Early school leavers and sustainable learning environments in rural contexts

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In this paper, I show by means of Yosso's community cultural wealth theoretical framework how equal numbers of early school leavers (ESLs) from the rural and the urban parts of the North-West province cite similar reasons for their early departure from school. The conclusion drawn from this scenario is that, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds and locations, they all seem to be affected in similar ways by conditions in their respective schools and social milieu. The above conclusion indicates that there is nothing intrinsically inferior or backward about rural learners and their settings. What seems to be different though may be how they are excluded with regard to curriculum practices that do not address their specific circumstances directly. On the basis of this conclusion I suggest that these curriculum practices be customised to the needs and conditions in the rural settings towards the creation of sustainable learning environments so as to stem the high rates of learner attrition therein. This must be done with the intention of giving rural learners opportunities similar to those afforded to learners from urban backgrounds. To date, rural learners have been deliberately and/or inadvertently excluded and marginalised; thus, to remedy the situation I propose the creation of sustainable learning environments in rural schools as well.

Keywords: early school leavers, sustainable learning environments, rural education, community cultural wealth.

The problem

One of the most serious problems in the South African education system currently is the high number of early school leavers (ESLs) (Dieltiens & Meny-Gibert, 2008; Department of Education [DoE], 2007; Development Bank of South Africa, 2008; Mahlomaholo, Mamiala, Hongwane, Ngcongwane, Itlhopheng, Fosu-Amoah, Mahlomaholo, Kies & Mokgotsi, 2010; Masitsa, 2006). For example, in the North-West Province where this study is focused, it is estimated that, in any one year, about 53 000 learners enrol for Grade 1 but that 12 years later such a cohort is decimated to around 20 000 learners sitting for the Grade 12 examinations (Mahlomaholo *et al*., 2010). This implies that about 33 000 learners will have fallen by the wayside, having left school before completing at least their 12th grade. Some studies use the stigmatising concept of the 'drop outs' to refer to the ESLs (see DoE, 2007; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe & Carlson, 2000). Such a concept tends to blame the victims of a system of education and schooling that does not provide adequate support for all learners and regard others, the majority, as expendable. ESLs are thus that category of learners who could have become productive citizens in a democracy but who, due to factors beyond their control, had to leave school before completing at least Grade 12.

This problem of ESLs seems to be compounded even further when the learners reside and attend schools in rural settings of the country. To illustrate this point, in the North-West Province over 70% of the learners who leave school early come from rural environments (Mahlomaholo *et al*., 2010; Statistics South Africa, 2007). While it is a fact that rurality as a setting may be exacerbating the issue of learner attrition, I wish to argue in this paper that rural learners do not enjoy the same privileges and resources as their urban counterparts. For example, schools in the rural settings are few and far from where the learners stay (Mahlomaholo & Hongwane, 2009). They also do not have easy access to services such as water and electricity. Teachers who work in these areas are less qualified and often have very low levels of motivation (Matlho, 2011). A closer look at the rural settings also shows that, unlike the urban areas, they

are not the seats of power as they lie usually on the margins and fringes of social, educational, political and economic activity (Woodrum, 2011).

As a country we seem not to have a very clear understanding of what constitutes rural education. Our educational policies and practices of the curriculum use the urban learner as the norm and focus for educational provisioning (Matlho, 2011). This results in rural learners being ignored and thus located on the periphery of the national education agenda (Balfour & De Lange, 2011). Furthermore, there are many stereotypes about what rurality and education therein entail. There are even views expressed about the unsophisticated, inferior intellectual capacity and backward nature of rural learners and their lack of knowledge regarding technological gadgets, to name a few (Sherwood, 2000; Sibanda, 2004).

In this paper, I am thus advocating for rural education policy and curriculum practice to take rurality as their point of departure and continue to validate the community cultural wealth thereof because it has its own experiences, fears and aspirations just like its urban counterpart. When such an approach is adopted, rurality and rural learners are understood for who they really are. It is also under such conditions that we can talk about a sustainable learning environment being created for the rural learner because it privileges equity, social justice, freedom, peace and hope.

The lens

Such an approach is clearly articulated in Yosso's (2005) theorisation on *community cultural wealth* which differs significantly from Bourdieu's (2003) notion of *cultural capital*. The latter, when faced with the apparent disadvantage of rural learners as described by the dominant discourses, would argue that they have deficiencies with regard to the requisite cultural capital. This means that rural learners, with regard to their place of and conditions at birth, have not been adequately socialised into the ways of learning required at school; thus, precipitating an early departure (South, Haynie & Rose, 2005). This perspective, rather than attempting to thoroughly understand and resolve the problem of the high levels of rural learner attrition, seems to adopt a noncommittal position and ultimately finds the latter guilty as charged, without taking too much consideration of the circumstantial evidence to the contrary. High levels of attrition among rural learners would be evidence of how they lack the *habitus, cultural capital* and the disposition to do well at school (Bourdieu, 2003).

Contrary to the above view, Yosso (2005) would first want to establish the extent to which schooling as currently provided to rural learners is relevant, meaningful and rooted in their experiences. The point made through community cultural wealth is that rural schooling, as it is in South Africa, ignores what is essential, meaningful and relevant to the rural learner. Rural learners have their way of making sense of the world which has been tested through time (Delgado, 2002). They are tacitly aware of the problems in their environment and of ways of responding to them adequately (Campbell & Yates, 2011). They have the *navigational capital* that helps them survive the often harsh realities of their contexts, together with having aspirations for the future and being aware of the impediments to their success. This *aspirational capital* is present, irrespective of the odds against its realisation. Rural learners have their networks of mutual support and validation (Yosso, 2005), as well as knowing that collectively, they have the power to survive and face the challenges of their lives. This *social capital* is built onto their *familial and linguistic capitals* (Yosso, 2005). The sense of belonging is strong among them as is usually the case with the poor and the underclass the world over (Yosso, 2005). Most importantly, they also have the *resistance and resilience capitals* that have enabled them to challenge instances of inequity, unfairness, discrimination, oppression and marginalisation instituted against them (Yosso, 2005). According to Yosso, the capitals described above constitute his notion of community cultural wealth.

Grounded on the above perspective, I therefore tend to see the high levels of attrition among rural learners first as an indication of the exclusion of their community cultural wealth from educational policy and curriculum practices. The African National Congress government has recently recognised this fact and has even prioritised both rural development and education for closer attention (Mahlomaholo *et al.*, 2010). However, this has still to be translated into concrete and practical policy and focused curriculum practices. An analysis of the many educational legislative and policy imperatives (Mahlomaholo, 2010) reveals that

issues of equity, social justice, freedom, peace and hope have been privileged therein, but they have not focused attention on the problem of education for the rural learner, in particular.

Understanding rurality

Rurality has not been adequately analysed in South Africa. It is not a homogenous entity but includes a number of varied contexts and theorisations. In South Africa it refers to those sparsely populated environments where agriculture is the dominant mode of economic activity. There are also other forms of rurality which include the many trust and tribal lands in the country led by traditional leaders (Motala, Dieltiens, Carrim, Kgobe, Moyo & Rembe, 2007). Even with regard to theorising 'the rural', there seems to be multiple positions from which to understand the concept and the place. For example, Hlalele (2011:1) notes the following about rurality:

> So long as a nation's rural life is vigorous, it possesses reserves of life and power, which nourish, nurture, promote and sustain humanity ... Urban and metropolitan schools, colleges and universities may unintentionally structure their learning programmes in such a manner that they neglect rural attributes and resultantly ostracise or marginalise learners/students from rural environments. To complete the loop, these institutions are more likely to fail in preparing graduates for a decisive contribution to sustainable rural learning ecologies.

The above quotation defines 'the rural' from an asset-based perspective, showing how resourceful rural environments are but have unfortunately fallen victim to the parasitic and pyrrhic urban demands. This definition differs from the conventional deficit-based one referred to earlier in this paper which emphasises what 'the rural' lacks (Demi, Coleman-Jensen & Snyder, 2010; Minnaar, 2006). Depending on one's perspective, it seems that the rural can represent a space of deprivation and exclusion while, for others, it could be understood as a place full of untapped potential waiting to be explored and exploited (Demi *et al.*, 2010; Hlalele, 2011; Minnaar, 2006; Motala *et al.*, 2007). However, one distinguishing feature of the rural environment seems to be an abundance of land, sometimes coupled with a scarcity of skilled person power to till and develop these areas (Michelson & Parish, 2000; Minnaar, 2006). As an example, there is a need for engineers, skilled artisans, competent commercial farmers, economists and technologists of all kinds to respond to the infrastructural and service provision needs of the rural. The challenges to feed the many with safe food and to create sustainable and decent employment for the multitudes are almost overwhelming (Motala *et al.*, 2007). Without romanticising the situation, I realise that poverty is rampant but that there is a possibility of transcendence in rural settings. In fact, hope seems to lie in the creation of sustainable learning environments to unleash this latent potential which will be stifled if the high levels of learner attrition are to continue.

Methodology and design

To demonstrate the above, I present in this paper the reinterpretation of some data on learner attrition from a study commissioned by the North-West Education Department (Mahlomaholo *et al.*, 2010).

We traced a total of 15 695 ESLs from across the North-West Province who fell within the cohort of 53 000 learners who started school in Grade 1 in 1998 but *did not reach nor write* the Grade 12 examinations in 2009, although they were supposed to be at that level as they had started schooling 12 years earlier. We firstly collected the names, particulars and contact details of these ESLs from the admission registers of all the schools in the province. We obtained permission from the North-West Education Department to do so with the help of the District officials and principals of the respective schools. There were almost equal numbers of rural (±48.3%) and urban learners (±50.9%) included. On the other hand, girls constituted 61% while boys made up 49% of all ESLs. For the purposes of this paper, I focused on the rural ESLs groups from the farming and tribal settings of the Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati Municipality District (identified as the DR RSM District) and the Ngaka Modiri Molema Municipality District (the NMM District) because, comparatively speaking, these are the most rural of the four Districts in the North-West Province.

The urban group came from the cities in the Dr Kenneth Kaunda (the DR KK District) and Bojanala Municipality Districts (the BJ District**)**.

In order to collect the data from these 15 695 ESLs, focus group interviews were conducted with them. This process spanned a period of six months. Our team of nine core researchers, assisted by 200 community development workers (CDWs), worked with groups of ESLs in community halls and centres across the province on appointed dates. From each ward in the local municipalities of the province, the Department of Local Government and Housing has people employed on a full-time basis as CDWs to collect information from the local communities about any matter in order to inform the government for purposes of service delivery. These CDWs agreed to assist us with the data collection process of our project. Because of the trust that they enjoyed in these communities, they arranged for the data collection meetings in their respective wards. They informed the ESLs of the purposes of the study and assured them of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information that would be shared. They also emphasised the voluntary nature of the ESLs' participation and that they could withdraw from the project at any time or refuse to talk or complete the forms without any adverse consequences befalling them. The CDWs collected most of the data and our team played the supervisory and quality assurance roles.

In a community hall where around 200 ESLs would be present at a time, the focus group discussions consisted of 20 small groups of about 10 ESLs each, talking and discussing the reasons for their early departure from school so as to remind and emotionally support one another. The responses were followed up with clarifying questions and reflective summaries as Meulenberg-Buskens's (1993) Free Attitude Interview Technique prescribes. At the end of the session each participant completed the form, which we had provided for his/her own personal reasons, confidentially. These completed forms were collected after the sessions and information therein used as basis for our analysis.

Owing to the large numbers of focus groups and discussions that emanated from them, we tape recorded, transcribed and translated only from Setswana texts into English; six of them where we, as the core research team members, participated directly. I selected only the significantly different contributions from the rural ESLs to constitute the corpus for analysis in this paper, since they were the focus herein. These I subjected to critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2009) where the written word served as evidence for the interpretation made at both the levels of discursive practice and social structures (Van Dijk, 2009). I am aware that the readings of these texts are mine and that another researcher could come up with different interpretations and conclusions. However, the data from the forms which were completed by the participants were coded and simple percentages of responses calculated (see Table 1). I used the 13 reasons coming from the ESLs' responses and corroborated by Masitsa's inventory (2006) as themes to make sense of all the data referred to above (see Table 1).

Findings and discussions

From Table 1 it is clear that there are no clear-cut distinctions between the ESLs from the rural and the urban settings regarding all the reasons cited for early school leaving. Regression analysis (of the 13 reasons) showed that percentages of rural ESLs almost perfectly predicted the percentages of urban ESLs who left school early for the same reasons. Correlation between the percentages of rural ESLs to urban ESLs: $r = \sqrt{r} \sqrt{r^2} = 0.955651276$. This similarity could be interpreted as an indication that rural learners are affected in the same manner and to the same extent by the social- and school-related factors as their urban counterparts. Given the gloomy picture painted in the literature about the extent of poverty and neglect rife in rural settings and schools (see Demi *et al*., 2010; Mahlomaholo *et al*., 2010; Michelson & Parish, 2000; Minnaar, 2006; Motala *et al*., 2007), credit should be accorded to the rural ESLs for their resilience, navigational and aspirational capitals that seem to have prevailed in spite of their sparse circumstances (Yosso, 2005). Hlalele's (2011:1) observation that rural environments should not be undermined because they are actually sources of power to "nourish, nurture, promote and sustain humanity" is largely vindicated by these findings.

Nevertheless, further probing provided an explanation of why rural learners, in spite of their apparent strengths, are over-represented among the ESLs as reported in the literature (Dieltiens & Meny-Gibert,

Table 1: Reasons cited by ESLs from rural versus urban environments for leaving school early

REASONS FOR LSE	DR RSM ESLs		NMM ESLs		RURAL TOTAL ESLs	DR KK ESLs		BJ		URBAN TOTAL	ALL ESLS	TOTAL ESLs
	RAW	%	RAW	%	%	RAW	%	RAW	%	%	RAW	%
1. Failure (R)	981	6.3	732	4.7	11	816	5.2	609	3.9	9.1	3138	20
2. Lack of motivation & Truancy	868	5.5	555	3.5	9	438	2.8	373	2.4	5.2	2234	14.2
3. Resettlement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	104	0.7	0.7	104	0.7
4. Abuse	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	0	0	2	0
5. Long distances	388	2.5	58	0.4	2.9	68	0.4	0	0	0.4	514	3.3
6. Pregnancy	297	1.9	162	1.03	2.93	384	2.5	118	0.8	3.3	961	5.8
7. Poverty	642	4.1	885	5.6	9.7	906	5.8	443	2.8	8.6	2876	18.3
8. Ill-health and passed away	96	0.6	70	0.5	1.1	86	0.5	33	0.2	0.7	285	1.8
9. Attraction of odd jobs	192	1.2	82	0.5	1.7	125	0.8	73	0.5	1.3	472	3
10. Looking after siblings	26	0.2	3	0	0.2	12	0.1	2	0	0.1	43	0.3
11. Early marriage	39	0.2	1	0	0.2	8	0.1	0	0	0.1	137	0.9
12. Criminal activity	1	0	3	0	0	28	0.2	6	0.04	0.24	38	0.2
13. Transfer	789	5	716	4.6	9.6	1867	11.9	1519	9.7	27.9	4891	31.2
TOTAL	4319	27.5	3267	20.8	48.3	4738	30	3282	20.9	50.9	15695	100
Socially based		15.7		12.6	28.3		22		14.9	36.9		
School based		11.8		8.2	20		8		6	14		

Correlation between the percentages of rural ESLs to urban ESLs: r = √r √r² = 0.95565 1276.

2008; Mahlomaholo *et al.*, 2010; Minnaar, 2006; Statistics South Africa, 2007). Rural ESLs seemed to be particularly unhappy about the kind of schooling to which they were exposed, as is shown by the following remarks:

> *It was not easy to keep your focus on schooling when you stay and attend school on a farm. On some days the whole school has to go and assist with harvesting or planting, depending on the season, for the whole week. There are no classes then. We go back home tired from working in the sun for most of the time. Now you tell me, is this schooling or farming?*

The above indicates that rural ESLs have to contend with school arrangements that do not support their progress academically and do not justify their spending time at school which is, in fact, unpaid child labour. It was for this reason that they left to take up employment as menial manual labourers as the school had failed them. In the same breath, the following observations emerged from another discussion:

> *You can actually feel that the teachers are also tired or something. I mean to teach the whole lot of us at the same time in the same classroom is really demanding. There are grade three, four and five learners all in the same classroom. It is not that we were too many, but we were supposed to be taught different things by the same person at the same time. It is just impossible. Most of the time we were taught the same thing which we had already passed in the previous years and this was just because there were new learners in a lower grade in our classroom. It was really frustrating. You are all lumped into the same classroom with all the other learners, especially the younger ones. Then how do you learn under such circumstances?*

From the extract above it can be seen that rural ESLs address a serious problem affecting many rural schools in South Africa which are organised on a multigrade basis (Matlho, 2011). Teachers who teach therein are trained to teach in monograde classrooms but find themselves having to teach in classrooms populated by learners in different grades. In some affluent countries which practise learner-centred teaching effectively, this is not a problem (Matlho, 2011). In fact, multigrade teaching is a strength where resources are shared and utilised optimally by all learners. However, in our rural schools where teachers have never been trained to implement this effectively, it has become a great hindrance, as cited above. To emphasise this point, another contribution by a rural ESL was as follows:

> *You should remember that there are no secondary schools nearby; we have to walk long distances to the next village for these. When we get there we are tired and sometimes we are even scared to walk back home by ourselves, especially in the afternoons. There are many dangers in walking by yourself to and from school. Even at school you do not get the excitement of being at school. There are no sports grounds at schools. It is just talk ... talk all the time, listening to the teacher. Honestly, I do not even know what I would have been able to do had I continued with schooling. There are no job opportunities here. Many of those people who studied hard are still like us; no jobs and just walk around the village, spending time at the taverns and so on.*

The above extract indicates how under-resourced rural schools are and how they do not address the development of the whole learner due to a neglect of extra-curricular activities. The main point is a lack of infrastructure at these schools and, as such, teachers rely on traditional modes of teaching instead of using the internationally acclaimed learner-centredness approach. The unfortunate outcome of the above limitations is that learners are not adequately prepared to take up meaningful employment or create jobs upon completion of their studies at these rural schools. In addition, the context in which these limitations occur is not supportive of a culture of learning and diligence. There appears to be an atmosphere of general gloom, helplessness and desperation working against sustained engagement with schooling. Moreover, there are no role models as even the graduates of such schooling roam the rural streets without any meaningful contribution to the improvement of their own lives and those of others. The extract below from another rural ESL corroborates the above-mentioned comments in the following words:

> *The school we attended had no buildings except for the principal's. He was also the only teacher who used one of the huts in the village as his office. It can be hot in those corrugated iron structures which we as learners used as classrooms. There is no cooling system in summer and no heating in winter. I*

wanted to become a business person, but our teacher did not help us to understand or gain that kind of knowledge, as all the time it was social studies which never touched on the things we wanted to learn about. From morning until the end of the day we just recited. It is not fun to do all that when you do not know why you are even doing those things. We are given homework to do, but how can I do any work when I have so many things to do when I get home; fetch water and chop the wood for cooking supper and tomorrow's meals. I did not have the time and there was nobody to help with the work as my parents were not educated. I am the only 'grown up' person at home who has to take care of the family. There is nobody to help me with my studies; there is nobody to motivate me or check my work. Even if I do not go to school, nobody cares.

The question of a lack of adequate infrastructure seems to be prominent even in this extract; therefore, it requires serious attention. Teachers also seem to need plenty of support in terms of subject content knowledge and teaching methodology. They have to diversify with regard to what they can teach or at least more teachers should be employed to provide the required wide spectrum of subjects and career choices for their learners. More effective strategies to support learners with their homework, as an example, seem to be one of the priorities that need to be addressed because learners sometimes do not have parents to help them. Even where parents are present, they appear not to have the requisite knowledge and education to provide relevant support.

It is possible that some ESLs from urban environments have experienced the challenges highlighted by the rural ESLs above; however, they did not articulate them in their focus group discussions. For purposes of reporting and analysis, I thus selected those aspects that were different from the rural ESLs' discussions which could explain why such high levels of learner attrition are occurring. What seems to be different among them are the ways in which they are excluded with regard to curriculum practices that do not address their specific circumstances directly, as exhibited in the discussions above.

Sustainable learning environments

An adequate response to the problem of rural ESLs seems to lie in the creation of sustainable learning environments. Such environments are those that place the highest priority on the role of the educators who have to lead, organise, manage and maintain them (De Corte, 2000). Among the many aspects of this role is the self-esteem and self-efficacy of rural educators. One of the most effective means of enhancing these attributes is by enabling them to discover the knowledge and power they have in themselves through sharing their expertise with peers and taking charge of curriculum planning in line with the requirements of their contexts (Aldridge, Fraser & Ntuli, 2009; Mgqwashu, 2009). To support rural educators, programmes with a specialisation in rural education could also be offered at faculties of education to empower students as they prepare to teach in rural schools where the needs are different and more specific. In this way, the reasons cited by the rural ESLs could hopefully be attended to.

The role of the educator becomes effective when supported by meaningful, useful and effective resources, which are in short supply in rural settings (Storey, 1993). In rural environments where there are extreme levels of neglect, the educator has to improvise and seek strong partnerships with other stakeholders within and beyond the immediate community because vital resources are not as readily available or as easily accessible as in urban settings (De Corte, 2000; Mahlomaholo, 2010). The creation of sustainable learning environments involves being aware of their limited resources and doing something about it. This involves fund raising, writing proposals to funding and donor agencies, as well as playing an advocacy role with regard to bringing the plight of the rural learner to the attention of the government and business concerns that may be in a position to assist (Mahlomaholo, 2010; Murry & Herrera, 1998). For example, in instances where learners do not have transport to travel long distances to school, home-based learning centres could be established where they are organised into small groups in their neighbourhoods and supported by able others under the constant supervision and guidance of educators and parents. Resources thus may have a different meaning for the rural environment where what is available can be utilised creatively.

Over and above the resources, a sustainable learning environment refers to the presence of strong linkages between the school, the home and the community (Mahlomaholo, 2010; van den Berg, 2009). Constant communication and feedback among these instances are very crucial. Sometimes parents in the rural areas have to work long hours or are absent as they have to seek work in far-flung urban centres, often leaving children to their own devices. The school, the educator and the neighbour are thus called upon to play the role of the parent and the pastoral care giver who must go beyond responding to the academic and the cognitive needs of the learner (Mahlomaholo, 2010; Tella & Tella, 2003). They should attempt to meet the emotional, social and many other human demands of the learners. Therefore, the learning environment extends far beyond the classroom to include the community (Fraser, 2002).

Conclusion

The discussion above has attempted to demonstrate that rural and urban ESLs are affected similarly by the same reasons to leave school early. I have, however, indicated that, in spite of these similarities, rural learners tend to experience high levels of early school leaving more frequently than their urban counterparts; this is mainly due to how schools and curriculum provisioning by teachers exclude and marginalise them. In response to these practices I have suggested the creation of sustainable learning environments where rural teachers are empowered to learn from one another and to discover that the power that lies within them will work in the best interests of their learners. One of the strategies could be to create strong partnerships within rural communities in order to ensure that the same resources and privileges which urban learners have are also available to rural learners. Rural learners have shown great resilience against all odds and if this cultural wealth can be capitalised on through the creation of sustainable learning environments in rural schools, fewer of these learners will leave school early.

Acknowledgement

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