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Attributes underlying learner performance in rural schools: The perspectives of rural school teachers in Namibia

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Abstract
The performance of learners at rural schools have been reported to be less satisfactory, yet sketchy evidence was available in literature to detail the factors influencing learner performance among rural schools. The purpose of this study was to explain the factors influencing teaching and learning at rural schools, with the aim of nurturing these factors for improved quality of output in rural schools. Case study design was used, which sampled teachers and education officials. Data was collected by means of a literature study, individual and focus group interviews. The data was analysed thematically. Key findings reveals that the performance of learners at rural schools is informed by diverse factors, which relates to the foundation for learning, teacher-learner ratio, English proficiency and parental involvement in teaching and learning. Factors such as subject specialization, working environment, genetic characteristics and climatic conditions also underpin teaching and learning in rural schools. The findings revealed diverse factors, as sufficient evidence to explain the standard of learner performance at rural schools. The study recommends that these factors should be nurtured appropriately for improved quality of learning and teaching in rural schools.

Keywords: learner performance, teaching, learning, teachers, rural areas, rural schools

1. Introduction

Scholarship defines the 'rural' concept from different perspectives. Aziz (2011) [5] explains 'rural' as an area that is outside the city and with low population density. Rural is a place outside a metropolitan city, with a rural population density under 2500 people and is distinguished by adverse conditions (Johnson & Strange, 2005 [20]; Kulkarni & Mitra, 2015) [22]. Monk (2007) [27] disputes the location and population density factors, by defining 'rural' as an area with economic dependence on agriculture and tourism activities, regardless of population density and location.

In summarising these definitions, Lingam (2012) [24] and Heeralal (2014) [13] reveals that 'rural' is characterised by isolation, distance and smallness. Rural areas are easily differentiated from urban areas, as rural communities consist of a diverse mix of immigrants and native born residents (Hull 2003) [17]. However, contestations arises to Hull's (2003) [17] differentiation of urban and rural, that this difference may not be applicable in modern times as it is observed that urban areas are almost equally populated with a mix of both immigrants and native born residents. Other researchers contend that defining rural communities is not just about the size or location of the area and its population, but it also concerns place-based issues such as the economic, social and cultural aspects of the specific environment and how these aspects affects the way of life of the residents (Howley & Howley, 2010) [15]. This articles opts to define rural on the basis of the place-based issues and how these issues influence the different aspects of life for the residents.

In many developing countries, rural areas are the most populous areas, yet the most neglected region in the provision of basic amenities such as good roads, primary and affordable health care, electricity supply, potable water, well-equipped schools and other essential infrastructural facilities (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011) [1]. Rural environments are therefore highly populated residence in developing countries, yet neglected areas in terms of essential services provisions.

Rural environments can be geographically, socially, culturally, personally, and professionally isolating (Beutel, Adie & Hudson, 2011 [6]; McCormack & Thomas, 2003) [26]. Rural areas are geographically situated far from main urban areas and cities and accessibility to rural areas is not always easy due to rocky, sandy and bushy areas which make transportation difficult. The isolation associated with rural areas implies that teachers have limited interaction with other teachers with whom they can share teaching resources and global best teaching practices. Rocky, sandy and bushy areas implies that teachers' mobility is negatively affected and they cannot access resources and services when needed.

Apart from geographical isolation, living in rural areas also implies lack of social interaction (McCormack & Thomas, 2003 [26]; Towse, Kent, Osaki, & Kirua, 2002) [33]. Entertainment, recreational services and sporting facilities are limited in rural communities, resulting in restrictions on social interaction and on opportunities to realise potential in different spheres of human existence such as sport achievements. As rural environments are often severely impoverished and are associated with an aging population, unemployment and low quality of life, many teachers particularly those from urban backgrounds are faced with challenges regarding recreation and socialising, which adds to their job dissatisfaction (Monk 2007) [27]. The lack of opportunities to meet new friends and to socialise hampers teachers' quality of life in rural areas.

This results in qualified teachers aspiring for recreational opportunities declining employment at rural schools or getting transferred to urban schools that may cater for recreational services. The availability of essential goods and

services in urban areas means that schools in urban areas are well established in terms of resources and facilities, which then attracts good quality teachers to urban schools due to good working conditions (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008) [28]. Most teachers therefore prefer to work in urban schools in order to enjoy the positive experiences associated with an urban environment, which widen disparity between urban and rural schools (Marwan, Sumintono & Mislan, 2012) [25]. This diminish learning opportunities at rural schools, resulting in learning outcomes not successfully met.

Teacher training curricula also posed threat in educating student teachers about the place-based issues in rural environments, as most of the students graduating in teacher training institutions are not adequately trained and prepared to live and teach in rural areas (Hellsten, McIntyre & Prytula, 2011[14]; Lingam, 2012) [24]. This inadequacy in teacher training and the realities of rural area conditions not well researched, results in newly appointed teachers' disappointment and deterrence from accepting employments at rural areas (Hellsten, McIntyre & Prytula, 2011) [14]. Many teacher training institutions are located in urban areas and teaching practices for students often take place at schools in urban localities (Heeralal, 2014) [13], although some students do their teaching practices in rural community as their community of origin (Lingam 2012) [24]. Students who do their teaching practices in rural community as their community of origin may not go back to their community of origin for work after graduating as they may regard their education as a means of social mobility to locate to rural areas (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008) [28]. Those teachers who live in rural areas will remain disadvantaged professionally due to lack of opportunities for professional growth, resulting in teacher turnover. Rural school teachers are often overloaded with both teaching and administrative work which can be in conflict with their professional development ambitions (Hudson & Hudson, 2008) [16]. This results in rural school teachers not having sufficient time to devote to their career development endeavours for improved teaching capabilities.

The ripple effect is passed on to learners who live in rural areas, being generally exposed to schools where lesson presentations are not provided by teachers not participating in continuous professional development programmes (Jarzabkowski, 2003) [18]. Teachers' suitability to rural areas can be attained by improving teachers' professional competencies and adaptabilities suited for the circumstances experienced in rural areas.

Moreover, most rural schools face unique challenges related to lower salary levels, unqualified teachers, location and lack of facilities (Owusu-Acheampong & Williams, 2015) [30]. Learning in rural areas is also affected by its population density as in some cases there are too few learners to justify the establishment of the school in the area (Hannum, Irvin, Banks & Farmer, 2009) [12]. Hence, living in rural areas does not provide opportunities for rural residents to attain high-level education to be able to provide essential services for their rural communities and be competitive on the job market.

In the absence of high-level of education, life in rural areas is therefore related to experiencing harsh living conditions as manifested by poverty as a lack of resources with which to acquire a set of basic goods and services (National Planning Commission, 2015) [29]. The lack of resources affect the provision of education including aspects such as learners' attendance of classes, teachers' motivation and parents' understanding of education and the roles they have to play towards the education of their children. Living in rural areas therefore presents adverse living and working conditions that should be researched continuously, with a view of developing measures on how to cope with these conditions so that their effects on teaching and learning is kept at minimum.

2. Statement of the problem

Any school environment should strive to implement learning and teaching optimally and record continuous impressive learner performance in standadised tests. In spite of the challenges they might be faced with, rural schools are without exception to this expectation. Despite this expectation though, the performance of learners in standardised tests at rural schools has not always been impressive successively. It has been observed that rural schools may record good learner performance in standardized tests in certain academic years, whereas certain academic years the performance of learners in standardised tests may not be impressive. This study endeavors to discover the factors underlying the differing performance of learners at rural schools with the aim of explaining the factors influencing learner performance at rural schools, and how such factors can be managed for sustained good learner performance.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed for this study is described according to the following layout.

3.1 Research design

The purpose of this study was to establish the factors underlying learner performance in rural schools, and explain how good rural school performance can be sustained. In executing this purpose, a qualitative case study design was conducted. A case study allows an exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project or programme functioning in a real-life context, and provide specific and contextually rich data (Simons, 2009) [32]. An explanatory case study design was relevant to this study, to enable the researcher to ask the factors underlying learner performance in rural areas from participants' perspectives in their own environment. Participants were also able to explain why they think those factors matters and how such factors can be nourished for sustained good learner performance at rural schools.

3.2 Sampling and participants

Participants consisted of five school principals, two education officials and twenty eight teachers. Participants were sampled from two education offices and five rural schools of Omusati region, Namibia. Participants were sampled using non-probability sampling techniques. In non-probability sampling, the researcher has no way of forecasting or guaranteeing that each member of the population will be represented in the sample and some members of the population have little or no chance of being sampled (Leedy & Omrod, 2005) [23]. In non-probability sampling, the researcher has the prerogative to judge the population and produce the sample.

School principal participants were sampled by means of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves

researchers handpicking the participants to be included in the sample on the basis of the researcher's judgments of participants' typicality to the phenomenon of study (Chiromo 2009) [7]. As principals were in charge of schools as learning institution in rural areas, they were better positioned to articulate rural-based issues and how they influenced teaching and learning activities at their schools.

Teacher participants and two education officials were sampled using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a type of non-probability sampling technique where the sampled members indicate other members who could provide rich information for the study (Chiromo, 2009) [7]. School principals and education officials assisted the researcher in getting hold of long-serving teachers and education officials in the region. Long-serving teachers in the teaching fraternity in a rural setting were well-positioned to outline the conditions that compromised successful teaching and learning in rural areas. Similarly, long-serving education officials who discharge education administration and management in Omusati region, were able to equally contribute meaningful insights to the research intentions.

3.3 Data collection methods

Data was collected by means of a literature study and an empirical investigation. The researcher reviewed existing literature pertaining rural school teaching and learner performance. To complement the data from the literature study, an empirical investigation was commissioned, which used individual interviews and focus group interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with school principals, on a voluntary basis, at their respective schools, as well as with two education officials at their respective education offices.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with teachers at their respective schools, in a focus group of six teachers. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to generate a considerable amount of data about the participants' collective opinions and experiences with regard to the factors influencing teaching and learning achievements in rural schools. Focus group participation was voluntary, and all members of the focus group and other participants were given background information about the study, prior to their participation.

As focus group interviewing explores the views of diverse groups of people, the researcher was able to unpack different perspectives within the group in relation to the topic of discussion (Choy, 2014) [8]. In addition, asking a group of people to respond jointly to common questions can yield varied and detailed data on the same topic (Dudwick, Kuehnast, Jones & Woolcock, 2006). The questions for both the individual and focus group interviews were open-ended in nature in order to provide opportunities for both the researcher and participants to discuss certain topics in more detail. The open-ended nature of the questions provided opportunities for the participants to provide as much information as possible regarding rural school teaching and learning, and the researcher was able to prompt participants for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon that was being studied.

3.4 Data analysis

The empirical data was analysed by inductive categorisation, whereby the researcher pointed out the similarities and differences in the reasoning of the participants, and presented the findings according to the themes and patterns which emerged (Atieno, 2009 [4]; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) [19]. The findings were interpreted and discussed in relation to the existing literature findings. The interpretation and discussion also made use of the verbatim excerpts from the interview data to justify the authenticity and weight of the research findings.

4. Trustworthiness of findings

The trustworthiness of the research findings were established by triangulation and member checking.

4.1 Triangulation

Triangulation is the use of multiple methods to data collection in order to enable these methods to complement each other and to confirm that the data present common codes and themes (Kahn & Best, 2006 [21]; Creswell, 2014 [9]; Leedy & Omrod, 2005) [23]. According to Guba (1981) [11], the use of different methods in a study compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits. This study employed data triangulation as one of the types of triangulation.

Data triangulation involves using different sources of information to increase the trustworthiness of the study findings (Creswell, 2014) [9]. Triangulation involves using different sources of research instruments, such as interviews, focus group discussions or participant observation that utilises different informants to enhance the quality of the data from different sources (Anney, 2014) [2]. The researcher has used different data collection methods in this study, which included individual interviews with school principals and education officials, as well as focus group interviews with teacher participants. These multiple methods administered to different participants all produced data that complemented each other in addressing the research goals. The similarities in responses of the informants represented the authenticity of the research findings.

4.2 Member Checking

Member checking seeks to establish whether the participants agree with what the researcher have written about the data they provided during the empirical inquiry (Ary, Jacob, Sorensen & Razavieh, 2010) [3]. Member checks requires that the data interpretations and discussions as they are derived are continuously tested with participants from whom the data was solicited (Guba, 1981) [11].

The aim is for researcher to solicit feedback and share the interpretations of the data with the participants to help clear up miscommunication, identify inaccuracies and help obtain additional useful data. For this study, the researcher went back to the participants and shared the findings of the analysis, possible interpretations and discussions of the findings with the participants. This was meant to establish common grounds on the data analysis findings and interpretations with participants. This iterative process ensured that the findings that were eventually presented, were indeed a true and genuine reflection of the original data collected from the participants.

5. Findings and discussion

After the data was analysed thematically, the attributes engendering good learner performance at rural schools as expressed by participants related to the foundation for

learning, teacher-learner ratio, language competencies, parental involvement, subject specialisation, working environment, group of learners and the influence of climate on teaching and learning.

5.1 The foundation for learning

According to participants, the foundation upon which learners build further knowledge should be well established at onset of learning. If a solid foundation with initial learning is not well-built, learners struggle to cope with learning as they proceed with further grade levels. In many cases, this solid foundation is not well-established resulting in poor learner performance as opined by participants; "*the major problem is that our learners have a weak background knowledge in most of the subjects. Learners do not have a strong foundation from the lower grades.*"

The reason for this lack of an initially solid foundation for further learning, related to teachers not being qualified sufficiently for junior primary teaching which is accompanied by insufficient assessment of learning outcomes. In this regard, participants determined as a major problem, the emphasis on final schooling year assessment and performance, yet without ensuring quality benchmarks in preceding grades. Participants also pointed to the problem experienced with English as language of teaching and learning, as well as a second language for both teachers and learners.

Placing emphasis on final schooling grade level and the challenges brought about by English have been shunned at a considerable depth by participants who revealed that "*the foundation at primary school needs to be strengthened. What I can see, we only value grade ten as being important in measuring learner performance. But at grade four, there is no benchmark. It will be irrational to expect learners to perform well at exit level, such as at grade ten when they cannot make it at primary grades*". In addition to lack of quality benchmarking at lower grades, "*junior primary and senior primary learners need a strong foundation. Learners lack basic English language competencies from the primary level… teachers at primary levels should be empowered to groom these learners and have them prepared for junior secondary phase*."

It was clear that the fight against poor learner performance as experienced at the selected rural schools, was the endeavour to provide adequate education and training for human capital development relevant to the rural environment, to build a strong foundation for learning. A further reason responsible for the poor learning foundation of primary school learners was the lack of continuation of the subjects taught at primary school level, which eventually differs significantly with junior and senior secondary grade levels. It is anticipated that the content of subjects started in the primary phase should relate well to what is built on in the secondary phase. According to participants, "*this linkage needs refinement for the sake of more successful learning at rural schools.*"

5.2 Teacher: learner ratio

Participants indicated that the teacher-learner ratio for the primary phase (grades 1-7) as idealised by government was 35:1, for the junior secondary phase 30:1 and for the senior secondary phase 30:1. In real terms, the teacher-learner ratio differed significantly from the idealised suggestions. Participants emphasised that the real teacher-learner ratio that they were working with was not favourable for effective teaching and learning as the "*teacher-learner ratio was 50 to 60 learners in a class, and not appropriate good teaching and learning. It was difficult for teachers to pay attention to each and every learner's learning needs given the length of the lesson, which was forty minutes*".

Teachers were teaching in overcrowded classrooms which is the result of financial constraints accompanied by poor economic growth that faced the government to accommodate vast population growth in rural areas. Vast numbers of learners in the same classroom for a limited period of time hinders individual attention resulting in hampered learner performance. Teacher-learner ratio is hampering progress in most schools as teachers are teaching a lot of learners within a limited period of time. The forty minutes lesson is not enough for the teacher to attend to every learner's learning needs.

Apart from a lack of sufficient numbers of teachers and classrooms to effect an ideal teacher-learner ratio, overcrowded classrooms also imply insufficient didactic materials with teachers struggling to manage sharing arrangements among learners. There are not enough teaching resources, given the teacher-learner ratio that teachers have to cope with. For example, "*a teacher teaches at least fifty learners in a class, yet the government only provides one textbook. What type of miracle can one make to ensure that each learner make use of this textbook during the lesson presentation of forty minutes?*"

It was clear from the interviews with participants that the teacher-learner ratio of more than 50 learners per teacher influenced negatively the performance of learners at rural schools. A correct number of learners that is manageable within the lesson presentation time should be effected and sustained to ensure a good learner performance in rural schools.

5.3 English language competencies

At the selected rural schools, the language of teaching and learning for the junior primary phase was the vernacular language, namely Oshindonga, a dialect of Oshiwambo. From the senior primary phase onwards, the language of teaching and learning was English, which was both learners and teachers' second language. Participants emphasised that neither teachers nor learners were fully conversant in English, posing threats for clear facilitation and profound mastering of subject content. As highlighted in the previous section about the foundation for learning of learners not well-built in English, participants contend the barriers towards English also being relative to teachers. It was expressed that "*the problem lies with us and our learners for having language barriers, specifically English. Our teachers and learners cannot communicate easily and effectively in English and this mostly affect learner performance negatively*".

When learners were not able to express themselves eloquently, it was difficult to ask clear questions on subject content. Therefore, learners encounter difficulty to interact with their teachers in English in order to get clarity on subject content. Assessment in English posed a further threat to learners, namely, the struggle of presenting their thoughts coherently by means of English, as "*learners were really struggling with expressing themselves and presenting their ideas in English*". As learners in rural areas were rarely exposed to frequent English speaking, unlike their

counterparts in urban areas, learners in rural areas presented their answers confusingly making it difficult for teachers to assess the extent to which learners have reached anticipated outcomes in real terms.

Part of the lack of continuity with what is taught in the junior and senior phases of schooling relates then specifically to the discontinuing of mother tongue as the language of teaching and learning. The result is that *"junior and senior primary learners do not have a strong foundation in English language skills because they lack the basic language competencies from the primary level"*.

It was clear from the interviews with participants that a lack of English proficiency, caused by the vernacular teaching and learning during the first four years of schooling, contributed to immensely weak learner performance in the senior phases of schooling in rural areas. Considering the value of mother tongue instruction for proper understanding, the importance of English as a global language is equally important, and participants agreed that the earlier learners are exposed to English as a language of teaching and learning, the sooner they will become proficient in English and be able to master content successfully by means of English expression and presentation.

5.4 Parental involvement

Constructive parent involvement contributes to improved learner performance. Participants expressed that parents were not supportive to teachers' efforts at schools. It was argued that teachers tried their best at schools, but once learners went home, they were influenced by parents and have their attention completely diverted from their schoolwork. The diversion of learners' attention from school work by their parents was attributed to the fact that some *"parents are not literate, thus lacking an understanding of what learners were doing at school and what support they should provide once learners were back from school."*

The situation is worsened by school holidays when learners were exposed to a non-schooling environment for a prolonged period of time with parents not encouraging their children *"to stay in touch with their books due to their* [parents] *low level of literacy."* The result is that teachers first have to revise the previously taught content after school holidays, which impact negatively on available instruction time to cover the complete syllabus.

Apart from parents being indifferent to the education of their children, parents were also guilty of not providing the required physical and emotional support to their children. The result was that *"the home backgrounds of the learners posed threats to good performance due to factors like alcohol and lack of food at home as parents were often at cuca shops (shebeens)"*. A time spent at shebeens could have been well used to support learners with their school works.

Participants emphasised that parents who understood the value of education were supposed to excuse their children from house chores and ensure sufficient time and nutritional food for their children to perform optimally in schools. Such a scenario was not relevant at the selected rural schools as parents did not ensure sufficient food for their children and they blatantly hindered their children from attending school regularly. Participants appealed to *"the government to make the school feeding programme available to all school grades, catering for all learners to ensure that no learner is taught on an empty stomach."*

Parents hindered learner school attendance massively as *"our learners assisted their parents with house responsibilities and sometimes these responsibilities compromise teaching and learning, resulting in poor learner attendance and performance. A learner is sometimes absent from school for three days. When that learner comes back to school, he will indicate that his parents instructed him to take the cattle to the cattle post for better grazing."*

The tendency of parents using learners to cater for household chores at the expense of their education is well documented and relates to parents' attitude of not being convinced of the value of education (Shadreck, 2012) [31]. Such an attitude interferes with teachers' endeavours to improve the performance of their children. Learners who are regularly absent from school for three days and more, are not able to compete with learners who are attending school on a daily basis and who are enjoying the essential physical and psychological support from their parents. Therefore, parents should take lead as primary teachers of their children and commit themselves in shaping a better future for their children, with the assistance of teachers.

5.5 Subject specialisation

Participants revealed that teachers were teaching a combination of subjects, comprising of subjects that they were trained to teach as well as subjects for which no training was offered at all. This resulted in work overload as teachers had to prepare more extensively for the subjects not known to them. Overloading teachers with subjects they were not qualified to teach *"affected the motivation of the teachers and the learner performance"*. Considered against the background of challenging accommodation arrangements and insufficient teaching facilities and materials, overloading teachers *"with lessons for which they were not qualified to teach decreased teacher morale and diminished performance"*.

Not performing to expectation as a result of being required to teach subjects in which teachers did not received initial training was understood by participants to be unreasonably unfair because *"when learners go to the next grade and were failing to perform, the previous teacher were always to blame"*, regardless of the fact that the 'previous teacher' had to teach subjects for which one had not been trained.

Being professionally trained as a teacher does not imply being an expert in all subjects. Apart from specialised subject content, different subjects have different teaching methods and pedagogies which require specialised training. The allocation of teachers to subjects for which they received no training was necessitated by teacher workload that related to the number of lessons per week per teacher. School principal participants explained that for a five day teaching cycle teachers must conduct 40 lessons and for a seven day cycle 52 lessons. With regard to class teaching per grade, teachers must conduct 40 lessons per week for grades 4 to 7 and 41 lessons per week for grades 8 to 10. As a result of many teachers not meeting this required number of lessons per cycle or per week with their subjects of specialisation, they were obliged to teach additional subjects for which they were not qualified.

For improved learner performance, it is thus imperative that every teacher should teach the subjects for which they were trained to teach. Being a specialist is subject methodology

and pedagogy, would culminate into successful teaching and learning, as well as high learner achievement.

5.6 Working environment

Accommodation for teachers at rural schools was not sufficient and comfortable which resulted in exhausted teachers. In this regard, *"if the teacher sleeps in a makeshift structure and do not get enough rest, then one do not expect this teacher to perform in the class the next day"*. Apart from challenges with accommodation, the lack of classrooms forced teachers to present their classes under trees was not conducive for optimal learning.

Trees served as 'classrooms' posed their own challenges that related to rain and wind storms. During times of strong wind, it was difficult for teachers to deliver their lessons effectively as their voice projection was compromised by the movement of the wind. During a rain storm, teachers and learners sought shelter where possible, but mostly in occupied classrooms and, if the rain continues throughout the day, lesson presentation for that day were hindered. Rain storms did not only disturb learners who were taught under a tree, but also learners whose classrooms got occupied for shelter.

Sufficient and proper facilities on the school premises is required by rural school teachers as motivating factors for them to remain at rural schools. Learners are also motivated by enough and proper learning facilities and didactic materials. Teaching some learners under trees while others were being taught classrooms was considered unfair and humiliating. With regard to didactic materials, emphasis was placed on the importance of technological-related equipment because *"modern teaching aids are needed in order to keep up with the world of work-related technology"*, such as computers and projectors for PowerPoint presentations by teachers.

5.7 Genetic characteristics

Relying on the years of their teaching experience, teacher participants noticed the correlation between school performance and specific groups of learners admitted for a specific grade and year at a school. Even with motivation incentives such as financial incentive, participants acknowledged fluctuating learner performance, differing from year to year, regardless of the payment of the financial incentive. The performance of the learners *"depends on the group of learners admitted in a particular year*". There were evidence of *"cases whereby one year a teacher has a group of learners that performed well and the other year the same teacher has a group of learners that performed poorly, regardless of any motivation incentives"*.

The performance of learners were noted to be usually fluctuating, as the school may have a group of learners who are talented admitted in a particular year, and other years the school might admit learners of mixed intellectual abilities, those who are highly talented academically and those whose talents are not comparable to the others, thereby achieving low marks.

Learner performance is thus the result of academic potential as determined by genetic materials that correlate with a specific home environments. The quality of input from teachers may remains the same. However, due to hereditary factors differing from year to year, the same kind of teaching efforts results in differing learner performance.

5.8 The influence of climate on teaching and learning

Given the design of rural area, teaching and learning at rural schools were inhibited by climatic patterns. Floods caused damaged roads with schools having to close for many weeks. Since ploughing activities took place during the rainy season, many learners were involved in farming activities at home while school were suspended because of floods. Some parents *"took advantage of having their children at home to continue with farming activities while some parents were enjoying extra leisure time at the shebeens*". Eventually continuing with school implies backlogs too large to catch up on, resulting in teaching and learning outcomes not being reached optimally.

6. Summary

It becomes clear that the performance of learners at rural schools was underpinned by diverse factors, which relates to the foundation for learning, such that learners should have a strong learning foundations from elementary grades on which to build successive learning. A weak foundation imply weak successive learning, whereas a strong learning foundation culminate in good learner performance. The teacher-learner ratio affects teaching and learning, such that overcrowded classrooms remained not conducive for effective teaching and learning. Moreover, teachers do not have ample time to attend to individual learning needs of every learner within the limited time allocated for the lesson. English as a language of teaching and learning, posed threats to both teachers and learners, as the language was foreign to them all. Teachers struggled to clarify content to learners in English, whereas learners struggled to present their ideas convincingly in English, which gave external examiners hard time to figure out what they were trying to express.

Parents are recognised as primary teachers of their children and their absence in the teaching and learning process negatively affects learner performance. Secondly to parents, were teachers who, in the interest of teacher-learner ratio and teacher workload, were given extra subjects to teach for which they were not trained, which compromised the quality of output. In addition, teaching and learning at rural schools were conducted in dilapidated facilities and under trees which was not conducive for learning. There was also evidence that the performance of learners in rural areas was influenced by the genetic characteristics of learners who were admitted to schools in particular years. Since rural schools are located in densely populated areas, they were prone to floods and wind, which often times compromised teaching and learning as schooling was suspend for considerable periods of time.

7. Conclusion

There is sufficient evidence to explain the standard of learner performance at rural schools. Often, rural educational stakeholders were blamed for the deteriorating standard of learner performance, yet those who shed the blames do not have an appreciations of the factors influencing learner performance at rural schools. Some of the stakeholders placing blames on teachers may not have known that they too, has a role to play in improving the quality of teaching and learning among rural schools. Availing the attributes of learner performance at rural schools in the large body of literature will solve the lack of

knowledge about the factors that can either cause learners at rural schools to perform poor or good. This knowledge will help various education stakeholder to make informed decisions of how these factors can be nurtured, all for the sake of improved learner performance in rural areas.

8. Recommendations

To improve the performance of learners at rural schools, the following recommendations are made:

- Educational planners should ensure that learners have a strong foundation for learning from primary grades. The language of instruction from primary grades should be one that clarifies concepts to learners, and should be one that learners should continue learning with. The current trend of teaching learners in vernacular in primary grades, then shift to English as they exit the primary phase diminishes learners' capability to master subject content. Notwithstanding the significance of mother tongue instructions, learners should be introduced to English at early primary level as that will the language that they will be using for learning throughout to tertiary levels.
- A manageable teacher-learner ratio should be implemented in schools by school administrators to ensure that teachers have a manageable class size for effective teaching and learning.
- The use of English among teachers and learners should be encouraged to ensure proficiency. It should be noted that not knowing how to express an idea in English properly do not imply lack of knowledge about subject content, but a lack of proficiency in language skills. English is a foreign language in Namibia and should not be used as a measure of intelligence to pass learners to the next level. Therefore, the marking of learners' work should be considerate of the fact that teachers and learners are taking and using English as a second language, and thus should not be expected to have the same language proficiency levels as native English speakers.
- Parents should be encouraged to take lead and commitment in the education of their children, and be reminded that refraining from such commitment, is equivalent to gambling with the future of their children.
- Teachers should teach subjects for which they were trained. Any additional subject given to teachers for which no training was provided, should require intensive continuous professional interventions to keep teachers abreast with expectations.
- Regional Directorates should ensure that schools have enough classroom buildings for conducive teaching and learning and counteract teaching under trees.
- Educational stakeholders should mobilise enough resources to support learners of different genetic capabilities to perform up to expectations.
- The central government should construct access roads among rural communities, to facilitate access to schooling during flood times.

A favourable consideration of the above recommendations may culminate in effective teaching and learning among rural schools, accompanied by increased quality of output in learning outcomes.

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