

# SCHOOLING IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICA

SMALL, ISOLATED SCHOOLS REVEAL PROSPECTIVE BLUEPRINT TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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South African National Research Foundation Accredited & Funded Scholar

Senior Researcher

Faculty of Education

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Cape Town

South Africa

[ck52427@gmail.com](mailto:ck52427@gmail.com)

+27(0)72-437 2824

## INTRODUCTION

It would be fair to say that many if not most scholars engaged in researching *South Africa's public education system* would quite naturally, or inevitably, draw attention to its titanic failures and paucities in recent decades. Its sweeping bleakness in terms of ushering in better prospects for the majority of the country's children is there for all to see. A recent Educational Conference organised by the Joint Cultural Societies in Cape Town carried the sub-theme: *No real education is possible in an abnormal society*. Here the common premise was advanced that, since education is but a reflection of our broader society, no real educational change was viable without, ultimately, meaningful and productive social change. Key presenters thus argued that the country's existing taxation model, for instance, calls for change, where the rich must be taxed more appropriately, for the benefit of the disfavoured majority. Existing toils and struggles need to be taken up on deeper grassroots levels, was a further argument advanced on the occasion. "Labouring, perpetually poor communities should speak truth to power" declared an outspoken expert, while another mooted the necessity of establishing, in the long run, "a socialist orientated governing system", where "the needs and aspirations of the poor are paramount". A careful, honest scrutiny of these standpoints shows that, each of them carries weight, notwithstanding our individual, ideological predispositions. Proponents of capitalism cannot evade the basic reality that the mechanisms, rules and procedures of the market economy are essentially based on the principle of competition. Individual and not social advancement remains life's primary purpose. The *profit motif* is both the wellspring and thrust

of capital accumulation, notwithstanding how restrained or subtle this may be articulated in modern times.

In terms of the provision of good, quality education, the overriding question that emerges here is this: how long – in years and/or decades - would it take for productive, meaningful social change to come about? If the recent local elections are anything to go by (and not dismissing the state's hard-handed response to the #fees-must-fall campaign) would it be apt to say that this could take anything from ten, twenty, or even thirty years? In other words, in the absence of social change, what is the fate of the overwhelming majority of South Africa's 12 million and more school-going children today? One suitable, *provisional* response to this all-encompassing problem is to gain deeper awareness and understanding of how poor, struggling schooling communities have endeavoured to overcome the odds. Such an approach could very well present a suitable educational framework – broadly defined - for others to emulate or for the very least, contemplate in their quest to raise attainment levels and educational standards while real social change remains obscure and elusive.

#### **RESEARCH PLAN, OBJECTIVES & CRITERIA**

Flowing from prior field research studies initiated in 2014 in the broader, rural Overberg region of South Africa, two primary schools were selected for further in-depth scrutiny (during the month of August, 2016). These schools were selected on the basis that, despite them being relatively small, isolated, and impoverished, they were well-functioning and industrious, regularly winning regional prizes in maths and science education. Consisting of a lead researcher, an assistant, and a two-member filming crew, the project's overall goal was to determine, and illustrate, by means of photographic and DVD capturing, particular aspects that have contributed to these schools' somewhat rare accomplishments, if we consider the frightful situation currently swamping most of South Africa's 5.8 million rural school children. It is strongly contended that, while we remain hopeful of and committed to "a better life for all" these schools bring good, *intervening* lessons to their many struggling peers.

Our evaluation criteria were all-encompassing, yet fairly simple, and centred on the participation, contribution and/or effectiveness of (a) district officials (b) school principals, (c) teachers (d) parents and (e) outside/community supporting bodies. These components, collectively, as it is widely believed, are central to the educational experience *and* advancement of the school child. With this in mind, we looked into practices ranging from meeting learners' transportation and nutritional needs, to those geared towards the provision of a "holistic education". Without adequate transportation many rurally-based school children simply cannot get to school in the first place, whereas prolonged deficient nutritional intake may result in not merely physical but also mental stunting. In terms of an all-rounded education, did these schools offer, for instance, classes in music or singing? Music has the capacity to improve children's emotional development, key to more effective learning. Arts education brings many benefits, all conducive to the child's creative, social but also intellectual growth. Likewise, good, quality physical education, as it commonly is argued, can enhance many things, from hand-eye coordination, aptitudes in precision and accuracy, to teamwork, cooperation, self-image and confidence levels, all of which, again, can distinctly enrich the actual learning process. Last, we also surveyed learners' general levels of well-being, and behavioural dispositions towards one another and their adult superiors. What were their overall levels of "contentment", a criterion

many theorists have argued is requisite to not purely the child's educational but also human development?

## **OVERBERG PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

### **Education Department**

In-depth talks were held with district officials at the Overberg Education Department offices (Caledon, Western Cape Province), where pertinent guidelines, protocols, data, and statistics could be collected and discussed.

### **Principals**

The school principals were well-qualified, professional, and experienced, and had regular, meaningful contact with their respective teaching and support staffs. Staffs were kept up-to-date on current developments, official requirements and deadlines, and the execution of future plans & tasks. Much room existed for staff questioning, feedback, and participation. School successes were also highlighted, leading to a pronounced sense of pride and achievement, amongst caretakers, cooks, and gardeners alike. Principals also had consistent, fruitful interactions with student populations where news, upcoming events, recent successes, basic rules and regulations could all be highlighted and reinforced. Pertinent too, was the support offered by school secretaries, who, even from a distance, were experienced and proficient.

### **Teachers**

The teaching staffs observed were all fully qualified, devoted to their tasks, and well-prepared. It was clear that they were knowledgeable of their respective subject areas. In most cases, their classrooms were well-adorned, thereby creating a definitive culture of teaching and learning. Certain teachers went the extra mile by incorporating visual representations and multi-media into their lessons.

### **Pupils**

The overwhelming majority of students emanate from exceedingly deprived homely circumstances. Where required, safe and reliable transportation to and from school was provided, sometimes with the help of farmers. During their lunch breaks pupils were presented with well-prepared wholesome meals (oatmeal, mealie-meal, milk, fish, chicken or meat, with a variety of freshly-harvested vegetables). Fruit (particularly oranges and apples) was frequently also provided. Most pupils displayed a remarkable sense of interest in their school work, with visibly high concentration levels, in many cases.

### **Extra-Curricular Development**

Schools stressed, and pertinently revealed, their commitment to a holistic education. The schools offered dedicated music programmes, with consideration given to instrumental training (descant

recorder, brass, and marimba band) and choral singing. Pupils' levels of interest and dedication to this area were prominent. Their levels of self-confidence and participation, commitment to team work, capacity to pay attention to detail (as in music notation) and overall levels of responsibility in meeting group expectations, were all quite pronounced. On the sporting front, one school made use of outside experts in physical education, who showed a marked understanding of the technical and physiological aspects of this crucial yet neglected aspect of primary school education.

### **Parents**

Teaching staffs regularly held info sessions, where parents were systematically exposed to the curricular demands placed on their children. It was such undertakings, noted one principal, that strikingly improved their results in mathematics.

### **Support Organisations**

Outside specialists offered programs in Humane Education (as part of the Life Orientation learning area), which endeavours to encourage good, pupil peer relations. As the spokesperson of one organisation said: "Many rural communities suffer from high levels of violence and abuse, and our goal is to teach children to create and live in a more humane and caring environment". In this instance stress was placed on raising learner awareness of the plight of animals, generally, and how school kids could actually take better care of them. Like their counterparts elsewhere many of these rural households either own animals and/or frequently encounter those belonging to fellow community members and farm owners (generally dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, cows, pigs, sheep, goats, chickens and pigeons). Here the argument was made that good pupil-animal relations, based on care and compassion, ultimately can lead to better human interactions. Another outside organisation endeavours to enrich this process, through the provision of religious instruction. It was heartening that these parties did not seek to exclude, but to provide an all-rounded moral education, without elevating or marginalising any one, particular faith. A key objective here was to help schools in the provision of pastoral care, for, as it was indicated, "many pupils lack having a father figure in their lives". A further outside support organisation endeavours to instil broad awareness of how eco-systems operate and how the soil can be utilised more productively in the provision of crops. A central aim here was to demonstrate how a most basic human need can be fulfilled beyond the precincts of the school setting (often the only place where rural children can enjoy a more nutritious meal)

### **Conclusions & Lessons**

Overall impressions are that district officials are empowered to perform crucial supporting roles in the provision of quality education to these schools, something from which many other rural districts across South Africa, could learn much. Broad observations indicate the presence of a positive and professional work ethic.

Principals' interaction with staffs was healthy and admirable. This situation is beneficial as it inspires team work, and the sharing of duties and responsibilities in a manner that is transparent and inclusive. Secretarial assistance clearly boosted the overall learning process. These individuals played an important role in assisting school principals to devote more time to the smooth day-to-day

running and functioning of their schools, without which – *good leadership* - the entire educational process can be wrecked.

Teachers, in turn, showed a marked commitment to their respective principals and, as such, the rules, policies, and general codes guiding both classroom management and their schools' overall welfare. Moreover, teachers were committed, compassionate and devoted towards those entrusted to their care, thereby setting the important basis for future academic success.

Generally, the children enjoyed participating in not only intellectual, but also physical and creative activity. This, in turn, aroused in many a sense of achievement, pride, and wellbeing, so critically absent in South Africa's dismal hinterlands. On the whole, pupils came across as confident and self-assured, with their human dignity well protected. The provision of well-balanced, nutritious meals, it must be stressed, does not only curb hunger pains, but also erodes personal shame, low self-esteem and the experience of an undignified life. The involvement and support of outside structures can be seen as vital, as children who live in a more benevolent and compassionate environment have a far better chance at coping with their schooling demands, as in deed the case seems to be at these schools. The schools had a pronounced values system in place, which was noticeable also in key points (on classroom walls, doors, passages). This approach seems to have worked quite well:

Pupils, on the whole, were considerate and courteous towards their principals, teachers, and peers, as well as towards gardening staffs, caretakers, cooks, visitors, and passers-by. At school assemblies pupils listened attentively and displayed a marked sense of commitment to both those in authority and upholding the school's basic rules and disciplinary codes.

Most of all, pupils, overall, could confidently read, write, count and do basic sums at the required level and frequently above. Learners were eager to respond to questions in class. Their work books were neat and kept up to date, and regularly monitored by dedicated staffs. Noticeboards carried the names and achievements of top pupil performers, thereby not merely *recognising academic excellence*, but also enticing others to emulate or even surpass such accomplishments.

Besides purely appealing to parents to serve on school governing bodies and help out with the annual bazaar and general cultural and sporting events, these schools included parents in the actual learning process. Accordingly, they were *empowered* - to greater or lesser degree - to play a more proactive role in helping their children with things such as homework, assignment completion, and test preparation. Primary school children, particularly those based in far-off, often abandoned rural districts, also, and more often than not, rely on parental assistance to cope with and flourish in their schooling.

It is clear that district officials together with the principal, the teacher, the parent, as well as outside, support organisations are essential role players and critical conduits in the child's pedagogic progression. But not only this, these schools demonstrate the significance of incorporating a variety of associated measures and programs geared toward raising the emotional, ethical, creative, physical, and social dimensions of the school child. All of this, in the final analysis, are mandatory to fruitful and effective learning, which further may explain why these schools have flourished so well while so many others continue to stumble and fade in the wilderness.



