

Research Article

An In-Depth Investigation of the Socio-Economic Conditions that Contribute to Poor Academic Performance of Learners in Rural Schools: The Case of One School in the Stutterheim Area

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Abstract: The study was conducted to investigate contributory socio-economic conditions to poor academic performance of learners in one rural school in the Stutterheim area. The main objective of the study is to determine the main reasons that contribute to poor academic performance of the learners at the school. Secondly, to find ways to mitigate the challenges experienced by learners from rural areas. Parents of the area, teachers who taught and who still teach at the school, and former learners of the school constituted the population of the study were interviewed. From the identified population, ten teachers, ten parents, and ten learners were randomly selected as the sample. A qualitative research approach was used to conduct the research and it assumed a descriptive nature. The researcher used interviews by means of questionnaires to collect data. The researcher used the coding technique to analyse data. Findings from the study indicate that long distances walked by learners, social problems, absenteeism and economic factors result in poor academic performance by learners. The conclusion of the study is that the government is failing rural learners in giving them the support necessary for success.

Keywords: High school learners, socio-economic conditions, academic performance, rural areas, absenteeism.

Introduction

One of the key objectives of the post-1994 government in South Africa was to redress imbalances and injustices of the past. In the education sphere, this meant levelling the playing fields between the haves and the have-nots, black and white, rural and urban, and township and suburban. This was meant to be done through setting uniform standards and funding for all schools in the country. The overall objective is to unlock the potential of all learners to be able to perform at their optimum (Act No. 84 of 1996). Unlocking the potential for rural learners is a national problem as some continue to perform comparatively lower than their counterparts in urban areas. In most rural areas, poor academic performance by learners was found to be inextricably linked to domestic problems, community challenges of different kinds, intra-school problems and lack of support from government. The expectation is that findings from the research will enable the government, community, school leadership, individual parents and learners to collaboratively work towards the eradication of these conditions that hinder academic excellence.

Objective of the study

The two objectives of the study were;

- To investigate the socio-economic conditions that lead to poor academic performance by learners in rural areas.
- To explore strategies to improve learners' performance in rural areas.

Research methodology

Population

The population of the study is all the parents in the area, four principals (from all other schools in the area), all the teachers in the area and all the learners in the area. This is informed by the fact that the high school is the only one in the area.

Sample

The sample was constituted of five principals from all the schools in the area (one high school and three primary schools), ten teachers, ten parents, five members of SGB, and ten learners.

Table 1. Demographic profile of learners

Variable		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	6	60%
	Female	4	40%
Age cohort	12-20	10	100%
Highest Grade Registered	Grade 12	3	30%
	Grade 11	7	70%
Community Type	Urban	0	0
	Rural	10	100%
Race	Black	10	100
Sample = 10			

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Parents

Variable		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	5	50%
	Female	5	50%
Age Cohort	55 and above	2	20%
	45-55	6	60%
	39-45	2	20%
Highest Grade Passed	Grade 8	4	40%
	Grade 10	4	40%
	Grade 12	2	20%
Community Type	Rural	10	100%
	Urban	0	0
Race	Black	10	100%
Source Income	Government Grant	9	90%
	ECPWP	1	10%
Sample = 10			

Table. 3. Demographic Profiles of the Teachers

Variable		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	8	80%
	Female	2	20%
Age Cohort	55 and above	1	10%
	45-55	5	50%
	25-39	4	40%
Race	Black	10	100%
Community ground	Rural	8	80%
	Urban	2	20%
Sample = 10			

Research instrument

Given that the study is of a descriptive nature, the researcher collected data through questionnaires and interviews as research instruments. In conducting the interviews, the researcher kept in mind the level of literacy of the parents.

Delimitation of the study

In the interest of saving time and resources, focus was given to parents, former teachers and former learners who are still residing in the area.

Data collection

The data was personally collected by the researcher from all the respondents. The researcher also personally conducted interviews with the parents given their low levels of literacy.

Data analysis

After data was collected, it was organised, tabulated and analysed. The researcher used coding as the tool to analyse the data.

Significance of the study

The study drilled deeply into the socio-economic conditions that contribute to poor academic performance by learners in rural areas. The findings of the study will inform policy-makers in formulating policies that impact on rural schools. The study will also capacitate principals, teachers and parents in advocating for resources, infrastructure and policies that will enable academic excellence in rural schools.

Literature Review from Related Literature

The operative concept for this study is 'academic performance' which researchers refer to as the ability of the learners to cope with the work given by the teacher (Suleman *et al.*, 2012) Suleman *et al.*, (2012) posit that academic performance is "the ability of the student to study and remember facts and being able to communicate his knowledge orally on paper." This is the part that seems to be elusive to learners from rural areas. This is due to various factors internal and external to the school. These include; association with wrong peers, lack of basic educational facilities, teachers drunk at school, teachers using corporal punishment, lack of parents control and attention, absenteeism, unfavourable conditions inside the school (Simon, 1986; Aremu and Sokan, 2003; Suleman *et al.*, 2012). There is evidence to suggest that there is correlation between socio-economic status of a learner and academic performance. The further the "[learner] is from school, the unsatisfactory the academic performance" (White, 1986; Suleman *et al.*, 2012).

Suleman *et al.* also posit that involvement in extracurricular activities might also negative impact academic performance. The researcher disagrees with Suleman *et al.* when they posit that involvement in extracurricular activities like "cricket, football, volleyball etc." also contributes towards unsatisfactory academic performance by learners. The assertion above is in direct contrast with the Involvement Theory as advanced by Alexander Astin. Astin developed the theory after observing students at the University of California. Through the Involvement Theory, Astin (1984) posit that involved students perform academically better than uninvolved students. By uninvolved students Astin means a student who "devotes considerable energy studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organisations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students."

An uninvolved student on the other hand, "neglects studies, spends little time on campus, abstain from extramural activities, and has infrequent contact with faculty members or other students." From the involvement theory there is evidence that students who also participate in extracurricular activities perform academically better. Involvement in extracurricular activities is therefore not a contributing factor to "unsatisfactory academic performance" as Suleman *et al.*, (2012) suggest.

(Taylor and Mulhall, 2001; Eppley, 2009) make an interesting observation about the importance of context in motivating a learner to perform better. They posit that successful teaching means being a teacher that acts as a mediator between the curriculum and lived experiences of the learners. Some learners in rural areas hardly get an opportunity to travel beyond their immediate town and surroundings. It therefore becomes critical for the teacher to make a connection between their real world and “their larger world”, their lived experiences and the real world out there. At a philosophical level, this refers to the dialectical relationship that exists between the curriculum and the cultural context (in terms of time and space) of the learners. The curriculum is mostly presented in English in an environment where no one speaks the language outside the school premises. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is usually not a single outlet that sells any form of reading material from newspapers to books in their environment. The content and context of the curriculum is offered to learners is mostly urban and sometimes western inclined.

The environment in which the learners live (rural) does not promote literacy nor is it empowering to learners. The non-enabling environment that rural learners experience and their poor academic excellence are mutually reinforcing. Wa Thiong’o (1986) the education system or curriculum in colonial settings that does not reinforce a people’s culture and that does not reinforce a people’s Indigenous Knowledge Systems to a “cultural bomb”. Wa Thiong’o posits that “[t]he effects of cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capabilities and ultimately in themselves ... Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams (Wa Thiong’o, 1986: 3).

The environment in rural areas also presents various challenges for learners. Researches have over the years identified a number of socio-economic factors that contribute to poor academic performance of learners in rural areas. These include:

Transport problems

Entrenched structural problems in rural settings present transport difficulties for learners and teachers that lead to reduced contact time in schools. They are forced to arrive late at school and to leave as early as possible. This allows very little or no after class contact time between teachers and learners in schools. The distance from family, from town, from recreational facilities and from medical facilities also lead to absenteeism (Eppley, 2009).

Brain drain

Rural areas tend to lose educated people, as most children who receive post-matric education are more prone to leave rural areas for urban areas. Artz (2003) refers to the phenomenon as “brain drain”. This leaves the rural areas with few or no role models for the learners. The brain drain also depletes the intellectual investment of the rural areas.

Poverty

The prevalence of poverty in rural areas tends to be more than that of urban areas (Economic Research Service, 2004; Lichter and Johnson, 2007) Poverty as a problem leads to problems of its own. It often leads to some learners missing out some days at school because of lack of access to basic necessities. These could be learning support materials, items of schools uniform, sanitary towels etc. This is further compounded by the fact that most schools located in rural areas still lack basic necessities like basic facilities, poor training of teachers, and access to extra funds (Timaues *et al.*, 2011) this is a problem also identified by Le Cordeur (2021) in positing that environmental factors—things that were practically taken for granted in the Western way of thinking and in affluent schools—play an important role in fulfilling your intellectual abilities. This includes poverty, available resources, school leadership, teachers’ work ethic as well as learners’ reading ability and academic skill in language of instruction. Favourable environmental factors have a potential to increase learning abilities of learners and over time, the learners are able to reach their true potential.

Whilst on the other hand, Gqirhana (2016) posit that unless resourcing and infrastructure, and distance to school are fixed, performance of rural learners will continue to remain low.

Disruptive environment

The other challenge that faces rural schools is a challenge by most South African schools, that of creating an environment free of “disruptive behaviour”. The South African Schools Act of 1996 gives powers to “SGB to adopt a Code of Conduct for learners as means towards “Establishing a disciplined and purposeful school environment, dedicated to improving the quality process.” (Howley *et al.*, 2009; Mestry and Khumalo, 2012).

Parental control and support

The reality is that most parents in rural areas have lower levels of education. This leads to them attaching lower value to education to an extent that dropping out from school matters less to them. This makes it difficult for these parents to give support to their students and to motivate them to go on. The state of affairs therefore reinforces poor performance of rural learners (Mulkeen, 2005).

Results and discussion

The data collected revealed that there were several factors that contribute to poor academic performance by rural learners. These factors could be summarised into the following themes;

- ✓ Economic status
- ✓ School attendance
- ✓ Lack of motivation
- ✓ Lack of support
- ✓ Recreational facilities
- ✓ Substance abuse
- ✓ Sport
- ✓ Electronic gadgets
- ✓ Learner attitude
- ✓ Literacy of parents

Responses from learners

From all the respondents alike, it became apparent that one of the reasons for the failure rate is poor school attendance. There were different reasons that were given for poor attendance from the different cohorts of respondents. From the learners, there reasons given were; family related problems, sport injuries, weather conditions and failure to do homework. The reasons given are disturbing in that they give a sense that there is poor guidance and monitoring at home if a learner cannot miss school because they failed to do homework. There is no justification for not doing homework and there is no excuse for not going to school because of failure of performing a given task.

The learners gave different reasons for their poor academic performance. They reasons they gave include the long distances they have to travel to school mostly on foot as there is no dedicated government school transport. They also blame their guardians and parents for giving them extra duties during their study periods.

The learners also blamed their obsession with cellular phones and social media as a destruction from their studies. Some of the learners blamed the fact that all the teachers have a tendency to give them homework everyday giving them very little time for studying. Some of the learners raised the fact that they find it difficult to study at home as they stay in overcrowded homes.

The learners indicated that for the school results to improve, they need to be provided with study guides. Some learners supported the school practice of study camps and proposed extra-classes.

Responses from parents

The parents turned out to be literate as those interviewed passed between Grade 10 and 12. This meant that there is an expectation that they could be able to assist the school-going children with homework and other school activities. There is also an expectation that parents with such levels of literacy would be able to motivate the learners to take keen interest in their academic work. The data from the parents also exposed the fact that most parents stay with many school-going children in their homes and also with other family members who are not attending school. This creates a disabling environment where distraction from noise, unavailability of study space and time, exposure to some social ills like immoral acts, vulgar language etc. These negatively affect the academic performance of learners. The female parents alluded to the fact that they were not employed and that their only source of income was the government social grant. Most of these parents received the social grant on the basis of being single parents. These women were a representation of most parents who have kids at the identified high school who depend on social grants as a source of income. A few of the parents indicated they depended on the Eastern Cape public works Programme. The reality of the ECPWP programme is that it is not a full-time employment but a seasonal relief employment. This points to the fact that some parents find it difficult to provide some of the materials necessary for the success of learners. The inability to receive this kind of support from parents can lead the learners into depression. The cause of the depression could be the feeling of inferiority complex, pressure from school to perform academically, peer pressure, and the feeling of inadequacy. This factor points to the dialectical relationship between poverty and psychological trauma. Poverty traps learners into emotional stress that they cannot handle and unfortunately, rural schools are not adequately equipped to deal with cases of mental illness. Children by their very nature do not possess the necessary emotional capacity to self-regulate which in essence means lack of emotional regulation. This means “the ability of a child to initiate effective efforts to adjust emotional reactions to social and situational constraints,” (Zelazo *et al.*, 1997).

On whether the community could contribute to high academic performance of learners, the parents responded by saying that they see no role for the community in improving the performance of learners. This became a cause for concern to the researcher in that it points to a disengaged community as the community members believe that the school operates independently of the community. The danger with that mind-set is that when the results are poor, parents tend to blame the teachers and fail to see their contributory role to the phenomenon. The reality of the matter is that schools thrive when there is a closer working relation between the school and the neighbouring community.

Another interesting fact that came out of the data is that parents reported that the learners hardly ask them for assistance with their academic work. This was despite the fact that the parents were literate to varying degrees. There could be various reasons for the reluctance of learners to seek help from their parents. Learners could be feeling isolated and unsupported, as it appears that the parents do not take the initiative but wait for the learners to ask. That could be an overwhelming feeling for learners particularly during examinations. That could lead to anxiety that in turn could lead to failure.

There seemed to be an appreciation of the need for access to supplementary sources for learners. Parents saw the radio and television as adequate supplementary sources for learning. A few parents identified Wi-Fi as a necessary supplementary requirement for learning. It also came out from the parents that their parents were not exposed to travelling outside the province and their district. The lack of travelling which exposes learners to different environments and different ways of doing things has an impact on their perception of the world and on how they construct knowledge.

The parents identified several things that are necessary from the school and from government to support effective teaching and productive learning. This includes adequate school computers, morning classes for senior classes, Wi-Fi connectivity, security at school, laptops, computer training for all learners, additional mathematics classes, study camps and winter school, more sporting

activities, closer collaboration between the school and the Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture and scholar transport.

Responses from teachers

Most of the teachers seemed not to be satisfied with the performance of learners even though they indicated that there had been an improvement in the past two years (2018-2019). The teachers identified poor attitude of learners towards schooling as a contributory factor to poor academic performance. They noted that most learners lack commitment and seriousness about their studies. Amongst the things that the teachers identified as community related factors that contribute towards poor performance by learners. They cited the following; proliferation of taverns and shebeens on the school precinct, selling of alcohol to school uniform wearing children, community members jumping the school fence to sell drugs to learners at school, parents take time to respond when they are invited to school to discuss their children's performance and behaviour. At the end of the month, most girl learners do not come to school as they go to receive government grants for being single parents as a result of early pregnancies.

Suggested interventions

The teachers suggested that the government should embark on awareness campaigns to encourage the guardians and parents to take responsibility and play an active role in the education of their children. The teachers also recommended that the government should provide enough Learner Teacher Support Material (LTSM). They also identified a critical need to inculcate respect amongst learners so that they can be able to treat teachers equally. In an attempt to broaden the horizons for learners, the teachers proposed that learners need to be exposed to more excursions. The other suggestion that they have, is that the motivational talks given to learners should be prioritised in the first quarter as it is usually too late and less effective just before the examinations. They also proposed that there should be closer collaboration between the school and the community so as to develop collaborative strategies to combat social problems that impact on education. These efforts could include awareness campaigns against drugs and alcohol. Teachers also saw the need for the school to set realisable targets for learners right at the beginning of the year.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the government should conduct research in the rural areas so that the intervention by government is not thumb suck but should be informed by the situation on the ground. There is also a need for the community to hold meetings where they identify strategies by which they can support the school with the purpose of improving academic performance by learners.

There is also a greater need for the government to prioritise learner transport, the provision of WI-FI connectivity and financial support for learners from poor families. There is a greater need for government to develop a strategy to support poor families and also to eradicate poverty in rural areas. The reality is that poverty is linked to a number of challenges that the school experiences. These include early pregnancy, mental illness, attitude problems, substance abuse and low self-esteem.

It becomes important that the mind-set of the community change from seeing schools as distant ivory towers operating in isolation to communities identifying their role in ensuring that there exists a mutually beneficial relationship between the schools and the community.

Conclusion

The study found out that learners in rural areas are disadvantaged as compared to their counterparts in the urban areas. Poverty and poor government support are amongst the factors that negatively impact on the academic performance of learners. The teachers, parents and learners identified different causes and made different recommendations. The broad areas identified as factors contributing to poor academic performance include;

- ✓ Economic status
- ✓ School attendance
- ✓ Lack of motivation
- ✓ Lack of support
- ✓ Recreational facilities
- ✓ Substance abuse
- ✓ Sport
- ✓ Electronic gadgets
- ✓ Learner attitude
- ✓ Literacy of parents

The study recommends greater collaboration between the school and the community to ensure that all the impediments to academic performance are jointly attended to. The study also recommends greater government intervention and a specific and specialised focus on rural areas.

The study has found that a one size fits all approach does not assist to alleviate the challenges faced by schools in rural communities.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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