Tapping into the Asset-based Approach to Improve Academic Performance in Rural Schools

Phumlani Erasmus Myende

*¹School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, P Bag X03, Ashwood 3605, South Africa
E-mail: myendep@ukzn.ac.za*

ABSTRACT This theoretical paper, through the Critical Emancipatory Research lens, captures the discourse around the asset-based approach, in different contexts for purpose of arguing for it in improving academic performance in the South African rural schools. It begins with exploring literature that support the need for the asset-based strategy in improving academic performance: the components of the asset-based approach are discussed and literature on how the school environment can best be set to utilise the asset-based approach is explored; possible threats for the asset-based approach are also discussed with an aim to establish how they can better be addressed in the context of applying this approach in improving academic performance. The paper concludes by combining together the discussion with an aim to demonstrate why the asset-based approach is relevant particularly in the rural context.

INTRODUCTION

The debates about the low and unpleasing standards of education especially in rural communities started since the early ages of the South African democracy. In its several manifestos, the African National Congress (ANC) has always promised improving the quality of education for all (Myende 2014). Given the fact that the right to basic and quality education is part of the Bill of Rights (see Section 29 of the South African Constitution) (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996a), Myende (2014) is of the view that it is justifiable to expect the State to invest more in education. However, what seems to be a losing battle for some communities and schools is to believe that the government should alone be held responsible for addressing rural education challenges. Despite the South African government's increasing investment in education; achieving the goal of quality of education particularly in rural communities has been a challenge (Gardner 2008: 8; Msila 2010; Yettick et al. 2014). While it is undeniable that improving the quality of education should be the responsibility of the government (Soroto 2004: 10; Myende 2014), the argument advanced in this paper is that addressing rural education challenges will not succeed unless a rural people-centred approach is employed (Myende and Chikoko 2014; Myende 2014). This entails allowing local people to invest their strengths and capacities towards improving academic performance in their schools. The author of this paper further argues that calculated rural education challenges lead to poor academic performance. Drawing from the recommendations of the Ministerial Report on Rural Education (MCRE) (South African Department of Education 2005), the paper advances the debate that rural education challenges, including poor academic performance are only challengeable provided deficit models towards addressing rural education backlogs are countered through the use of capacity-based models or asset-based approaches. This implies applying bottom-up approaches or moving away from considering the government as sole provider of all solutions to rural educational problems and to acknowledge that rural schools and their communities have a vast account of assets to use in dealing with their educational challenges (Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) 2005: vii).

Asset-based approach is therefore suggested in this paper as a school management strategy that could be employed in improving academic performance in rural schools. While the approach is proposed and its benefits are known, there are limited practical examples of how this approach may work in real context, particularly in the process of improving academic performance in schools. The paper therefore investigates how the asset-based approach as a management strategy can be used to improve academic performance in a rural schools.

Rural education in South Africa and in many countries such as China, United States of Ameri-

ca (USA), Malaysia, Iran, Ghana, Mali, Cambodia, El Salvador, Uganda, to mention a few, continue to face enormous challenges. This has made it difficult to maintain quality standards in rural schools that are comparable to urban counterparts (Gordon and Qiang 2002: 1; Moulton 2001: ii; Kline 2002: 170; Muijs et al. 2004: 149; Soroto 2004: 9; Harris et al. 2006: 410; Gardiner 2008: 9; Ngcobo and Tikly 2008: 1; South African Development of Basic Education 2009: 8; Aref 2011: 499; Ebersöhn and Ferreira 2012: 31; Hlalele 2012a: 113, 2012b: 269; Norviewu-Mortty 2012: iii). The above scholars agree that rural schools in many cases are unable to create opportunities that will allow their learners to attain quality education. As Muijs et al. (2004: 149) state, it does not mean that all rural schools offer education at a low level of quality; however there is an agreement that many schools with challenges of offering quality education are mostly in rural areas. Framed with the critical emancipatory research (CER) and the asset-based approach, this paper seeks to address the research question: *How can the asset-based approach be used as a school management strategy to improve academic performance in rural schools*?

Objectives of the Study

The study draws discourses from literature to argue for the asset-based approach towards improving academic performance in rural schools. It begins with exploring literature that support the need for the asset-based strategy in improving academic performance: the components of the asset-based approach are discussed and literature on how the school environment can best be set to utilise the asset based approach is explored; possible threats for the asset-based approach are also discussed with an aim to establish how they can better be addressed in the context of applying this approach in improving academic performance. The paper concludes by combining together the discussion with an aim to demonstrate why the asset-based approach is relevant particularly in the rural context.

THE CER AND THE ASSET-BASED APPROACH

The paper combines the perspectives of critical emancipatory research and asset-based approach. The application of multiple theories in understanding the phenomenon is called theoretical triangulation (Thurmond 2001: 253; Ziyani et al.2004: 12). Theoretical triangulation is used for multiple purposes. For example,Ziyani and King (2004: 12) contend that it can be applied in the attempt to draw upon various theories instead of utilising one only viewpoint. Furthermore, Thurmond (2001: 254) posits that the intent is to conduct research within multiple lenses and questions in mind, to support or refute findings. The following are the benefits of applying the theoretical triangulation:

Theoretical triangulation can contribute in increasing confidence in research data, creating innovative ways of understanding the phenomena, revealing unique findings and challenging or integrating theories; enhances the researchers' ability in providing a clearer understanding of the problem; helps to provide a broader and deeper analysis of findings (Thurmond 2001: 255-256).

While the application of theoretical triangulation carries many benefits, it also has some challenges that need to be addressed. For example, failure to adequately define the concepts within frameworks may lead to confusion (Thurmond 2001: 257). In discussing CER and the asset-based approach in this paper, the critical concepts are identified and adequately defined to address this challenge. It is also indicated that theoretical triangulation may be faulty and epistemologically unsound. The epistemological contributions of the theories applied in this paper are justified later to address this challenge.

The Rural Context and the CER

"In South Africa it is well known that since the end of apartheid 1994 rural development and rural education has remained on the margins of progress made in improving people's lives" (Nkambule et al. 2011: 342). "Rural places frequently face substantial economic and social challenges. For example, on average the rate of poverty in rural communities is higher than that of urban communities. Due to this, several positive aspects of rural communities are ignored and overlooked" (Hlalele 2012a: 113-114) and the focus has been more on what is negative in the rural context. The researcher argues in this paper that the issues outlined above have contributed immensely on the perspective held by

the same rural communities that someone should rescue them against the challenges, including poor or ineffective schools. One can logically establish how such economic and social power-lessness is belittling rural communities to even view themselves as powerless. Therefore, it is argued that there is a need to conscietise these communities about how they can become role players in improving academic performance in their own schools. Critical emancipatory research connected well with this paper as it is driven by an understanding that the voice of rural communities has been marginalised not because it is useless but because social, politi-cal and economic (NMF 2005: 140; Hlalele 2012a: 113) conditions made them to internalise their powerlessness.

Rurality and Rural School

Rurality and rural school are conceptualised differently by different people from different contexts. Due to such differences, there remains no one agreed definition of rurality and a rural school. Redding and Walberg (2012: 5) state that rurality is uniquely characterised by low popu-lation density together with family isolation and community remoteness. On the other hand, Malhoit (2005: 11) and Redding and Walberg (2012: 6) further indicate that most rural schools are small and they offer narrow scope of curric-ulum and less extensive courses.

What both Malhoit (2005) and Howley et al. (2009) point out is that these small schools have better academic achievement. Furthermore, Howley et al. (2009: 516) note that rurality is char-acterised by a continuously declining popula-tion both in schools and in the community. This decline in population mostly happens within the educated members of community and thus it is regarded as brain drain (Howley et al. 2009: 516;Williams and Nierengarten 2010). One im-portant characteristic that the above scholars also associate with rurality is poverty and low access to technology which also results to limit-ed access to internet and library services for rural students.

The characteristics of rurality and rural school as discussed above are also pointed out by some scholars from a South African perspec-tive although there are differences as well. Bal-four et al. (2008: 98) point out that poverty is one of the major characteristics of rurality in the South African context. Accompanying poverty are some aspects which were also noted in the first perspective provided. These include lack of transportation, insufficient infrastructure, and limited access to social services. "Poverty, fis-cal incapacity, low levels of adult education, and low levels of learner achievement run in the same mutually reinforcing circles in rural areas" (Hla-lele 2012a: 113). What the researcher learns es-pecially from Malhoit (2005), Balfour et al. (2008), Hlalele (2012b) and Redding and Walberg (2012) is that rurality and poverty are two inseparable issues. There is also an agreement that rural schools are the mostly impoverished schools in terms of resources but the context of South Af-rica is different from the American context in terms of enrolment numbers and the state of academic achievement. This is explained better below:

While declining enrolment remains a signifi-cant factor in some rural school districts, rural enrolment on the whole is growing while non-rural enrolment is declining. Most rural areas already face tremendous barriers to learners' high achievement and operate in less than favour-able policy environments (Hlalele 2012a: 113).

This may suggest that in other contexts like the United States of America, rural school may have very few learners making it possible to dis-tribute resources easily, while South African records show that rural schools have huge num-bers and making the issue of resources' distribu-tion to be one of the rural schools' challenges.

Chikoko and Khanare (2012: 24) also provide a detailed account of what characterises rurali-ty. They posit that "rurality" is a multi-layered concept encompassing the farming communi-ties, peri-urban settings, informal settlements, and what is often referred to as the "deep rural". The concept of "deep rural" according to Chiko-ko and Khanare (2012: 24) refers to some of the remotest pasts of the countryside. They further indicate that due to their location within margin-alised places, rural schools will therefore be mar-ginalised and disadvantaged schools.

The features presented above suggest that rurality and rural school is only associated with negative aspects of life which are backwardness, underdevelopment and poverty (Kamper 2008; Aliber 2009; Aliber and Hart 2009; Aliber and Cousins 2013). However, rural communities have untapped potential to shape a better future for themselves (NMF 2005: vii). This presents a different picture from what rurality has been ar-

gued to be. Hlalele (2012a: 113-114) also states that rural communities have unique attributes which make rural places attractive places to live and raise family. This suggests that there are positive aspects within the rural context and they are critical in the survival of communities within rural contexts.

The different perspectives confirm the differing views on what realities constitute rurality and rural school. In this paper both the negative and positive aspects associated with rurality and rural schools are acknowledged. To be in line with the frameworks as well as the aim of this paper, the researcher does not disregard other scholars' views about rurality but to avoid deficit understanding of rurality the paper adopts Myende and Chikoko (2014) conceptualisation of rurality in the South African context. Using the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act, No. 41 of 2003 (RSA 2003) and the KwaZulu-Natal Traditional Leadership and Governance Act, No. 5 of 2005 (KZN Legislature 2005), these scholars argue that rurality has nothing to do with lack of infrastructure development, backwardness and poverty. Therefore, they posit that rurality may be understood as any geographical area that is under the leadership of traditional leaders *(Amakhosi, Izinduna, Izibonda* and *Amaphoyisa Enkosi)*. This means the place can be developed in terms of infrastructure and may be very closer to cities and towns but if it is governed by traditional leadership the researcher regards it as rural.

An Asset-based Approach Towards Improving Academic Performance

The need for asset-based approach stems from the shortcomings of the traditional path (needs-based approach) to community renewal. According to Kretzmann and McKnight (1996: 24), Eloff and Ebersöhn (2001: 149), Ebersöhn and Mbetse (2003: 323), Keeble (2006: 2), Boyd et al. (2008: 191), Burke et al. (2009: 9), Venter (2010: 13) and Loots et al. (2012), the needs-based approach involves agencies, universities, the government or other donor groups intervene to find remedy to rural societal problems. The above scholars further posit that employing the needs-based approach, results to communities who are unable to acknowledge their strengths, capacities, assets and resources. Needs-based approach has further resulted to social service providers who see communities in terms of the extent of their problems and needs. Needs-based approach creates communities who are consumers rather than producers of their solutions. Thus, these communities will pay their attention to their deficiencies instead of the possibilities for deploying their assets for the improvement of academic performance in their schools. This will further lead to unsustainable intervention strategies.

The Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (DoE 2005: 8) confirms that the above approach has dominated in the government's strategies to address rural education challenges, including the issue of poor academic performance. It has been argued that since 1994, the South African government has dedicated efforts in improving the status of rural education through addressing social challenges which are connected to academic performance (Nkambule et al. 2011: 341). However, the issue of academic performance is still a concern for many rural districts, especially in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Evidence shows that there is less to be gained if the needs-based approach is the adopted path in the process of trying to improve academic performance in a rural context. Both the NMF (2005) and the DoE (2005) have acknowledged the inability of the government's policy frameworks to sufficiently address the needs of rural communities. Thus the researcher argues for the asset-based approach which shall bring the local people at the centre of problem solving and draw from their ideas.

An extensive inquiry conducted at the Northwestern University in the United States of America on successful communities suggests that successful communities followed the asset-based approach. However, the same inquiry also acknowledges that the communities inadvertently presented a one-sided negative view. This compromised rather than contributed to community capacity building (Mathie and Cunningham 2003: 476). The same has been argued about South African government's attempts to address rural education issues. From 1994 the South African government has been concerned about addressing connection between the social ills such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, underdevelopment etc. and the poor academic performance of learners in rural schools (Nkambule et al. 2011: 341). The National Senior Certificate schools' report for 2011, 2012 and 2013 (KZNDoE 2011,

2012, 2013) shows that poor academic performance in South African rural contexts is prevalent to date. The Ministerial Report on Rural Education (DoE 2005: 7) indicates that part of the failure of the State to address rural education challenges is a result of employing deficit models in dealing with rural education challenges. Deficit approaches are mostly based on what the government assumes will better respond to rural education challenges without assessing what rural people believe will serve them best. These models further ignore that rural and deprived communities are also characterised by resourcefulness that positions them as agents of change within their context (Mahlomaholo and Netshandama 2010: 77). Thus, the need for asset-based approach as a proposed management strategy towards improving academic performance in the rural context is defendable.

The asset-based approach is premised on the notion that rural development is possible and sustainable when local community people are committed to investing in themselves and their resources (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993: 4). Asset-based approach further links with the notion of decentralised rural development (Scoones and Wolmer 2003: 7). Decentralised approach to rural development does not ignore the deficits of the rural contexts. However, it acknowledges the importance of localised initiatives. Decentralised rural development is advocated on the basis that it calls for local management of resources which will, in turn result in communities looking after those resources better (Scoones and Wolmer 2003: 7).

The South African Schools Act (RSA 1996b) acknowledges the role of all stakeholders in the education of a child. This is not only based on the role that these stakeholders play, but it is also assumed to be a right-based approach to educational governance. The need for asset-based approach towards improving academic performance also stems from its acknowledgement that rural community, despite being neglected, can drive their educational development initiatives. This is in line with the decentralised educational governance, the South African Schools Act advocates and the Rights-based approach (Scoones and Wolmer 2003: 9).

In a nutshell, the recognition of the fact that rural communities possess a set of assets is both a policy and a research supported argument. Asset-based approach does not only link with

the rights-based approaches to school development, but may be seen as another component of school-based or site-based management (SBM) (David 1996; Back and Murphy 1998; Briggs and Wohlstetter 2003; Rainey and Honig 2012). In their conceptualisation of SBM, David (1996: 2) and Briggs and Wohlstetter (2003: 351) posit that SBM does not only include the school principals, parents, teachers and non-teaching staff involved in the decision-making of the schools but it may include other members from the broader community and local associations. Similarly, asset-based approach transcends the school boundaries (primary tier of assets) and looks at important secondary tiers and outside tiers of assets in developing the school (Chikoko and Khanare 2012: 30). SBM shifts control of schools to a broader community level (Rainey and Honig 2012: 468). Therefore, the asset-based approach provides the means through which the involvement of local community will draw from what the community can provide as assets towards improving academic performance.

Moreover, asset-based approach is a bottom-up approach to community development (Kretzmann and McKnight 1996: 4). Accordingly, SBM emphases the bottom-up approach to school decision making (Midgley and Wood 1993: 246). This does not only apply to controlling, but it further suggests a more effective approach to addressing school challenges as it means more locally generated energy to improve schools (Briggs and Wohlstetter 2003: 352). In arguing for asset-based approach it is important to understand what assets are possessed by local communities in general and rural communities in particular.

Tiers of Community Assets

Under the definition of assets it is briefly highlighted that there are three tiers of assets (Chikoko and Khanare 2012: 29-31). This classification of assets include the primary, the secondary and the 'outside' layer. In their paper the above scholars identify several assets for schools under each layer indicated above.

The primary tier consists of those assets which are accessible with ease and are mostly located within the school. The school management in the mentioned paper identified teachers, learners, class managers, the deputy principal and school infrastructure as components of the

primary layer of assets. While Chikoko and Khanare (2012) were interested in how these assets are conceptualised in relation to taking care of vulnerable children in the context of HIV and AIDS, this implies that beyond teaching, teachers can do more to address different situations in their schools (Myende 2013: 92). What is not known thus far is what they can contribute as human capital beyond the teaching of their subjects. The lack of time has been identified as a challenge when trying to include teachers beyond their teaching responsibilities (Naidu et al. 2008: 35; Myende and Chikoko 2014: 254). Thus, this lack of time is one of the challenges to be considered when asking teachers to contribute more than their teaching responsibilities.

In addition to teachers, learners and the school infrastructure, Chikoko and Khanare (2012) identify the secondary layer of assets. The secondary layer consists of assets located within the schools' neighbourhoods but not controlled by the schools (Chikoko and Khanare 2012). The paper reveals that community members, faith-based organisations and other organisations are important for the survival of the school. To confirm the above findings, research (Myende and Chikoko 2014: 255) indicate that charity organisation, faith-based organisations, local business, local government agencies parents and families form a crucial component of school community assets and they can contribute is improving learners academic performance. Again this paper tries to ascertain what opportunities and challenges are there for these assets to contribute towards improving academic performance.

The third layer of assets is described as those assets outside the community both in location and ownership. Chikoko and Khanare (2012: 31) assert that these assets include private businesses, non-governmental organisations, national corporations, universities and research institutions. However, Chikoko and Khanare (2012) conclude that schools proved to be unable to tap into these assets. This may pose another challenge for the asset-based approach as school management strategy towards improving academic performance. Based on the asset-based approach principles as outlined in the theoretical framework section, schools should be able to build from their primary layer, and should identify possible strategies to address their challenge. This should be followed by an attempt to bring on board the secondary tire and the outside tier.

Chikoko and Khanare (2012: 29-31) provide a clear outline of possible assets as conceptualised by school management. However, community capitals' framework by Emery and Flora (2006: 20-21), further provides a concrete picture of other assets that exist in most of the communities. Through the communities' capitals' framework which includes human capital, social capital, cultural capital, built capital and financial capital (Emery and Flora 2006: 21), schools can do an analysis and identify relevant local assets. Research has demonstrated that all communities whether rural or urban have different forms of capitals and sometimes these capitals are untapped. The researcher is convinced that a school should create conducive conditions in order for the application of the asset-based approach. Drawing from scholarship in the field, the paper discusses below the school conditions that enhance the application of the asset-based approach.

School Conditions Conducive for Asset-based Approach

Asset mapping and mobilisation have been identified as major components for the operationalization of the asset-based approach. A closer assessment of what is involved in each component makes it clear that the approach will not work unless schools become places for all stakeholders. As an approach towards making schools places for all, Bryk and Schneider (2003: 40) assert that social trust is the key strategy to set connections between school's immediate communities and outside communities. Traverso-Yapez et al. (2012: 1) as well as Hyman (2002) call the process of setting these connections as community capacity building. As earlier argued, the asset-based approach calls for the collaborative involvement of the communities concerned (Chaskin 2001: 290).

The meaningful involvement of concerned communities requires a shift from the top-down approaches to community participation (Hyman 2002: 198; Oakley and Tsao 2007: 820). Therefore for the schools to be able to harness all the available assets they need to set an environment where social trust and human capital are strengthened. It has also emerged that community capacity building needs to be facilitated in

creating good conditions for using available community assets and to empower communities to be at the centre of any development (Chaskin 2001; Hyman 2002; Brykand Schneider 2003; Oakley and Tsao 2007; Traverso-Yapez et al. 2012). Hyman (2002: 2) provides a detailed account of the clusters for community capacity building. Hyman's (2002) has described the processes that schools can follow to ensure strong school community building.

Table 1 provides a clear picture of community capacity building which is a technique to ensure that all community members invest their capacities in ensuring that academic performance in their schools is improved. For well-coordinated activities towards improved academic performance, all members of the school community need to be engaged. This helps in building strong human and social capital which is crucial in generating local and community centred solutions. The next aspect is to find out what each member of community aspires about the school and what he or she sees to be his or her role in ensuring locally generated solutions towards improving academic performance.

After community engagement and sharing of aspirations and interests it will be important to organise strong community leadership which brings together a stock of social capital and other assets. In doing this, participating members need to be cautious of the influence of power differences in the participation of all members. The leadership required will be of strategic importance in ensuring community action. Through this action, assets will be pooled together for agreed actions towards improving academic performance. Green and Haines (2012: 13) posit that

connecting community assets is crucial for ensuring sustainable community initiatives which in turn will contribute in creating future benefits in the quality of life for residents. As argued in the study conducted by Myende (2013: 81), effective communication serves as the catalyst for ensuring a strong connection between different assets. Therefore, community builders need to make sure that there is a clear line of communication in the school community to ensure that all participants are abreast with all school activities aimed at improving academic performance. This was also found in a study conducted by Myende (2013: 87) to be the role of the school managers. The researchers argue that school managers or leaders should be aware that harnessing the assets depends on their ability to build the school as a community consisting of different members.

Challenges for Asset-based Approach

While the asset-based approach is proposed in this paper as a beneficial management strategy towards improving academic performance, there are cautions found in literature that needs to be considered when adopting this approach. However, due to limited literature on these challenges the paper draws from the work of Mathie and Cunningham (2003, 2005), Myende (2012, 2013) and Myende and Chikoko (2014) as they have identified some challenges for asset-based approach.

Mathie and Cunningham (2005) caution users of the asset-based that sometimes it becomes difficult to decide who should lead community initiatives. There is always confusion about the

Table 1: Clusters of community capacity building

Cluster	Rationale
School Community Engagement	School community has to become more engaged with each other in ways that will facilitate relationships and the exchange of information
Agenda Building	School community must find or create forums for sharing and prioritising their concerns and their aspirations for their schools
Community Organising	School community must organise around trusted and capable leadership, taking stock of their social capital and other assets.
Community Action	School community stakeholders must pool their assets into an action strategy and build bridges to other resources that will be needed for success in improving academic performance
Communication and Message	Development Community builders will need to keep an open line of communications with residents and their community partners about all aspects of the change effort, but particularly as it relates to developing and communicating positive messages about progress and results.

meaning of citizen-driven community development and this challenges the application of the asset-based approach (Mathie and Cunningham 2005). In this way the application of the approach neglects the class and power relations embedded in the social relationships and the community level (Mathie and Cunningham 2005: 182). This may be the case at school level and thus requiring a clear understanding of how an asset-based approach can be implemented and who should drive it. Mathie and Cunningham (2005: 184) propose that clarity should be made on how an asset-based approach fits within the institutional policy framework in order to address power sharing struggles between different participants. In addition to the challenge of power sharing, Mathie and Cunningham (2005) further assert that regardless of coherence and social trust that may exist in the community, members of that community will still hold their own personalised interests and aspirations. As a strategy these scholars maintains that there should be strong attempts to uncover the strengths that exists in the shadow of the obviously powerful in the community.

While exposing the strengths of all participants, community collective participation is not guaranteed. In all their two research papers Mathie and Cunningham (2003, 2005) assert that fostering inclusive participation is not a simple task. This can be a challenge as the success of the asset-based approach is largely dependent on local people's willingness to invest themselves and their capacities in initiatives aimed for their developments. While this is an overall challenge, it is argued that it is more experienced in societies where there is hierarchy and marginalisation of other groups. In the discussion of political capital it is indicated that rural schools exist under strong traditional leadership. While this may be good in terms of attracting outside assistance, this may also block participation from other community members as traditional leadership structures are usually male dominated.

Domination in terms of leadership was also identified by Myende (2012) in his studythat sought to investigate the possibilities for asset-based approach in school-community partnerships in the South African context. It was found in the study that the school could not draw from other important community assets as the school principal did not extend invitation to parents and other community individuals and groups (My-

ende 2012: 64). This did not happen only to the school's external community, but some teachers were not aware of the partnership initiatives in the school. This paper indicates that poor communication may block the identification and mobilisation of other important assets. School leadership was identified to be a challenge in this case. The same challenge is identified by Mathie and Cunningham (2003, 2005) in their two studies. They contend that external agencies are at arms' length, for leadership to sustain the asset-based approach which calls for local leadership to play its role.

In addressing the leadership challenge, in the school context Myende (2012: 65) suggests that there should be distribution of leadership to avoid expecting school principals to be the only leaders in community initiatives. Mathie and Cunningham (2005) suggest that it important to learn about the qualities of essential leadership both in terms of the particular individuals involved and in terms of the nature of leadership required in implementing the asset-based approach.

The work of Myende (2013) and Myende and Chikoko (2014) have further shown that school leadership can also be a challenge for the utilisation of the asset-based approach. In his work, Myende (2013: 91) contends that effective communication is required for the asset-based approach to work. The communication of objectives and goals to be achieved is central in persuading all stakeholders to contribute their assets; however this seemed to be a challenge for school leaders. Failure to communicate the objectives and the goals may create gaps between those who lead schools and this will in turn thwart the leaders' way towards harnessing individuals and group assets. Chikoko and Myende (2014: 255) further note that the challenge of unclear goals and objectives for the school hinders the asset-based approach utilisation.

CONCLUSION

The paper began with the justification of the asset-based approach to rural school improvement with a special focus on improving academic performance. What emerged in this paper is that the asset-based approach is relevant in sustaining school initiatives aimed at improving academic performance. This became important

in that rural education improvement in the South African context has been hindered by the marginalisation of the rural dwellers voice with regards to what they think can serve them well. This marginalisation has followed the external solutions which are not sustainable and are less sensitive toward rural schools challenges. The externally generated solutions have not only excluded rural participants but, they have also created a mentality that only external contributors can attend to rural education problems living rural dwellers at the receiving end.

The second issue emerging in the literature is that the asset-based approach, which puts more emphasis on building communities from inside-out links with some reforms in school management. A handy connection between the asset-based approach and school-based management or site-based management has been shown in the paper. The site-based management is built on the premise that local school stakeholders may better manage their schools if they are entrusted with responsibilities to do so. It is also within the premise that local stakeholders will be in a better position to also extend participation beyond the school boundaries and draw from the expertise of community members outside the school. This is the guiding principle of the asset-based approach which leads the approach advocating for open participation and recognition of the skills map possessed by the locals. The third emerging issue emanates from a historical belief that rural areas are characterised by backwardness, poverty and inability to provide their learners with quality education equitable to their urban counterparts. While this is not disputed in the literature paper, the tiers of assets and the forms of community capitals indicate that rural areas have vast array of assets which are mostly untapped. There is evidence that these assets have kept rural areas attractive places to live and raise family. These assets are motivating the researcher's argument that rural schools can tap from community assets to improve academic performance of their learners. Through community capitals framework, justification for the presence of these capitals in the rural context has been provided. In identifying and mapping community assets, it emerged that social capital which has been characterised as the "glue" that connects people, is the key in bridging the gap between assets identification and putting assets into action. Community ca-

pacity building was then suggested as a strategy to bring assets together and to ensure that assets are converted to meaningful community action. The cluster of community capacity building provided a clear step-by-step approach towards building community capacity. The concepts of community building created the link between school-community relations and the asset-based approach. Through this link it became easy to identify school management and leadership roles in making sure that different communities are brought on board to tap into their assets.

The appealing school management leadership roles included an ability to delegate responsibilities accompanied by control measures. While it emerged that leadership needs to be shared, schools principals appear to be the centre of successful community building initiatives. Channelling of resources remained motivated by the principals' ability to connect different facets of the school community. The section on school managers and the asset-based approach called for school leaders to establish and sustain ongoing, meaningful and effective school-community connections through effective communication that ensures that goals and objectives are clear. All the above appears to be possible provided the school managers or leaders are able to model leadership which will keep all partners interested in investing themselves and their assets in the school activities.

Through the possible challenges, the literature further indicate that the asset-based approach connection with the community participation presents some questions that need to be addressed. Leadership of initiatives becomes a challenge because of power dynamics present in communities, including rural communities. The roles of the external people or institutions remain unclear as their help is of an arm's length. Identifying the space of the asset-based approach within the policy context of schools was drawn to be a panacea in addressing leadership issues and the role of external assets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The author in this paper drew from literature to argue for the use of the asset-based approach towards improving academic performance in rural schools. While literature has demonstrated merits of the asset-based approach and the kind

of school environment required in order for this approach to be used, the researcher recommends empirical research that will ascertain the possibilities for the asset-based approach towards improving rural schools. The paperfurther recommends the inclusion of the asset-based perspectives within the policy framework used to address rural education issues. Given that school leadership emerged as one of the crucial aspects in utilising the asset-based approach, the researcher further recommends research on the asset-based leadership. This will help in ensuring that leaders understand what it entails to operate within the asset-based perspective.

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