

# Social justice and rural education in South Africa

DIPANE HLALELE

University of Free State

*Social justice is undeniably grounded in efforts at circumventing provisions that seek to uphold ostracism and exclusionary practices which have permeated South Africa and many other societies worldwide for extensive periods of time. Vast incongruities and/or inequalities between better resourced urban communities and neglected rural areas impinge on the provision of and access to education. This paper, grounded in a distributive paradigm that views social justice as a proper distribution of social benefits and burdens among members of society, traverses the positive and negative features of rural education related to social justice. It concedes that difference is an inherent, inevitable and indispensable feature of social existence and education, arguing that rural education needs to embrace difference, shape demands and model social benefits in accordance with the realities of a particular rural setting. This implies that social justice should be perceived as a humanising process – a response to human diversity in terms of ability, socio-economic circumstances, choice and rights.*

**Keywords:** rural education, social justice, distributive paradigm, difference.

## Introduction

According to Frattura and Tropinka (2006), critical theory integrates the value of social justice into the practice of research for reform. How injustice and subjugation shape people's experiences and understanding of the world constitutes the focus of critical theory. A critical theory perspective concerns itself with issues of power and justice and the ways in which the economy, matters of race, class and gender, ideologies, discourse, education, religion, and other social institutions interact to construct a social system. Inquiry that is critical should be connected to an attempt to confront the injustices of society. Kellner (2003, cited in Frattura & Tropinka, 2006) comments that what makes critical theory critical is not only the study and understanding of society, but also critiquing and changing it. No social arrangements are viewed as neutral, but rather as artificial constructs structured to benefit one segment of society over another. It is within this discourse that the article interrogates social justice and rural education.

Conventions, constitutional obligations, and requisite rights around education rights often permit individuals and groups to hold governments accountable for the progressive realisation of rights (Spreen & Vally, 2006). Keet (2005, cited in Spreen & Vally, 2006) examines the contradictions in the human rights discourse of education rights as public good. Focusing on South Africa, he shows how 'education-as-a-human-right' remains elusive and why it has failed to prevent the increasing commodification of education and the attainment of social, economic and environmental justice. The failure of education policies and laws to ensure the attainment of education rights for the majority of South Africans, including the rural inhabitants, is an immediate challenge. Bryant (2010) asserts that one of the primary obstacles of rural education is wilful ignorance, particularly on the part of governments, of the conditions in rural areas and schools. Wide disparities in access to quality education continue to plague rural areas (McQuaide, 2009). Malhoit (2005) posits that society's obligation to educate learners should not depend on a child's demographic good or bad fortune; nor should geography dictate a child's educational destiny. The obligation to educate learners in rural areas spawned several strategies to address the issue.

However, despite all efforts deployed by countries around the world and the vigorous mobilisation of international communities, rural people still lag far behind in education and are particularly hard hit by poverty and hunger (Sauvageot & da Graça, 2007). In developing countries, the slow progress towards universal education is largely due to sluggish school enrolment and attendance among rural people, and

the persistence of very low enrolment rates in rural areas. Poverty, hunger and underdevelopment are holding back educational development (Sauvageot & da Graça, 2007).

## Social justice conceptualised

As is the case with many other social concepts, social justice has varied and complex definitions. Among these, there exist common threads that hold the concept together, and give it shape and identity. An early explanation by Tsanoff (1956:12) suggests that justice derives from the phrase *suum cuique* or “one receiving their just due”. In addition, Coates (2007) puts forward an alternative form of distributive justice wherein one receives fairness in social, political, and economic outcomes. Kose (2009:630) opines that some scholars argue against a definitive and universal conceptualisation of social justice, while many argue that social justice has to do with “recultivating individual and institutionalised practices rooted in low expectations, deficit thinking, marginalisation and cultural imperialism”. It can therefore be accepted that a general definition of social justice is hard to arrive at and even harder to implement. In essence, social justice is concerned with equal justice, not merely in the courts, but in all aspects of society. This concept demands that all people have equal rights and opportunities; everyone, from the poorest person on the margins of society to the wealthiest.

According to Gerwitz, Ball and Bowe (1995), theories of social justice advocate mechanisms used to regulate social arrangements in the fairest way for the benefit of all. For the purpose of this article, conceptualisation of social justice hinges on Nancy Fraser’s definition, of justice as “parity of participation” (Tikly, 2010:6). Fraser (2008:16) elucidates that “overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on par with others as full partners in social interaction”. Gerwitz (1998) maintains that social justice is premised on the discourse of disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalisation and exclusionary processes. Social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition and empathy. The presence of words such as ‘demands, mechanisms, disrupting, subverting’ in the definitions above suggest concerted action and seem to elicit revolutionary overtones.

Similarly, Calderwood (2003) adopts a revolutionary approach to social justice. She posits that it works to undo socially created and maintained differences in material conditions of living, so as to reduce and ultimately eliminate the perpetuation of the privileging of some at the expense of others. Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz and Murphy (1996) raise concern about sensibility toward social justice. They claim that sensibility should forego ethical concerns, commit to structural analyses of ethical concerns, adopt an activist orientation and seek identification with others. Regarding the promotion of social justice, Calderwood (2003) is of the view that people need to act to reduce and eradicate oppression, however distant they may feel from the personal culpability of its enactment. The view is further emphasised by former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown who, quoting an unknown Greek philosopher, said: “When will there be justice in Athens? It will be when those that do not suffer are as angry as those that do” (Lesedi, 2009). Undoubtedly, there seems to be an agreement that injustice is not only an issue that concerns those at its receiving end, but also those members of society that do not seem to be affected. The situation seems to further call for alertness, or what we may call thinking beyond the visible and the ordinary. An unfortunate reality about social justice is that the mechanisms of injustice are to a large extent invisible, even to those who strive to live their lives and carry out their work ethically (Calderwood 2003; Solomon & Murphy, 2000). The question that may arise from the debate above is whether or not, and to what extent, providers (policymakers and administrators) are aware of the practices, processes, rules and regulations that perpetuate acts of social injustice and thus consider themselves as culpable. In summary, social justice can be understood as:

*the exercise of altering institutional and organisational arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002:162).*

Questions relating to the proper distribution of benefits and burdens among sites have always posed a challenge for education institutions. Fraser’s perspectival dualist framework troubles the disparate

distribution of goods and services and/or social structures that enable material inequality (North, 2006). Fraser (1997) also asserts that the increasing stress on sectoral politics undermines redistributive efforts that seek to improve the well-being of marginalised citizens. Her perspectival dualist framework views recognition and redistribution as the co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice. Social justice works to undo socially created and maintained differences in material conditions of living, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the perpetuation of the privileging of some at the expense of others (Calderwood, 2003). In order to promote social justice, we must act to reduce and eradicate oppression, however distant we may feel from personal culpability for its enactment.

Sabbagh (2003) indicates that distributive justice includes at least three major components: the normative patterns that regulate resource distribution (*i.e.*, justice principles and their derivative rules); the classes of social resources that are being allocated, and the valence-positive or -negative of the expected distribution outcomes. Arguments in this paper adopt a moral community perspective, viewing responsibility and care among members as central to social justice. Social activists advocate the need for social change in rural areas which is linked to social justice, using a process that is consultative, collective, participative and empowering. Connectedness and responsibility enrich the notions of fairness, and equality, thus extending the baseline of ethical practice (Lloyd, 2000).

## Rural education

The definition of ‘rural’ still eludes us due to ambiguous connotations and the obvious and somewhat fallible comparison with ‘urban’ contexts. According to Sauvageot and da Graça (2007), rurality may be defined in various ways and no universal definition has been adopted in the history of human endeavour. Most rural dwellers work in agriculture, often for meagre rates of compensation. From a learner diversity perspective, public schools in rural areas do not have a good track record in meeting the needs of diverse learner populations. A great deal of diversity among rural learners indicates both a challenge and an opportunity for the state to contribute to closing the many national achievement gaps (Ludlow & Brannan, 2010).

Rural students in urban areas are out of sight and out of mind. In the United States of America, the states where rural education is most notably underperforming (that is, performance ranks worse than socio-economic challenges would suggest it should) are predominantly non-rural states, located on the East or West coast of America where the rural population is ‘out of sight, out of mind’. Rural parts of China, Australia and South Africa are no exception. Poverty, fiscal incapacity, low levels of adult education, and low levels of learner achievement run in the same mutually reinforcing circles in rural areas. As expected, regions where the educational outcomes in rural schools require the most urgent attention are those with most impoverished minority and rural learners, where schools receive the fewest resources and where rural students attend the largest schools in the largest districts. While declining enrolment remains a significant factor in some rural school districts, rural enrolment on the whole is growing while non-rural enrolment is declining. Most rural areas already face tremendous barriers to learners’ high achievement and operate in less than favourable policy environments (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Rural communities have unique and relative attributes. According to Malhoit (2005), the school is the most important public institution in a rural community and also represents the economic lifeblood of the economy. A few other relative attributes are discussed below.

## Community capital in rural areas

Rural people tend to live in their communities by choice, and their decision to live in a rural place should not affect the quality of their children’s education. While rural places frequently face substantial economic and social challenges, they also possess a number of assets that are often ignored or overlooked. The community capital present in many rural communities makes them attractive places in which to live and raise a family. There is a strong bond that exists among rural community members which fosters a firm commitment to protect and support children. With their sparse populations, lower crime rates, beautiful

open spaces and sense of community, many rural places offer a welcome break from the problems of urban and suburban living such as traffic congestion, crime and the high cost of living (Malhoit, 2005).

## Rural people are strong supporters of public education and community-based schools

They view a quality education as essential to an effective rural economic development strategy, because good schools produce a quality local workforce that, in turn, builds upon already present community capital. The school is the most important public institution in a rural community, a rallying point for services to poor families and children, a polling place, a library, and a community centre (DoE, 2005; Ludlow & Brannan, 2010; Malhoit, 2005).

## Poverty

In many countries the term 'rural' is synonymous with 'poor'. On average, the rate of child poverty in rural communities is higher than in urban areas. Poor children lack adequate housing, access to quality health care, proper nutrition, and adequate child care. There is a general agreement that these factors contribute to limited access to quality education for rural children (Malhoit, 2005).

## Ageing population

With the loss of younger people to urban areas, rural places tend to have an ageing population. While there are advantages to an ageing population, especially where seniors have a substantial retirement income, in low-income rural places this trend can reduce purchasing power and increase the cost of social services that compete against education for funding (Malhoit, 2005).

## Smaller schools

Rural schools are frequently smaller than urban schools, either because of a community's sparse population or by choice. Rural people tend to choose smaller schools because their common sense confirms what research shows, that they are better places to educate children. Overwhelmingly, education research (Little, 2008; Malhoit, 2005) has found many advantages of smaller schools over larger schools including better achievement, higher throughput rates, fewer discipline problems, and higher rates of participation in extracurricular activities).

The rural (and somewhat relative) attributes discussed above indicate at least two issues. First, rural areas possess assets/attributes/benefits other communities may not have. Secondly, rural areas need special attention, assistance and support; rural communities are more likely to be a ubiquitous phenomenon as people exercise their right to choose.

Malhoit (2005) posits that rural areas need the provision of high-quality education which will not only correct the policies that may have unjustly denied learners by providing them with 'just funding,' but also offer learners opportunities to obtain a meaningful education that prepares them for jobs that pay a living wage, participation in higher education, as well as being actively responsible citizens. The next section provides a critique on the provision of and access to rural education in South Africa.

## Reflections on rural education in South Africa

South Africa's rural communities, like those in many developing and some developed countries, remain disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in urban areas (DoE, 2005). Evidently, underlying the gains of our young democracy are the challenges that are experienced by rural communities. The Ministry of Education (2005) notes that the problems experienced in rural areas of South Africa, though to some extent unique to rural education, are in fact widespread to varying degrees in the previously disadvantaged communities. In order to enhance impact, the programmes and policies geared towards redress, access, equity and equality clearly need further intervention in the rural areas. The Ministerial Committee on

Rural Education (MCRE) (DoE, 2005) suggests that in addressing the complexities of rural development and education, in particular, the intervention strategies should aim at ensuring consistency in government's rural development strategy, wherein access to economic activities is expanded in order to reduce poverty, invest in human rights and social justice, and improve living conditions. The observation by the Ministry indicates a tacit acknowledgement of the lack, as well as the inevitable obligation to address rural education as a social justice issue.

According to Spreen and Vally (2006), the quality of education, particularly in rural and historically disadvantaged communities, should be regarded as a human rights issue. Many schools in South Africa are situated in rural areas which put learners at a disadvantage. The rural environment is notably less rich not only in terms of human resources, but also in learning as well as livelihood resources (Lindeque & Vandeyar, 2004). Kallaway (2001:16) laments:

*the tendency to dismiss educational initiatives that seek to make direct interventions into issues of development as attempts to control and subordinate rural people to the colonial order or dismiss them as an aspect of failed socialist experiments, or even see in them only the machinations of apartheid social engineering, as throwing out the baby with bathwater.*

Rural occupation in South Africa is directly linked to apartheid and the colonial policies of dispossession, resettlement and a systematic exclusion from opportunities (DoE, 2005) and is characterised by diverse rural areas. This means that each rural area possesses a different make-up in terms of needs and resources. Key features of a rural profile in South Africa include long distances to towns; the poor conditions of roads and bridges to schools; a lack of or limited access to Information Communications Technologies (ICTs); a lack of services such as running water, electricity, sanitation, health and educational facilities; low economic status, and little access to lifelong learning opportunities. One of the most pervasive features of rural communities is poverty (DoE, 2005). Food security and the cost of education are also major problems. Furthermore, rural communities are characterised by high illiteracy levels. The problems of rurality are further compounded by continued under-resourcing of schools relative to need. The government's commitment to equal and fair treatment has unfortunately yielded meagre change for rural schools (DoE, 2005). In relation to education, lack of basic services (water, sanitation) affects access to and the quality of education, such as inadequate infrastructure in schools (buildings, ICTs) and the long distances learners must travel to schools. The attributes of rurality that adversely affect the quality of education include a lack of qualified teachers, multigrade teaching, unreasonable teacher-learner ratios, irrelevant curricula, and competing priorities between accessing education and domestic chores, while the teaching staff seem to be imbued with poor morale and motivation (Mollenkopf, 2009). Furthermore, teachers may be unwilling to move to rural areas where social and cultural opportunities are limited and salaries may not contain an enticement peg. Even when teachers are willing to work in rural areas, working conditions are likely to make them reluctant to stay for the long term (Mollenkopf, 2009).

## **Reflections on some approaches to rural education**

The issue of literacy has nearly always been associated with freedom from oppression (Adair, 2008). There seems to be a general consensus that there is a need for greater collaboration with an integrated approach to finding solutions to address poverty and underdevelopment in rural areas. Williams and Nierengarten (2010) state that in addressing rural realities mandates, there is a need to consolidate, collaborate and cooperate. This implies that rural imperatives need a community aligned with and willing to draw from various sources. For example, efforts to provide cooperative and collaborative staff development for teachers in rural areas may be negatively affected due to distances and therefore, transportation costs. However, promoting a positive view of education in rural areas, encouraging innovation and initiative in the provision of rural education services, and providing a framework for the sharing of concerns, issues and experiences relating to education and training in rural areas may go some way to addressing the injustices affecting rural inhabitants. Amelioration in respect of social injustices should be regarded as a responsibility of all concerned. Nearly three decades ago Helge (1985) noted that the enhancement of rural education should be an inter-agency effort with significant involvement from the Department of

Education. The realisation that rural education involves all disciplines and that efforts in the past have been fragmented has become a present reality. Helge (1985) further suggests the implementation of a holistic approach, which implies collaboration among relevant agencies such as the Ministries of Rural Development and Land Reform, Basic Education, Social Development, and Roads and Transport. Various agencies, depending on the unique and relevant attributes of a particular rural community, need to form a consortium or partnership to address rural education issues.

The absence of a coherent policy framework (Wallace, 2007) *Evidence from the Community Survey 2007*, indicates that rural inhabitants continue to face the perennial challenge of access to education (Fleisch, Shindler & Perry, 2010). According to Johnson and Strange (2007), rural schools have unique needs that impact on their education. Rural schools have also experienced recent problems due to increased costs for healthcare, transportation, special education services, and other expenses (Thorson & Maxwell, 2002; Williams and Nierengarten, 2010). One-size-fits-all solutions do not meet the needs of the ignored and misunderstood rural schools (Bryant, 2010). The Ministry of Education concedes that a special focus on rural education for unique, dedicated intervention without providing fundamentally different education may ghetto-rise education for rural communities (DoE, 2005). Bryant (2010) further states that rural life has been wrapped in a snug cocoon of fantasy. Thus, one of the obstacles of rural education, perhaps the primary obstacle, is a wilful ignorance, on the part of governments, of the conditions in rural areas and schools. For example, most teachers in various fields of specialisation face professional isolation because they are, in most cases, the only teachers in their specialisations. McQuaide (2009) states that the lack of qualified teachers is one of the most crucial factors hindering the development of basic education in rural areas. Within the confines of the suggested whole-systems perspective should be the realisation that rural contexts are diverse. It can therefore be accepted that, in most cases, no two rural contexts are exactly the same. Sabbagh (2003) aptly notes that the very idea of a just distribution calls for a local examination (in a specific context), and a distribution of resources should define specific boundaries when it establishes the unit of potential resource beneficiaries. Fraser's (1997, 2008) notion of difference seems inescapable in the provision of and access to education in rural schools. The consolidation of rural schools has been one of the strategies used to deal with problem of dwindling learner numbers.

## Conclusion

In this article I discuss critically rural education from a social justice perspective. Arguments indicate that, even though rural communities possess assets not found elsewhere and can offer certain benefits, they need specialised support. What may be regarded as a reasonable and desirable intervention in one rural community may not necessarily be relevant to another rural community. McQuaide (2009) posits that options of universal access to, and the equity and quality of basic education in rural settings need to be thoroughly considered. This suggests a realisation and understanding of as well as a commitment to the need for an integrated approach to rural education as a social justice issue. Rural inhabitants face the challenge of being conscious of their uncritical acceptance of the status quo. Therefore, delivery of rural education should be shaped around and be responsive to rural social justice issues pertinent to the unique and diverse rural context (Alston, 2007). Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler and Sonu (2010) suggest that, when seeking to transform inequities inherent in society and expressed so sharply in schools, classroom teachers can be understood as the most essential element, as they have the ultimate responsibility of navigating the curriculum and instruction with their students. Agarwal *et al's.* (2007) suggestion presupposes emancipatory pedagogical endeavours. According to Baldwin, Buchanan and Rudisill (2007), this adds a dimension of social justice that requires teachers to critically analyse the perceived realities of social and environmental injustices that affect teaching, learning, and the curriculum. Teachers therefore need to understand their broader role as agents of change and development; as agents in addressing rural education as a human right and a social justice issue. There needs to be an understanding that rural contexts are diverse and that context-specific solutions will be needed. In conclusion, the author agrees with Wallace (2007) who states that "what matters most for economic development is the capability of rural people to be efficient producers given their natural resource base. There is little doubt that economic

and social development, and the benefits that accrue, such as improved nutrition and health, requires an educated populace". Lastly, all endeavours to address social injustices with regard to rural education should be characterised by difference, attributable to diversity in rurality. This means that the resource base, needs, approaches and solutions for each rural context may not necessarily be the same for all rural areas. Context-specific approaches are therefore recommended in the provision and promotion of access to education.

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