in rural schools

The sustainability of rural education is critical for rural development (Reid, Green, Cooper, Hastings, Lock & White, 2010). In South Africa, the learning and teaching challenges in rural schools are closely tied to the sustainability of rural education and rural communities. From the interview discussions we had with a purposefully selected sample of two district officials, six school principals, and six teachers in the Bushbuckridge area of Mpumalanga in June 2012, we are able to make some points from this evidence. Moreover, while acknowledging that there are limitations of such data, in terms of generalisations, what these participants stated closely mirrors the issues we found in existing literature (HSRC-EPC, 2005).

A recurring theme in their narratives was the notion of a poor culture of teaching and learning in rural schools. The participant explained this in terms of a lack of teacher content knowledge; an inadequate supply of qualified Mathematics, Science and English teachers; a lack of qualified grade R teachers, including Foundation Phase teachers; poor management of curriculum teaching time; high level of teacher burn-out; high level of learner drop-out from school, and learners' negative

attitude towards learning. Although it could be argued that some of these challenges also exist in urban schools, Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) posit that the intensity of rural challenges is more pronounced in rural than in urban areas. Barter (2008: 468) argues that “alternative epistemological and pedagogical approaches in teaching and learning are required that are aligned to rural education challenges and development”. Given the complex and culturally diverse contexts of rurality, there is a need for teachers to develop teaching approaches that acknowledge the dynamics and complexity of the rural context.

A lack of subject content knowledge has been a challenge for some teachers in rural areas, particularly in high schools (HSRC-EPC, 2005). Teachers in Bushbuckridge district also mentioned a lack of expertise in career guidance, an area that could provide an important opportunity for developing new thinking about prospects for well-educated rural learners. The neglect of providing timely and regular supply of teaching resources was also highlighted.

In addition to the above challenges, there is the challenge to teaching and learning from learners’ erratic school attendance, which may be caused by the long distance they travel to and from school. In the Bushbuckridge district, for example, poor school attendance is influenced by home chores, since parents expect the children to participate in work such as cultivating the land and taking care of the siblings. From a deficit point of view, the above challenges become the ‘reasons’ for poor academic achievement of rural learners (Moletsane, 2012). Because these challenges are endemic to the rural context, learners lose the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn. Consequently, rural schools face overwhelming teaching and learning challenges that consistently compromise efforts in delivering quality of education that could drive rural development.

There have been several interventions by the DoE to address some of the rural education challenges (DoE, 2005). However, teacher education institutions have not taken proactive measures that specifically attend to the challenges of rural schools. For example, Islam (2012) cites the lack of relevance, complete omission, and misrecognition of rural-urban disparity at KwaZulu-Natal to show that there is a disconnection between university courses on educational theory and the practices of student teachers. Similarly, in an analysis of pre-service education programmes in Australia, Boylan (2004: 7) describes the situation with regard to rural education as being “piece-meal”, with no evidence of rural education or rural practicum in the modules. In this respect, we believe that our proposal for strengthening rural TE is important.

Proposal for integrating rural education in teacher education

Theoretical justifications and comparisons

Recent research advocates a re-conceptualisation of rurality and rural education as a lived and generative concept (Balfour *et al.*, 2008) that moves beyond the deficit paradigm of rurality (Moletsane, 2012). Such research shows that there are gaps in current teacher education modules in terms of addressing the challenges and unique needs of rural teachers and learners. We suggest that a rural TE programme be integrated in a teacher education programme at the university where we teach. We are cognisant of the fact that there are a number of rural teacher education initiatives that are operational within South Africa, aimed at improving rural teacher education discourse and practice. For example, Rural Teacher Education Project at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Islam, 2012) and the Kwena project at the Witwatersrand University (Place, 2004). One of the key recommendations of the MCRE (DoE, 2005: 44) was that, "consideration should be given to pre-service teacher education courses to cover teaching in rural areas". In order to address this call, the DoE, in collaboration with the Royal Netherlands Embassy, has embarked on a programme of research that focuses on initial and professional development of educators in rural areas (Gardiner, 2008). Of primary concern is the need to attract high-quality teachers to the rural areas and the reconstitution of teacher education programmes in ways that will make this possible.

There are many aspects of rural education and development that could be incorporated into pre-service teacher education programmes. For example, understanding of the relationship between schools and communities, understanding place (Gruenewald and Smith, 2008; Budge, 2006; White, 2010; Islam, 2012), and developing skills to teach multi-age and multigrade classes (Page, 2006). A rural TE component of a teacher education programme is designed to make teachers classroom ready, school ready and community ready for a rural teaching career (White, 2010). The first challenge in rural teaching is to make certain that student teachers appreciate the rural space in all its diversity and complexity. We believe that this can happen only when they have an opportunity to experience teaching in a rural context for themselves. The rural TE programme is designed and has activities that are structured to challenge and dispel students' stereotypical representations and mythical conceptions of rurality (Islam, 2012). Student teachers need to grasp the concept of rurality defined earlier. Cloke (2006: 19) observes that "we need to understand how different theoretical frames of rurality illuminate very different pictures of rurality and indeed steer rural research and *practice* (our emphasis) down very different pathways". Moletsane (2012: 1) suggests having strength-based paradigms that acknowledge the challenges these communities face, but also recognise that individuals and groups have strength, skills as well as knowledge and resources that can be used to develop and implement interventions for change.

Only a rural place can provide an opportunity for pre-service teachers to acquire the place-embedded values (Boylan, 2004). We acknowledge some concerns levelled against education programmes designed specifically for the rural schools and learners. One of the concerns relates to the apartheid policy of separate education for Whites and Blacks. As a result, it is believed that any attempt to present a distinct programme of education with a rural focus invokes past memories. Consequently, any such programme is, therefore, viewed as trying to 'ghetto-ise the rural' (DoE, n.d.). However, we still maintain that such concerns are more politically driven rather than pedagogic and that the pedagogic should override the political, particularly in educational matters.

Structure of the rural TE programme

We position rural TE not as a competing programme to the current TE, but as a complementary programme that addresses the challenges of rural teaching and development. It should have both a residential and a fieldwork experience component that should extend beyond the classroom (Islam, 2012). Student teachers will attend a one-week residential and theoretical induction programme at the Wits Rural Facility in the Bushbuckridge district in Mpumalanga, followed by two weeks of TE in the surrounding rural schools. Each semester will have two rural TE sessions that run parallel to the regular TE that the majority of students do in the urban setting.

Aims and content of the rural TE programme

Focus and aims of the rural TE programme

Given the foregoing rationale for rural education for development, the rural TE focuses on four main aims. First, the programme will afford students the opportunity to explore assets and challenges experienced when working in rural schools. For example, the following rural assets could be considered, namely how people act as a community; pastoral work, and rural people derive strength rather than vulnerability from challenges (Moletsane, 2012; Islam, 2012). Secondly, the student teachers will acquire the skills and knowledge that prepares them to teach in a challenging rural context. Thirdly, the programme also aims to help students interrogate and hopefully dispel misrepresentations and stereotypical images about rural schools and communities (Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012; Islam, 2012). Lastly, the programme hopes to develop students' values of community, collaboration tolerance, and an appreciation of diversity. To attain the above aims, the rural TE programme is divided into two key components, namely a residential one-week workshop and two weeks of teaching at a rural school.

One-week residential workshop at the Wits Rural Facility

The focus, in this instance, should be to familiarise students with the various theoretical conceptions of rurality and rural schooling. In this respect, it is crucial to have an informed understanding of rural space in terms of connectedness,

development of identity and culture, interdependence on rural place, spirituality, politics, activism, and civic engagement (Gruenewald and Smith, 2008; Bugde, 2006). The students' experience of teaching in rural schools should be informed by their understanding of place and they should incorporate their new awareness of rural place in their teaching. Part of the residential one-week programme would involve a local guest presenter (for example, a principal, community leader or parent) who would speak to the students about community/school life, challenges, possibilities, potentials, assets and values and how they might be harnessed for effective teaching and learning purposes. Using the knowledge and experience of rurality and rural life and schooling, student teachers should develop a lesson plan on a subject and topic of their choice which they will implement during their teaching in the next two weeks.

Two weeks' rural school experience: Learning and teaching in rural schools

The focus of the TE, in this instance, is learning about rurality in and beyond the classroom. A real opportunity to work in the specific rural context will be provided. It will involve interactions and discussions with teachers for the purpose of sharing pedagogical strategies in order to enhance the culture of teaching and learning within the rural context. We assume that student teachers learn best about a context and acquire skills to teach effectively within that context by being immersed and embedded in the context itself. Thus, student teachers will experience and explore life in the rural community in all its diversity. For example, they will be exposed to local community centres, community functions, family, and meet with learners, parents and teachers. Students will work with questions such as: In what ways do learners/parents and community knowledge enable or inhibit acquisition of formal knowledge? How may the key people in the community whom they have heard/met contribute in terms of knowledge, resources and skills for teaching and learning in rural contexts? How would they collaborate with these groups to enrich learners' learning experiences? On the last day of the fieldwork, students will share the experiences, highlighting opportunities and challenges for teaching and learning, and how the rural TE could be improved. This could be presented in the form of an e-mail or text message to a friend who has not considered taking a rural TE, persuading him/her to join the rural TE in the coming semester.

Implications of the rural TE

It is hoped that the rural TE will have conceptual, professional and research implications for the student teachers and the teacher education programme. The conceptual shifts in terms of students' understanding of rural teaching will be noted and they will be required to compare what they thought about rurality and rural teaching before and after the rural TE. The rural TE could develop into an evidence-based-practice project that would generate more knowledge on rural teaching and teacher education.

Conclusion

In South Africa, rural education and rural development are important social justice issues, especially in places previously established as homelands. Yet, with the post-1994 democratic dispensation and government's resolve to redress the colonial policies of separate development, the rural-urban drift continues to pose huge challenges for quality education and sustainable development in rural communities. In this article, we attempted to explain how certain notions of what rural means dominate education practice in ways that undermine rural development within the South African context. We also critically examined the concepts of rural education and education for rural development, highlighting the conceptual misunderstandings embedded in these notions and their implications for education practice in rural schools. We proposed the notion of education for rural development as a useful concept, with the potential of transforming and sustaining rural education and development. We described the implications of a change of education for rural development for teacher education, with a focus on the TE programme, and we invite comment and critique on our proposal for incorporating education for rural development as an integral component of teacher preparation in South Africa.

Endnotes

1. Universities have lacked experience in training teachers for lower grades and this had a negative effect on the education of children in both rural and poor urban areas. In addition, university courses did not teach future educators how to translate the concepts and ideas of their training into the everyday realities of the learners and their parents. Universities focused on training students to seek ways in which they can make changes at school and in classrooms, instead of teaching them how to work as a team at schools.
2. The problem with viewing rurality this way is that often the people who live there become both stereotyped and stigmatised as less clever, less developed, less intelligent, powerless and unenlightened than urban residents.
3. Such spaces tend to cover large geographical areas and are relatively underdeveloped in terms of basic infrastructure such as transport networks, electrification, water supply, health and educational resources, but they are culturally rich and embedded with vast resources of untapped or underutilised indigenous knowledge systems.

4. They have low literacy rates; low educational progression rates; low educational participation rates; low standards of health; low educational efficiency rates; high poverty indices, and poor road networks, among other development challenges. For example, learners at all levels and in all schools could learn about development and underdevelopment; indigenous knowledge systems; traditional folklore, beliefs and values, and about life and living in rural areas, among other more privileged forms of curriculum biased towards urban areas.

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