

# Rural school children picturing family life

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*Rurality is an active agent and central to the lived experiences of children growing up on a farm and attending a farm school. It is a key to their everyday experiences, and influences family life, schooling and their future. Previous studies elsewhere in the world have explored the notion of childhood in rural contexts, but there is a dearth of similar research in South Africa, which has a vast section of the population living in rural areas and therefore a vast number of children attending school in rural areas. A farm school – a public school on private property - provides the context for this study's exploration of children's views of family life in a rural area. The data was obtained using drawing as a visual participatory methodology with 16 primary school children, aged between 6 and 10, both boys and girls, providing an insider local perspective on growing up on a farm in a rural environment. How do children picture their lives? What do these pictures tell about rural family life? How does this influence schooling? This paper reports the findings and makes critical recommendations for turning the tide for children in rural education contexts.*

**Keywords:** rural community, farm school, public school, family life, visual participatory methodology, drawings.

## Introduction

*Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education ... that a child of a farm worker can become the president ... (Mandela, 1994:144).*

The context within which children grow up influences their everyday lives, their family life, their schooling and their future (Taylor & Hyde, 2002). Indeed, the establishment of a favourable teaching and learning context in the classroom becomes even more decisive if the school accommodates learners who come from less favourable contexts, such as under-resourced rural communities.

South Africa is a developing country, which “has not yet reached the stage of economic development characterized by the growth of industrialization, nor (as was once thought) a level of sufficient national income required to finance the investment necessary for further growth” (Bannock, Baxter & Davis, 2003:97). Despite its backlogs, it is a country with a richness and diversity of people, and with textured *family lives*. It also has an interesting array of schooling settings: urban, peri-urban and rural *contexts*, as well as private, semi-private and public schools, ranging from large comprehensive schools to small rural farm *schools*, all aiming to contribute to human development. In South Africa, farm schools, which are the focus of this study, are located on private property, and were initially established for the children of farm workers.

While there is a body of literature focusing on rural schooling in international contexts (Clare, Jimenez & McClendon, 2005; Cummins, 2009; Riley, 2009; Henderson, 2008; Saloojee, Phohole, Saloojee & IJsselmuiden, 2007; Hancock, 2005; McKinstry, 2005), there is a dearth of literature on rural schooling,

rural farm schooling and family life of children attending farm schools in South Africa. Our research is aimed at making a significant contribution to filling this gap.

## Children's everyday family life in rural contexts

Rurality (and childhood and family life in rural settings) is itself an area that is relatively understudied within the social studies of childhood. Corbett (2007) notes, there is a need for social research that is place-sensitive and that takes account of the differing social-spatial environments of growing up in urban, peri-urban, township and rural spaces.

This study is located within a larger international project entitled *Textual Display of Children's Everyday Lives* in Norway,<sup>1</sup> being undertaken in China, the United States and South Africa. The four-country project is organised around the use of teddy diaries where children (or their parents) document through the 'voice' of a teddy bear their everyday activities. As Haldar and Waerdahl (2009) highlight, the diaries, which are made up of writings (by children and sometimes their parents or siblings) along with drawings, offer a window into what the families themselves perceive as significant. Since the teddy diary circulates from family to family and between families and school it yields textual material informed by local cultural norms which would otherwise be difficult to obtain by "outsider" researchers alone, and as such the methodology complements and extends other approaches to understanding the experiences of very young children such as "kitchen research" (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) and the "least adult approach" (Mandell, 1988).

## The context of South African rural schooling, the farm school and the study

Rural education in South Africa is experiencing many challenges. A study of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), entitled *The emerging voices: A report on education in South African rural communities* (HSRC, 2005), presents a picture of rural education as one where the inequalities of the past linger. Another report by the South African Department of Education (DoE), *A new vision for rural schooling*, resulted in the establishment of a Rural Education Directorate within the DoE (DoE, 2005). A subsequent step forward was the formulation of the *National framework for quality education in rural areas* which has five key focus areas, "improving quality of teaching and learning in rural and farm schools; attracting and retaining learners at rural schools; planning, restructuring and improving infrastructure at rural and farm schools; promoting advocacy and sustainable partnerships; and building effective school governance and management of rural and farm schools" (DoE, 2009:3).

The specific setting for the study is the Langkloof, a beautiful valley in the Western Cape, and an area producing deciduous fruit such as apples, pears, peaches and plums. A hamlet, called Noll (also known as Nolls Halt), situated near a larger town Uniondale, is the nearest economic centre to the farm school we focus on in this study. The farm school lies in a larger farming district with a population of 16.565 individuals (Dorrington, 2005:20). Approximately 11% of the Western Cape population is living in rural areas (Tom, 2004). This rural district has a large Coloured population,<sup>2</sup> with many of the people living and working on the farms, and their children attending the nearest school located on a nearby farm. Various socio-economic factors such as unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, alcohol abuse, gender violence, teenage pregnancy, malnutrition and child labour (Blum & Diwan, 2007) influence community life.

The farm school itself was established more than one hundred years ago (Hough, personal communication, 2009) and was linked to a church, with the school's name bearing testimony to this link. Over the years it has generally only had one teacher, who also acted as principal, administrator and factotum. Currently, there are two female teachers teaching the 27 children in the school. The children are divided into two classes, one consisting of the Foundation grades 1-3 and the other of the Intermediate grades 4-6, utilising a multigrade approach.<sup>3</sup> The original building still exists and one section is used as a classroom and the other as a small computer laboratory with 11 computers. Another prefabricated classroom has been erected and a container does duty as a kitchen, from where the children are provided

with meals as part of a school feeding scheme. A new small ablution block has been built, with toilets, hand basins and doors which can lock, improving the sanitation and safety of learners (*Human Rights Watch*, 2001). The school is fenced and the playground has a swing or two on a dusty patch.

## **Getting an insider local perspective of growing up on a fruit farm in a rural environment**

### **Research question and aim**

Against the backdrop of family livelihoods and the context of rural schooling, the aim of the research was to investigate the following: What can children's drawings tell us about family life and growing up in the context of a rural farm in South Africa?

### **Research design**

The research was undertaken within the boundaries of a *constructivist* philosophical approach, investigating how the participants construct their own reality, while actively involved as participants in the research process (Adler, 2005). The research further draws on an *interpretive* theoretical approach, seeking to "understand the world in terms of the experiences of the people involved in it" (McFarlane, 2000:27). In order to explore and understand the family life of a group of children and what it is like for them growing up in a rural environment, we used a *qualitative applied* research paradigm. The research was systematic, subjective, naturalistic, contextual, descriptive, inductive, exploratory, interactive and holistic in nature (Creswell, 2003; Struwig & Stead, 2001).

### **Research methodology**

As noted above, we drew on the methodology developed by Haldar and Waerdahl (2009), who worked with children in a Norwegian setting, using teddy diaries.

#### *Sample*

A purposive, convenience and availability sample (Struwig & Stead, 2001) was utilised, whereby we included all the Foundation Phase children of the school. There were sixteen in total, seven boys and nine girls. Their ages ranged from six to ten and all were Coloured children.

#### *Data generation*

According to Creswell (2003), data collection comprises three features, namely delineating the boundaries of the study to the participants; collecting data by means of various methods, including using visual material, such as drawings, and establishing the process of recording the information. These features are also to be found in our data collection. The boundaries of the study have been explained in the Introduction; the collection and the recording of the data are explained below.

The teddy diary protocol developed by Haldar and Waerdahl (2009) requires one teddy bear and one diary to be circulated among the whole class, with each child getting a turn to take the teddy bear and diary home. We decided not to circulate one teddy only for the following reasons: First, we wondered whether a teddy bear would be the most suitable soft toy, and decided to have toys which we thought this group of children would play with if they had the opportunity to. Secondly, we wanted some differentiation between the different grades of the multigrade classroom, so we decided on a different soft toy for each grade (a monkey, a dog and a dinosaur). Thirdly, there was a consideration of ownership, so we elected to buy enough soft toys so that each child could not only take the soft toy home when it was his/her turn to write and draw in the diary, but also to keep it to play with, returning only the diary to school.

The research team visited the school where we explained the project to the children, using pictures and posters to assist their understanding of the project. We then introduced the soft toy and the diary.

The following prompt (translated here from Afrikaans into English) was written on the front page of the diary:

*Hello, my name is ... and I am a special friend of this class. This is my book. I will be very happy if you write and draw in my book about the things you and me experience together. Maybe your mother or your father can help you. Warm regards, ...*

Because the children were in the Foundation Phase we suggested that they draw and write in response to the prompt. In this article we focus only on the drawings which they also explained orally to us during a follow-up visit, reminding us of the “talking drawing” approach of McConnell (1993:260), which combines drawing (visual representations) with talking (oral representations), to clarify their illustrated experiences. Their explanations (“speaking to the pictures”) were recorded at the time and later transcribed *verbatim*.

Some of the advantages of using drawings include the possibility that participants may find it easier, quicker and more pleasurable than writing to reflect on their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Ozden, 2009). The tool is even more valuable in cases of verbal and especially writing language barriers (Smith, Meehan, Enfield & Castori, 2005). Drawings might also include mental representations of which participants may be unaware (Leon, Wallace & Rudy, 2007). From a research perspective, however, a limitation of drawing is that it cannot always be taken as an accurate representation of thoughts, feelings and experiences (Ozden, 2009). For that reason, we saw drawing as part of triangulation where the participants could also speak about their drawings.

### *Data analysis*

The data consisted of 3 class diaries, one for each of the three grades, plus drawings. These drawings were not done collectively in the classroom setting, but at home, as an individual activity of each participant. We analysed the 16 individual drawings, not only in terms of the visual content, but also in terms of the oral narratives of the children. Thus, as is suggested by Cross, Kabel and Lysack (2006:192) “... the use of drawings is optimized when used alongside participants’ explanations of them”. The oral narrative of each child is viewed as a first layer of analysis of the drawings.

We then examined all the transcriptions and used an open coding technique to analyse their explanations, as a second layer of analysis, in terms of the research question (Mouton, 2002). All four researchers analysed the transcriptions, carried out constant comparisons to continually refine the analysis (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2006), and finally reached consensus regarding the emerging themes (Willig, 2001).

### *Ethics and consent*

We obtained permission to do research from the Western Cape Department of Education, as well as from the principal of the school. The principal – on our behalf – sent the consent forms home with the learners. All forms were signed and returned to the school. We also obtained ethical clearance for the research from the ethics committee of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

## **Findings: growing up in a family on a fruit farm**

In this section we offer our analysis of the 16 drawings and of the follow-up interviews with each child. While the drawings offer a window on a number of different thematic areas, we focus in this instance on the everyday lives of the children and what the drawings reveal about rural childhood. We interpret the data according to three main themes.

### **Rurality and the influence of place/space on growing up**

The drawings that the participants made of their homes confirm the notion of open space, and their descriptions of their drawings provide us with insight into their experiences. These experiences include

playing outside in the river or dam, on the gravel road running past their homes, or in the orchard near their homes.

The drawings of the children all depict very basic and small homes (see Figure 1) set close to each other, usually one-roomed or one bed-roomed. The drawings compare well with the photograph of a home (see Figure 2) taken to visually document the context of the research. The homes are not equipped with running water and water has to be collected from the river or the dam, as one of the children indicated, “We draw water for washing from the dam” and “we fetch the water in a bucket”. The homes do have electricity. To heat the water for bathing they have to “boil the water in the kettle”. The small homes are often overcrowded, as one child indicated that “me, my mom, my dad, my dog, and my little brother sleep there ... [in the room]”. The homes on the farms are also long distances from the nearest shop, which sells the basic necessities, and which they frequent in the afternoons after school to buy some sweets or food stuff for their mother, as the following quotations indicate, “I walked from Boskloof to get to the shop” and “I went to the far shop ... we bought chips and sweets ...”. The school is also a long distance away requiring the teacher to collect some of the children from their homes in the morning and drop them off at home after school.

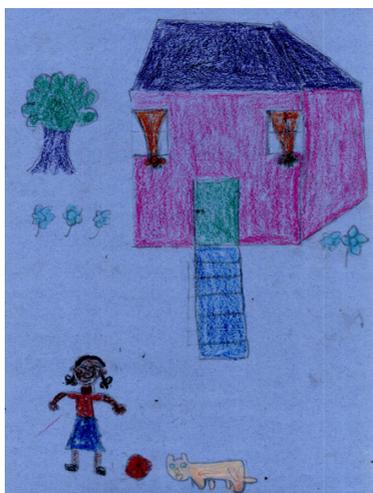


Figure 1: Drawing by grade 3 learner of her home



Figure 2: Photograph of some of the children's homes

The isolation and distance from school and town, according to Phometsi, Kruger and Van't Riet (2006), can have a negative impact on children in terms of services and resources; yet these children draw and describe how they go about their daily living to circumvent the apparent challenges. The distance of the homes from resources influences access which impacts on a whole range of activities. Although Bray and Dawes (2007:49) highlight the need for electricity to power computers, none of these participants had computers at home because of their families' low income. However, the children did have access to computers at their school.

## Engaged as a family

A critical feature of the drawings and narratives relates to the ways in which children and their parents are 'engaged' together in their living and working on the fruit farm. The participants drew and talked about the activities their parents engaged in to earn money on the farm. While the fathers are the main providers of income and work on the fruit farms as pickers, packers and transporters, the mothers mostly take care of the children, sometimes being able to supplement the family income by doing seasonal fruit picking,

for example “... she works in the orchard ...”. The participants also refer to their mothers doing domestic activities such as baking bread, cake and *roosterkoek* (a type of breadroll baked on an open fire or in an oven) and making jam from the fruit available on the farm, with one participant sharing how his “Mother surprised the two of us [she brought them cake to eat]”.

However, the children are required to share in the chores and have to fetch water and wood, and run errands, such as walking to the shop to buy groceries, as in “we walked to the shop to buy bread for mom”. As Biersteker and Kvalsvig (2007) note, these activities are regarded as children’s work and have to be performed efficiently. This practice of assigning responsibilities to children is viewed positively as part of their socialisation and making them feel valued, and as a practice which allows children to be absorbed into households when necessary, without placing an intolerable burden on adult caregivers. While child labour is a contentious issue, the services children contribute to the management and maintenance of livelihoods and household economies seem far more valuable than previously estimated (McGarry, 2008).

However, the chores that contribute to the running of the household could have an impact on the time and energy available for learning. Only once did a participant mention school work, i.e. “We had done our studies ...”, which raises the issue of how skilled and prepared the parents are to motivate and assist their children with their learning. Atkinson (2007) writes about how poor educational and skill levels condemn farm workers to manual and semi-skilled work. While the quality of rural schooling in South Africa might be uneven, the farm school from which the participants are drawn appears adequate and efficient, in spite of the fact that the school cannot “offer the wealth of facilities and learning options that can be provided in larger schools” (DoE, 2005:68). Equally important is the lack of provision for secondary school education as the children need to go to boarding school at the nearest town to complete secondary school. In addition to the family engagement in relation to work is a type of family togetherness as depicted in terms of doing things together, such as listening to the radio and watching television (see Figure 3).

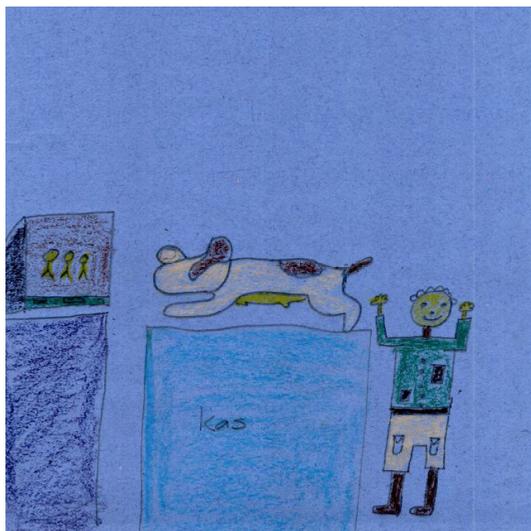


Figure 3: Drawing by grade 3 learner depicting the family and the soft toy (dog) watching television

For the children, going to town on Friday evenings included going to the tavern with the parents, who consume alcohol and also dance, “We go dancing at the tavern ... they dance, eat and buy wine ...”. Although the use of alcohol by the parents is only mentioned once, alcohol abuse is a concern in such isolated communities, with foetal alcohol syndrome impacting on the unborn child with implications for later learning (Vaux & Chambers, 2010).

Consumption is clearly depicted in the activities of the children and the parents, mainly buying necessities such as food and clothes. The income generated provides money to buy small treats at the shop, “My mom gave us money for sweets”. It also provides money to visit the mall in the nearby town, “In the mall there are clothes, and shoes and dolls” and “Mom buys things when we go to the mall”; “We go to the shops on Sundays and Saturdays”. Friday evenings, the weekly entertainment event in town sees the consumption of alcohol “... buy wine ...”, which is a particular problem in the Western Cape (Baxen, 2008).

### A sense of having fun

It is interesting to note the frequent reference to games and playing. Many of the participants’ drawings showed them playing outside the house in the garden and among the flowers. The participants also described their love for nature, e.g. “We play on the grass ... climb in the tree”. Many of the participants mentioned that they like swimming in the river, waterhole or dam, for example, “I am not afraid of the water. I taught myself how to swim” and “We’ve been to the river”. Other places where they usually played were on the side of the road, in the sand, on the farm, in the house, in the bath and in the bed.

The activities included watching television and listening to children’s programmes and stories on the radio. When they have some money for buying chips and sweets, they do not mind walking to the shop, e.g. “We walk to the shop – it’s not far – then we buy sweets”. Going to town over the weekend seems to be a highlight for them (“On Saturdays and Sundays we go to the shops”). They also mentioned playing with the family dog, swinging or playing with a ball, a toy car made of wire, a doll’s house, and participating in games: “We play a game of ‘touch’ (Afrikaans: *Jagentjies*). When I catch him, he must chase me.” The participants mentioned playing with friends, siblings or the soft toy, e.g. “One of my school friends went with”, and “I play a little bit with Flappie (soft toy dog)”. Excursions were usually undertaken with family members, extended family, neighbours, the teacher or the farmer.



Figure 4: Drawing by grade 1 child depicting children at play

The literature on childhood calls attention to the importance and value of play. Ward (2007:76), for example, points out that both Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 12 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child describe the child's right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities. Kekae-Moletsane (2008) explained the significance of play by saying it is the medium through which children express their experiences as well as their feelings and it lays the foundation for the cognitive styles of adulthood. In play children confirm their existence and affirm their worth, and they can re-create events and exercise control over them.

## Conclusions

The words of Nelson Mandela used in the beginning of this article encourage us to think deeply about the experiences of growing up as a child of a farm worker and the future of such children in contemporary South Africa. The children's voices clearly speak to many positive experiences which should not be overlooked when conceptualising interventions for children living and learning in rural areas. As such the positives challenge the stereotyping of family life and growing up in a rural context as deficient and allow us to build on such positives when considering schooling in a rural context. While this small-scale research allowed us to get an insider perspective on growing up on a fruit farm in a rural district, it also provides us with an opportunity to consider implications for rural education and how it is taken forward in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Clearly, this study raises a number of critical questions. To what extent is the rural environment a deficient space or one that is rich in opportunities for the development of children? How can the challenges of sustaining a family on a small income be offset by access to and support for schooling which is efficient and where teachers are well trained, enabling the children to excel, complete their school career and gain employment in order to break the cycle of poverty? How can the DoE provide quality teachers (trained in multigrade teaching), and after-school support so that children can be committed to a culture of learning and completing their homework? How can the school be positioned as a centre of community development and an environment where children and their families are enabled to acquire appropriate knowledge, skills and values for making a good life? How can the distance from resources and services be countered through making technology available at the school? Rurality (and distance) is a fact of life in South Africa, and rural livelihoods in southern Africa remain a key feature in the experiences of many children. While this study has gone a small way in uncovering some of the realities of growing up rural, its greatest significance, we would argue, is the approach itself, and the importance of tapping into the voices of rural children. As such, the study confirms the need to research children's experiences of family life in a rural context and to use such findings to argue for interventions that will bring about change in the lives of children and their families through improved schooling in rural contexts.

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## Endnotes

1. The data presented in this article was collected as part of a larger project called the "International Project on Teddy Diaries: Textual Display of Children's Everyday Lives". The international project was initially funded by Oslo University College in a grant to Marit Haldar. Data were gathered by Naydene de Lange, Johanna Geldenhuys, Marit Haldar, Claudia Mitchell, Tilla Olivier, Eréndira Rueda and Randi Wærdahl. The multi-year project entailed an international comparison of the textual display of everyday life among elementary school children in China, Norway, South Africa and the United States. Through the use of teddy bear diaries circulated among the homes of first-grade children, project members used the diary entries as a source of knowledge about normative standards of everyday life. See Haldar and Wærdahl (2009) for a methodological introduction to the project.

2. In South Africa the term Coloured (also known as *Bruinmense* or *Kleurlinge*) refers to an ethnic group of people of mixed race who stem from slaves, Asians, Europeans, Khoi, and Africans. Within the Coloured group (8.9% of the South African population) there are vast differences with regard to religion, language and socio-economic status (Family life in Coloured families, n.d.; Erasmus & Pieterse, 1999).
3. Multigrade classes have learners from two or more grades taught by one teacher in one room simultaneously. They are usually found in rural communities which are isolated by geography and social differences, and populated by marginal social groups who may lack any meaningful access to education. While more than 2 million children attend multigrade schools on a daily basis in South Africa (Jordaan & Joubert, n.d.) most teachers teaching such classes are not trained in multigrade teaching approaches.

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