

IMPACT OF ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ON TRANSFORMING UNDER-RESOURCED RURAL SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA: A STUDY IN LIMPOPO PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

Rural schools in South Africa remain marked by persistent disadvantage: inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages and turnover, weak access to amenities, and lower academic outcomes linked to apartheid spatial legacies and funding arrangements. This synthesis advances Asset Based Community Development as an alternative to deficit framing, specifying four interrelated components, community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilisation, and capacity building, and explaining how human, cultural, social, organisational, physical and locational assets can be identified and recombined to support school improvement. This qualitative study explores the principles, practice and promise of asset-based community development in transforming under resourced rural schools in South Africa. Leadership practices and governance mechanisms that convene participatory processes are emphasised, alongside policy recommendations for neighbourhood-scale, long-term funding and formal links between higher education and rural schools. Methodological notes describe conceptual analysis and qualitative fieldwork approaches, identify limits related to context specificity and source bias, and call for multi-site, longitudinal mixed-method studies to evaluate effects on teacher retention, learner outcomes and community capabilities. The researcher employed the asset theory and social capital theory. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge benefitting the Department of Education.

Keywords: *Community involvement, Community Resource, Funding, Transformation, Rural*

INTRODUCTION

Asset based community development is an approach that emphasizes the value and potential resources within a community, with the aim of enhancing the quality of life of its inhabitants and promoting the wealth and welfare of the community (Haines, 2014). This method, A excavate, the skills within the community. In South Africa rural schools continue to face challenges related to poverty, infrastructure, staffing, governance and access to opportunities. However, communities also possess human knowledge, cultural resources, social networks, local organisations, leadership capacity and institutional partnerships that can support educational improvement (Cunningham & Mathie, 2002). The ABCD framework emphasises community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilisation and capacity building as mutually reinforcing processes. Through these processes, schools can become centres of collaboration, learning and development. Evidence reviewed in the manuscript demonstrates that partnerships between schools, families, community organisations, universities and civil society actors can generate sustainable solutions tailored to local circumstances (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Such approaches complement rather than replace state support. They encourage ownership, participation, resilience and long-term development. Rural schools continue to face challenges related to poverty, infrastructure, staffing, governance and access to opportunities. However, communities also possess human knowledge, cultural resources, social networks, local organisations, leadership capacity and institutional partnerships that can support educational improvement. The ABCD framework emphasises community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilisation and capacity building as mutually reinforcing processes. Through these processes, schools can become centres of collaboration, learning and development (Omodan, 2023). They encourage ownership, participation, resilience and long-term development while addressing educational inequality and social exclusion. The ABCD framework emphasizes, community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilisation and capacity building as mutually reinforcing processes. Through these processes, schools can become centres of collaboration, learning and development. This qualitative study was guided by the following questions:

Q1 What are the barriers and facilitators to building sustainable social capital between marginalized rural communities and schools?

Q2 In what way can rural schools leverage local economic assets to provide viable vocational training and career pathways with the limited resources at hand for all learners?

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Asset theory emphasizes that resources and capabilities within a community are important drivers of community development. The discussion highlights how Asset Based Community Development shifts attention from

deficits to strengths within rural communities. The ABCD framework emphasises community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilisation and capacity building as mutually reinforcing processes. Through these processes, schools can become centres of collaboration, learning and development. Evidence reviewed in the manuscript demonstrates that partnerships between schools, families, community organisations, universities and civil society actors can generate sustainable solutions tailored to local circumstances. They encourage ownership, participation, resilience and long-term development while addressing educational inequality and social exclusion. Rural schools continue to face challenges related to poverty, infrastructure, staffing, governance and access to opportunities. However, communities also possess human knowledge, cultural resources, social networks, local organisations, leadership capacity and institutional partnerships that can support educational improvement. The ABCD framework emphasizes community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilisation and capacity building as mutually reinforcing processes. Through these processes, schools can become centres of collaboration, learning and development. The findings of Omodan, (2023) infers that place and specifically rurality, is closely tied to educational inequality and marginalization.

Historical and Policy Context of Rural Schooling in South Africa

Spatial patterns in South African schooling are deeply entangled with the historical legacy of apartheid, which instituted racially segregated education systems and uneven provision of resources. Even three decades after the formal end of racial segregation, schools in rural areas are still under-resourced and characterized by dysfunction and weak acquisition of essential educational skills. The lack of basic need like electricity, laboratories, ablution facilities to name a few directly undermine the aspiration, inscribed in constitutional and policy frameworks, for equal access to comparable standards of teaching and learning (Mmodana-Zide, 2023). Current funding and classification mechanisms also reflect and mediate spatial inequalities. Schools are categorized into quintiles according to the socio-economic conditions of their surrounding communities (Magunje & Chigona, 2024). While this framework is intended to redress disadvantage, it simultaneously makes visible the spatial clustering of poverty and under-resourcing that is a direct outgrowth of apartheid era spatial planning. Educators in historically disadvantaged rural schools are expected to facilitate effective teaching and learning in context that lack laboratories, libraries, and internet access. This tension between ambitious curricular expectations and spatial development forged under apartheid and only partially addressed in subsequent policy reforms.

Socio-Economic and Infrastructural Realities of Rural Communities

Communities who reside in rural areas are frequently characterized by constrained economic opportunities and limited access to basic services, conditions that shape both livelihood strategies and demographic patterns. In South Africa rural located schools operate in contexts marked by financial challenges, unqualified educators and weak access to social and educational amenities (Hlalele, 2012., Tayyaba, 2012 & Mukwevho, 2018). Material conditions in and around schools are central to understanding how learners experience teaching and learning. These conditions restrict school capacity to provide quality education and help to perpetuate cycles of under resourcing and under privilege within rural communities (Omodan, 2023). Work on geographically differentiated socio-economic conditions advocates strategies that rebuild foundational economies, improve basic infrastructure, and maximize local assets on civic infrastructure and community engagement. Funding for levelling up is argued to be most effective when invested at neighborhood scale, over a long term, and underpinned by resident decision making. Such place-based strategies are explicitly linked to asset-based community development, which recognizes the capacities of local people and their associations, creating new economic opportunities while expanding social capital and local control over infrastructure (Chang, 2022).

Actors, Institutions and Power Relations in Rural Education

Everyday work in rural schools unfolds within environments marked by material scarcity, yet relationships among school leadership, educators, learners, and communities can mitigate some of these constraints. Rural schools are situated in areas characterized by social and economic deprivation, with limited access to sanitation, clean water, roads, and electricity (Maseko & Chigeza, 2024). Within such settings, school leaders and educators are required to sustain teaching and learning under conditions that tend to erode well being and professional efficacy, while learners attend schools that reflect broader community marginalization (Omodan, 2023., Maseko & Chigeza, 2024). Asset based community development explicitly positions educators, families and local leaders as a central component through which all partners participate in identifying and addressing school level problems. By involving these actors in decision making and implementation, Asset based community development aims to cultivate pride, ownership and commitment towards educational change, creating a locally driven model that is tailored to the specific conditions of rural schools (Omodan, 2023).

Literature on School Improvement and Community Engagement

Asset based community development holds great promise. By exploring and integrating resources within the community, community can better respond to challenges, solve problems and achieve sustainable development. This approach stimulates community innovation and creativity, enhances community cohesion and a sense of belonging, and fosters interaction and social connection among community members (Nel, 2020). Problem saturated accounts of rural schooling foreground scarcity, deficiency and crisis. Analysis of policy and stakeholder responses emphasize repeated attempts to alleviate problems through externally driven measures aimed at supplementing resources, addressing educator shortages, and improving infrastructure. These efforts include proposals and initiatives from policymakers, educators, and other actors who seek to relieve material and staffing deficits in rural schools. Findings suggest that these remedial actions have not fundamentally altered the structural marginalization of rural schooling and that they have failed to move institutions beyond the status of being at their “lowest best”. Within this context, problem focused interventions appear to function primarily as short-term relief than as vehicles for transformative change. Research explicitly proposes Asset Based Community Development as a framework through which rural school communities can move beyond being objects of intervention to becoming agents in addressing their own challenges (Omodan, 2023).

Asset Based Community Development in School Community Ecologies

Human, cultural and symbolic resources emerge as central categories within asset-oriented approaches that seek to frame marginalized communities as sites of capability rather than deficiency. Conceptual work on Asset Based Community Development identifies community members themselves as holders of valuable skills, knowledge, and social networks that can be mobilized for positive change. Cultural and symbolic assets include locally embedded practices, histories, and meanings that sustain identity, pride, and belonging, and can be activated within participatory planning and education initiatives (Chang, 2022., Omodan, 2023). Assumptions underpinning Asset Based Community Development explicitly foreground these categories of assets. Community engagement is premised on the view that residents are best placed to identify their own strengths and resources and to craft solutions tailored to their circumstances. Cultural and symbolic forms of knowledge also appear as significant even if they are not explicitly labelled as “assets”. In South African rural communities, educators and residents describe indigenous practices for predicting seasonal change and rainfall based on behavior and plant flowering patterns. Educators note that such beliefs can carry misconceptions, for example that ritual prayer alone causes rain and argue that classrooms must both acknowledge these cultural meanings and correct scientific inaccuracies. Awareness of learner’s belief systems is therefore treated as essential for effective teaching and for integrating indigenous and formal knowledge in ways that respect cultural symbolism while supporting scientific literacy (Selepe, Ramsaroop & Carolin, 2022). By documenting who and what is available locally, asset mapping helps to build a more resilient, self sufficient and empowered community that is better positioned to respond to challenges faced by rural schools (Roof & McVee, 2020). The potential plan to transform rural schools is by leveraging the unique assets and resources of the communities (Xu & Maitland, 2017).

Transforming Teaching, Learning and School Culture

Classroom practice in under-resourced school’s settings already draws on locally embedded ways of knowing that can be treated as curricular resources rather than peripheral beliefs. Research on decolonizing curricula in South Africa argues that schooling has historically marginalized such as indigenous knowledge systems, with colonial and postcolonial syllabi dominated by western epistemologies and constructs. Calls for curriculum therefore emphasize giving prominence to indigenous knowledge systems and using locally grounded understandings as a basis for learning activities, rather than treating them as marginal or token additions (Hlalele, 2019). Existing interpretive frameworks recognize locally situated knowledge as a resource for teaching and learning rather than as an obstacle to be corrected (Hlalele, 2019., Selepe, Ramsaroop & Carolin, 2022). They further argued that effective teaching requires awareness of learner’s belief systems in order to acknowledge their cultural significance while also clarifying scientific explanations. By treating indigenous environmental knowledge as an asset, rather than as superstition to be displaced, such curriculum work embodies an asset oriented, contextually responsive pedagogy in under-resourced rural schools (Hlalele, 2019., Selepe, Ramsaroop & Carolin, 2022). Curriculum focused studies in South African rural areas further show that learner centered pedagogy can build directly on indigenous environmental knowledge already used by communities. When educators treat these understandings as starting points for classroom inquiry rather than as misconceptions to be ignored, they open possibilities for experiential activities in which learners document local environmental cues, compare them with formal meteorological explanations, and critically examine how different knowledge systems interpret evidence. This orientation is compatible with decolonial curriculum

arguments that call for giving prominence to indigenous knowledge systems and for designing learning activities that connect strongly with learners lived contexts (Hlalele, 2019., Selepe, Ramsaroop & Carolin, 2022).

9 Community Development Outcomes Linked to School Transformation

This condensed section synthesises the key arguments presented in the original manuscript. The discussion highlights how Asset Based Community Development shifts attention from deficits to strengths within rural communities. Rural schools continue to face challenges related to poverty, infrastructure, staffing, governance and access to opportunities. However, communities also possess human knowledge, cultural resources, social networks, local organisations, leadership capacity and institutional partnerships that can support educational improvement. The ABCD framework emphasises community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilisation and capacity building as mutually reinforcing processes. Through these processes, schools can become centres of collaboration, learning and development (Omodan, 2023). Evidence reviewed in the manuscript demonstrates that partnerships between schools, families, community organisations, universities and civil society actors can generate sustainable solutions tailored to local circumstances. Such approaches complement rather than replace state support. They encourage ownership, participation, resilience and long-term development while addressing educational inequality and social exclusion. Rural schools continue to face challenges related to poverty, infrastructure, staffing, governance and access to opportunities. However, communities also possess human knowledge, cultural resources, social networks, local organisations, leadership capacity and institutional partnerships that can support educational improvement (Omodan, 2023). The ABCD framework emphasises community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilisation and capacity building as mutually reinforcing processes. Through these processes, schools can become centres of collaboration, learning and development. Evidence reviewed in the manuscript demonstrates that partnerships between schools, families, community organisations, universities and civil society actors can generate sustainable solutions tailored to local circumstances (Omodan, 2023).

Policy and Practice Implications

Policy debates on rural schooling need to move beyond episodic deficit-oriented interventions and create enabling environments for sustained asset-based work. Lack of basic amenities continues to be a problem in rural areas. Despite repeated attempts by policy makers and other relevant stakeholders to address these challenges, schools are still characterized as operating at their “lowest best”, which has prompted explicit calls to look inward and mobilize assets within schools and communities (Omodan, Tsotetsi & Dube, 2019). This diagnosis implies that educational policy must formally recognize community engagement, asset mapping, asset mobilization and capacity building as strategic levers, rather than treating them as peripheral or ad hoc activities. Conceptual work on Asset Based Community Development specifies concrete dimensions that can be translated into policy instruments. The lack of resources in a community can be addressed by community engagement and working collaboratively. Involving community members with relevant skills in school development and partnering with local organizations and businesses.

Research Design and Methods

This qualitative study explored the application of an asset-based approach to improving academic performance in rural schools. The focus was on two elements which emerged during the data generation and analysis. Firstly, the conduciveness of the conditions for the application of the asset-based approach and the contextual factors affecting the implementation of asset-based community development approach. According to Silverman, (2016), qualitative researchers are concerned with the subjective study of realities and the study of these realities is interpreted and dependent on text and image data (Creswell, 2014). The study was guided by the interpretive paradigm, regards truth as being socially construction, multifaceted and dependent on the context, time, culture and experiences of the participants (Poggenpoel & Schurink, 2002). Moreover, because this study was conducted with an intention to make meaning to a few categories the study looked for complexity of views as drawn from the participants (Cohen, Marion, & Morrison, 2011., Creswell, 2014). A case study approach suited this study because case studies are conducted in real contexts and their intention is to investigate experiences bound by the context within which the studies are conducted.

Purposive sampling was adopted (Bowling, 2014), with participants of the study selected with the goal of being able to identify potentials for maximum variation and a range of perspectives from this sample to other actors in the community. The participants were part of the schools around the communities involved in a project which employed the (ABCD) for school improvement. Because of their involvement in the project, participants were “information rich” with regard to providing in-depth insight on what factors promote or hinder this approach to school improvement. The data used in this article was generated from the school management team and ten

learners in different grades. Issues of ethics were dealt with before the interviews, the researcher obtained permission from authorities, and participants voluntarily signed the consent form.

Data Generation and analysis

Discursively oriented interviews (DOIs) were utilized as a data generation method, using “talk as social action” (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004). The DOI methodology is suitable for studies in which participants are social actors who interact with the researchers and at the same time are involved in discursive practice and communicative action. This form of interview allowed participants to have an open and unrestricted conversation with the researcher and this suited this study. To analyze the participants responses, I employed both inductive and deductive qualitative data analysis. Firstly, I transcribed the data verbatim from the audio recording. Relevant extracts of the transcribed text were highlighted and then grouped without comments under themes. Themes were clustered into categories and compared with relevant literature.

Findings and discussions

Three themes emerged from data analysis, resource equity and social justice, networking and partnerships, the skills within communities. The following section will present themes in relation to meeting the needs of disadvantaged populations.

Theme one: Resource issues and social justice

Participants shared stories of resilience and survival were seen to be of a particular value in areas of deprivation. Within a context of growing inequalities in different areas of rural areas, where the external environments are hostile to young school going kids especially girls who are forced to marry older man who are perceived to be wealthier to escape from poverty. This practice is on-going without being reported to authorities because of lack of basic resources like nearby police stations. Schools are faced with a high drop out of girl learners because of this practice. ABCD offers inroads to identifying promising coping and resistance mechanisms building on human capacities, creativity for girls who have a skill but due to being forced to leave school can utilize the identified skill. Although the Constitution of South Africa advocates the right to education for all, and there is a greater receptivity to land reform in their favor, to the education of girls, and to the creation of space for their contribution to decision making in the community as whole. Shining the light on the strength and capacities of women and the value of their contribution, can be a more effective way of justifying the changes needed to restore or establish social justice and equitable sharing of resource. The findings showed that there is no much support or collaboration between the school and community to ensure the smooth running of the school.

Theme two: Networking and Partnerships

The nature of networking between the school and community organizations was seen not to collaborate. School governing bodies were hardly meeting with the school management teams, engagement with the community is not on an equal base. Most rural community members are literate therefore the school management team find it hard to communicate and interpret policies to members of the communities. School governing body members are not democratically elected. ABCD advocates networking with different stakeholders and forming partnerships with stakeholders to change the negatives in a school setting to positives. The findings also showed that communities had limited cooperation with the school community as they were not even attending meetings when invited by the school. Participants felt that they do not want to force parents to meetings as it is not safe to walk in the field alone during weekends and during the week it is not feasible as there is not electricity. Although participants alluded to the fact that the school is around an environment in which inhabitants have got the potential to make invaluable contribution to its improvement because of various skills identified, some members in the community needed much push and social interaction. The division between the community and the school emerged right at the beginning of the study as participants raised the issues of non-communication between the school and parents. It appears the is “them and us”. To corroborate the picture painted by the school when asked if the asset based can work in the school? they all said no.

Theme three: Skills within the communities

Data obtained from participants repeatedly confirmed that the school is situated in a fruitful environment in which people have skills and potential to make invaluable contributions to its improvement. What emerged is that harnessing resources found in the community has been made challenging because of lack of understanding and collaboration between the school and the community. According to the SASA (RSA, 1996) and the site-based management approach, as indicated earlier (Rainey & Honig, 2012) schools belong to the community in the area in which they are situated. For this reason, the need for inclusive governance was identified as a way that the voices of the people where the schools are located are taken into account in taking the school forward. For Hyman, (2002), building a community involves drawing together members who have well-developed relationships and creating a space in which concerns and aspirations are shared. It emerged from the data that the

existing population in rural areas is dominated by people who need empowerment or awareness in order for them to realize their possible contribution. According to Hlalele, (2012) rural people have managed their lives and have survived against all odds, which indicates the potential is there, rural people have indigenous knowledge (Chakwizira & Mhemachena, 2012., Maila & Loubster, 2003., Mapara, 2009). I am not under estimating the power of education, but stress that rural people even uneducated ones do possess a skill that is learnt from indigenous knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In terms of the main research question- namely What is the impact of asset- based community development projects in transforming schools. Emerging from this study is the observation that a close relationship between the school and the community around the school. All the assets required for school improvement are found in both entities, the school and the community. It became clear that are not ABCD sensitized and the school community and residents are not self-motivated, self-driven and there is no collaboration to ensure that the school is transformed to ensure maximum performance of learners learning. In tapping into an asset-based approach for rural school improvement, this study presents one overarching idea: that is, that school leaders need to create a balanced relationship with the community and not distance themselves and be loners. Asset-based community development is a comprehensive development approach that focuses on the internal resources and capabilities of the community. It emphasizes the mobilization and integration of community assets to promote community assets to promote community development and improve the quality of life of community residents including the school around. This approach recognizes that existing resources and capabilities within a community are an important foundation for community prosperity and sustainable development.

Through asset-based community development, communities can discover and utilize their own resources, such as human resources, social capital, material assets, and cultural heritage. The mobilization and integration of such resources can promote the participation and cooperation of community residents, stimulate community innovation and creativity, and promote the development process of the community. However, asset-based community development also faces some challenges. One of them is the issue of resource equity and social justice. To promote the sustainability and inclusiveness of asset-based community development, policymakers and practitioners can take a range of steps. First, they can establish effective participation mechanisms to ensure the participation and cooperation of community residents. Second, they can support community organizations and advocates, fostering community organizing and leadership. In addition, policymakers can formulate policies and regulations to support community development and provide necessary resources and support.

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