Abstract

This paper argues that there is a critical role for rural schools to play in community development. The socio-economic challenges of the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa are immense, and whilst the national government of today places great emphasis on local economic development initiatives to address poverty alleviation and job creation, there has been no mention of what role education, and in particular rural schools, can play towards community development. The government remains silent on the recommendations of the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (2005), which brings to the fore issues of relevant curriculum, school-community relationships and the role of district based education officials. Rural communities need to be given a platform where they can determine their development challenges and solutions, and its local school (be it the teachers, curriculum or property) could be the catalyst by which these are achieved. In turn, rural schools would benefit from the social infrastructure of its community in enhancing its performance. Models of what can be achieved through deeper community-school relationships are discussed and various school-community projects in the Eastern Cape (historical and current) are presented. By starting with the premise that community needs and school needs are interrelated, we can create opportunities to explore ways that students and the school can address community needs while helping students learn. If the community is the locus for promoting community agency and sustainable development, then it is here that citizens should hold their deliberations and dialogue on important issues related to rural schooling and community sustainability.

Descriptors: Community; Community Development; Curriculum; Education; Eastern Cape Province; Local Economic Development; Rural Schools; South Africa
The ‘rainbow nation’ of South Africa has had a complex and often tumultuous history, and yet much of it is unknown until the Iron-Age. Its current national boundaries are predominately the creation of competitive European imperialist powers, rather than any cultural, environmental or historical identity. Indeed from the 17th century onwards, when the Europeans began to settle and trade, and even throughout the subsequent battles that were fought and treaties signed and reneged, little consideration was given to black and coloured people, despite the fact that they constituted over 80% of the population; other than as potential labour.

A defining moment in South Africa’s recent history was the 1948 elections, which the National Party fought on its policy of apartheid (literally ‘the state of being apart’). With control of the media and vicious propaganda, and assisted by the creative electoral boundaries, the National Party held control right up until the first democratic elections in 1994. With apartheid came a legal apparatus system that included classification by race, physical separation of black people from residential areas, forced removal to the homelands, and a Bantu education system that aimed to direct black or non-white youth to the unskilled labour market.

The structured exclusion of black people in South Africa from economic power began in the late 1800s with the first dispossession of land and continued throughout the 20th century with first the Mines and Works Act, 1911, the Land Act of 1913, and the raft of apartheid laws enacted after 1948.

As a legacy of the apartheid era, South Africa had a mainstream economy led by a minority of the 13% white section of a 40 million population and containing within it a subsidiary but formal sub-sector of small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs). Within the latter sub-sector, the representation of black business was largely negligible. Alongside the mainstream economy has existed a marginalised economy of survivalist entrepreneurial attempts by the historically excluded, and as a result high levels of unemployment; highly unequal distribution of income, and low levels of growth and investment became and remain deeply entrenched.

After the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africans embarked on large-scale political and socio-economic reforms, in which the South African government planned to mould the two “economies” into a sustainable systemically-linked entity for optimal economic development and growth. New policy imperatives imposed high expectations on the agency of education in South Africa’s transformation in terms of the dual goals of economic growth and social redress.

In the period since 1994, macroeconomic stability has largely been achieved, and the more mainstream economy has become increasingly integrated into global markets. Despite the economic successes and a broad range of state policy, strategy and programme interventions aimed at overcoming economic disparities, entrenched inequalities continue to characterise the economy and act as a deterrent to growth, economic development, employment creation and poverty eradication.
The Eastern Cape Province

The mid-2006 estimates by Statistics South Africa place the population of the Eastern Cape at approximately 6.9 million people. Human settlement patterns in the Eastern Cape, as in the rest of South Africa, have largely been influenced by the past social and economic devastation of homeland rule and apartheid. Much of the backlog in basic service provision (access to water, sanitation, electricity and housing) in the Province can be found in the former ‘black homeland’ areas (formerly known as Transkei and Ciskei located in the centre and east of the province). Since 1994, this has put the Eastern Cape Province in the position of having to invest much of its budget allocation into the access of basic services, in other words playing ‘catch up’, so much so that whilst other Provinces have been able to move forward, for example, into implementing the Government White Paper on ‘ICT in Schools’ (2003), the Eastern Cape Province continues to address the challenge of eradicating the many mud schools that still subsist.

Sadly the picture gets bleaker; more than two thirds of households in the province are classed as suffering from poverty, while just over half of the population (53.5%) is unemployed (ADM, 2007). The Eastern Cape is thus faced with widespread poverty, with rural areas being the worst affected. The lack of employment and income in many households means that these households are vulnerable to many of the problems associated with poverty, such as poor health care. The situation is further exacerbated by the increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS. The provincial HIV prevalence amongst antenatal clinic attendees was more than 28% in 2004 (ADM, 2007). The Eastern Cape
is arguably the poorest province in South Africa, facing all the development challenges of South Africa in one province.

**Education in the Eastern Cape**

Currently there are just over 2.1 million learners in just over 6000 public schools taught by some 65000 educators in the Eastern Cape alone (Department of Education, 2006). Education in the Eastern Cape has had a turbulent journey since independence in 1994.

The education landscape prior to 1994 was fraught with an inequitable system that had been developed to serve the needs of the apartheid system and economy. Post-1994 dramatic changes in both the systematic administration and implementation of education were introduced. Furthermore the new Constitution of South Africa guaranteed that everyone had the right to a basic education (South Africa, 1996).

Unsurprisingly, South Africa’s first ten years of democracy are marked by an overwhelming commitment to equality, treating everyone in the same way no matter what their differences. Hence rural schools have been managed and funded on the same principles and formulas as urban schools.

Using the term ‘rural’ here has, of course, its challenges. In Canada, du Plessis et al (2002) compare six definitions of ‘rural’. They determine that though each emphasizes a different criteria (context, population, size, density), each definition provide a similar systematic conclusion, namely, rural people have lower employment rates and lower income. If forced to provide a definition, du Plessis et al (2002:4) recommend:

> It would be the ‘rural and small town’ definition. This is the population living in towns and municipalities outside the commuting zone of larger urban centres (i.e. outside the commuting zone of centres with population of 10000 or more).

For South Africa the term is ambiguous and the difference with urban subjective. Though the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (2005) adopted the definition of ‘rural’ used by Statistics South Africa in the 2001 census (a spatial definition), it proposes that further refinements of that definition should be made to include relevant features of the environment, such as, distance to towns, settlement patterns, access to information and communication technologies, access to services and facilities, social conditions in the community, the health, economic and educational status of the community.

For the purposes of this paper I have used the Statistics South Africa definition of ‘rural’ which constitutes Traditional Authority areas (principally ‘community owned’ land in the previous ‘homelands’) and formal rural areas (largely commercial farms in the previous ‘white’ areas of South Africa).

Just as South Africa’s rural schools were funded and managed along the same lines as urban ones, so too, curriculum and pedagogies of rural schooling were planned to be the same as those for urban settings. Yet in America, as far back as the 1920s the ‘citified’ curriculum imposed on rural schools has been questioned (Brim, 1923, Tshireletso, 1996) and the motivation for a differentiated curriculum for rural schools pleaded (Frost, 1928). As controversial as this may seem, there remains the question of whether one rigid curriculum serves both the urban and rural community contexts. More recently the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (2005) echoes much of the debate on rural schooling that has emerged since the 1920’s. The report highlights the need to balance the importance of giving substance to the constitutional commitment to
the right to education with the recognition of the importance of evaluating the needs of particular people in specific contexts. This is clearly demonstrated in one of the principles used to underpin the orientation and theoretical framework of the Ministerial Report (2005:4)

Although education serves individual aspirations such as for social mobility, state education necessarily privileges social benefits. Current conditions imply that the most important aims for rural education are rural development and poverty alleviation.

Local Economic Development

There is a plethora of literature on development within various social and theoretical frameworks. Badat (2007) suggests that these can be conceived in two different ways, ‘thin’ notions of the development and ‘thick’ notions of development. He relates ‘thin’ notions of development as referring to economic growth or improved economic performance. He relates ‘thick’ notions of development as extending beyond the economic perspective to include social, cultural and political issues.

Though the thrust of this paper leans towards the ‘thin’ notions of development, aspects of the focused school-community relationships proposed later in the paper, present, by their virtue, traces of the ‘thick’ notion of development.

Local Economic Development (LED) is receiving an increasingly high profile in South Africa, with specific interest largely being in its link to poverty alleviation and job creation. The National Framework for LED in South Africa (2006: 20) presents its vision for local economies:

Functional local economies change and respond to new circumstances, consumer preferences and styles and product innovations. The active involvement and participation of residents in municipal affairs is a hallmark of robust and inclusive local economies, characterised as follows:

- **The people** in these local economies, the citizens/communities of these local areas, are resourceful, skilled and able to take full advantage of economic opportunities. They are innovative and able to participate in and/or establish, run and grow thriving enterprises. They produce locally made and branded products for the domestic and international market that are of high quality and appeal to the needs of different consumers. They develop solutions and products that are affordable and meet the needs of poorer communities;

- **Their leaders** inspire confidence in the local economy and are able to mobilize resources for the advantage of local communities. They also make, manage and implement economic development strategies that are participatory, realistic, feasible and viable, yet creative, innovative and visionary in order to unleash potentials and grasp development opportunities. They work together with national and provincial government and development agencies to best position their local economies in the global context on an ongoing basis.
In addition, the South African LED Policy framework outlines the four key pillars of LED that can contribute to robust local economies as:

1. Good Governance
2. Competitive Advantage
3. Enterprise Support
4. Community Programmes

In order to build community, the LED Policy Framework discusses the need for a paradigm shift, a corrective to the dominant ‘globalisation’ model, where LED role players consider ways in which the balance between ‘globalisation’ and ‘localisation’ can be achieved, how local income multipliers can be increased and in essence what ‘true’ partnerships with community entail.

Yet, with the political space broadly opened up to allow for participation previously denied to the majority population of this country, it is generally acknowledged (Orford et al, 2004) that inadequate entrepreneurial capability and supportive institutional systems remain as key challenges to be addressed towards realising the broad economic reform goals mapped out for the democratic state.

In addition, our current political structure of a three-tier government system (national, provincial and local) may just be further exasperating the challenges. Education, for instance, is the implementation and oversight role for national and provincial government, whilst LED has largely been placed at the door of local government. Successful integrated development in the Eastern Cape is, therefore, far too dependent on effective inter-governmental relations.

It is not legislated that rural schools form relations with communities, yet as Kretzmann and Knight (1993) highlight, innovative community leaders are rediscovering that youth can contribute to the well-being and vitality of the community. We can learn much from the Eastern Cape Department of Education’s Imbewu Project. Imbewu is an isi-Xhosa word for seed. It was chosen as the name of the programme because Imbewu’s objective was to sow the seeds of transformation and renewal for sustainable education development in the Eastern Cape. The primary purpose for the first phase of the Imbewu Project (1998—2000) was to enhance the performance of 523 schools in the province as well as attempting to develop all levels of the education system in the Eastern Cape. The introductory modules established as the first series of whole school interventions included Vision Crafting.

Vision Crafting brought together community members, parents, school governing body members, learners with the principal to devise a collective vision for the school. As Lawrence and Peters (in Lawrence and Moyo, 2006) revisit some of these schools they discover just what an effect Vision Crafting had for both the school and the community. The following extracts are responses from interviews with school and community members as to what effect Vision Crafting had on individual, school and community transformation (Lawrence and Moyo, 2006:51):

*Vision Crafting brought the school stakeholders together...we had to craft our visions...even the parents...this gave us direction to move*
forward...and that was the beginning of progress and improvement (Gqinushwa/Ayliff)

..we started with Vision Crafting...where for the first time as a school we were able to involve the whole community...to craft a vision for the school because the school belongs to the community (Limekhaya High School/Uitenhage)

Vision Crafting by Imbewu, however, was devised from the perspective of the school. I would venture beyond Vision Crafting from a school perspective and suggest we need Vision Crafting from a community perspective, where communities construct their vision for development, of which the school is part of, and create a common set of goals towards its development.

As the Nelson Mandela Foundation report on Education in South African Rural Communities (2005:24) points out:

Schools are inseparable from the communities they serve, and without a holistic approach to the general conditions of poverty, neither the school nor the community can address the challenges.

The School Community Integration Pilot Project (SCIPP), a part of the Imbewu Programme (second phase) was designed to pilot practices that promote school-community integration and again much can be learnt from its approach, as it did indeed start with community mapping. As Moyo (in Lawrence and Moyo, 2006: 84) points out:

With regard to community mapping, there were two sets of workshops. The first focused on a number of factors designed to help communities discover themselves in terms of who they are, where they come from and what their future priorities are. The second focused on community relations.

The pilot project was implemented in three areas of the Eastern Cape, involving some 28 schools in 7 clusters. The project provided some good examples of school-community co-operation and the establishment of district/regional structures where different provincial and local government organisations worked with the schools and communities. The development outcomes included, amongst others, community members themselves attending the school for basic education and training, and skills development (such as information technology), and utilising the school facilities (land and buildings) to start economic development projects such as vegetable gardens. However, some of the projects have not been self-sustaining and/or have remained small scale, and some of the structures that were established have fallen by the way side.

If we were to achieve the LED vision as stipulated in the National Framework for LED (as noted above), then further analysis is required of what the contributing factors were that resulted in certain SCIPP projects not being sustained, and what can be done to mitigate those risks in future such developments.
Rural schools in the community: the community in the rural school

Rural schools are vital to the survival of their communities (Beaulieu et al, 2005). In addition to providing for basic education they serve as social, cultural and community engagement centres. Peshkin (1978) noted that rural schools served as symbols of community identity and that the ability to maintain a rural school was indicative of the community’s well-being.

As the Eastern Cape Province continues to be in the grips of education reform, and as the infrastructural and legislative support for LED has been firmly placed in the hands of local government, the time may be right for rural schools and their communities to form new and renewed relationships (Collins, 1999).

It is important to consider the term ‘community’. We often think of ‘community’ as a defined geographical area such as our home town or current place of residence. When asked to describe the community we belong to, our response will usually include descriptors such as rural/urban, population, majority ethnicity, political history, economic base, etc. Hopper’s (2006) diagram below provides a suitable visual representation of community in all its forms.

Rural schools are imbedded in communities, and just as learners, teachers and parents may influence the academic progress of the school learners, so can the communities in which the rural school is located. As a respondent to the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (2005:39) points out:

In each village and community there are people with useful knowledge and skills. There are active and retired professionals, there are community historians, there are young people with post-matric qualifications, there are poets and writers and dancers and musicians, there are healers, there are people with many different kinds of experiences, there are business people and so on.
Swanson (in Collins, 1999) determines a community’s ability to act to achieve collective goals as ‘community agency’ and is the product of the social infrastructure in a community. Even in rural communities where social infrastructure is seemingly reserved, there may well be considerable unexploited social infrastructure with diverse skills, knowledge, talent and energy.

At the same time, rural schools present themselves as a central focal point for community activities. The school buildings generally have a low utilisation rate as they are, in the main, used by school learners during school hours. As the purveyors of LED in South Africa begin to establish provincial entrepreneurial centres, or local offices for LED support and provision, little or no consideration has been made as to what role the rural school’s physical and community’s social infrastructure can play in this regard. In the new competitive environment, local school improvements as a development policy should be elevated to a stature equal to that of the more traditional development policies of infrastructure enhancement.

Collins and Branham (1999) state that a good rural school is interlinked with its community; it serves the community and in turn is served by the community. Miller (in Collins, 1999) further discusses the interrelatedness of the school and its community and provides a model that would be mutually beneficial to both:

1. The school as a community centre providing lifelong learning, providing, for example, adult basic education and training, and driving various community services;
2. Community as curriculum, stressing the community (in all its complexities) as part of the school learning activities in the classroom;
3. The school as a developer of entrepreneurial skills.

There have been some embryonic initiatives that have begun in various schools and communities throughout the Eastern Cape that reflect aspects of the above model (for example the work of the Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development, based at the University of Fort Hare), though it remains to be seen what impact they will have in the schools and communities involved.

A number of recommendations made in the Ministerial Commission on Rural Education (2005) begin to acknowledge the interrelatedness of rural school and community as well as the need for a co-ordinated approach to rural community development by all spheres of government:

1. Raise the awareness of the broader rural school community regarding different curriculum options
2. Looking at ways in which the community can be involved in enacting the curriculum
3. Engaging in discussions as to how agricultural practices of communities can be supported by district education offices
4. Drawing school communities in rural areas into decision making through broadly-based participatory approaches

Yet the Ministerial Commission on Rural Education (2005) recognises itself that though the government responses to poverty are increasingly multi-pronged and integrated, they do not clearly identify the relationship between rural schooling and measures to address poverty and development.
Rural Schools and Community Development: Considerations for the Eastern Cape

If schools themselves are going to become an engine for social change, they must undergo their own process of transformation/revolution...the boundaries of educational development, in this way, can no longer lie exclusively within the traditional ambit of education.

Porteus (in Lawrence and Moyo, 2006: 174)

If rural schools in the Eastern Cape were to undergo the transformation/revolution that Porteus suggests, then I believe we should begin by addressing the policy of ‘sameness’ between urban and rural schools in terms of funding, curriculum and pedagogical practices. Though the Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (2005) begins to make some rumblings in that direction, nothing has been forthcoming since its publication.

In the Eastern Cape we need to bring together various government departments, agencies, groups and individuals at various levels to assist rural schools and communities in working and acting together for rural community development. The community mapping workshops as implemented by SCIPP, and the sustaining structures that continue to work together today, are good examples of how this can begin. If the community is the locus for promoting community agency and sustainable development, then it is here that citizens should hold their deliberations and dialogue on important issues related to rural schooling and community sustainability.

If we refer back to Miller’s three unique, yet overlapping approaches that build strong linkages between schools and communities (in Collins, 1999), the first approach reflects the school as a community centre. There is a lot of unrealised potential for schools as community centres in the Eastern Cape both in terms of adult education and lifelong learning, but also in terms of providing critical services to the communities.

The second approach uses the community as curriculum. As Frost (1928) argues, there are a lot of similarities of learning needs between rural and urban schools, and yet there are also some differences too. It is these differences that justify a difference in curricula for the two types of schools. For example, the Provincial Growth and Development Plan of the Eastern Cape looks to large scale and subsistence farming as one of the solutions to employment creation and poverty alleviation; would curriculum that includes agricultural studies not better serve rural schools?

The third option of a school developing entrepreneurial skills again provides for a differentiated curriculum. In America Sher and DeLargy (in Stern et al, 1994) turned school based enterprise into a comprehensive curriculum programme for rural schools called REAL (Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning). With the help of REAL, local businesses were established that fulfilled services that were not previously formally available. Though the SCIPP project also resulted in entrepreneurial activity, the 28 schools it worked with are a small proportion of the 6000 plus schools in the province, and as Moyo (in Lawrence and Moyo, 2006) identifies, there is a need to explore the linkages between the development projects devised through SCIPP and the school curriculum.
Conclusion

Rural schools, working in partnership with local leaders and residents, can have a positive impact on community viability and development. This is especially true when students working alongside adults are given meaningful opportunities to engage in community-based learning that serves the needs of the community whilst simultaneously addressing the learning needs of the students (Beaulieu and Gibbs, 2005).

Identifying and utilising community agency, its social infrastructure, would provide any rural school a vital resource for its curriculum, and go a long way towards embedding community in the rural curriculum. The Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (2005) raises some very effective recommendations towards embedding the rural curriculum in the community, with a particular aim towards community economic development, though we have yet to see any action towards making that a reality. As Collins (1999:30) concludes:

If rural communities are to survive in a changing global economy and government devolution, localities need to develop policies that use schools as democratising institutions that train adaptable citizens, workers and business owners who can sustain community life in an uncertain future.

By starting with the premise that community needs and school needs are interrelated, we create opportunities to explore ways that students and the school can address community needs while helping students learn. An important aspect then is what exactly does this mean for the rural school teacher?
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