Exploring School Underperformance in the Context of Rurality: an Ethnographic Study

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

After decades of democracy, South Africa (SA) is still a country that is characterised by huge inequalities and socio-economic challenges which are intense in most rural areas. As microcosms of a larger context, rural schools tend to bear the brunt of numerous challenges as they have to cope with poor infrastructure, scarce resources and under-qualified teachers. In spite of the many challenges rural schools experience, the country has adopted an accountability systems approach that uses examination results in measuring school performance, thereby ignoring the contextual factors that rural schools face. This study sought to explore and understand the notion *underperformance* in a secondary school in the rural Ilembe District in KwaZulu-Natal from the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers. Guided by the propositions derived from theories of underperformance and of rurality, the study was located within an interpretive paradigm and utilised the qualitative approach to research. An ethnographic design involving observations, interviews and document analysis was utilised as it was important to capture the experiences, interpretations and meanings that participants gave to school underperformance in their particular contexts.

The findings suggest that there is a disjuncture between educational policy, schooling and contextual factors afflicting particularly rural schools. In essence, participants' perspectives on school underperformance were influenced by a number of contextual factors; however, existing national education policy tends to ignore not only what happens within the rural school, but also the context in which the school is located (i.e., its rurality). The factors that informed the perspectives of the participants can be

categorised into: 1) factors within the school such as the school context or location (rurality), learning prospects, the values and standards that rural people attribute to schooling, and curriculum relevance; 2) perspectives on the relationship among the rural household, the community and the school; and 3) perspectives on the role and value of schooling in a rural setting. The study therefore argues that approaches used to measure performance or underperformance must take into consideration the context/place in which such schools are located. Moreover, educational policy and decision making should place rural inhabitants at the forefront of educational planning. In order to address school underperformance in rural areas, the study advocates an improved theoretical lens in the form of a place sensitive approach which will engender understanding of this phenomenon. Such an approach would put context/place at the centre of educational analyses and allow for conciliation between policy, schooling and contextual factors.

DEDICATION

To my late parents

My father **Mr TJ Langa**, affectionately known as '*Washelela*' for instilling in me love for education and for being the best life coach ever.

My mother **Mrs B Langa**, for loving me unconditionally and for sacrificing so much for my well being and for my education.

You are my angels

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ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

ANA	Annual National Assessment
ANNSSF	Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding
ASA	Accountability Systems Approach
C2005	Curriculum 2005
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
CTA	Common Task(s) for Assessment
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education
HOD	Head of Department
HSRC	Human and Science Resource Council
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
KZNDBE	KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education
LEA	Local Education Authority
LTSM	Learning and Teaching Support Material
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
NNSSF	National Norms and Standards for School Funding
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSLA	National Strategy for Learner Attainment
NSNP	National School Nutrition Programme
OFSTED	Office of Standards in Education
PPN	Post Provisioning Norms
RCL	Representative Council of Learners
SES	Socio-economic Status
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team
US	United States of America

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

> Being there is different. Being there is not romantic. To be there is to be
> engaged in a struggle to live and to hope. Money and jobs are scarce, the land
> itself harsh and demanding, and the schools, which straddle the old rural
> routines the glittering prospect of a different life heralded by political and
> economic change in the far-away cities, are often ill-equipped, under-
> resourced and poorly staffed. Rural people know this.
>
> (Emerging Voices, 2005, p. 2)

This extract gives a vivid description of rurality in the South African context. South
Africa faces immense inequalities and socio-economic challenges which are most
intense in rural areas (Pennefather, 2008). These rural areas are still immersed in
problems that are ignored by education policies (Chisholm, 2004b; Emerging Voices,
2005). These include learners' socio-economic backgrounds which are characterised
by, among others, poor housing, poverty and lack of fiscal power (Emerging Voices,
2005; Malhoit, 2005). These challenges translate into rural schools which experience
vast inequalities and are confronted with challenges such as bad infrastructure, scarce
resources and under-qualified teachers (Lindeque & Vandeyar, 2004; Emerging
Voices, 2005; Pennefather, 2008; McQuaide, 2009; Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012;
Hlalele, 2012). These challenges become a barrier to rural children's chances of
accessing quality education (Spreen & Vally, 2006) as they have made it difficult for
policy makers to improve the quality of rural education. Even after education reforms
and a litany of monetary interventions aimed at solving these problems, rural schools

are still regarded as performing below set national standards. Moreover, despite the many challenges which are negatively skewed against rural schools and the failure to address them, school performance in South Africa is measured by student performance in national examinations, particularly at the end of their schooling career in Grade 12, also referred to as Matric in South Africa. This means that contextual factors both within the school and in the surrounding community are not taken into consideration when schools are labelled as underperforming. The country has adopted this approach to measuring school performance despite growing critique that standardized testing and examinations do not accurately measure learner achievement and school performance (Gibson & Asthana, 1998; Guisbond & Neill, 2004), especially in schools in socially and economically disadvantaged areas like rural settings. Evidence has emerged which suggests that there is a very strong negative correlation between contextual factors (socio-economic characteristics) and examination performance (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll & Russ, 2004; Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005). In a country that is suffering great inequalities (especially skewed negatively against rural areas), it is highly problematic that a uniform measure where all schools are held to the same performance standards regardless of socio-economic differences is still used (Jansen, 2001).

Informed by the plight of rural people, the difficulties they experience and the significance of diverse contexts which play an important role in schooling, particularly school performance, this study was premised on the notion that examination results only give a limited perspective on the success or failure of schools generally and rural schools in particular. This study argues that to understand success and failure, it is important to explore the views of those served by the

schools: the learners, teachers, parents and other community members. This study therefore aimed at exploring school underperformance as understood by learners, parents and teachers in a rural context. It examined their experiences and understanding of underperformance in their rural school. While it may be a valid argument that the challenges confronting rural people are not distinctive to rural schools, the study hoped to challenge the stereotypical negative understandings adopted about rurality. This was done by listening to the real stories of learners, parents and teachers who were served by these rural schools. The approach was influenced by the need to consider the agency of rural people in taking the lead in shaping a better future for themselves; a factor which is often ignored in rural education matters (Emerging Voices, 2005). Thus the study addressed the following critical question:

- *What are the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school? What informs such perspectives?*

1.2 Rurality in the South African Context

Rurality has not been sufficiently explored in South Africa but what comes out clearly is that it is not a uniform structure but comprises of a number of diverse contexts and theorisations. For example, it could refer to those settings that are sparsely populated and where agriculture is the major means of economic activity. It could also be areas that consist of the many tribal lands controlled by traditional leaders (Mahlomaholo, 2012). Rurality can also be understood by exploring the historical settlement on land ownership of rural areas which are directly related to "…apartheid and the colonial policies of dispossession, resettlement and a systematic

exclusion from opportunities" (Hlalele, 2012, p115). As such, the inequalities that exist in South Africa can neither be separated from our past nor from the unequal power relations between urban and rural contexts (Pennefather, 2008).

This section will continue to present the context of the study with particular reference to the changing political, geographical and educational contexts in South Africa. All these factors have implications for measuring school underperformance in rural contexts.

1.2.1 The Native Land Act of 1913

The issue of land possession in South Africa dates back to the passing of the Native[1] Land Act of 1913 which was an act of parliament aimed at controlling the ownership of land by black Africans (Native Land Act, 1913). The act created a system of land possession that robbed the majority of South African citizens of the right to own land. It declared that only 7% of the total land mass of the country could be owned by black Africans. Black Africans were no longer able to own land or even rent land outside of designated reserves. This promoted separate residential areas for black Africans (or Natives as they were referred to in official documents). The Act was the first legislation that promoted segregation of racial groups and later became a foundation of the system of apartheid which ended in 1994.

The Native Land Act (1913) was central to rural poverty as the areas demarcated for black Africans became overcrowded and suffered from soil erosion and decline in

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[1] This was a term used to refer to black people in SA.

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agricultural production. Most black African men moved to the city to look for work and this changed the lives and status of many black African families from land workers to wage earners. This largely created the poverty that is still overwhelming black rural communities even today and which affects the schooling of rural children to a large extent.

1.2.2 Bantu Homeland Constitution Act of 1971

Under the Apartheid system[2] nine 'native' groups, referred to under apartheid as 'Bantus', were assigned their own homelands or Bantustans[3] (Bantu Homeland Constitution Act, 1971). The Bantu Homeland Constitution Act (1971) gave powers to the government to give independence to any 'homeland' as determined by the apartheid government. These Bantustans were 'independent' states within South Africa. Movement outside these Bantustans was strictly regulated. All black Africans, depending on their ethnicity, became citizens of these self governing homelands. This was meant to control the movement of black Africans in and out of the cities where residential and business properties were reserved for white people. Black Africans who worked in the areas outside the Bantustans had to apply for permission to 'travel' and they always kept passes[4] in their possession to prove that they had permission to be in the city. The Bantustan areas were predominantly rural. In the new South Africa, the provinces that were former Bantustans are the locales

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[2] This was a system of racial segregation enforced through legislation by the National Party government who were the ruling party from 1948 to 1994. Under this regime the rights of the majority of Black Africans in South Africa were curtailed and White supremacy and Afrikaner minority rule were maintained.
[3] These were territories set aside for Black Africans as part of the policy of apartheid.
[4] This was a document that Black Africans were required to carry with them when moving outside their homelands or designated areas. Failure to produce a pass often resulted in the person being arrested.

that still suffer from great poverty and socio-economic disadvantage which impact negatively on schooling (Emerging Voices, 2005). These areas include the current provinces known as the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West and KwaZulu-Natal. This study was located in the latter province.

1.2.3 Bantu Education Act of 1953

As was the case with land possession and land settlement, the education system under apartheid suffered many inequalities. Under this system, which lasted more than four decades, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 advocated a racially separated education system. Bantu education served the interests of white supremacy. The then government argued that the policy of Bantu education was aimed to direct black Africans or non- white youth to the unskilled labour market. It deprived black people of access to the same educational opportunities and resources enjoyed by white South Africans. It degraded black people's history, culture and identity. Bantu education restricted the quality of schools serving Africans. This was based on the argument that black people could not be given quality education because this would be irrelevant in the life that they were expected to lead in South Africa. Black schools were given limited resources.

Under the Bantu Education Act (1953), separate education departments catered for the needs of the four principal racial groups in South Africa (i.e., Black Africans, Indians, Coloureds and Whites). Schools for whites were given generous funding while those of black students were denied adequate facilities, textbooks and quality teachers (Betram, 2009; Omar, 2009). This resulted in the creation of nineteen

education departments catering for the educational needs of four racial groups on a separate and grossly unequal basis. This racially and ethnically organised education system prepared learners in different ways for the positions they were expected to occupy in their social, economic and political life under apartheid. As Naicker (2005) points out, apartheid education was characterized by wide-ranging imbalances and inequities. Some of the more notable inequities in school-based education were the disparities in the per capita expenditure, the learner-educator ratios, the qualifications of educators and the allocation of physical resources (Naicker, 2005).

Thus it can be argued that, under apartheid, white children enjoyed a good education whereas black Africans lived in a dehumanizing environment where their every move was restricted and where education and vocational opportunities were limited. The government relied heavily on the state education system to support and maintain the values of apartheid and to keep black Africans in check. All aspects of education were controlled by the government which ensured that governance, funding, professional training and curriculum were driven along racial lines to promote white superiority over black Africans. Although these laws were repealed in the new democratic South Africa, their effects are still felt even today. More significantly, since the Bantustans were mostly rural and were home to the majority of black Africans, this situation still persists today.

1.2.4 Post-Apartheid Reforms

On 10 May1994 Nelson Mandela took office as the first president of a democratic South Africa. In 1996 the new constitution promised, among other things, the right to

basic education for all (South African Constitution, 1996). A new education system that was to remove all traces of racial inequities was vital to set the foundation for a democratic South Africa. The South African government introduced a range of educational reforms to overcome the legacy of the apartheid education. These reforms are discussed fully in Chapter Two.

The reform process began with the formation of one national ministry of education together with nine provincial education departments for the nine newly formed provinces. Also, the new democratic government committed itself to the eradication of inequalities that existed in education. It was the intention of the government to ensure an equitable, efficient, qualitatively superior and financially sound school system for all its learners irrespective of their racial or ethnic background (Omar, 2009). With the post-apartheid reforms, a new curriculum was introduced. Like all other post-apartheid education policy reforms, the curriculum is premised on and promotes the principles of equity and redress as a means of overcoming past inequities. However, despite all these changes and lofty ideals, 18 years into democracy education remains unequal and lags behind particularly in rural areas. Moreover, the challenges experienced by schools in rural areas have made it difficult for policy makers to improve the quality of rural education. Rural schools in South Africa are still performing below set standards for education (Emerging Voices, 2005). In particular, most rural schools are regarded as underperforming when learner performance is measured in national tests and examinations. These observations prompted me to explore rural people's understanding of school performance/underperformance.

1.3 Rationale of the Study

My interest in rural schools dates back 17 years when I began my teaching career in a rural school at Ndwedwe Circuit, Ilembe District, where I was a History teacher. My experience there was very frustrating as, despite the fact that I was a new graduate, hard working and dedicated, I could not produce good results with my Grade 12 learners. Five years later I left the school. I started teaching in an independent (private) school for girls where, with less effort, I managed to produce excellent results and got an award for the best History results in Matric in my circuit. I left that school to teach in a township[5] school where, again with little effort, the school was producing good Matric results. My experiences opened my eyes to the fact that the three schools where I had taught belonged to three different 'worlds'. It also made me wonder whether the uniform method used for the assessment of all learners (i.e., using the Matric results as the only yardstick to determine the success, or lack of success, in academic performance) was appropriate in the diverse contexts of SA schools. I realised that the issue of underperformance in rural schools needed to be understood holistically before any measures to transform these schools could be taken.

In January 2008 I was appointed principal of an underperforming rural secondary school. I inherited a school that was underperforming while I served under an underperforming ward in a district that was also underperforming. A month after I had started working there, the school was given a 'special measures school' status which meant that it had achieved a lower than 60% Matric pass rate for three years in

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[5] Townships are urban areas occupied by black Africans

succession. The school was automatically put under the National Strategy for Learner Attainment (NSLA) Programme. This is an intervention project by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) which intends to turn around underperforming schools. The intervention measures in this case included detailed guidelines of the provincial turnaround strategy that originated from the office of the Superintendent General of Education. Although these measures were called guidelines, it was clear that all the strategies in the guideline document had to be implemented by the principals of these schools. My duties as a principal revolved around conditions set by the DBE for underperforming schools. The issue of accountability was stressed in all meetings. As a principal I was overwhelmed by instructions from DBE officials who came to my school to offer 'support'. This left me with the task of interpreting external necessities rather than determining aims and objectives on the basis of the needs of my learners, parents and teachers. Assumptions about the reasons for underperformance came from officials. The community I was serving and the teachers in my school were never given a chance to truly plan and contribute to the improvement efforts beyond implementing what was 'indirectly' imposed by the DBE. Although my school improved and is no longer labelled as underperforming as we maintained an above 60% Matric pass rate, I remain concerned about the sustainability of these 'good' results. Linked to my worry is the fact that government's initiatives to turn around underperformance in schools have not been very effective.

The government has shown commitment to quality education in South Africa, as evidenced in school intervention projects that have become relatively common. However, these projects are either initiated by the DBE or are donor-funded. They

are intended for the development of various aspects of the education system for the purposes of school improvement and subsequently learner performance (Moletsane, 2002; Chisholm, 2004a; Taylor & Prinsloo, 2005; Guest, 2008;). However, studies suggest that these improvement projects have not had a significant impact on teaching and learning and learner performance (Jansen, 1996; Christie & Potterton, 1998). Researchers have also noted that despite the large amount of money spent on education in South Africa, schools are still at the bottom compared to other countries of the world (Chisholm, 2004a). In addition, despite the enormous positive changes, South Africa is still a country characterized by great inequalities and high levels of poverty rooted in the legacy of apartheid. The most affected are rural communities whose schools continue to be negatively affected and are therefore labelled as underperforming (Pennefather, 2008).

When I embarked on this study I hoped that it would provide some answers and illuminate understanding of the complex phenomenon of school underperformance in rural contexts. Upon its completion the study's particular significance for me was the knowledge that it contributed enormously to my personal and professional development and that it would help me to strengthen my role as a principal of a recently 'improved' school. Insights gained from this study will inform the direction my school should take and enable me to assist the school to generate a strategy that will not only produce sustainable improvement of results, but that will also serve the needs of the community the school is serving. Moreover, it is my contention that the study will contribute significantly to the debates surrounding the issue of underperformance of rural schools.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Rurality is an educational phenomenon that is rather understudied, under-researched and underdeveloped within the social sciences in South Africa (Balfour, 2012; De Lange, Olivier, Geldenhuys & Mitchell, 2012; Moletsane, 2012). Internationally, research done on schools in rural areas is limited compared to the work done in urban and suburban educational settings, with little systematic research being done in rural schools (Hardré, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009). For example, Hardré (2008) points out that over 30% of schools in the United States (US) are in rural communities, yet less than 6% of research conducted in schools has included rural schools. In South Africa, no sustained scholarship concerning rural education existed until the publication of the Emerging Voices Report (Emerging Voices, 2005) in which attention was given to the challenges and problems associated with rurality as a learned and lived experience (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008). Rural school leaders are eager for information about research-based interventions and strategies that increase student success in rural communities. However, identifying such interventions is difficult because of the lack of high-quality research conducted in rural settings (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005).

There is a concern that rural research is largely associated with urban-based teachers in rural areas and campus-based student-teachers, who often associate rurality with deficit and disadvantage (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008). Furthermore, the people who write and speak about the negative impacts of poverty in rural communities, including poor educational outcomes in general and poor Matric

learner achievement in particular, are mostly outsiders. Moreover, rural people are never part of the development of interventions that are meant to improve their education; rather, these interventions are developed for them by these outsiders (Moletsane, 2012). It is envisaged that this study will challenge the stereotypical assumptions about rurality. By listening to and valuing the real stories of learners, parents and teachers in a rural school, I endeavoured to bring their perspectives and concerns to the forefront of educational provision in rural settings. Moreover, it was my intention that the study should provide a platform for rural people to share their knowledge, experiences and understanding of school underperformance.

The study will hopefully add some depth to our understanding of the phenomenon of underperformance in the context of rurality and improve our approach to 'transforming' these rural schools. The findings will enable us to understand rural schooling, what the key barriers to learning might be, and the possible strategies to address these. It should further assist policy makers to create meaningful policy and other intervention programmes that are aimed at dealing with underperforming rural schools. Policy makers have to acknowledge the voices of members of rural communities across South Africa and ensure that policies undertaken to improve the quality of rural education are informed by the powerful insights of the people in those communities (Emerging Voices, 2005). Thus, the findings of this study may have significant implications for policy, practice, school effectiveness, and school improvement.

1.5 Conceptual Frameworks

Since the purpose of the study was to elucidate understanding of school underperformance in the context of rurality, the next section explores these two concepts as they framed this study.

1.5.1 School Underperformance

Underperformance in education appears to be a laden concept that has multiple meanings in different contexts. Various concepts are used to refer to underperforming schools to which recent policy innovations have added further complications (Harris & Chapman, 2004). These concepts usually speak to either the schools' internal circumstances or acknowledge the significance of external factors in measuring school performance. For example, within the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa, school underperformance is understood to be associated with those schools that have not achieved a 60% pass rate amongst its Matriculants (Grade 12 learners). In this instance, underperformance is related to bench marking based on pass percentages of successful learners in Matric which, in turn, are associated with accountability measures on school performance. A second concept linked to this notion of school underperformance is ineffective schools. This is based on the argument that the main problem is that there are circumstances within these schools that do not allow learners to learn as much as they could (Reynolds, 1999). A third concept refers to schools that are eligible for special measures. These are schools where internal factors lead to the school failing to meet standards set and therefore they require great corrective measures to turn around the situation (Gray, 2000). The fourth refers to failing schools which applies to schools that achieve poorly in tests and examinations and schools where attainment, pupil behaviour,

teaching quality or management systems are considered especially poor (Downey, Von Hippel & Hughes, 2008; Araujo, 2009).

Other perspectives relate school underperformance to context. In this regard concepts such as schools in challenging circumstances, socio-economically disadvantaged schools, schools in difficult circumstances, and high poverty schools apply (McHugh & Stringfield, 1998; Barth et al., 1999; Borman et al., 2000; Van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). These perspectives are based on the premise that the key feature of underperforming schools is that they are mostly situated in areas that suffer high levels of social deprivation and that social issues have a strong effect on school performance, as there seems to be a link between socio-economic deprivation and school failure (Gray, 2000; Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005). In light of the above illuminations and in line with the DBE's nomenclature for schools 'in trouble', the concept underperforming school was used in this study.

1.5.2 Rurality

Researchers often lament the lack of a common, consistent and explicit definition of rurality (see for example, Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Anriquez & Stamoulis, 2007; Sauvageot & da Graća, 2007). Definitions of rurality mostly depend on the context of the subject being discussed. Similarly, research uses multiple definitions of rural education, making it difficult to understand the phenomenon or to establish a universal set of characteristics to describe or define rural schools and rural communities (Herzog & Pittman, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Budge, 2006).

Rurality is commonly described as that which is not urban. Rural areas have been defined as places out of the city, the other to the urban, inter-urban space with fuzzy outer limits, the socio-economic category opposed to the urban (Anriquez & Stamoulis, 2007). The reason why this view of the rural still persists is the confusing and constant comparison with the urban (Hlalele, 2012), with rurality often defined as the passive attendant to urbanity (Budge, 2006). This notion of understanding rurality in its relation to and in comparison with urban contexts ignores the fact that rurality is dynamic and has its own values and strengths unrelated to urbanity and urban influences (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008).

Much of the writing on rurality focuses on the notion that there are many challenges facing rural areas. For example, what usually comes out strongly in defining rurality is that it is characterized by negativity. Ideas of rurality are concerned with "…space, isolation, community, poverty, disease, neglect, backwardness, marginalization, depopulation, conservatism, racism, resettlement, corruption, entropy, and exclusion" (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008, p. 97). Rural settings, unlike urban areas, are not seats of power as they usually lie on the periphery of social, educational, political and economic activity (Woodrum, 2011; Mahlomaholo, 2012).

This notwithstanding, it has been suggested that rurality can be viewed positively as a place that has some benefits and whose people are resourceful (Mahlomaholo, 2012). Therefore, depending on one's perspective, rurality can be portrayed as representing a space of deprivation, isolation, exclusion and backwardness (Ebersohn

& Ferreira, 2012) or it could be understood as a place full of untapped potential waiting to be discovered and developed (Mahlomaholo, 2012). This study took the latter view. When I undertook the study my view of rurality was that its people, namely learners, parents and teachers, have the agency to understand their situation and the potential to identify possible strategies for addressing the challenges they face. Thus the study sought to explain their views of an underperforming school. This view is unchanged since the outcomes of the study showed it to be true.

1.6 Methodological Approach

This study looked at school underperformance through the eyes of learners, parents and teachers in a rural secondary school. Context was important in this study as the intention was to understand perspectives of learners, parents and teachers regarding contextual factors and their influence on school underperformance and the different meanings and interpretations (Yates, 2004) that emerge from it.

In particular, the research question was: *What are the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming school? What informs those perspectives?* A qualitative research study was thought to be most suitable. This approach allowed the study to develop in-depth accounts of these participants' experiences in the contexts in which they operated. This is especially crucial in studying rural contexts which are complex, with varying social, economic and political situations. This study was guided by the tenets of an interpretive framework which required going into the participants' natural setting and experiencing the environment in which these participants created their reality (Radnor, 2002). This

framework resonated well with the study, where my intention was to find meaning within social interactions and where I fore-grounded context as a significant factor that influences human behaviour, understanding and the interpretation of things. The aim of the study was to reflect on the participants' perspectives on underperformance of a rural school and to discover the meanings that they made of school underperformance within their rural context. From these perspectives I could make meaningful statements and draw significant conclusions that would assist in our understanding of underperforming rural schools.

The study gave a voice to rural communities as they communicated their knowledge and understanding of their 'world'; thus the choice of using a naturalistic method of inquiry such as an ethnographic study was appropriate. This study used ethnography because it was important to capture the meaning that rural people gave to their circumstances. The ways in which people describe, explain and present their perspectives is derived from relationships with each other and their environment (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Thus, an ethnographic study allowed me to study the participants as they interacted with one another in their daily lives. As an ethnographer I spent time in the research site where participants carried out their daily tasks and had their daily conversations in order to be able to eventually render a thick description of their experiences and perspectives (Henning, 2004). In keeping with ethnographic principles, data were collected using three methods of data collection, i.e., observation, interviews and documents analysis. This allowed for methodological and data triangulation.

1.7 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters.

Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

This introductory chapter orientates the reader to the study, particularly outlining the concept of underperformance of rural schools. It sets the scenery for understanding underperformance - the main concept under scrutiny in this study - in the context of rurality. This chapter begins by giving the background and purpose of the study, followed by a brief historical overview of the South African context in relation to education systems and rurality. In the next section of Chapter One I discuss the rationale and significance of the study. I then provide a conceptual understanding of school underperformance and rurality, the two concepts that are at the centre of the study. I conclude this chapter by providing a brief overview of the research design and methodology utilised in this study.

Chapter Two: Perspectives on Underperformance in Rural Schools: a Review of the Literature

This chapter begins with a critique of the accountability systems approach used in measuring school performance. This is followed by an analysis of policies related to school performance/underperformance in South Africa. The chapter then reviews literature focusing on the significance of context in general and rural context in particular in understanding school performance. This is used to develop the argument that context is an important factor in school performance/underperformance. The

chapter also presents various perspectives on rural schooling and illuminates how rural schools experience challenges that emanate from contextual factors. I conclude the review by discussing the patterns that emerged from the literature review. This chapter concludes with reference to some conceptual frameworks for understanding underperformance in rural schools.

Chapter Three: Understanding Underperformance in Rural Schools: Towards A Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I review and discuss the generative theory of rurality (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008) and theories of underperformance: opportunity to learn theory, compensation hypothesis and contingency theory (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). These theories presented a good basis for understanding the views of the rural learners, parents and teachers of their underperforming rural school. I use these and the conceptual framework from the reviewed literature to present a number of key propositions about underperforming rural schools. These propositions guided the data collection and data analysis in this study.

Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter provides a comprehensive methodological orientation of the study. It locates the study within a qualitative approach and interpretive framework. The study was an ethnographic study exploring school underperformance through the eyes of rural learners, parents and teachers. The research field was a rural secondary school and the methods of data collection used were observation, interviews and documents

review. In this chapter I also expound on the ethical issues that were taken into consideration when conducting the study. I also discuss the data analysis procedures that were used.

Chapter Five: The Influence of Community Context on the School

This chapter reports on the perspectives of rural people on rural school underperformance. The focus falls on the relationship between the school and the rural context within which it is located. This chapter demonstrates that the views of rural people on an underperforming rural school are tied to their contextual factors and/or socio-economic experiences. The impact of context is reflected in how rural people judge schools against their needs or the context in which they live. This relationship is examined through the connectedness of the rural household, community and the school as well as that between the school and its rural setting. This report shows that contextual factors as illuminated in this study are important as they seem to play a significant role in how people perceive an underperforming school.

Chapter Six: Perspectives of Underperformance in a Rural School

This chapter reports on the perspectives of rural learners, parents and teachers by focusing on their views of schooling within their rural community. The chapter reports on how participants assessed their school's performance/underperformance in respect of the activities that happened or did not happen within the school.

Chapter Seven: Understanding an Underperforming Rural School: Some Concluding Reflections

This chapter provides concluding remarks based on the findings as reported in Chapters Five and Six. The implications of the study and some implications for further research are also discussed. I further elucidate how the study will contribute to the body of knowledge on underperforming rural schools.

1.8 Summary

This chapter served as an introductory chapter to the study. I began by giving a background to and elucidating the purpose of the study. Thereafter, I highlighted the historical South African context in relation to education systems and rurality. This was followed by a discussion of the rationale and significance of the study. I then provided a brief conceptual understanding of school underperformance and rurality, the two concepts that were at the centre of the study. This was followed by an outline of the methodological orientation of the study. I finally provided an overview of the thesis and its chapters.

In the next chapter I review the literature that focuses on school underperformance and rural schooling internationally and in South Africa.

CHAPTER TWO

PERSPECTIVES ON UNDERPERFORMANCE IN RURAL SCHOOLS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This study focused on the perspectives of stakeholders regarding an underperforming rural school. It addressed the critical question: *What are the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school? What informs such perspectives?* In the previous chapter I oriented the reader by presenting an introduction to the study. This chapter presents a review of literature that focuses on issues pertaining to the critical question that guided the study. The chapter presents an examination of literature which focuses on underperforming schools in general and underperforming rural schools in particular. The predominant question that was addressed in the literature review was: *How does a rural context impact on school performance/underperformance*? In my examination of the literature I held the notion that the ways in which school performance is measured are skewed against rural schools as they ignore the context in which such schools are located; in particular, contextual factors and the socio-economic status of the community the school is serving are disregarded. This thesis argues that school underperformance in rural areas cannot be defined based only on accountability systems that have centrally determined criteria. Most of these rural schools serve disadvantaged communities that are characterised by low socio-economic status, high deprivation and great inequalities. These factors should be taken into consideration when dealing with issues of school underperformance in rural areas. Thus, this thesis presents the views of the stakeholders on underperformance in their rural school.

This literature review chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section I review literature on the accountability systems approach used in measuring school performance. In this section I also explore the significance of context in general and rural context in particular in understanding school performance. This builds on the argument that the rural context is an important factor in school performance/underperformance. I also give an overview of policies and legislation relating to the issue of school under/performance in South Africa. This gives a framework for understanding school underperformance from a South African perspective. In the second section I discuss various perspectives on rural schooling and how rural schools experience challenges that emanate from contextual factors. I argue that these challenges have an impact on learner performance and subsequently school performance and therefore should be taken into consideration when determining whether a rural school is performing or underperforming. The third section discusses the patterns emerging from the literature review. The section concludes with some conceptual frameworks for understanding performance and underperformance in rural schools as utilised in this study.

2.2 The Accountability Systems Approach and School Underperformance

There has been an international call for schools to be more accountable. According to proponents of the accountability approach (Woody, Buttles, Kafka, Park & Russell, 2004; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009), this leads to improved examination results among learners and, subsequently, to improved school performance. These accountability systems consist of "…standards as broadly framed orientations for

subject matter, content and skills; standardized tests as the basis for performance indicators; and performance targets and quotas for measuring performance and underperformance" (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009, p. 354). Moreover, accountability systems employ rewards and sanctions which are the drive behind efforts to improve school performance (Woody, Buttles, Kafka, Park & Russell, 2004).

Although there are similarities in the measures and systems approaches used in different countries, individual countries use these approaches differently. For example, in the United States of America (hereafter referred to as the US), the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 compels schools to describe their success through students' attainment of academic standards and their performance on standardized tests. The US has created a system of standards and students' progress towards those standards is measured through standardized tests. Each state does the compilation and classification of annual test scores according to race, class, language, and special education status. This is done for the purposes of detecting achievement gaps associated with underperformance (Hyun, 2003; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In England and Wales, as Rosenthal (2004) points out, educational and other standards of individual state-financed schools go through inspections which are large-scale, on-site and regularly conducted by the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED). The objectives of OFSTED are improvement in learner attainment with the hope that inspections will directly influence exam performance in a positive way. It also examines the number and features of special measures schools (Rosenthal, 2004; Sammons, 2008). In South Africa a standardized measure of performance is also used where the performance of a school is measured through the Matric (Gr. 12) results. According to this system all secondary schools

are expected to achieve a certain level of pass percentage (Jansen, 2001). This measurement system addresses possible gaps in secondary schools, yet no such system exists for primary (Gr. 1 – 7) schools, thus excluding them from possible interventions should their students perform below any norms or standards. This was not a focus of the study but bears mention as a possible area for future research.

Supporters of the test-based accountability approach believe that schools work best when teachers and students know what is expected of them and society has a way of measuring how well those expectations are being met, usually through standardized tests and examinations. On the other hand, there are various critiques to the accountability systems approach to measuring school performance and underperformance. For example, for Gibson and Asthana (1998), examination results provide, at best, an extremely problematic guide to school performance. The emphasis on state-mandated standards for teachers and students tends to work toward uniform, if sometimes segregated, skills and outcomes that schools are expected to promote. They seem to ignore contextual factors which have an impact on learner achievement. The pressure of accountability and the publication of standardized test scores in the media reinforce the assumption that student, teacher, and school achievement can be determined by classroom routines alone. This ignores the influence of contextual factors such as, among others, socio-economic factors in the area where the schools are located. This approach also promotes the assumption that the only kind of achievement that really matters is an individualistic, quantifiable, and statistically comparable one. This assumption is misleading because it distracts attention from the larger cultural contexts of living, of which formal education is just a part (Apple, 2001; McNeil, 2002).

According to Petty and Green (2007), accountability measures have led to schools' progress being judged on academic results only whereas other contributing factors have been ignored. The authors charge that measuring student achievement tends to focus on the contribution made by the school while ignoring other contributing factors such as student ability, prior schooling, and socio-economic background. According to them, associated with the increased use of standardized tests, this growing move towards school accountability might increase inequalities between and among groups. In practice it is clear that it is students from low income families who continue to be more likely to perform poorly on standardized tests and leave high school without graduating (Ou, 2010). It has long been acknowledged that academic performance varies systematically between different types of pupils and also with respect to the home background of pupils (Kelly, 1996). This is mainly because there is a strong relationship between the socio-economic characteristics of schools and school outcomes (Beck & Shoffstall, 2005). Thus, using the same standardized measures of accountability for schools with varying characteristics and contexts is unlikely to cover the various factors contributing to learning and learner performance in schools.

There seems to be a strong relationship between contextual factors (socio-economic characteristics) and examination performance (Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005). Thus, the above discussion suggests that the accountability systems approach is not appropriate for measuring performance in rural schools which are characterised by high levels of deprivation and low socio-economic status. Schools in rural areas generally achieve at lower levels than urban schools (Hlalele, 2012). This is evident

in the leagues for performance published by the Department of Basic Education where the majority of the poor performing schools are revealed to be situated in the rural areas (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The low achievement of these schools could be attributed to the challenges that rural learners face in and around their schools (Chance & Segura, 2009).

The section below focuses specifically on the reasons why the accountability systems approach does not work well in measuring school performance in varying socio-economic contexts.

2.2.1 Accountability Systems Approach and Socio-economic Factors

As discussed in the above section, academic outcomes, usually measured by examination results, have dominated school assessment while other outcome measures have been ignored. This manner of measurement is based on the assumption that student achievement is a direct measure of school quality despite the fact that there seems to be a strong link between social deprivation and underperformance in schools (Gray, 2000; West & Pennell, 2003; Patton, 2008). Writing in the context of the US, Toutkoushian and Curtis (2005) stress the importance of taking the socio-economic status of school districts into account when trying to explain, amongst other things, students' average standardized test scores and ranking of schools within states. Socio-economic factors explain the large portion of variations in school level outcomes and the subsequent ranking of schools. As such, policy makers need to acknowledge that it would be a great challenge for public schools located in relatively low socio-economic status (SES) districts to achieve the same level of academic performance as schools located in higher SES

districts. Toutkoushian and Curtis (2005) further argue that it will be unfair to compare schools situated in poor socio-economic districts with those in other socio-economic districts based on observed outcomes only. They also opine that rankings based on observed outcomes only might give false views on the success of schools in meeting the needs of the students they are serving. In the context of this study, this means that the comparison of rural schools which are located in districts with low socio-economic status with schools located in districts with high socio-economic status using observed outcomes is inappropriate.

Similarly, there is a growing critique of standardized testing as a measure of learner achievement (Guisbond & Neill, 2004) and subsequently of school performance. According to Toutkoushain and Curtis (2005), when school performance measurement is based only on average test scores, this tends to punish schools located in districts with a relatively low SES. The authors used data from public high schools in New Hampshire in the US to demonstrate how the socio-economic status of a district can help explain variations in students' average standardized test scores, college attendance rates and subsequent rankings of schools within states. In their study, socio-economic factors accounted for nearly half of the disparities in performance among students on standardized tests across schools as well as on students' choices when considering pursuing a college education. These findings illustrate the importance of taking SES into account when measuring school performance.

It is for this reason that researchers like Gray (2004) question the relevance and appropriateness of the current performance measurement system, suggesting that it is

based on an 'inappropriate yardstick' and tends to ignore socio-economic factors and their influence on schooling. Gray further (2004) argues that a significant weakness of the current evaluative efforts is that the analysis of performance tends to be restricted to a single measure when there is more to school effectiveness than these quantifiable results. Moreover, these accountability measures have posed a series of problems for socio-economically disadvantaged schools because such measures tend to be insensitive to the challenges faced by schools in these contexts. These measures also set overly high expectations in relation to change and development in these schools and, by simply labeling them as underperforming, the good work these schools are doing is being undermined.

Furthermore, accountability based approaches in school evaluations are likely to underrate the effectiveness of schools that serve disadvantaged communities (Downey, Von Hippel & Hughes, 2008). This view is supported by Petty and Green (2007) who state that judging school performance on the basis of performance in standardized tests only is limited because:

> Schools also contribute to other learning, preparing young people to participate fully in society. Academic results may not reflect this learning for example in leadership, integrity, empathy, goal setting, self-esteem, and parenting skills, although this learning may have a profound effect on the future life of a pupil than the academic learning measured by examinations (Petty & Green, 2007, p. 68).

Downey, Von Hippel and Hughes (2008) concur when they argue that failing schools are recognized by many as schools where students show poor performance in achievement tests, ignoring other measures of success in these schools such as community impact and value. This then brings into question whether schools that are labelled as failing (based on examination scores) by the state are really failing in the eyes of the communities in which they are located and which they serve. Downey, Von Hippel and Hughes (2008) argue that achievement-based indicators of school effectiveness are prone to have errors and do little to help schools improve. They further recommend that the methods for the identification of failing schools must recognize that children's learning abilities are as a result of multiple social factors and contexts. It therefore becomes unfair to judge schools based on influences that are beyond their control.

Critics of this approach believe that it makes schools 'teach to test' (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). For example, Gamoran (2007) argues that any high-stakes assessment encourages teaching to test tendencies. His view is that any high-stakes assessment must confront four basic dilemmas: the level of setting the bar for standards; identification of what counts as progress towards standards; a clear and precise explanation of what standardized tests measure; and whether it is fair to set high and similar standards for all when opportunities for learning are unequal. He questions whether the administered tests measure something valuable, and whether teaching to the test means teaching a curriculum that matters rather than simply instructing students on how to respond to a particular assessment. He also points out that, with regards to the dilemma of where to set the bar, accountability systems aim high. Therefore schools with disadvantaged student populations are increasingly being

identified as failing to meet standards at higher rates than occurs for schools with more advantaged populations (Gamoran, 2007).

Demi, Butler and Taplin (2010) argue for contextualized league tables that compare achievement of schools. In their study, the authors examined the relationship between being disadvantaged and school achievement. Their study drew data from local education authorities (LEAs) in London. These researchers undertook a detailed analysis on levels of school achievement and the complexities of judging school performance. The findings suggested that there is a strong relationship between deprivation and examination success. This was clear as LEAs situated in non-deprived areas were found to be achieving higher percentages in GCSE passes. More analysis of the relationship between pupils' background and school achievement also indicated that schools with a high number of learners from disadvantaged families achieved lower compared to schools with a small percentage of these pupils. The authors therefore argue that uncontextualised performance tables are deeply flawed and that there is a need to compare similar schools and to move beyond league table approaches of comparing different schools.

The discussion in this section suggests that the accountability systems approach used to measure learner performance and subsequently school performance is problematic because they ignore contextual factors, even though such factors have a great influence on school performance. Although it is believed that schools work well if they have a yardstick to measure their success, using this method in poor schools (like rural schools) may underrate the effectiveness of such schools.

2.2.2 What does this mean in terms of measuring underperformance in rural schools?

As discussed above, the focus of most state accountability systems is on school performance. This is characterised by summative student indicators such as average test/examination scores and percentages of students scoring at the proficient level. This approach takes for granted that schools are collectively and directly responsible for these performance measures (Cobb, 2004). Nieuwenhuis (2007) notes that not one but various measures should be used to establish how well schools are performing. He further asserts that school accountability measures should include both qualitative and quantitative approaches and should take into consideration local contexts, responsiveness to the needs of the students and communities, as well as professional practices and standards. Since schools are complex and unique institutions that address multiple societal needs, there should also be allowances for local measures, tailored to meet local needs and concerns. Accountability systems should not only be used to judge but also to find ways to serving the needs of the school communities. Although testing could be useful in providing data for educators wanting to improve their practice, there are many measures of school success that are important to parents and to educators that are disregarded in favour of standardized tests.

Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay and Ciuffetelli-Parker (2010) highlight various ways of defining success in schools. These extend beyond standardized indicators to issues of school culture and climate; the nature of relationships and shared meanings and practices within the school among teachers, between staff and students, between

teachers and school leaders and beyond the school into children's families and communities. The current study was therefore premised on the assumption that, in order to understand school performance, the views of local stakeholders and community members should be brought to bear on what makes a successful/performing school. In this regard, the investigation aimed at exploring how learners, teachers and parents viewed an underperforming rural school.

2.3. School Underperformance in South Africa: Policy Review

In spite of the international scholarly critiques of the accountability systems approach that uses standards and examination results to measure school performance, post-apartheid South Africa has adopted and maintained this approach to measure progress and achievement in its schooling system. Informed by my understanding of the plight of rural communities and schools and the difficulties that they experience to improve the quality of rural education, this section presents a critical review of policy and legislative trends relating to underperforming schools in South Africa. The questions that were explored and that are addressed in this section were:

In terms of the policy framework of the South African education system:

1. *What is an underperforming school?*
2. *What are the criteria used to identify underperforming schools?*
3. *What is the impact of policy initiatives that are meant to address the issues of redress and equity in the under/performance of disadvantaged schools?*
4. *Given the demographic and geographic diversity as well as inequities in the country, to what extent and in what ways are contextual factors taken into consideration when dealing with issues of school underperformance*?

I consider this particular section of the review to be of great significance to this study as it provided a framework for understanding the perspectives of rural people on school underperformance.

2.3.1 An Overview of Education Reforms in Post-apartheid South Africa

As discussed in Chapter One, the education system in South Africa during apartheid was characterised by great inequalities; hence the post-apartheid education reforms which were informed by a political agenda which mainly focused on equity and redress. The main aim of the new education system was to deliver its political and educational mandates of redressing the inequalities of the apartheid education system and providing improved education to all South Africans (Omar, 2009). Among others, these changes included the integration of the 19 different national departments of education into one. This was done to ensure that all South Africans have access to equal quality education regardless of their geographic location and ethnic and racial backgrounds. In this section I explore the reforms in the education system. I also examine the funding policies for public schools and the impact that these have on disadvantaged (rural) schools.

2.3.1.1 Influence of Curriculum Reforms on Disadvantaged Schools

An important change to the education system was the introduction of the new curriculum in 1997 called Curriculum 2005 (C2005) which, after democracy, was an important effort to transform the education system that was inherited from the apartheid system. This new curriculum was built on the values that were inspired by

the South African Constitution which, among other things, aimed at healing the divisions of the past and establishing a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights (Department of Education, 2003).

Notwithstanding its various reviews and adaptations since its inception, the new curriculum was based on basic human rights principles:

- Social transformation: ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population;

- High knowledge and high skills: the minimum standards of knowledge and skills to be achieved at each grade are specified and high, achievable standards are set in all subjects;

- Human rights: human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice are infused through the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and human rights as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 is sensitive to issues of diversity such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language, age, disability and other factors (Department of Basic Education, 2012, p.5).

Since its adoption, the new curriculum has experienced many challenges, including scholarly and public critique that it fails to adequately serve the needs of under-resourced communities in terms of teacher supply, qualifications and expertise as well as quality education. The reasons for these criticisms and the reviews and

adaptations that followed were many and varied. For example, one critique was that teachers failed to effectively implement the curriculum (Jansen, 2001; Mattson & Harley, 2002; Jita & Vandeyar, 2006). Among other things, this was because it required teachers to make radical changes in their practice, this without the required training. It called for teachers to teach in new ways that were totally different from how they had been taught and how they had learnt to teach (Spillane, 2000). These radical changes in the curriculum required a lot from the teachers whose identities were within the traditional approaches which were totally different from those of the new curriculum (Jita & Vandeyar, 2006). For example, the new curriculum had pre-specified outcomes which were supposedly giving teachers the freedom to facilitate the achievement of these outcomes in any way that they liked. According to Morrow (2000) this was a fantasy because many teachers did not have the conceptual understanding required to do so. Although many teachers accepted C2005 as a political project which was different from apartheid education, their pedagogical responses were not the same. Criticism did not only focus on challenges of its implementation but teachers also struggled with the structure of the curriculum itself (Jansen, 1998; Matson & Harley, 2002). Some of the reasons cited are that the teacher development and the learning material necessary to achieve curriculum transformation were simply not in place (Potenza & Monyokolo, 1999). The structure of the curriculum was under-specified in terms of content and, as a result, teachers just did not know what to teach (Jansen, 1998). For rural schools which were already experiencing challenges of under- and unqualified teachers, this was even more challenging.

A Harley and Wedekind (2004) argue that this curriculum brought together different teachers and different classroom practices under a single administration. According to them this was a clear indication that there would be disparate effects in the implementation of the curriculum. Drawing on their own research, the research done by their students and a review of publications, they conclude that C2005 as a political project was successful, but that this success was accomplished at the expense of a pedagogical project. According to these researchers, the new curriculum failed to take into consideration the realities of the inequalities that characterise South African schools. This meant that the successful implementation of C2005 in previously disadvantaged schools (mostly those serving black African learners as well as rural schools) proved to be almost unachievable compared to the success it could achieve in previously advantaged schools (mostly those that served white children during apartheid). Mattson and Harley (2002) studied the strategies that teachers adopted to try and make this new system work. Their findings suggest that the 'mimicry' strategies that teachers used meant that the better resourced, historically privileged schools were more likely to be able to manage the implementation of the new curriculum than historically disadvantaged schools (Mattson & Harley, 2002), most of which were in the rural areas.

Due to challenges regarding implementation and content, the new curriculum was reviewed in 2000. The review committee undertook to review the implementation and timeframes of C2005 and not its primary principle of outcomes-based education. This committee recommended the reduction of the difficult terminology used in C2005. They also recommended the development of a revised National Curriculum Statement which would detail in understandable language the curriculum

requirements at various levels (Department of Education, 2000). The review resulted in the adaptation of the curriculum and the production of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) for Grades R-9 in 2001 and the National Curriculum Statement for Grades 10-12 in 2003. The RNCS also clearly maintained that educators and learners were to take on new roles. In this regard, educators' roles were significant as they were meant to nurture those of the learners. This curriculum regarded teachers as major contributors to the transformation of education in South Africa. It envisaged teachers who would be qualified and competent (Department of Education, 2003). Teachers were expected to assume various professional roles such as being mediators of learning, interpreters and designers of Learning Programmes and materials, leaders, administrators and managers, scholars, researchers and lifelong learners, community members, citizens and pastors, assessors and Learning Area or Phase specialists (Department of Education, 2003, p. 3).

In 2009 the newly-appointed Minister of Basic Education instituted the review of the NCS. The aim of the review was to explore the nature of the challenges and difficulties that were encountered in the NCS implementation and to make recommendations aimed at improving this implementation. This review initiative emanated from substantial criticism during the period following the 2001 review and suggested that the implementation of the NCS still brought challenges of curriculum and administrative overload and learner underperformance in local and international assessment (Department of Education, 2009). These were acute in rural schools, especially with rural school learners at the bottom of performance tables.

The 2009/10 review resulted in the revision of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the development of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). The CAPS combines the two documents into a single document which is now called the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12. The reviewing committee came up with a number of recommendations. For example, to relieve the pressure on teachers, the committee recommended the reduction of the number of projects given to learners, the elimination of portfolio files for learner assessment, and the abolishment of the Common Tasks for Assessment (CTA) for Grade 9. The NCS has also been repackaged to be accessible to teachers. For example, each subject has a single, comprehensive and concise curriculum and assessment policy statement that provides details on what teachers ought to teach and assess on a grade-by-grade basis. The CAPS provides a better understanding of what needs to be taught and learnt. The effects of these changes are yet to be seen as this new curriculum will be gradually implemented. The first implementation was in 2012 for Grades 1, 2 and 3 for primary schools and Grade 10 in secondary schools. Grades 4, 5 and 6 in primary schools and 11 are to be implemented in 2013 and finally Grades 7 in primary schools and 8 and 12 in secondary schools are to be implemented in 2014.

2.3.1.2 Impact of School Funding Reforms on Disadvantaged Schools

As discussed in Chapter One, school funding has a long history of inequality among the different races in South Africa. The schools that were historically white under apartheid were characterised by good infrastructural investment, good resources and access to well-trained and qualified teachers, while black African education was characterised by high teacher-pupil ratios, unqualified and under-qualified teachers,

and a lack of books, libraries and laboratories (Veriava, 2010). A solution to these vast inequalities required policies that would strongly address these issues; hence the democratic government's attempt to introduce measures to equalise and redress funding in all schools. This was done through establishing a policy through the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996, called the National Norms and Standards of School Funding (NNSSF) (Department of Education, 1998). In this section I give an overview of this policy and how it impacted on financial standing, teacher availability and curriculum offerings in disadvantaged schools.

According to the NNSSF, funding was to be allocated in such a way that children from poor schools serving poor communities, including rural schools, would be allocated more funds than children from other schools (Department of Education, 1998). A crucial aspect of this policy was the issue of school fees. Once funds were allocated to schools for personnel and non-personnel expenditure, school budget deficits were supplemented by the charging of school fees. To address the issue of disparities in the socio-economic status of families of school going children, the South African Schools Act (SASA) endeavoured to ease the financial responsibility of school fees for poor parents by allowing individual school governing bodies to decide on school fees and by allowing poor parents to apply to schools for exemptions from the payment of schools fees (Department of Education, 1996). However, this created problems of access for poor learners and also perpetuated the problem of poor schools lacking financial resources to run their schools (Veriava, 2010). After a series of assessments of this policy, it was amended in 2006 to improve, amongst other things, the parts of the policy that deal with the school allocation and fee payments in public schools. This was done after the realisation that

the monetary value of the school allocation was too low, as related to the inequities across the country (Department of Education, 2006).

The Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding (ANNSSF) policy makes provision for an improved way of addressing fee barriers to education for poor communities (DoE, 2006). Firstly, a system of nationally determined quintiles was established which ensures that state funding for poor learners is distributed in an equitable manner (Veriava, 2010). According to this policy, schools are divided into five categories, or quintiles, with the poorest schools in quintile 1 and the least poor in quintile 5. This division is based on schools' poverty ranking which is determined nationally on the basis of national data on income levels, dependency ratios and literacy rates in the community in which the school is physically located (Giese, Zide, Koch & Hall, 2009). Evidence suggests that the majority of rural schools fall in quintile 1 (Veriava, 2010).

Secondly, the national funding norms and minimum standards for each learner were established. The national department specified the amount the provinces should allocate to each learner in each quintile for non-personnel spending (Veriava, 2010). The national department also established the 'adequacy benchmark', which it regards as the minimally sufficient amount of money required for a learner to adequately access his or her right to basic education. According to Veriava (2010), in terms of the national norms for 2010 the poorest quintile schools ought to receive an allocation of R855 per learner and the wealthiest quintile R147. The adequacy benchmark is set at R571 for 2010.

Thirdly, the policy divides schools into 'fee-paying' and 'no-fee' schools. According to this provision, by 2007 all schools in the poorest two quintiles (i.e., quintiles 1 and 2) would have been declared as 'no-fee' schools which means that these schools are, to date, no longer allowed to charge school fees. To make up for the loss of income from school fees, these schools are allocated a larger amount of funding per learner. Almost all rural schools which fall under quintiles 1 and 2 have a 'no fee' school status (Veriava, 2010).

In their study Giese, Zide, Koch and Hall (2009) found that some of the positive impacts of ANNSSF were relieving the burden of school fees for poor parents and the increased income for most no-fee schools. However, they assert that, while it is important to acknowledge these positive factors, it is important to note that it was evident from this study that increased funding did not mean sufficient funding. Many poor schools, mostly those in rural areas, are still operating on limited budgets that do not promote provision of quality education or the provision of school infrastructure that is conducive to learning. As Bertram (2009) notes, while poor schools have been granted the no-fee status, well-to-do schools are able to charge their own fees additional to state funding. This sees previously white and advantaged schools charging high fees which allow them to employ and pay extra teachers and to sustain their good infrastructure which includes swimming pools, sports fields, laboratories, libraries and computer centres (Bertram, 2009). These are privileges that schools serving black Africans, most of which are in rural areas, cannot afford. These policies were meant to promote equity; however, they are not successful in doing so as they are skewed against rural schools which still mirror the

pre-apartheid education as they still face the challenges of unqualified and under-qualified teachers, lack of books, libraries and laboratories.

The ANNSSF does not deal directly with personnel costs in provincial education departments. However, it does have implications for post provisioning norms (PPN) which ultimately affect curriculum offerings in schools. This policy affects the decisions that provinces make around the number of human resources (personnel) they may appoint and pay as it clearly states:

> Unless the relative proportion of personnel costs to total provincial education spending is managed down, provinces will continue to be unable to finance essential non-personnel education services, whose distribution at present is both inadequate and highly inequitable. (Department of Education, 1998, p. 5).

The direction of the ANNSSF towards a reduction in the amount of the education budget spent on personnel so as to increase costs on key pedagogical non-personnel items such as new school construction, provision of essential services, supply of books and other learning support materials, and educator development (Department of Education, 1998) has resulted in the downsizing of educator posts. Although the issue of distribution and norms for non-personnel which comes highly recommended in the ANNSSF is important, the decision to reduce the budget for personnel has resulted in indirectly disadvantaging learners in poor schools, most of them in rural communities. The aim to minimise and reduce the cost of personnel has also contributed to a numerical mal-distribution in educators and in exacerbating inequity in educator distribution (Naicker, 2005). Given the prevalent high learner-educator

ratios, schools are being forced to employ educators through their school budgets to support the number of learners in their schools (Naicker, 2005) as well as the curriculum where elective subjects need to be extended to draw learners to secondary schools. Schools can appoint educator staff in addition to those employed and paid for by the state. The appointment and remuneration of such staff is the exclusive responsibility of the School Governing Body (SGB) and the additional funds to do so are raised by parents (Department of Education, 1996). Obviously, the employment of SGB-paid educators favours the more economically advantaged schools. Given their good financial standing through the collection of school fees, they are able to employ a considerable number of SGB-paid educators which results in these schools having far lower learner-educator ratios than schools in disadvantaged areas where most are 'no-fee' schools that can simply not afford to employ SGB-paid educators. The impact this has on the provision of quality education is likely to widen the gap in output between such economically advantaged and disadvantaged schools (Naicker, 2005) generally, and rural schools in particular.

Whilst the reduction of educator posts has contributed to economic efficiency and has served government's purpose of decreasing spending on personnel, it has seriously affected learning in poor rural schools. This cut-back of educator posts in schools has resulted in principals of these schools experiencing crucial challenges in meeting the curriculum needs of learners (Naicker, 2005). While economically advantaged schools can afford to employ SGB-paid educators to satisfy the curriculum needs of its learners, schools serving poorer communities suffer as they cannot afford SGB-paid educators; they have no option but to offer a limited curriculum. This has serious implications for the policy on educator provisioning

which links curriculum offerings to the number of educator posts. This serves the interests of advantaged schools as they have the financial resources to widen their curriculum choices and thus qualify for more educators in terms of this policy. A drawback for poor schools is that they have limited curriculum offerings and, as a result, a smaller educator entitlement in terms of this policy.

The next section addresses the question: *Given the inequalities in schooling among learners from different socio-economic backgrounds and geographic locations, how is performance measured in South African schools*?

2.3.2 Underperforming Schools: A South African Perspective

Despite the continuing inequities in the education system in South Africa and the failure of the government to address them, school performance is measured by student performance in national examinations, particularly at the end of their schooling career in Grade 12. This means that contextual factors (including the learners' socio-economic characteristics or background or the school and community context) are not taken into consideration when labelling schools as high or low performance institutions.

The South African Schools Act of 1996 did not focus much on school performance; thus, it was amended through the Education Laws Amendment Bill, 2007, to include issues relating to school underperformance with a clause referring to the 'Identification of underperforming public schools'. This section authorises the Provincial Head of Department (HOD) to identify an underperforming school. According to this clause the principal, as the representative of Head of Department at

school level, must submit an annual report to the HOD in respect of 'the academic performance of that school in relation to minimum outcomes and standards and procedures for assessment determined by the Minister of Education and clearly defined in the National Curriculum Statement' (Department of Education, 2007). This requirement is applicable to all public schools regardless of location or context. Schools that fail to achieve on average the standards set by the Department of Basic Education are labelled as underperforming and 'corrective' measures are taken against them. As Moletsane (2010) points out:

> Schools are expected to be effective and efficient in producing the particular outcomes pre-determined at government national level, and those who fall short, are said to be inefficient and ineffective and are appropriately sanctioned and punished and/or identified as needing special intervention (Moletsane, 2010, p. 2).

In this regard, the section also sets out the steps the Head of Department must take after he or she has identified such under-performing schools. These steps include, amongst others, sending a written notice to the school and, if necessary, the appointment of a person to perform the functions of the governing body and a person to serve as mentor for the principal so as to improve the performance of the school.

Accountability measures also fail to take into consideration the diverse make up of schools as the performance of all public schools is determined through a single aspect, namely end-of-year examinations. This is in spite of the fact that there is recognition amongst education researchers that academic performance varies

systematically between different types of pupils and also with respect to the home background of pupils (Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005). A great concern about the standardized measure of performance is that all schools are compelled to achieve within the same performance levels regardless of their history, resources or capacity (Jansen, 2001). For example, rural schools suffer great inequalities and are inundated with challenges of learners' poor socio-economic backgrounds, poor school infrastructure, inadequate resources, poor quality and shortage of teachers (Lindeque & Vandeyar, 2004; Emerging Voices, 2005; Pennefather, 2008; McQuaide, 2009; Hlalele, 2012). It is mainly because of these inequalities that it is deemed unreasonable to hold them to the same performance standards as schools in more economically advantaged contexts.

In particular, in South Africa school performance is determined by the results of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) in Grade 12, commonly known as Matric, whereby schools that obtain less than a 60% pass rate are judged as underperforming. To illustrate, in relation to the 2011 Matric results, the NSC report states:

> In the 2011 NSC examination 544 schools obtained 100%, 2 432 schools obtained between 80% and 100% and 1 895 schools performed between 60% and 70%. These schools are commended for their dedication and commitment to the quality of education in this country. The remaining 2 243 schools will be the focus of district intervention relating to school improvement (Department of Basic Education, 2012, p. 1).

The 2012 NCS Report lists the performance of all schools in the country in the National Senior Certificate examination, indicating the number of candidates who wrote the examination, the number who satisfied the NSC requirements and the percentages obtained. Although the report states that it is crucial that schools are not judged solely based on these figures and that learner performance is one of the indicators that could be used to judge the output of the school, there seems to be no evidence of any other criteria used to identify underperforming schools. School efficiency and effectiveness continues to be linked to standards which are reduced to the percentage of learners who pass Matric. The Matric pass rate remains the dominant and publicly touted indicator of school excellence, with league tables of pass rates regularly published in newspapers and publications of the Department of Basic Education. Thus, the pass rates are the most prominent indicators of school success and continue to discursively categorise schools as performing or underperforming (Omar, 2009).

The media also feeds into this, publicising lists of high achieving schools which tend to be dominated by schools which serve mostly white children, and the worst achieving schools, which continue to serve black African children and are mostly in poor communities, particularly those in rural contexts (Jansen, 2001; Department of Basic Education, 2012). Of course, this is not to say that all rural schools are performing below these set standards. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the four bottom provinces in the country in school performance are those that are mostly rural (i.e., Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and KwaZulu-Natal). In KwaZulu-Natal, where this study was conducted, the four bottom districts in performance

benchmarking in 2011 were mainly rural (i.e., Obonjeni, Empangeni, Ilembe, and Sisonke) (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

The DBE uses assessment results to plan for strategies for school improvement. To illustrate, the Strategic Plan 2011-2014 indicates that standardised assessments and systemic evaluations will be used to measure whether learners are achieving the curriculum outcomes and to identify the key areas in the curriculum that require improvement. The DBE will use all the internal and external evaluation processes to check where underperformance occurs and the underlying reasons for this so that appropriate interventions can be made (Department of Basic Education, 2011). This fixation with academic performance has been extended to primary schooling where the Annual National Assessments (ANA) have been running over the last three years on a sample basis and are being expanded into universal testing programmes of all learners in all schools in Grades 1 to 6 and 9. The testing programme is designed to assess the level of achievement by learners in respect of the learning outcomes and is also designed to identify root causes for poor learner achievement. Grades 3, 6 and 9 will be used to benchmark the performance in each phase. According to the DBE, this is critical for improving the overall quality of teaching and learning and improving the quality of basic education across the country.

Like all other post-apartheid education policy reforms, the curriculum is premised on and promotes the principles of equity and redress as a means of overcoming past inequities. However, with the challenges that schools experience in implementing this curriculum, measures used to identify underperforming schools are ironically

harshly felt by the schools serving learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds, especially rural schools.

2.3.3 The Continuing Disparities in South African Schools

Jansen (2001) raises a concern about the standardised measure of performance, arguing that what this means is that all teachers or learners or schools are compelled to attain the same levels of achievement, regardless of their history, resources or capacity. In South Africa, a school with students who come from a well-resourced background and has good infrastructure and resources (including adequate, well qualified teachers and material resources) is measured on exactly the same basis as a school with the opposite characteristics such as poorly qualified teachers, insufficient numbers of teachers, dilapidated buildings, and a poor 'culture of teaching and learning'.

In his 2001 work on the politics of performance in South Africa, Jansen argued that it was premature for the state to focus on using standardised systems of measuring performance while they were still dealing with challenges in the education system. He questioned the fact that the state was concentrating more on performance at the expense of the required educational efforts needed to redress the historical inequalities of an apartheid education system. His arguments still apply as is evident in the published results where the pattern of performance still reflects the pattern of the apartheid education system where schools serving black African learners, particularly those in rural areas, continue to produce lower pass rates. Jansen questions the use of the standardised performance measures as they ignore the

inequalities the country inherited from the apartheid system. He further attributes learner performance inequalities to inadequate resources, poor school infrastructure, poor teacher training and development in these schools. For him, these inequalities must be addressed before sanctions are imposed on underperforming schools (Jansen, 2001).

Taylor and Yu (2009) conducted a study which examined the effect of learners' socio-economic status on their educational achievement in South Africa. Their findings indicate that the education system seems to repeat the inequality patterns that existed before democracy. This means that schools that have learners with high SES continue to do well while schools with learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds are underperforming. In particular, characterised by, among others, poor SES, rural schools continue to perform the worst.

Poverty is part of the everyday life of people living in rural areas in South Africa (Emerging Voices, 2005). This affects schooling for rural children. There is widespread agreement that poverty and poor educational outcomes are related. For example, Van der Berg (2008) examined how poverty-related factors impacted on the performance of poor schools. His findings suggest that poverty decreases the ability to learn amongst poor learners and this happens throughout learners' schooling life. This study suggests that poor rural learners are not accessing quality education effectively.

The government has made efforts to correct some of these inequalities by providing more resources to poor schools; however, there seems to be more to underperformance than resource distribution. While a sizable proportion of educational resources, in particular learning and teaching support material (LTSM), has been made available to historically disadvantaged and rural schools (Department of Basic Education, 2011), the challenge here is that this does not seem to translate into improved learner outcomes. Improving distribution of resources in poor schools, including rural schools, does not necessarily translate into improved quality of education and is therefore not enough on its own (Taylor & Yu, 2009).

2.3.4 Implications for Performance/Underperformance in Rural Schools

The above discussion suggests that the new education system introduced after the advent of democracy in South Africa was intended to promote equity and redress and, in particular, to correct the injustices of the past by offering equal access to quality education for all learners. First, the literature reviewed above suggests that the interventions implemented to achieve this have either been inadequate or inappropriate. Furthermore, the approach used to measure school performance concentrates on standards and pass rates based on standardised examinations which tend to ignore the influence of contextual factors on learning. This means that marginalised groups, especially rural learners, whom these reforms were meant to assist, are still left behind in terms of performance. In other words, rural schools are still lagging behind in performance as this is measured in a uniform way despite the diversity of schools in South Africa. The government's commitment to equal and fair treatment has unfortunately not yielded enough positive change for rural schools as the educational attainments of children in rural areas are amongst the lowest in the

country (Emerging Voices, 2005; Department of Basic Education, 2011). This could be regarded as a violation of children's human rights as the reforms promised quality education for all and not just for those in well-resourced schools and communities (Malhoit, 2005).

This study was underpinned by the assumption that obtaining the views of rural people themselves (parents, learners and teachers) regarding their educational needs and what they regarded as good school performance or an underperforming school might yield positive results in identifying interventions that will work in developing relevant measures of performance for schools in rural contexts. To this end the study explored the approaches that rural people used to measure school performance, addressing the following questions:

How do rural people measure school performance?

To what extent do they have their own indicators of performance that are influenced by their rural contexts?

In the next section I discuss the rural context and its impact on rural education, a factor that is of significance in understanding underperforming schools in the context of rurality. This is meant to continue to argue that our understanding of that which we call rurality is crucial as it is an important factor that should be considered when measuring rural school performance. It will also lay a foundation for understanding that despite all the challenges that rural people face, it is also important to explore the attributes that they have and listen to them and allow them to say how they view school performance and underperformance in their rural context.

2.4 Factors that influence School Underperformance

The study was premised on the notion that the contexts within which children grow up influence their everyday lives, their family life, their schooling and their future (De Lange, Olivier, Geldenhuys & Mitchell, 2012). Rural settings have a negative influence on rural children and ultimately greatly affect their education. This is because these areas present challenges such as low socio-economic factors, high deprivation, poverty and inequities. The fact that many children living in rural settings lag behind their urban peers is unjust because the choice of rural communities to reside in a rural area should not affect the quality of their children's education. There is therefore a need for an educational approach that provides rural learners with quality education which is relevant, meaningful and rooted in their experiences. It is for this reason that researchers like Corbett (2009) advocate the significance of place in education. Corbett stresses that despite persistent attempts to erase and neutralize its influence in educational thought, policy, pedagogical practice and curriculum, place matters in multitude ways. According to him, place should occupy a more central position in the way we think about and deliver education. Hence the purpose of this study was to understand underperformance in the context of rurality and, in particular, to understand it from the perspectives of the rural communities themselves.

There is a very strong negative correlation between measures of social disadvantage and school achievement (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll & Russ, 2004). In England, Gray (2000) found that schools in socially deprived areas are more likely to be eligible for special measures and that they take longer to emerge from these adverse conditions despite efforts to transform them. In the US, efforts to provide support to

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failing and ineffective schools have often taken the form of school-wide reform and school restructuring programmes aimed at particularly low-performing schools and schools serving low socio-economic status communities (Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005). In some Dutch elementary schools, the average performance of students over several years was found to be significantly below the level that could be expected of them. The most important identifiable weaknesses that could explain this underperformance included poverty, ethnic minority status and language issues (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2007). In South Africa, most of the schools labelled as underperforming schools are rural schools (Department of Basic Education, 2011) serving communities with poor socio-economic status who suffer from high poverty levels and deprivation.

As social class differences remain a powerful indicator of subsequent educational achievement, on average most children from low-income families tend not to overcome the hurdle of lower initial attainment as class differences affect them long before they start school. Moreover, these differences have a growing influence as they get older (Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris & James, 2006). Thus, schools in low-income communities continue to present a problem to policy makers in many countries. The relationship between levels of disadvantage and poor attainment continue to be stubbornly resistant to policy intervention (Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris & James, 2006). For example, high levels of poverty have been found to interfere with a school's ability to successfully improve student achievement (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Ylimaki, Jacobson & Drysdale, 2007). While the attainment levels of poor children have slowly increased over time, the gap between the majority of children from low-income families and their more affluent peers

persists throughout schooling; hence the more socially disadvantaged the community served by the school, the more likely it is that the school will underperform (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003).

In a study in South Africa that was aimed at exploring the poor performance of Grade 6 learners in general and learner differences between middle and low income learners in particular, Van der Berg and Louw (2007) identified three main issues that account for poor performance by some of these learners. These were poor monitoring of students' progress by principals, poor quality of teachers, and teacher absenteeism. What influenced these three factors was the socio economic status of the learners, which put learners from richer families at an advantage over learners from poor families. In other words, what this study suggests is that SES is an important determinant of learner performance.

Lupton (2005) states that social justice in education demands, at the very least, that all students should have access to the same quality of educational processes. Yet schools in the poorest communities are believed to be offering a lower quality of education than those in more advantaged areas. Based on a qualitative study of four such schools, Lupton's article explores the links between the contexts in which these schools were operating and the quality of education they offered. His findings indicate that high-poverty contexts exercise downward pressures on quality and he recommends that high levels of quality in schools in the poorest neighbourhoods need to be assured by policy measures that change their context, among other things. The author claims that social justice will not be achieved by managerialist policies that seek to improve schools by addressing the performance of managers and staff,

without recognition of the context in which this performance takes place. He further maintains that while they are moving in the right direction, policies for dealing with school quality in poor areas are still formed and debated within the constraints of a managerialist paradigm and informed by the largely context-blind school effectiveness movement. Unless policy makers believe that it is just a coincidence that so many of these incompetent staff members are gathered in the most disadvantaged institutions, there is a need to look at the context in which practice is developed and implemented. Lupton's study makes a direct link between evidence of the impact of context on school practice and the policy agenda for improving schools in disadvantaged areas.

2.5 Understanding Underperformance in Rural Schools

The previous section argued that learner and school performance is greatly influenced by contextual factors such as low socio-economic factors, high deprivation and inequalities. In this section I review literature which explores how rural schools tend to be burdened with more socio-economic challenges than schools in urban contexts, and how this results in poorer learner and school performance in the former contexts. Schools that are situated in rural areas already put learners at a disadvantage because of all the contextual challenges that learners have to overcome. Students living in rural areas achieve at lower levels than do their non-rural counterparts. This low achievement could be attributed to the challenges that these students face which affect their academic performance (Farmer et al., 2006; Johnson & Strange, 2007; Chance & Segura, 2009). This further supports the notion that performance in rural schools should not be measured by centrally determined standards. Moreover, rural people should contribute to and be part of decision

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making with regard to the education of their children and appropriate measures should be taken to ensure the success of their schools.

In spite of the huge positive changes in South Africa after democracy, it is still a country that is characterized by great inequalities and high levels of poverty, especially in rural areas (Pennefather, 2008). Although as a country South Africa has experienced enormous changes at policy level, there are still considerable differences in terms of learners' socio-economic backgrounds, school infrastructure and resources, learner-teacher ratios, qualifications of teachers, availability of teachers and teacher shortages in key subjects (Pennefather, 2008). The government's commitment to equal and fair treatment has unfortunately not yielded enough positive change for rural schools as the educational attainments of children in rural areas are amongst the lowest in the country (Emerging Voices, 2005). Thus, the failure of national education policies in South Africa remains most evident in rural areas (Harley & Wedekind, 2004), and education in the rural areas remains inundated with problems and challenges that are simply not considered by educational policy makers and within theoretical and pragmatic initiatives (Chisholm, 2004b; Emerging Voices, 2005; Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008).

One of the most persistent qualities of rural communities is poverty (Hlalele, 2012), since the majority of people who are extremely poor live in rural areas (Anriquez & Stamoulis, 2007). Rural schools are still confronted by challenges caused by a poor environment that is characterized by high levels of poverty and social deprivation. Many of these rural schools serve youth who experience impoverished developmental contexts that are linked to poor educational and occupational

outcomes (Kim, Brody & Murry, 2003; Farmer et al., 2006). These challenges significantly hinder the educational achievements of children served in such settings and may limit the attainment of even the most promising students, as there is a strong association between the socio-economic characteristics of schools and school outcomes (Beck & Shoffstall, 2005). In these areas, poverty becomes the major obstacle for educational development as it poses a great challenge to most rural schools (Howley & Howley, 2010; Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012). There is general agreement that there is a strong connection between poverty and poor educational outcomes. The poorer the child's family, the fewer chances s/he has of doing well in education. Education therefore barely offers a way out of poverty but simply seems to confirm existing social hierarchies (Raffo et al., 2009).

The Emerging Voices (2005), which was a study on rural poverty and education in South Africa which was commissioned by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, adds depth to the understanding of the phenomenon of rurality, poverty and schooling. It gives light to an understanding of what rural schooling is all about, what the key barriers to learning might be, and the possible strategies to deal with the huge challenges facing people in rural areas. The study produced a thorough qualitative overview of the problems of rural schooling in the context of rural poverty. It revealed that rural children are robbed of their constitutional right to education, as their rights within education are limited. For these children, access to primary schooling is threatened by the circumstances under which they live (Emerging Voices, 2005).

Knight, Shi and Quheng (2009) investigated the role that different aspects of household and community poverty play in determining the quality and quantity of education obtained by children in rural China. The study was based on the hypothesis that poverty at both the household level and the community level can have an adverse effect on the quantity and quality of education. The authors argue that education and poverty are closely related in numerous ways and that the interaction among a set of poverty related and education related variables is capable of generating a vicious cycle of education deprivation and poverty and also a vicious cycle of positive interaction between education and income. They use the concept of 'poverty trap' to support their argument. Poverty trap is a general phenomenon associated with lack of saving and access to credit, absence of productive social networks, scarcity of local economic opportunities and the debilitating effects of a culture of poverty [among communities]. They state that there are many conditions that can trap individuals or groups in intractable poverty and education is one of them. Poor households may not invest in education and therefore perpetuate locking their descendants in a poverty trap, thus perpetuating inequality. Children remain uneducated and therefore poor. Poverty might reduce the prospective rate of return to education and thus discourage enrolment. Poverty reduces the chances of completion of middle school and continuing to high school. They show that there is a strong positive relationship of community income and community enrolment. Lower parent income means inferior education quality for their children. This is why students from sprawling informal settlements, poor townships and rural areas are prevented from accessing and receiving quality education. This phenomenon has become a feature of the struggle of poor communities (Spreen & Vally, 2006).

Riddell (2005) raises the important concept of learning disadvantage which may be exacerbated by poverty. This arises "…when young people's circumstances impair their functioning as learners or prevent their previous learning from being accessed in the classroom. It derives from social and material disadvantage but also arises when the dominant culture and expectations of school are at odds with those of family or community" (Riddell, 2005, p. 44). This then results in learners from disadvantaged communities or families lagging behind in performance. While schools enable young people to accumulate material, cultural and linguistic resources as a result of their experiences at school, the importance of young people's experiences for the majority of time they spend in their community and home cannot be underestimated. If children's lives are impoverished socially and materially outside school and go on being so throughout their school careers, it is difficult to develop a mutually reinforcing relationship between learning in all aspects of their lives. It is more difficult for the experiences provided at home to complement and reinforce what is being studied at school.

Second, not only are rural areas poor in terms of human resources and livelihood resources, but they also lag behind in terms access to quality learning in schools (Lindeque & Vandeyar, 2004; McQuaide, 2009). As Bryant (2010) charges, one of the major barriers to quality rural education is the government's deliberate ignorance of the conditions in rural areas and schools. This is related to the fact that there seems to be a lack of understanding of what constitutes rural education (Mahlomaholo, 2012). Furthermore, rural people tend to be politically, socially and economically isolated. This results in rural learners being overlooked and therefore side-lined from the national education agenda (Balfour & De Lange, 2011). Their needs are utterly

ignored when it comes to educational policies and practices in the curriculum, as these seem to model and focus on the urban learner for educational provisioning (Mollenkopf, 2009). Hence the need to understand what is of great value to rural people so education initiatives that are meant to educate rural children can take this into consideration when planning for rural education. Most of the children in these areas come from poor families and they lack proper housing, access to quality health care, proper nutrition, and adequate child care. These factors all have a negative impact on their schooling; there is general consensus that these factors contribute to limited access to quality education for rural children (Malhoit, 2005).

Third, emerging literature suggests that there is little understanding of how rural people view schools and what makes a good school. For example, Hlalele (2012) suggests that for rural people, quality education is important for rural economic development. In this regard parents, principals, teachers and learners place a high value on education and the benefits that they think it can bring in terms of development. However, there seems to be a disjuncture between the needs of rural communities and educational expectations. This is due to failure of education to value rural people's ways of life and what they value in education (Emerging Voices, 2005). Unless policy makers take these factors seriously in rural education planning, efforts to improve education in rural contexts will continue to fail. For example, Nemes (2005) classifies rural values into three main categories: ecological values, cultural values and community values. Ecological values refer to a clean environment, open space, natural and cultural landscapes, possibilities for the production of food, and good productive conditions for high quality agricultural products. Cultural values focus on rural ways of life: rural culture, folklore and the

built environment, local foods, arts and crafts, local products and production methods and traditional beliefs and customs. Community values refer to social networks: kinship relations, mutual trust and understanding, and special ways of communication (Nemes, 2005). Unfortunately, these tend to be ignored in curriculum policy and content, resulting in mainly foreign (in rural contexts) content being taught in schools.

Similarly, people in rural settings have a salient attachment to place (Gruenewald, 2003) and the consideration of place is crucial in the education of rural people. Rural attachment to place is characterized by relationships with land, a sense of connection to nature, and rootedness in local relationships (Howley & Howley, 2000; Flora & Flora, 2004; Howley, 2006). Place, for rural people, involves the meanings and relationships associated with land, nature, local history and knowledge and these are of great value to them. Greenwood (2009) asserts that places are pedagogical both because their contexts shape our experiences of learning and becoming, and because our experiences of learning in turn contribute to place-making, place-changing, and place-leaving. Despite the meaning of place to rural people, place has been inconsiderately ignored in education matters. Even in education research, for example, much of the research on rural educational aspirations fails to take into consideration the particular significance of place to the rural families in which such children come of age (Howley & Howley, 2000). There is a strong possibility that rural youth are also motivated by attachment to local place and that such an attachment, along with other benefits of rural life, offers residents advantages that are often popularly ignored or devalued**.** Budge (2006) notes that there is something very powerful about the sense of place in rural communities that helps them transcend the

challenges of poor infrastructure and few resources. This is what education policy makers should explore in rural education issues.

The cultural aspects of rural life are also neglected in educational policy and content. Rural ways of living and being and knowing are devalued and literally marginalized. Rural people are seen as inferior and, in this way, simply divided from their own meaningfulness and power. This in turn has great impact on how parents view schooling. They often realize that pursuit of a great deal of schooling by their children means that the young will leave their rural communities and families, never to return (Corbett, 2007). Since parents want to live near their children, they then regard schooling much more suspiciously. A common theme among nearly all rural people, young and old, is the desire to keep living in a rural place, especially the one they grew up in, remaining close with their families which, in rural places, often constitutes a durable extended network of relatives (Burnell, 2003). Schools could do a lot more to enhance the chances of success and fulfilment for rural young people who want to remain near family and community. Creating a decent and frugal life in rural places is a significant accomplishment. Rural schools could surely support this option much better than they currently do in many communities. Schools, with their supposed interest in academics, could do something important here as well, and advocates of place based education already recognize this possibility (Gruenewald, 2003; Corbett, 2007).

Fifth, population in rural areas is spatially dispersed. This spatial dispersion means that schools in rural settings are few and far from where the learners stay (Mahlomaholo, 2012). Long distances to towns, the poor conditions of roads and

bridges to schools and limited transport for learners (Emerging Voices, 2005) mean that rural schools are confronted with the challenge of learners who still walk long distances to school. It also means that on rainy days there is no schooling in most schools because roads become inaccessible. Most rural settings also lack basic services such as running water, electricity, sanitation, and health and educational facilities. These omissions impact negatively on access to and the quality of education.

Sixth, the problems associated with rurality are further exacerbated by poor resources and inadequate infrastructure in schools (Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012). The districts where the educational outcomes in rural schools require the most urgent attention are likely to be those with most impoverished minority and rural learners, where schools receive the fewest resources (Hlalele, 2012). This lack of infrastructure which receives inadequate attention (Mashau, Steyn, van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2008) becomes a main stumbling block towards quality education (Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012). Rural schools usually comprise dilapidated buildings, insufficient classrooms, broken windows, limited or no access to water, electricity and sanitation and restricted access to resources such as libraries and books, information technology and specialized science laboratory equipment (Department of Education, 2005). Gustaffson (2006) suggests a link between the quality of schools and physical infrastructure and performance. He cautions that it is difficult to separate the effects of rurality and poor quality of education. This is because there is evidence which suggests that the physical environment has an effect on schools. Schools where resources are better seem to be able to pass over many of the major problems whereas poorer schools are not able to do so. Indeed, the establishment of a

favourable teaching and learning environment in the classroom becomes even more challenging if the school accommodates learners who come from less favourable contexts such as under-resourced rural communities (De Lange, Olivier, Geldenhuys & Mitchell, 2012).

Seventh, the quality of teachers in rural areas is very poor. Teaching in deep rural settings incites many images of barriers, difficulties and despondency (Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012). Rural education is negatively affected by the often poor quality of teachers found in rural schools and the challenges that these teachers confront in their daily endeavours of teaching. Academic research points to the importance of teachers in facilitating student performance, yet studies on teacher qualifications have shown that many teachers, especially those in high-poverty and rural districts, are not certified and lack knowledge of the subjects they teach (Shaul & Ganson, 2005; McQuaide, 2009). This lack of qualified teachers is one of the most crucial factors hindering the development of basic education in rural areas. Research has shown that teachers in rural schools are often scripted as under-qualified and unqualified (Emerging Voices, 2005; Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012). This means that the rights of children in these areas are compromised by poorly-trained teachers with few incentives to live in the areas where they teach, as well as incredibly limited facilities and resources to assist them in their task (Emerging Voices, 2005). Many teachers in rural schools are unqualified or under-qualified, making it impossible for them to deliver the kind of education that could be transformative of rural contexts and rural people (Emerging Voices, 2005).

Arnold, Newman, Gaddy and Dean (2005) point out that the need to attract and retain highly qualified teachers is more pronounced in rural schools. This is a huge challenge especially because there is a link between teacher quality and student achievement. There is therefore a great need for evidence-based guidance concerning teacher recruitment, preparation, and professional development to be made available for superintendents and principals in rural communities. Rural schools cannot recruit or retain highly qualified teachers who have appropriate training and credentials (Holloway, 2002; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005; Lowe, 2006). This is necessary especially because rural teachers are often required to be experts in multiple subject areas (Hardré, Sullivan & Crowson, 2009), do multi-grade teaching (Mollenkopf, 2009), and endure unreasonable teacher-learner ratios (Hlalele, 2012). Moreover, most teachers in various fields of specialisation face professional isolation because they are the only teachers in their field in the area (Hlalele, 2012).

Rural schools also experience disturbing teacher mobility and turnover. Teachers may be unwilling to move to rural areas where social and cultural opportunities are limited and salaries may not contain an enticement peg. Even when teachers are willing to work in rural areas, working conditions are likely to make them reluctant to stay for long (Mollenkopf, 2009). As a result, these teachers are filled with poor morale and very low levels of motivation (Mollenkopf, 2009). The distances that separate these schools also impact negatively on the ability of the staff to share educational facilities according to students' need (Ramage & Howley, 2005; Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Eighth, another challenge is the severe out-migration of the youth. An entire generation can be absent from certain rural localities. Moreover, those who leave are usually the most educated and resourceful young members of the community (Nemes, 2005). Young people are moving from rural areas to urban areas and this leaves rural areas with mostly ageing populations (Hlalele, 2012). In low-income rural places with a predominantly ageing population financial power is reduced even more (Malhoit, 2005). Even worse, most of the supposed economically active adults are unemployed which means that there is low economic status (Hlalele, 2012). This also results in rural communities being characterised by high levels of adult illiteracy (Hlalele, 2012) which makes parental involvement in schooling a challenge. A high proportion of teachers in rural schools cite a lack of cooperation by parents (Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012). Rural children suffer the common misfortune of poor adult education. Rural schools serve many single-parent families where the head of the household has little education (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2003).

Rural challenges need to be addressed otherwise the efforts for school improvement or for meeting higher educational standards will be fruitless (Malhoit 2005). As Malhoit (2005) points out, policy makers should develop policies that measure schools' capacity and performance in meeting educational goals and outcomes for rural students. In measuring those outcomes, state accountability systems must acknowledge that progress will take time and that multiple measures, not just standardized test scores, should be used as yardsticks to measure success. For instance, education success should also be determined by looking at the graduation rate, school discipline rates, the level of parental involvement, and the success of schools in preparing students for active participation in civic and community life,

higher education, and employment that pays a liveable wage. Rural students also deserve some opportunities to learn as it is the state's responsibility to ensure that its young people are educated. Those who are in distressed places are often the poorest, the least well educated, the least mobile, and the most at-risk of educational failure. They have the same rights to an equitable and adequate education as all other children (Malhoit, 2005).

The studies cited above reinforce the notion that rural contexts that are characterised by low socio-economic status, poverty and deprivation are preventing rural school children from performing well in school. This then further suggests that the accountability measures used to measure school performance are not appropriate as they do not consider the challenges that rural schools face.

2.6 Stakeholders' Perspectives on Underperforming Rural Schools: Lessons from the Literature

In the preceding sections I reviewed literature related to policy perspectives on school underperformance, particularly the accountability systems approach as a popular measure of school performance. I then reviewed literature related to the significance of context in school performance. Finally, the review focused on rural education, particularly rural schooling. The reviewed literature will be used to develop a theoretical understanding of underperformance in rural schools.

South African policy presents school performance as some aggregate measure of student performance on tests and examinations. However, literature reviewed in this

study suggests that there are three factors that must be considered in understanding underperformance in rural schools. These are internal or schooling factors, external or contextual factors and policy factors. Figure 2.1 illuminates these factors graphically:

Macro Policy Factors

Educational Values:
accountability, standards, assessment, pass rates

Education Objectives: *equity, redress, development*

Underperforming Rural Schools

External Factors (Contextual)	Internal Factors (Schooling)
Rural Household: *family SES (employment status, household income), nature of parents (age, literacy levels, etc.)* **Rural Environment/Situation:** *poverty, services, distance & transportation, infrastructure, resources* **Rural values:** *culture, place, land, development*	**School Situation:** *resources, infrastructure, quality of teachers, curriculum, leadership and management*

Figure 2.1: Underperforming rural school conceptual framework

2.6.1 Macro Policy Mandate

The first factor that influences perspectives on an underperforming school is the national policy issue. This includes policies which inform the measures used to assess school achievement and performance. To illustrate, on the one hand the policy mandate after 1994 was for an education system that would address the inequalities of the past through equity and redress. It was envisaged that this would assist schools in historically disadvantaged contexts and their communities to develop towards parity with historically advantaged schools. Yet at the same time, to achieve this goal, the DBE developed an accountability systems approach to assess the performance of the education system in relation to these objectives. In particular, learner achievement in standardized tests and examinations was adopted as the most important marker of success. This uniform measure across all schools has been

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adopted despite the differences in the economic and educational profiles and the geographic and cultural contexts of the schools in the country.

Based on the objectives of the education system, rural school performance can be viewed as the ability to produce positive developments in rural schools and in rural communities. A school should then produce positive change to the community in terms of redress and equity. In rural areas, as the education objectives predict, a school has to be seen to be producing results or changes by showing great improvement and by serving the developmental needs of the community in a tangible manner.

2.6.2 External Factors (Contextual)

Contextual factors refer to issues in rural communities that affect school performance. These include socio-economic factors, nature of parents, poverty, infrastructure, resources and rural culture and values. The literature reviewed revealed that, despite the huge positive changes in South Africa after democracy, it is still a country that is characterized by great inequalities and high levels of poverty, especially in rural areas. These rural areas suffer from challenges of low socio-economic status, deprivation, a lack of basic services and poor infrastructure. These factors impact negatively on the quality of the education of rural children.

The value of place, land and culture is very important to rural people. Rural schools need to understand this and education initiatives that are meant to educate rural

children must take these factors into consideration when planning for rural education. Schools could do a lot more to enhance the chances of success and fulfilment for rural young people who want to remain near family and community. Moreover, rural people regard quality education as important for rural economic development. Creating a decent and economically viable life in rural places is a significant accomplishment and schools should be able to do that. However, the question remains whether the value of place among rural people is considered in educational matters, particularly where rural schools are concerned. Schools should value rural culture and rural ways of living, being and knowing. There is something very powerful about the sense of place and culture in rural communities that helps them transcend the challenges of poor infrastructure and few resources.

2.6.3 Internal Factors (Schooling)

Schooling factors refer to the issues within a school that also contribute to how rural people view school underperformance. These factors include resources, infrastructure, the quality and training level of teachers, curriculum, leadership and management. To illustrate, rural schools suffer from challenges of limited resources, poor infrastructure and poor quality of teachers. They have limited or no access to water, electricity and sanitation. They also have limited access to resources such as libraries and books, information technology and specialised science laboratory equipment. These schools further face the challenge of teachers who are reluctant to work in rural areas. Some teachers reflect poor work ethics as they are under-qualified. There is also a huge shortage of teachers and teacher mobility occurs frequently as schools find it difficult to recruit and retain good teachers. These

factors impact negatively on the quality of education offered in these rural schools and limit the quality of education offered to rural school children.

The literature suggests several key lessons for understanding underperformance in rural schools. Foremost are policy matters - in particular the problem created by the accountability systems approach in measuring school performance in rural schools. Second is the influence of contextual factors such as socio-economic factors (poverty, deprivation, low SES, poor infrastructure) in rural schools. Third are the challenges faced by rural schooling such as poor infrastructure, the poor quality of teachers and a lack of resources. These challenges formed the basis for the investigation to understand the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school.

2. 7. Summary

In this chapter I reviewed literature related to school underperformance. In particular, I illuminated the policy of measuring school performance through the accountability systems approach. I then looked at the significance of context in school under-/performance. Finally, I looked at rural education, particularly rural schooling in relation to school performance. I concluded this chapter by highlighting lessons learned from the reviewed literature which formed a framework for understanding the perspectives of stakeholders on an underperforming rural school.

In the next chapter I present in-depth theories of rurality and underperformance which underpinned this study.

CHAPTER THREE

UNDERSTANDING UNDERPERFORMANCE IN RURAL SCHOOLS:

TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

The study explored school underperformance in the context of rurality. It aimed at examining school underperformance through the eyes of rural learners, parents and teachers. In the previous chapter I reviewed literature that informed the development of a conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding these perspectives. I begin this chapter by reviewing a theory of rurality (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008). In addition, I review various theories that have been used to study and explain school underperformance. The theories of school underperformance include the opportunity to learn theory, the compensation hypothesis and the contingency theory (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). These theories presented a good basis for understanding the views of rural learners, parents and teachers on their underperforming rural school. Informed by the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, I conclude this chapter by presenting key propositions about underperforming rural schools.

3.2 A Generative Theory of Rurality

The first theoretical framework informing this study was the generative theory of rurality as posited by Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008). This theory is premised on the claim that social theories (including theories of rurality) are very useful in our understanding of particular systems or organisations. However, they do not account for the rural environment as an active force in shaping self and

community identities. These researchers advocate a theory of rurality that is transformative, which is strongly based on the view that challenges facing rural communities require their active role as agents of this transformation. A significant feature of this theory is its main focus on rural people. It accounts for the "…ability of people in space and time to sustain themselves both as subjects and as agents able to resist or transform the environment, depending on [the] resources available" (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008, p. 4*).* It conceives rural people as having the agency to, given a chance, propose ways which the direction of their education would take.

As Balfour (2012) points out, this social theory is aimed at examining existing beliefs about rurality and education in rural contexts. It is easy to theorize rurality as a passive context, which is how most research portrays it; but rurality can also be portrayed as an actively formed collection of forces, agencies and resources (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008) that could be clearly visible in lived experiences as well as in educational and social processes involving rural learners, parents and teachers. Rurality is further a concept that is based on the view that rural people make use of time, space and resources differently to transform their rural environment rather than be subject to it. This is the total opposite of the popular belief of the negatives associated with rurality. As a context, rurality here is considered as transformative, capable of not only affecting positive change but also of inspiring teachers, community workers and learners in rural contexts. Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) maintain that the purpose of this generative theory of rurality in addressing rural education research would be to credit rurality as a primary focus and not as a secondary factor that rarely draws people's attention to rural

matters. While rural places face serious economic, political and social challenges, they also possess a number of qualities that are often ignored or overlooked (Mahlomaholo, 2012).

This theory reflects on three dynamic variables that are available to address rural challenges (i.e., forces, agencies and resources) (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008; Balfour, 2012). Forces refer to the "…movement of labour and production from the rural to the urban and back again as constituted by space, place and time" (Balfour, 2012, p. 14). Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008) and Balfour (2012) refer to space and place as that which is occupied by people and as having great influence in shaping people's identities and subjectivity. Place does not only have a great impact on who people are in the world, but it also influences their behaviour and thinking. This brings to light the significance of place in education and the notion argues that if learning is socially situated, then place has great influence on it. These researchers also place great value on time in rural life as that which determines movement. Forces are mostly about how space and time influence each other's change depending on movement between places (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008; Balfour, 2012).

Education is as much an activity as labour or production and as such occurs within space. This highlights the significance of place in rural education. This theory calls for education to take into consideration the conditions in these rural settings; rural people's beliefs and culture, social, economic and political situation which may extend to the state of rural households. Crucial to this is rural people's attachment to place (Howley & Howley, 2000; Gruenewald, 2003; Howley, 2006). This makes the

curriculum and teaching and learning processes crucial in terms of what is taught to rural students as well as the mediation of school expectations and rural expectations on education. Time determines movement such as moving from one place to another; how this movement happens affect time spent doing it (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008). In schooling, the importance of time is determined by the distance travelled to school by learners and teachers, the distance from homes to school and the distance between other services and the school. This raises the important question whether rural communities that are remote in space and time and further suffer the issues of distance and poor infrastructure (such as transportation) can access education fairly and equally.

The second variable is agency. Agencies are identified as a series of behaviours and dispositions such as "compliance and disruption; activism and entropy and involves an exercise of will towards both ends" (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008, p. 101). Two contrasting perspectives of rurality are highlighted namely a negative and positive perspective. The negative perspective is that it portrays rural as "passive, static, backward and ignorant". It sees rurality as being in need of rescue, pity and charity (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008; Balfour, 2012, p. 101). On the other hand, it views rurality as transformative and capable of changing behaviour and of bringing out people's positive traits if both space and time are controlled. The defining characteristic of agencies is their ability to transform the relationship between space, place, and time. In rural settings the diffusion of the environment to change the relationship between space and time determines the extent to which these require agency to be modified or brought into close proximity to each other. This could also refer to the ability of rural people to change or transform things. In

education, this basically refers to accessibility which implies the physical distance between school and home. This theory also highlights the importance of the ability of and the extent to which rural people can contribute to schooling. This implies, among others, their involvement in school activities and how they deal with issues that may disturb schooling (such as the distance between home and school and how this distance can be reduced or managed) and the role of rural people (learners, teachers, parents, community leaders) in being the agents of change in rural education.

The third element of a generative theory of rurality is resources. Like agencies and forces, these variables have various meanings which are mutually connected. They refer to material and emotional resources as well as to conceptual and physical resources. These are resources which are either purchased or generated but their efficacy in a context depends mainly on agencies or forces and the extent to which these might delimit their availability and use (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008). Commitment and connection to the area have the potential to extend access to resources and to transform the relationship between space and time. As such, the generative capacity of communities to deploy them depends in turn on agencies' effects on forces.

Low levels of resources in rural schools narrow opportunities of performance in these schools (i.e., performance as defined by the department of education). These resources can be "…person-based (individual strengths), family-based (household income, employment), school-based (infrastructure and expertise), community-based (institutions, services, beliefs) and society-based (policies and structures)" (Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012, p. 32). They represent the relationships of rural communities and

settings in their entirety. These resources can be used effectively if there are successful relationships within rural settings that enable their provision, maintenance and sustainability. These relationships would then ensure that agency is enabled which would therefore mean that rurality is not depicted as lacking in resources but as active in causing educational change or transformation (Ebersohn & Ferreira, 2012).

This theory allows for scrutiny of rural people's perspectives on an underperforming school. Such an investigation should take into consideration the nature and quality of the opportunities that the school and community offer stakeholders to take an active role in schooling activities as well as the extent to which the school considers their values, services and needs.

3.3 Theories of School Underperformance

The second theoretical framework informing this study was van de Grift's and Houtveen's (2006) theories of school underperformance: opportunity to learn theory, compensation hypothesis and contingency theory. According to van de Grift and Houtveen (2006), there are both internal and external factors that influence learner performance in underperforming schools. Thus, to explain these factors these researchers draw our attention to the theories of school underperformance, including the opportunity to learn theory, the compensation hypothesis and the contingency theory. These theories have been identified as sources of both external and internal locus of control for school problems and solutions.

3.3.1 Opportunity to Learn

The opportunity to learn theory focuses on internal factors emanating from schools themselves. It gives explanations of school underperformance that favour an internal locus control. This theory concentrates on endogenous factors like the curriculum, learning time, quality teaching, an educational climate, knowledge of learner achievements, and measures for learners with special educational needs. It is based on the notion that, in underperforming schools, learners are not given sufficient opportunities to achieve the minimum objectives of the curriculum (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006; Houtveen et al., 2007). This is due to in the many challenges that are experienced by underperforming schools. For example, textbooks and the teaching material used in these schools are not up to acceptable standards and, as a result, learners are robbed of the opportunity to achieve even the basic objectives of the curriculum. Added to that is insufficient learning and teaching time, inadequate teaching which does not inspire learners, unsuccessful measures for learners with special needs, as well as ineffective leaders (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006).

There are usually conditions in underperforming schools that impact negatively on the amount of teaching time that is allocated to teaching and learning. Compared to schools with more favourable socio-economic circumstances, teachers in schools that are facing challenging circumstances, like rural schools, have to work harder and show more commitment if they want to improve learner achievement. Furthermore, they have to work even harder for that improvement to be sustained. These schools face challenging learner behavior, high rates of staff turnover and a poor physical environment (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll & Russ, 2004). These factors do not

only negatively influence the schooling processes, but also have a negative impact on teaching and learning.

Gustaffson (2006) gives a good example of how circumstances in schools with challenging circumstances might not allow for reaching the minimum objectives of the curriculum. In these schools a lesson can be disturbed by the learners' inability to grasp what the teacher is teaching. He points out that in schools that are facing challenging circumstances, a teacher wanting learners to follow a set of instructions will have to spend time explaining the instructions before learners can be expected to begin an exercise. Added to that, the physical environment will most likely not be conducive to learning and once learners start going through the exercise many, will require additional help in interpreting the instructions because their reading ability is limited. Compared to the more affluent schools where learners are more likely to be competent readers, schools in challenging circumstances have to struggle to achieve even the minimum discipline measures and other issues not related to conditions for teaching and learning. During the limited time of a school day, learners at poorer schools will therefore have less time to actually learn from an exercise as more time is required for explanation. In addition, learners are more likely to require help, creating a distraction to other learners and further decreasing the amount of learning actually achieved. Conditions are therefore working against learners where more time is required for learning. A teacher at poorer schools will have to invest significantly more energy during class time and is likely to have to deal with a host of social problems. At more affluent schools a teacher will more likely be able to direct problems to the school's social worker who is paid by the School Governing Body (SGB) as nu such support service is provided by the education department in

public schools. At the end of the teaching day a teacher at a challenged school will often be drained and not be able to pay attention to the learning needs of those who desperately need it, which means they fall further behind and perhaps become disillusioned with school, which eventually motivates them to drop out (Gustaffson, 2006). These factors impact negatively on learners' capacity to learn as insufficient learning and teaching time, inadequate teaching which does not inspire some of the learners and a disregard of struggling learners are at the order of the day (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006).

3.3.2 Compensation Hypothesis

In their compensation hypothesis van de Grift and Houtveen (2006) acknowledge the importance of both endogenous and exogenous factors in school underperformance. The compensation hypothesis focuses on exogenous factors like the complexity of a school's surroundings and the socio-economic status of the learners and the community (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). In their work on the identification of weaknesses in underperforming schools, van de Grift and Houtveen (2007) confirm that endogenous factors affect learners' opportunity to learn. The factors they list include insufficient learning material offered at schools which does not allow for achieving core targets; insufficient learning time for reaching the minimum objectives of the curriculum; poor instructional quality; insufficient insight into students' performance levels; insufficient or inappropriate special measures for struggling learners; and prolonged dysfunctional organization (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2007). However, they found exogenous factors as well, like high mobility and recurring fluctuations in learner enrolment and teaching staff; and high percentages of children at risk due to several risk factors (such as poverty, low socio-

economic status, and ethnic minority status). They point out that schools that perform well suffer less from teacher mobility, have limited student mobility, have fewer low-SES children, and are smaller than underperforming schools. Hence they conclude that more affluent schools' contextual factors are more favourable for creating improvement than those in underperforming schools (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2007).

The compensation hypothesis is based on the notion that schools in disadvantaged areas must compensate for the fact that learners who enter these schools are already lagging behind their peers in better functioning schools; thus dysfunctional schools must do more to provide in the basic needs of their learners such as creating a safe, orderly, and stimulating environment before they can work on making structural improvements to educational processes (Janssens, 2001). This means that these schools need to make up for what the learners do not have due to their disadvantaged circumstances. They need to provide a safe, orderly and stimulating environment before they can deal with effective teaching and learning. This hypothesis suggests that staff in schools in disadvantaged areas have to work harder on improving both academic and situational factors than staff in functional schools in order to achieve the desired educational outcomes.

Lupton (2005) argues against the notion that, if schools are failing to deliver quality education, the school leadership and teachers are to be held responsible and should be replaced. She highlights two ways that show that this assumption is problematic. Firstly, while more financial support alone cannot solve every problem in education, problems in schools in challenging circumstances are generally made worse by

insufficient financial support. For instance, in her research, she found that teachers in disadvantaged schools were compromising quality teaching and management in order to deal with priority issues concerning the welfare of their pupils. She argues that this was as a result of lacking resources. Specifically, financial assistance would enable schools to have appropriate staff to provide pastoral support. Secondly, she argues that discourses on quality in education that looks at any single matter like funding or management as a cause of failure and that does not include socio-economic contexts in which these schools are situated, cannot make a significant difference.

3.3.3   Contingency Theory

The contingency theory looks for connections between endogenous and exogenous factors (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). It is based on the argument that the effectiveness of an organization (such as a school) depends on internal and external contingency factors (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2007). External contingency factors include the complexity of a school's surroundings, the school's socio-economic environment, the age of the organization, and so on. Internal contingency factors include school policies, school organization, and the school board. According to the contingency theory, schools should look for the best match between their internal and external contingency factors. This theory envisages that the activities of principals, teachers, and school boards reconcile the educational process and the school's situational factors (Creemers, Scheerens & Reynolds, 2000). In underperforming schools, this process of mediation is not successful. Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll and Russ (2004) state that effective schools in disadvantaged areas are characterized

by a specific pattern of elements of organization and policy that distinguishes these schools from ineffective schools in disadvantaged areas.

In rural schools, the internal situation is likely to be informed by external factors. For example, Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris and James (2006) investigated a development programme that focused on a group of eight secondary schools. The schools in this study were considered to be facing extremely challenging circumstances characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and deprivation. They were also schools considered to be seriously underperforming and in need of improvement and support strategies. The study reflects upon the emerging evidence about improving schools in the most difficult circumstances and argues that more context-specific programmes of intervention are required if the goal of improving performance in such schools is to be realised. These researchers reached the conclusion that socio-economic context is a huge and unquestionable force that shapes the aspirations and subsequent attainment of young people in disadvantaged areas. There is the residing, powerful issue of external factors that continue to impact negatively upon the school, irrespective of its efforts to improve and sustain improvement. However, despite the recognition of the close relationship between poverty and attainment, this has generally been ignored in attempts to improve schools in disadvantaged areas which opt to concentrate on problems internal to the school. As a result, many of the improvement programmes and initiatives have simply failed to tackle broader contextual issues. This has meant successive disappointments for many of the externally funded improvement programmes and projects aimed at raising achievement in the poorest schools (Harris & Ranson, 2005). Therefore, unless the wider social and economic inequities are addressed,

schools in challenging circumstances are unlikely to improve (Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris & James, 2006).

Harris, Chapman, Muijs, Russ and Stoll (2006) outline the findings from a small-scale research study that explored how a group of secondary schools in challenging contexts had improved and raised attainment over a period of five years in succession. The study stresses the importance of external factors and how these influence schools' ability to improve and to sustain improvement. It identified certain strategies for improvement that schools found to be successful in securing improved performance. These researchers argue that more highly differentiated improvement approaches to school improvement are needed for schools in such circumstances. They conclude by suggesting that while schools in challenging contexts can raise attainment and performance through their own efforts, the external environment remains an important influence upon a school's ability to improve. The strong control that these socio-economic conditions have on schools in challenging contexts means that substantial resources will be required to gradually remove the social and economic barriers to underachievement.

Chapman and Allen (2006) argue that schools in difficult contexts tend to mirror the communities they serve. This phenomenon makes them show signs of a variety of internal barriers to improvement which stem from external factors. This notion is supported by Harris, Chapman, Muijs, Russ & Stoll (2006) who assert that school improvement efforts can prove to be very difficult for schools in challenging circumstances. This is because these schools face levels of socio-economic deprivation. In his work he used existing empirical data to focus on the process of

leading change in a group of schools in challenging circumstances in England. He agrees that quality and leadership are important in these school contexts but he goes on to argue that it is not enough to tackle the persistent relationship between social disadvantage and underachievement. This relationship could be dealt with through structural change, localized and community based action rather than through standardization and accountability.

Harris and Chapman (2004) argue that contemporary approaches aimed at the improvement of schools in difficult or disadvantaged contexts are not likely to succeed as they are neither sufficiently differentiated nor context specific. They recommend an alternative approach to the improvement of such schools. They recommend an approach that is against standardized solutions and in favour of differentiated measures that take into consideration and value the diversity, variability and complexity of schools in difficult contexts. Stakeholders in rural schools are likely to view school underperformance through the relationship between the school and its rural context, with particular reference to how the school takes the community context into consideration when planning schooling activities.

3.4 Propositions for Understanding Underperforming Rural Schools

Based on the elucidation of the concept of rurality and informed by the reviewed literature and the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, four key propositions were developed. These propositions were linked to the critical questions that guided this study and might shed light on the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school. These propositions were broadly based on the three important aspects influencing school performance/underperformance: schooling

(internal) factors, contextual (external) factors (which are discussed in the next sections) and macro policy factors. Macro policy factors refer to the principles and values as set out by the policy directives guiding schooling processes. The policy factors relevant to school under/performance matters are equity, redress, and development. Macro policy factors also refer to school performance measures: standards, assessment and Grade 12 pass rates. These should be in line with schooling and contextual factors and the perspectives of rural people could be based on the fact that these should complement one another. All three affect school under/performance and should be viewed individually and as whole to explain under/performance matters.

The first proposition is based on the opportunity to learn theory (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006) which posits that students in underperforming schools are not given sufficient opportunities to learn and to achieve the minimum objectives of the curriculum. This proposition holds that there are internal factors in rural schools which negatively influence the opportunities of rural learners to learn. These include insufficient teaching resources like textbooks, laboratory equipment and other learning and teaching support materials. This lack of resources might impact negatively on the quality of teaching and learning happening in the school. Poor infrastructure also means that the school environment is not conducive to effective teaching and learning. Rural schools are also confronted with the challenge of ineffective teachers who may struggle to understand students' lack of academic performance and who may also not be able to devise appropriate strategies for struggling learners. Underperforming schools are also characterised by weak and poor leadership and management. These factors may prompt stakeholders to view

school underperformance as a consequence of the circumstances in rural schools that deprive rural learners of adequate opportunities to learn.

The second proposition is based on the compensation hypothesis (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006) which acknowledges the importance of consideration of external factors in school underperformance. The compensation hypothesis focuses on external factors like the complexity of a school's locality (in this case rurality) and the socio-economic status of the learners and the community. It is centred on the idea that schools in disadvantaged areas must provide in learners' basic needs before they can work on making structural improvements to educational processes. Rural schools need to make up for what the learners do not have due to their disadvantaged circumstances. This proposition maintains that perspectives on underperforming rural schools might be based on the fact that schools should employ corrective measures to compensate for the deprived social and economic background of their learners. This means that rural people may expect schools to offer that which is lacking in their children's lives outside school. Thus a successful/performing school might be viewed as one which provides the learners with what they lack in the community and hence an underperforming one as one which fails to offer such services and resources.

The third proposition is based on the contingency theory (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006) which is rooted in the argument that for schools to be successful, there is a need to look for the best match between their internal (schooling) and external (contextual) factors. Activities of principals, teachers and school governing bodies should reconcile the educational process and the school's situational factors. This

proposition suggests that rural people might view school underperformance from the perspective that schools should plan in such a way that their internal processes complement the contextual realities around it. For example, rural stakeholders might view a performing school as one whose internal activities reflect community and family values and activities. In this regard the community may respond positively to a rural school that offers a subject like Agriculture which is relevant to the rural way of life.

The fourth and final proposition is based on the generative theory of rurality as advocated by Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane (2008). This theory posits that challenges facing rural communities require the active role of these communities as agents of transformation. This proposition maintains that rural people's views on an underperforming school depend on the nature and quality of the opportunities and participative decision making that the school presents in order to allow them to take an active role in defining good rural schools and quality rural education. This would then allow for a deeper understanding of what school performance means for rural schools.

These broad propositions were used to frame the study and to guide data collection and especially the analysis without limiting or suppressing the voices of the rural people in the study.

3.5 Summary

In this chapter I reviewed and discussed theories related to underperforming schools as well as the generative theory of rurality which formed part of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks underpinning this study. The chapter was concluded with a list of propositions developed from the theoretical frameworks. These were used to guide the processes of data collection and analysis which are elucidated in subsequent chapters.

In the next chapter I discuss the research design and the methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The study explored an underperforming school in the context of rurality. It aimed at answering this critical question:

- *What are the perspectives of learners, teachers and parents on an underperforming rural school? What informs such perspectives?*

This study explored school underperformance through the eyes of learners, parents and teachers in one secondary school in a rural context. It aimed to give voice to a rural community's understandings and interpretations of their 'world'. In this chapter I present a comprehensive discussion of the methodological orientation and research design, data collection, ethical considerations as well as the processes of data analysis and interpretation that were employed in the study.

4.2 Research Approach

As stated in the previous chapters, my intention was to understand the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on underperformance in a rural school. As such, context was a very important aspect of the study. To achieve my aims, a qualitative research approach was considered to be the most appropriate. This approach allowed a close examination of the social and cultural contexts in situating different meanings and interpretations the participants would make regarding their school vis-à-vis performance/underperformance (Yates, 2004). This approach further allowed me to

closely observe the practices and experiences of the research participants and to develop in-depth accounts of these and the contexts in which they operated. This approach is especially important in studying rural contexts with their complexities, involving varying social, economic and political positions. In addition, a qualitative approach was an effective choice as it stresses the importance of context in studying the meaning embedded in the actions of individuals or societies (Yates, 2004). In qualitative research, a researcher studies phenomena and behaviour in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative research is premised on the notion that research is not only about observing and measuring, but also about collecting data from different sources and making sense of those data (Yates, 2004). It further supports the notion that making sense of data could only be possible if participants' thoughts and feelings as well as the significance of context are taken into consideration through methods of data collection and data analysis (Yates, 2004). As such, this approach was useful in this study as I tried to understand how groups of learners, parents and teachers gave meaning to and expressed their understandings of school underperformance within their rural context.

A research paradigm guides the process of inquiry and forms the basis for the practice of science by directing the research towards appropriate research methods and methodologies depending on the nature of the phenomenon being studied (Henning, 2004). This study was located within the interpretive paradigm. This paradigm requires going into the participants' natural setting and experiencing the environment in which they create and recreate their reality (Radnor, 2002). It also regards all human action as meaningful and as interpreted and understood within the

context of social practice (Usher, 1996). It is based on the belief that it is not only by observation that knowledge is constructed, but also by explanations of people's intentions, beliefs, values, reasons, meaning making and self-understanding (Henning, 2004). The paradigm resonated well with this study as my intention was to find meaning within social interactions. Moreover, I fore grounded context as a significant factor that influences human behaviour, understanding and interpretation. Informed by this thinking, both I as the researcher and the research participants were viewed as interpreters, which is another significant characteristic of interpretive research. As such, the study utilized qualitative data collection methods that included observations, interviews and document analysis.

4.3 An Ethnographic Study

The choice of research design and methodology in this study was influenced by the objectives of the study and the critical question. I had to find an approach that would allow me to best answer this critical question:

- *What are the perspectives of learners, teachers and parents on an underperforming rural school? What informs such perspectives?*

A research design determines what a researcher will look at, how data will be collected and how it will be analysed (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Informed by the interpretive paradigm and the qualitative research approach, this study utilised an ethnographic design. **E**thnographic design was selected based on the notion that it is particularly appropriate where deeper understandings are sought. Ethnographic studies are not characterised by their boundaries alone; the principles that guide these studies are more complex as they include the setting of boundaries with the aim of

capturing the way of life within the system or a group (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This study used an ethnographic design because it was important to capture the meaning that the participants in the study gave to underperformance in their school within the context of rurality. The ethnographic approach was also chosen because it allows for an exploration of the ways in which people describe, explain and present their perspectives as derived from relationships with one another. This approach allows the researcher to capture such views and relationships through observing behaviour and interactions, how participants respond to circumstances (social, economic and political), how they are in the world, and their connection with the place in which they live. Key elements in this study were participants' understandings and interpretations of actions and procedures and the sense they made of these as well as their discourses regarding the school processes and schooling in relation to their rural context.

In this study I endeavoured to illuminate rural participants' views on school underperformance in relation to their context. The ethnographic process allowed me to get close to the learners, teachers and parents and to observe what was happening in the school on an ongoing basis within a certain period of time. It allowed me to give meaning to and understand participants' social meanings and activities in the rural setting. I was able to get close to the inside in order to 'tell it like it is', 'give an insider's account', 'be true to the natural phenomenon', 'give thick descriptions' and to 'deepen rich data' (Brewer, 2000, p. 37). To do this, I employed a relatively open-ended approach in order to investigate how these people viewed the situations they faced, how they regarded one another and also how they saw themselves in this context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Informed by the principles of ethnography, I needed to spend an extended period of time in the setting where participants carried out their daily tasks and had their daily conversations in order to be able to eventually render a thick description (Henning, 2004). Although traditional ethnographers would live with a researched group for an extended period of time (sometimes a year or more) in order to document and interpret their distinctive way of life, the fieldwork of this study comprised a period of eight months. In the initial observation period I spent two weeks in the school for five days a week; thereafter I was in the school at least three days per week for the rest of the eight-month period. Times allocated for fieldwork varied depending on what I intended to do. Most days I would be in the school during normal school hours, arriving in the morning for assembly and leaving in the afternoon when the learners were dismissed. Guided by the data already collected I would sometimes arrive in the area very early in the morning before the school started to observe the social activities and activities of learners and parents coming to the school in the morning. Some days I would leave at least three hours after the bell had rung to observe the activities of learners after school. After the completion of the fieldwork phase of the study, I made at least three return visits to the school for the purposes of data verification and clarification. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that although there is no specified length of time for data collection, the researcher can stay until s/he feels that sufficient data have been collected to address the critical questions. Thus, in total I spent eight months in the school and left when I felt that I had collected sufficient data to illuminate the critical question.

The data collection process was informed by the notion that ethnographic research includes observations of people's interactions in their setting (Delamont, 2002) and involves the presence of an observer for prolonged periods in a single setting. Hence, during the time I spent in the school, I observed and talked with learners, teachers and parents. As an ethnographer my interest was to see my participants in the school context and to try to reconstruct their experiences, beliefs and understandings from their own standpoint (Smith, 1998). Informed by the theoretical frameworks as presented in Chapter Three, I wanted to document the entire range of school activities; the social life of learners, teachers and parents; the relationship between what happened outside the school and what happened inside school; and the impact that these relationships had on each other. This process enabled me to draw together all aspects of learners' school, social and home lives and to illuminate their experiences related to schooling. I could also show the complexities of rural life by valuing participants' views, perspectives, opinions, prejudices and beliefs about the underperformance of their rural school (Delamount, 2002). This in-depth ethnographic study of a rural secondary school community (Hammersley & Atkins, 2007) focused on a phenomenon (a rural secondary school) as a bounded system in its real-life context and, in particular, it focused on the interaction between context and action (Henning, 2004). Participants were studied within the rural school context with events occurring naturally while boundaries were clearly defined. It was an ethnographic study of members of one school sharing their perspectives on the underperformance of their school as they interacted with one another in the rural school context.

4.4 Sampling Process

Delamont (2002) notes that honesty and reflexivity are crucial in sampling and that it is important to document how the sampling took place. To select the research field and research participants (Henning, 2004), I employed the system of 'purposive' sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). To understand the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school, I chose one school in a rural context in order to provide a unique example of real people in a real-life rural context. The ethnographic study method of inquiry afforded me the opportunity to observe the natural environment of the school, the classroom and the playground and also to probe deeply into the school situation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

Therefore, informed by my critical research questions (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995) and the ethnographic study, I selected a rural school which had been labelled as *underperforming* by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). If a school obtains a Grade 12 pass rate that is below 60% for three consecutive years, it is regarded as underperforming and the DBE places it under the National Strategy for Learner Attainment Programme and gives it a special measures school status (see Chapter One). A second criterion for selecting the school was informed by its proximity to my place of work. Therefore, for convenience purposes, I selected a school in the same district where I worked, namely Isibani[6] Secondary School in the Ilembe school district in the KwaZulu-Natal province. The profile of the school is presented in a following section.

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[6] This is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the school

Following the system of 'purposive' sampling as suggested by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000), I targeted subjects likely to yield the richest data for the research questions under study. I had planned to interview teachers, parents and learners in the selected school using both semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews for all the structures in the school (i.e., learners, the Representative Council of Learners [RCL] members, parents, School Governing Body (SGB) members, and teachers. I was engaged in participant observation for over a period of one month before I finally identified the interview participants. During this time I purposely searched for information rich participants. I also got very close to one of the teachers whom other teachers spoke highly of as she was the youngest member of staff and also furthering her studies. She became my contact person and I could communicate with teachers through her. She was instrumental in assisting me to find my way around the school in the initial stages of the research and also in choosing suitable participants.

During this 'initial observation stage' I got to know my target group well and also began to understand, to a certain extent, the culture of the school. I had chats with learners when I was monitoring classes that were not attended to, which was quite often. I got to know learners very well, which assisted me in finding information rich learner participants. After chatting with Grade 12 learners for some time, I began to identify learners who were outspoken and who represented different subject streams. I later chose seven learners (four boys and three girls) from Grade 12 to serve as interview participants representing the learners of the school. I did not have a choice regarding the RCL members as only two learners (boys) served on the RCL in the

school. As far as parent sampling was concerned, I had to be careful because parent participation in school activities was very poor. I checked the parents' meetings register and chose seven parents (four women and three men) who regularly attended parents' meetings. These included a cooking lady (i.e., a woman who was employed as a cook in the school's feeding scheme) and a lady who sold snacks to the learners at break time and whose children also attended the school. The School Governing Body members were also limited in numbers as they were only five so I planned to work with all of them. I ended up working with only four (three women and one man) because the fifth one was not available. I got to know the educators well enough to identify those whose participation might serve the purposes of the research. For the semi-structured interview I interviewed a Life Orientation teacher who was commuting daily from the nearest city to the school. She was a qualified educator with 10 years' teaching experience. She had been at the school for only two years. The choice of teacher focus group interviewees was limited as the school had only a few teachers so I interviewed six of the eight teachers in total (four women and two men). These teachers were teaching across all grades. One was from the area and the others travelled daily from the city. Three were qualified educators and the other three were pursuing their teaching qualifications. In total, I interviewed seven learners, two RCL members, four SGB members, six parents, and six teachers.

4.5 The Research Site

Since this was an ethnographic study which fore grounded context, a clear description of the rural locale in which the school was located is crucial as it provides a foundation for understanding the analysis and findings of this study. In this section

I therefore offer a framework for understanding the research field by giving a full background description and illuminating the context of the school. This will facilitate a deeper understanding of the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers of school underperformance from within this rural school context. It was this context that, according to the theories of underperformance used in this study, impacted on schooling in general and on teaching and learning processes in the school in particular. Again, the theoretical frameworks used in this study served to stress the relationship between internal (schooling) factors and external (contextual) factors which, in terms of place and time, impacted on the schooling activities and processes that were observed. These frameworks also facilitated the interpretations and meanings given to the behaviours, interactions and relationships that were observed in the research site.

4.5.1 The Community Context

In order to understand the school in which this study was undertaken, it is important to first describe the larger community context in which it is located. The school is located in a rural area called Ezindongeni[7], situated five kilometres away from the tarred road leading to the nearest commercial centre. A commercial centre is central to most rural villages; in this case it is 40 kilometres from the nearest town and 90 kilometres from the nearest city, Durban. The main activities and meeting place for people in the centre happens in the main taxi rank linking people to the nearest town, nearest city and the neighbouring villages. Teachers working in schools in the area take the taxis from this point to their respective schools and villages.

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[7] This is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the community

There are local municipal offices and government offices of the Department of Home Affairs where births, deaths, marriages and related affairs are registered and where adults 16 years and older obtain their identity documents and passports. There is also an office for Social Welfare; this is the ministry that is responsible for the issuing of old-age pensions and social grants for orphaned children and unemployed single parents. There is a lot of activity in these offices as the majority of people in this area depend on pensions and government grants. As much as aged parents appreciate these offices which make access to old-age pensions easy for them, they also feel that their services encourage teenage pregnancy because young girls are tempted to have babies so they can register their children, get birth certificates and apply for their social grants. The presence of these offices therefore symbolizes poverty alleviation in terms of old-age pensions and social grants for orphans, but on the other hand it perpetrates teenage pregnancy because of social grants for young girls. This place is very busy on pension days because it is a pay point for pensioners and grant holders. On 'pension day', traders from surrounding villages come to the centre to sell their wares to the pensioners. On these days schools experience large numbers of absentees with young mothers receiving grants and children accompanying their aged grandparents.

The centre also functions as a shopping place for people from surrounding villages, including those from Ezindongeni. It boasts a number of shops and a bottle store. These shops are bigger and cheaper than those normally found in the villages, making the centre popular and convenient for purchasing 'end of the month'

groceries. It is also in this centre where small business people and informal traders seek their fortune. These are people who have stalls around the economic centre and work as shoemakers, carpenters, technicians, etc. There are also stalls where fruit, vegetables and snacks are sold. There are also takeaway containers that sell cooked food and drinks. This is a good source of income for locals as most people leave their homes very early in the morning and can only eat when they get here. It is also a halfway station for people travelling from the city to the villages as they stop here for ready meals. This is also where taxi drivers have most of their meals for the day. This area creates jobs and business opportunities for members of the surrounding villages.

The kinds of houses built in this village are evidence that these people suffer from great poverty and disadvantage. The common style for each household is a rondavel[8] with a thatched roof and *isifladi* which is usually a square one or two roomed house made of mud or blocks with a zinc roof. Rondavels are traditionally used as a kitchen during the day. This is where people make fire for cooking and for warmth in winter. At night children sleep here which explains why most learners in rural schools smell of fire smoke as that is where they hang their uniforms to dry at night. *Isifladi* is used by older people as places where important visitors are received and also where older people sleep. Most households are headed by ageing parents who are mostly illiterate or have had limited access to education. As most young parents already have new lives in urban areas, their children remain behind with their grandparents. Some of the learners are orphans as there is a high mortality rate among young adults. This affects parental involvement in the children's education.

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[8] This refers to a round African style hut usually made of mud with a conical thatched roof

Travelling from this centre to the school takes two kilometres on the tar road to a main gravel road. From here it is another five kilometres to the school. Even though this commercial centre is the heart of a cluster of villages, there is not much movement of people from the immediate area of the school to this centre during the day. Also, because local public transport is expensive, people prefer to walk these seven kilometres to the centre. The road from the school to the commercial centre is riddled with pot holes which makes public transport scarce. Because of this difficulty with transport, learners rarely go to this commercial centre; most only go there on pension days. A walking trip to this area is sometimes planned, but learners who reside in this area are excluded. Another reason why learners seldom go there is because this centre has no educational facilities like libraries or places that offer educational programs. On the main road to the school, the only activity in the morning is children going to school. You also see a few cars that transport teachers to schools in the area. During the day you rarely meet a car while a few livestock graze contentedly along the road. You can also see young men hanging around in the supermarkets and taverns (alcohol outlets). When driving to school, you join the gravel road off the tarred main road. The central places for this community are the churches and shops (which are called supermarkets and which sell alcohol). The shops are popular meeting places for the community which explains why, in the words of a parent, *"…young people drink from an early age because there is alcohol temptation everywhere they hang out"* (Parents' focus group interview). In the five kilometres to the school there are about five shops along the road. Next to the school are two shops where some learners spend most of their school day. This is where, according to them, they buy cigarettes, play games and buy alcohol. These shops are

also hangouts for young boys who have dropped out of school or who have passed Matric but have no further education or job prospects.

This village lacks basic services like running water and electricity. Most households rely on candle light and they still fetch water from the river or boreholes which are far apart (at least 2 km). This means that people walk long distances to fetch water or to do their washing. The community also still collects firewood from far away to make fire for cooking or for warmth in winter. Most of the household chores are performed by school going children. In the afternoon one can see young children, mostly girls, even of primary school age, carrying buckets full of water, washing and walking to the common borehole tap. On weekends it is the same children (again mostly girls) who walk long distances to the nearest forest to fetch fire wood. All houses have pit toilets that are manually dug by family members.

This context shows that there is a visible high rate of poverty in the area. Most households are confronted by great deprivation as most community members rely on pensions and government grants to support themselves and their families. Some women rely on self-generated income as they sell sweets and snacks to learners and run a small business in a stall in the commercial centre on pension days. The village has a very high unemployment rate; even adults who should be economically active are unemployed and most young boys and men spend time in and around the shops. Drinking is common among both men and women. These factors are likely to affect the education prospects of young girls and boys and impact negatively on their schooling.

4.5.2 The School Context

This section describes the history of the school and the school in its current state. Data used were obtained from observations, interviews and document analysis. To obtain information regarding the history of the school, I interviewed an elderly gentleman in the community who had been a member of the School Committee when the school was established in 1977. I also reviewed the minutes of School Committee and Parents' meetings for the period 1977 to 1991. To obtain a clear picture of the school in its current state, field notes from observations and interviews were used.

4.5.2.1 The History of the School

Community members played a major role in the establishment of the school in 1977. The school was the first secondary school in a cluster of three villages in the area. It was established so that children from three different villages could proceed from primary to secondary school in the same area. As in most rural areas at the time, schools would only offer instruction up to the last class in primary school (which was Standard 6 or currently Grade 8). In most rural areas, if you wanted your child to go further than primary school you had to send him/her to a township school in urban areas where they often had to stay with relatives. This was not easy as very few people in the community could afford this.

> *'Those times were difficult for struggling parents who wished for their boys to finish school but because of financial constraints could not. If you did not know anyone in the township then your child could not go beyond Std 6. They would either work in the sugar plantations or on farms, if they are lucky when*

they are old enough would go to the city to look for work.' (Conversation with Former SGB Chairperson, 4th November 2010 – verbatim transcription)

This is what motivated people to request for a secondary school in the area. In 1976 the three chiefs from three neighbouring villages and one of the community members who was a teacher in a secondary school in KwaZulu came together under the chairmanship of a pastor from the Faith Mission church to discuss the possibility of establishing a secondary school in the areas. This collective effort by the three chiefs from the three villages was very rare as the villages were competitive and there were usually faction fights among people from different villages. The task team travelled to Maphumulo to ask for permission from the then Department of Education to register a secondary school that would be used by these villages which already had a primary school each. This was not an easy task as it required great patience. The application required that departmental offices had to be revisited a number of times for submissions and this involved a lot of travelling.

When permission was granted to build a secondary school, there was a delay in registering it as all three chiefs wanted this school to be built in their respective villages. They eventually reached an agreement and they agreed on a spot next to the main road opposite the courts which was central to the three villages. However, it was discovered that this area was dangerous for the children as it had a waterfall. Later they settled for the area where the school is currently located, which is in one of the villages. To this day the name of the school represents the unity of these three villages. Planning to build the school was fraught with problems. They only had the

land that had been donated by one of the chiefs but no money. It was common at the time in rural schools that the community would request the establishment of a school and that permission would be granted by the Department of Education. When the community had identified a suitable piece of land, the Department would allocate a principal to the school. The same thing happened in this school. To obtain funds to construct the school, the chief suggested that each household should contribute financially towards the project. People did this happily without complaining because they looked forward to having a secondary school in the area so their children could finish school.

In the rural areas in the 70s and 80s, the procedure was that the community would take full financial responsibility for the construction of the school building, which explains why much schooling occurred in people's houses and in churches as there were simply not enough resources among rural communities to fund building projects. Government only accepted responsibility for allocating a principal, registering the name of the school and receiving reports on school activities from the principal. At Isibani secondary school (the site of this study), the allocated principal and the school committee consisting of two church pastors and two male members of the community held their first meeting on the 2nd of March 1977. Minutes of this meeting recorded this date as the official date for the establishment of the school. Discussions on the school finances also took place at this meeting.

> *'The principal was introduced to the members of the School Committee. The principal then gave a financial report. The money that the school had was R650 which was used to open a banking account for the school later that day'*

(Minutes of School Committee meeting, 2nd March 1977 – verbatim transcription).

The money that was used to open the first school account came from contributions made by the community members. This bank account meant that even though there were no buildings and no learner enrolment yet, the school was officially operational. The steering committee tried in vain to obtain sponsorships from other sources; hence the only source of finance was the community members.

> '*Mr Themba Ngiba (pseudonym) suggested that they write letters asking for funding from leaders of other organisations. He was seconded by Mr Sibisi (pseudonym). They then asked the principal to prepare those letters that would have two stamps, from the school and from the chief*' (Minutes of School Committee meeting, 2nd March 1977).

At the same meeting a suggestion was made to request for donations from other sources as no sponsorship could be obtained. A series of meetings followed in 1977 to report on financial issues and progress on construction. School Committee and parents' meetings were held where the committee and the parents were given a full report on the expenses of the construction of three classrooms. The principal submitted financial reports and presented evidence of receipts and bank balances. By the end of the 1977, Isibani Secondary School had '*…three classrooms that were built at the cost of R3 041*' (Receipt book, 1977). After the classrooms had been inspected and approved, the school '*…got permission to admit the first group of Form 1 learners in 1978*' (Minute book, 1978). Later on, the school was subsidised by the Department of Education to build more classrooms. The following extract

gives evidence of the subsidised funds that the school received from the government and how those funds were allocated for more classroom constructions.

> *'f.   Financial   report   showed   a   balance   of   R1208,13c*
>
> *g. They were informed about funds from Lundi: R4800 which made a total balance of = R6008, 13c: This money was to be used to pay outstanding balances and for the construction of the new buildings = one classroom and an office'* (Minutes of School Committee meeting, 4th December 1979).

As was the case in most rural schools, the school offered instruction only up to Form 3 (now Grade 10). Higher grades were later phased in and the first group to do Form 5 (Matric/Grade 12) was in 1991.

> *'This year we are fortunate to have the first Std 10 group at Isibani. We are proud of that and we hope that the majority of them will pass and we need the support of the community to make this happen'* (Minutes of School Committee meeting, 16th April 1991).

The history of the school is significant. It reveals how this rural community took the initiative to ensure that a school was built for the education of their children. Yet today the community is regarded as powerless and ineffective and parents fail to take part in the activities of their school. This then raises two important questions:

- *Does this school, for which the community went through so much, still serve the needs of the community*?

- *Is the agency of rural people who need to take the lead in the education of their children still recognized today*?

4.5.2.2 Isibani Secondary School Today

As stated above, Isibani Secondary School is located in the rural area of Ndwedwe in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. It is a no-fee school and is classified as a section 21[9] school. The school has been part of the National Strategy for Learner Attainment (NSLA) Programme for the past three years (See Section 4.3 above). This means that its Grade 12 pass rate has been below 60% for three subsequent years. During data collection in 2011, the school had a teaching staff of 10 which comprised the school principal, two heads of department, three permanent educators and four temporary educators. Seven of the teaching staff, including the principal, commuted from the city (Durban) to the school every day. The school had two non-teaching staff members consisting of a cleaning lady and a school clerk. There was also a lady who worked as a cook who was privately employed by a service provider as the school was part of a National School Nutrition Programme[10] (NSNP).

In 2011 the school had an enrolment of 250 learners comprising 150 girls and 100 boys. The school offered instruction from Grade 8 to Grade 12, with an average of 50 learners per class. As reflected in the previous section, these learners came from economically disadvantaged and poverty stricken homes with no access to basic facilities like water or electricity. Almost all the learners came from low- or no-income families. Parents' status ranged from unemployed to state grant funded

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[9] Section 21 of the South African Schools Act, 1996: It states that all schools classified as Section 21 schools receive a lump sum, per-learner transfer for the payment for which they have responsibility. School governing bodies in these schools may deal directly with suppliers and contractors for the relevant budgeted items in accordance with standard procurement procedures (ELRC, 1996)

[10] This is a school feeding programme where the Department of Basic Education provides free lunch for learners in disadvantaged schools.

parents or guardians and to those who earned a self-generated income from informal employment. The girls who had babies received social grants for their children.

The school was situated not far from the gravel main road and two local 'supermarkets' where I observed that most learners hung around before, during and after school hours. The gravel road leading to the school took me to the school gate from where I had a horse shoe view of the school buildings which were, at the time of the study, painted green and yellow, matching the school uniform for learners. On the left side of the school was a building which consisted of four classrooms. During data collection these classrooms looked very old with bare concrete floors, old desks and old, green chalkboards. The walls were painted a fading yellow and were riddled with graffiti. Most of the windows were broken. A few metres behind this building there was an old building that served as a kitchen where learners' food was prepared and served. On the right side of the school was a building which had two classrooms similar to the ones on the left. One classroom was used for Physical Science; it was called a laboratory even though there was no laboratory furniture or equipment inside. The biggest classroom in the school was situated here. This venue was used as a hall.

The third building at the far end of the school served as the administration block. It had three main doors. The first door was the entrance which led you to the administration area that was partitioned into three rooms. The entrance hall was furnished with a table and a chair which were constantly used by one of the teachers. On the notice board there was a timetable and important notices. The room at the far

end of the administration area was a staff room for ladies furnished with about three chairs and two tables. Next to this room was the principal's office which had a desk and a chair for the principal and two plastic chairs for visitors. The principal's office also had a notice board with the year plan, calendar and departmental notices. Next to the principal's office was the clerk's office. This office also had a desk and a chair. It also had a photocopying machine, computer and a printer which teachers had access to, even though most of the time the school had no electricity as power supply was weak. This was the only building with electricity in the area. Then there was a door that led to the room that was used by male teachers as their staff room. Next to that room was a computer room which had eight old computers and a printer. This room was used by the Computer Applications Technology (CAT) students. The fourth door led to a room that had a fridge, a stove, and tables and chairs that were used by the HOD as a Hospitality room cum office. Female teachers gathered here during break time to have their lunch. A hundred metres behind this building were the pit toilets for the teachers; one for male teachers and one for female teachers. These toilets were always locked with padlocks so learners could not use them. The learners' toilets which were also a pit system were situated further down behind the teachers' toilets. The school was surrounded by a wire fence which had many openings that the learners and community members used to enter or exit the school premises even though the school had a gate which was always wide opened.

Inside the principal's office was a display of the school's service delivery charter which had the vision of the school:

To be a school of excellence by providing education that will empower and uplift learners to play a meaningful and responsible role in the society.

(Isibani Secondary School's Service Delivery Charter)

It also displayed the school's mission statements which were:

To provide education of high standard and quality;

To provide effective teaching and learning; and

To provide education that will develop learners intellectually, socially and emotionally, recognising individual strengths and instilling sound moral values through involvement of their parents and the community.

(Isibani Secondary School's Service Delivery Charter)

Although the school aimed at empowering the learners to become functional members of this rural society, it was my first impression that the odds were against them because of the challenges that the school so obviously faced. From the physical appearance of the school it could immediately be categorized as a poor school. It was clear that the school suffered from poor infrastructure with buildings that were old and unkempt; inadequate resources as there was no library and no laboratory; and the fact that half of the teaching staff were under-qualified temporal educators. As was the case in the majority of schools in poor rural areas, the school was also underperforming. This means that it obtained lower than a 60% pass rate in the Matric results as determined by DBE standards.

4.6 Data Collection Process

Ethnographers draw from a range of sources of data. In ethnography during data collection the researcher participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions through informal or formal interviews, and collecting [and perusing] documents and artefacts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The study used critical elements of ethnography to pursue the research agenda and various methods of data collection were used. My intention was to understand the perspectives of rural people on an underperforming rural school; therefore, to access data in this school I used three methods of data collection: participant observations, semi-structured and focus group interviews and document analysis.

Data collection and data analysis were unstructured and not necessarily based on pre-planned schedules. Although I planned detailed interview schedules (see Appendix M), these were used more as guidelines than as interviews. I did not follow these to the dot. Although I had no pre-given categories for grouping the data, the theoretical lens which I used for this study allowed for data collection on both internal (schooling) and external (contextual) factors relating to school underperformance. Data were collected in natural settings in real school life activities as they unfolded in the daily school related lives of the participants. As an ethnographer I allowed the data to shape the findings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

4.6.1 Observations

The heart of the ethnographic study lies in participant observation (Henning, 2004) where the researcher is the primary tool for data collection (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999). I had no pre-planned observation schedules; this was because I wanted to use a rather open-ended approach which would allow me to be true to the perspectives of my participants. In the first two weeks I came to the school to observe and capture patterns of all the schooling activities. Later on I also allowed data derived from interviews to shape the observations. As certain categories and themes started emerging during initial data analysis, which was done parallel to data collection, observations became more focused on those categories and themes that were generated from initial analyses.

In this study I took the role of a participant observer as I engaged myself in the various activities in the school. I was even sometimes asked to monitor some of the classes when teachers were absent. The English teacher even asked me if I could assist with the teaching of Grade 12 literature as I was also teaching this class in my school. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), one of the advantages of participant observation is that researchers are able to establish ongoing behaviour as it occurs; the researcher is then able to make appropriate notes about its significant features. The challenge with collecting observational data is ensuring that your presence does not alter the behaviour of the people in the setting (or what is known as the 'Hawthorne Effect') (Anderson, 1999). This I managed to avoid by being in the field long enough for my participants to 'forget' about my presence, by

participating in various school and classroom activities and by sometimes putting my notebook away while observing.

As a researcher I had to maintain a balance between insider and outsider status. I had to identify with the people under study and get close to them yet maintain a professional distance which would permit adequate observation and data collection (Brewer, 2000). A proper balance allows the researcher the opportunity to be inside and outside the setting; to be simultaneously a member and non-member and to participate while also reflecting critically on what is observed and gathered while doing so (Brewer, 2000).

I was an insider by virtue of my being a principal of a rural secondary school. My professional experience came with both advantages and disadvantages. As a participant observer it was less challenging as the setting or field was familiar to me. This made it easy for me to locate myself as a researcher (Brewer, 2000); hence the eight months spent collecting data. I did not have to familiarise myself with the field so not much time was invested in getting to know the activities taking place in a school. I already knew what to expect (e.g., the implication of the bell ringing in the morning, between lessons and in the afternoon; understanding the timetable; finding my way around the school; interpreting learner behaviour such as bunking of classes, etc). Here, I did not have to undergo an extensive period of re-socialisation into the practices of the group. For this reason the amount of time spent in the field was considerably shortened. As Brewer (2000) states, the length of time spent in the field can be shortened depending on the nature of the role adopted and the diversity of the

activities and social meanings in the field. I spent most of the time doing unstructured observations in the classrooms during 'free' periods (when learners were on their own with no teacher in class), on the playground during break time or when learners were 'bunking' classes. I also spent my time doing community interaction (when members of the community came to the school), observing interactions between teachers and learners and between teachers and teachers, and also observing school occurrences.

The disadvantage of being an insider researcher was my preconceived ideas about underperforming schools. For example, I assumed that in an underperforming school there would be little proper teaching and learning and that management would be ineffective. It was challenging sometimes to maintain a proper balance in my dual role as part insider and part outsider. During this whole process I was aware of how my prior knowledge and experience of being a secondary school principal could tarnish and influence the way I viewed my participants. My subjective experience and my knowledge of what underperformance means could sometimes not be separated from this process. I found myself mostly looking at things that we in our profession have been led to believe constitute underperformance. It became very difficult to remain a neutral observer as I had to suppress my own viewpoints and perceptions about underperformance and learn only from the participants. As a principal of an underperforming rural school myself, I managed to turn the school around and I therefore had my own preconceived ideas of what constituted underperformance and what should be done to turn around an underperforming school. My experience, ideas and expectations constantly pre-empted my observations, something I struggled with throughout the research process. Yet I

learnt to always remind myself of the critical question all the time to avoid being easily distracted from the task at hand.

During field work, behaviour and interactions in and around the school were noted and written down later. Observing different areas where people spent their time was also an important part of the study. As many aspects of the natural setting as possible were observed: the staff room; class rooms; visits by community members; teachers' and learners' activities in the morning, lesson times and free times, break time and after school; school routines. I walked on the verandas observing classes, chatted with the pupils regularly and carried out follow-up chats on observed behaviour or occurrences. I observed and wrote field notes of incidents which had relevance to my study, such as the significance of place in the analysis and organisation of everyday interactions, and constructing traditional truths and objectivity (Hammersley & Atkins, 2007). These notes helped me to compare and contrast actions and to interpret relationships. I chose not to walk around with a notebook but to observe and then quickly find time to write down what I had observed in private in a space that was allocated to me in the staffroom. This I decided to do to avoid distraction that could be caused by my notebook as this would have reminded the participants that I was a researcher.

During the time I spent with the learners during lessons, break time and after school, I noticed that learners saw the opportunity to report on some of the things that were happening in school that they felt were not right. For example, they started 'blowing the whistle' on teachers who were having sexual relations with learners, those who

came to school under the influence of alcohol, teachers who were not honouring their lessons and those who were using corporal punishment (which is illegal in South Africa as stipulated by legislation). They also talked about teachers who came to lessons ill-prepared and would chat for the whole lesson about subjects that learners felt were not supposed to be discussed between adults and young learners. Although I discouraged them to mention names, I was in a dilemma about whether to use this data in my work. This was because it was heartbreaking to know that the learners expected me as someone they trusted to remedy the situation for them or report this to the authorities, but because of issues of confidentiality I struggled with this. In the end I decided not to use those data in the thesis and not to report sensitive issues to the authorities as doing so would have meant going against the ethical considerations of this study. However, I decided to encourage the principal and the RCL members to initiate classroom conferences where learners would report issues affecting them to the RCL and, in turn, the RCL would give a full report to the principal. I hoped that this would give learners a platform to raise their concerns and for the principal to use his authority to act on sensitive information.

4.6.2 Interviews

Both formal and informal interviews were conducted with learners, teachers and parents in different situations in the school. As Radnor (2002) points out, if we want to understand why people do what they do, we need to ask them, as asking takes us to the realm of meaning. Interviews help us get the meaning that people give to the social situation in which they find themselves (Radnor 2002). I conducted informal interviews (which I referred to as conversations) with learners, teachers and parents.

I 'chatted' informally with parents who worked in the school and with an elderly gentleman who had been a member of the first School Committee when the school was established in 1977. I also had informal conversations with the young boys who were usually hanging around the shops next to the school. These informal interviews were used to follow up on issues which emerged from my observations and formal interviews. Sometimes an important source would be mentioned by my participants and I would follow that up. A good example of this was when the principal mentioned to me that the current SGB chairperson's father, who had been a member of the School Committee, was still alive and living in the area. I decided to arrange a meeting with him. With the help of the principal I met him and he proved to be a valuable source of information regarding the history of the school. Moreover, by interacting with learners inside and outside the schools I tried to get an understanding of their views.

I also used formal interviews as a method of data collection. The formal interviews in this study took the form of semi-structured interviews (See Appendices M, N & O) and focus group interviews (Appendix P). I conducted semi-structured interviews with a Grade 12 learner, the SGB chairperson, the Life Orientation teacher and the principal in the same order. These interviews lasted less than an hour each and were tape recorded. I chose to use semi-structured interviewers because they allowed me to create an atmosphere where my participants talked freely and were clearly understood. They allowed me to ask questions that encouraged them to open up about their perceptions, attitudes, thoughts and feelings. They also allowed me flexibility as I was free to follow their interests and concerns (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Radnor, 2002; Yates, 2004).

I also conducted focus group interviews with parents, learners, RCL members, teachers and SGB members. The advantages of focus interviews are that they are an easy way to collect data as they require less time and less effort compared to semi-structured interviews. They also generate a discussion that can bring a variety of issues to the fore and are possibly less influenced by the researcher (Yates, 2004). Compared to semi-structured interviews, I found that focus group interviews were better in terms of the quality of the information that was generated. Here all my participants were comfortable, willing and free to participate. I had to do very little because they debated amongst themselves, and these were just chats that required very little probing. All I did was to introduce questions and the conversations would flow. I even thought they forgot that I was interviewing them. These focus group interviews were also tape recorded.

I had to be very careful in developing instruments to assist the process of eliciting information and making meaning. Hence the use of IsiZulu (the local language) and the careful structuring of research questions. The reasons I chose to IsiZulu was because some of my participants were elderly people who were either illiterate or not fluent in English and had used IsiZulu all their lives. I also wanted learners and teachers to speak from the heart and to make the interview process as relaxed as possible. As a second English language speaker, I know from experience that speaking English can be a daunting task and if I had insisted on English it might have discouraged my participants from participating. As a researcher I had the advantage of speaking the same first language as my participants so I exploited that fortune to my advantage as it elicited rich data. However, a disadvantage of translations is that

translated discourse sometimes loses its meaning in translation. To avoid this, I presented direct (verbatim) translations in this report even if it meant breaking the rules of English such as repetitions, using fragments, sentences with no clear subjects, etc.) Verbatim transcriptions or direct translations are referred to as such in the text.

Interviews have disadvantages too. They are time-consuming in the sense that they require careful preparation and one always has anxiety before an interview (Radnor, 2002). I also found it very challenging to find a quiet place as the school was normally noisy. I ended up using the classroom that was used as a hall. I had to be careful with my timing and make sure that the interviews did not occur during break time where all the learners were outside. During the process of interviewing I wrote notes and used a tape recorder.

4.6.3 Document Analysis

Documents are important because they provide valuable cross-validation of other methods used to support or disconfirm information. To further strengthen the triangulation in this study, documents were analysed (Robson, 1993). I perused a variety of documents to get a better understanding of school activities, events, plans and issues around school under/performance. The documents I analysed included minutes of meetings (staff meetings, parents' meetings, SGB meetings and departmental meetings). These were analysed for the purpose of gaining more insight into issues of performance discussed at meetings. Further, the school's Service Delivery Charter was analysed to look at the vision, mission and values statement of the school as determined by all stakeholders (parents, teachers and learners).

Teachers' time book and learner registers were analysed to check learner and teacher punctuality and absenteeism rates. Progression Schedules were also reviewed to check the pass rates in all grades.

I found that using the three data collection methods allowed me to compare my observations with what I derived from the interviews and with what I came across in the documents I analysed. This was in line with the process of triangulation, which is the use of multiple methods in order to extend the range of data and is routinely a feature of ethnography (Brewer, 2000). These methods were used to study people in a naturally occurring setting or 'field' in which I, as the researcher, participated directly and in which there was an intent to explore the meanings my participants ascribed to schooling in general and to their school's underperformance in particular. After the fieldwork was completed, I made several return visits to the school for purposes of data verification, clarification and member checks.

4.7 Ethical Issues

4.7.1 Gaining Access

To gain access to a research site, ethnographers must locate a setting in which the study will take place. This usually needs careful planning as the researcher frequently operates through 'gate keepers' who can help to gain access to a site and participants (Miller & Salkind, 2002). After the school (research site) had been identified, I began the processes of negotiating access to the school. I had to keep in mind that gaining access to the participants would have a major influence on the relationship that I as a

researcher would have with them and that it would also influence the way they would respond (Yates, 2001). From perusing the literature and previous research documents I learnt that gaining access to a school (and recruiting participants) is one of the most challenging responsibilities when conducting a study. The main challenge in terms of accessing the schools was 'selling' the research idea to relevant educational authorities and potential participants. This included giving them full details regarding the processes of my research.

Fortunately for me, access to the school was not as challenging as I had envisaged because the principal was not only someone I worked with but his school was in the same district as my own. Moreover, he was a university graduate who understood the benefits of research. He was very keen to support the project. Even so, I had to be very careful and strategic. I called the principal during the holidays just to explain my intentions to him. I also informed him that the school had been highly recommended as a research site by one of his colleagues who spoke highly of him. I then made an appointment to meet with him and to explain the research process in person. It was a relief to find that the principal was very excited about this and welcomed me warmly. After securing my position in the school, I then did the formalities and sent a letter to the principal which fully explained the nature of the study.

It is important what people are told about the research in the process of negotiating access both with regard to its purpose and what it will involve for them. Moreover, any possible consequences stemming from the publication of findings should be

shared. I was fortunate in the sense that the principal was as excited about this research as I was and he quickly arranged meetings with the staff and SGB members. The principal was very supportive; he embraced the project and sounded excited about the research. He 'sold' it to the teachers and SGB by saying that they had worked hard as a school but had failed to produce good results. He argued that they might get the answers they were looking for through the findings of the research. During meetings with the teachers and SGB members he gave me a platform to explain my research intentions and did a very good job of selling the research to them by explaining how the findings of the research would benefit the school. As someone who was well respected and liked by his staff and his SGB, they warmed to the idea and also expressed that they looked forward to working with me. It was possible that some of the teachers might have felt bullied or coerced into participating in the study due to power relations between them and the principal. My interactions with them suggested that this was not the case. However, to ensure that the principal's voice did not dominate, I interviewed the two groups separately throughout the study.

Access to a research site requires skilful negotiation, often requiring research bargains and compromises with either the gatekeeper who holds the key to entry or the subjects in the field. It also involves continuing negotiations and renegotiations until the field is exited (Yates, 2001). There were times when I felt that I was not needed and that I was interfering with people's spaces. This happened during very busy times of the school year such as on due dates for marked scripts, moderation dates, preparing for the visits by departmental officials, or sometimes for no apparent reason. I had to allow space when that was needed and plan on renegotiating access

when I felt that I could go back to the school. It was exciting to see that once I was able to read the school patterns on relaxed days and stressful days, I could easily rejoin the staff and was accepted with enthusiasm.

4.7.2 Getting Past Gatekeepers

Negotiating access also involves ethical considerations that have to do with whose permission needs to be obtained if initial access is to be granted. Initial access negotiations started with the school principal and thereafter ethical clearance was sought from the Provincial Department of Basic Education. Once the sample schools were identified, letters and proposals for the project were sent to KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education (KZNDBE) for the attention of the Head of Department (HOD). I also had to deal with KZNDBE requirements which all researchers have to meet before they are allowed to conduct research in KZN schools. The first of these requirements entailed a submission of research documents to KZNDBE. These included a summary of the research proposal and the name of the school where the research was intended to be conducted.

Gatekeepers are those people who control or have power within the research context. There are formal and informal gatekeepers. The former refers to individuals who have the power to grant access to the research field. In my case these formal gatekeepers were the principal and the HOD of the KZNDBE. Informal gatekeepers are those who can affect access positively by being more open and forthcoming than formal gatekeepers; however, sometimes they can act negatively by objecting to the permission granted on their behalf by someone else and by then trying to limit what

is seen and heard (Brewer, 2000). Knowing who has the power to open up or block off access or who consider themselves or are considered by others who have the authority to grant or refuse access is important (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The most friendly and cooperative of gatekeepers will shape the conduct and development of the research. The ethnographer will be channelled in with the existing networks of friendships and enmity, territory and equivalent 'boundaries' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). When initial access was granted it was important for me to choose an influential person, someone who was admired and respected by most teachers, to be my contact person. This was because it was going to determine the support I would have from my participants. This was also important as it was related to gaining access which had to be constantly renegotiated (Yates, 2001). My contact person could not be the principal because he had a busy schedule and also because it had to be one of the teachers. I then developed a good relationship with one of the teachers who was very influential. She was well admired by the teachers as she was the youngest and was also furthering her studies. She became my 'assistant' and was instrumental in ensuring that all my interview activities went smoothly. She offered advice when I was stuck with the venues or experienced a lack of participation. I also formed a very close relationship with the administration clerk as she held the keys to the knowledge about the activities in the school, the whereabouts of teachers when they were not in school and information of parent participants and documentation.

Although access to a research site needs to be secured through gatekeepers, it also has to be negotiated with the people being studied. In this case I developed a working relationship with my contact teacher who assisted me with the ins and outs and told me about people's personalities and attitudes so that I could easily approach them

(Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Interview access cannot be assumed to be available automatically; relations have to be established and identities reconstructed. I had to wait a while before I interviewed teachers to make sure that they were all comfortable and would accept me as one of them, especially because they knew I was a principal.

4.7.3 Gaining the Trust of Research Participants

Gaining trust, which is also called building rapport, is not done overnight. It takes time and considerable effort and it requires of the researcher to gain the trust of the people involved in the research community. It does not end until the researcher leaves the research site (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Researchers earn people's trust by showing willingness to eat like they eat, speak as they do and do as they do. Time spent in the field can even be restricted at the beginning in order for people to get used to the presence of the researcher; slowly at first and more intensively thereafter. Trust is continuously worked at, negotiated, renegotiated, confirmed and thereafter repeatedly affirmed. This development of trust gave me more access to data in teachers' freely shared stories about their learners and about themselves. For example, I developed a trusting relationship with the HOD to such an extent that at one stage she shared with me the story of leaving school early and getting caught by the principal. I felt that once I enjoyed a trusting relationship, I could reach out to teachers. At some stage they shared their views about the principal with me, whereas at the beginning they would not.

4.7.4 Informed Consent

Informed consent means that people must consent to being researched in an unconstrained way, making their decisions on the basis of comprehensive and accurate information about it (Yates, 2004). In this study the specific moral and ethical issues that were considered in terms of the participants were informed consent, deception, right to privacy and right to withdraw (Yates, 2004). All the participants were given letters which had full details of the research process. They were given letters that they took home to discuss with their families. Letters to parents and SGB members were written in IsiZulu to ensure that they understood the contents. These letters gave a full explanation of the nature and purpose of the research. The letters also assured the participants of the confidential and anonymous nature of their involvement in the study. It was also clearly stated that data would be treated with strict confidentiality and used for research purposes only. Moreover, they were given the assurance that the school, the principal, parents, learners and teachers would not be named but that they would be given pseudonyms. This was meant to encourage participants to give rich data that they might not give otherwise. My participants displayed incredible honesty as they felt comfortable speaking about school activities. This was because I created an environment in which they could express their opinions without feeling uncomfortable or exploited (Yates, 2004). This was done through continuous assurance that matters discussed would under no circumstances be shared with other people. Participants were also informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage during the research process. When they had fully understood these conditions, they then signed the informed consent forms (Henning, 2004). Fortunately for me there were no grounds for deception. This has to do with how much you tell your participants about the research (Yates, 2004).

I assumed the role of overt participation as I explained everything to my participants and told them everything there was to tell about the research. As a researcher you do not want to impart knowledge that will affect how participants respond, but at the same time you have an obligation to gain informed consent and explain everything to your participants.

Unlike the relatively easy process to recruit parents and teachers to become participants in the study, recruiting learners was more difficult. The learners of the school were still regarded as minors and therefore required their parents' or guardians' consent for participation. Parents' and guardians' free and voluntary consent was requested in writing. If they agreed, they signed the consent form, thereby officially giving consent for their children to take part in the study.

4.7.5 Termination of the Data Collection Process

Termination of the data collection process depends on the discretion of the researcher. Researchers may decide to stop collecting data when they feel that they have collected sufficient data to complete the study. If a researcher has saturated his/her research categories and is only receiving repeated information, or when the researcher begins to observe consistency in the identified themes, categories or constructs, then the researcher can decide it is time to terminate the collection process and exit the field (Anderson 1999). My decision when to terminate the fieldwork in this research study was based on the fact that, eventually, I was not getting any new information but only confirmation of what I already had. Most importantly, I terminated the fieldwork phase of the study when I knew that I had

collected data of sufficient quality and quantity to address the research questions I had set out to pursue.

4.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis in ethnography involves examining the group's observable and learned patterns of behaviour, customs and ways of life. In this study data collection and 'initial' data analysis were conducted simultaneously. I decided to transcribe my own data so that I remained informed about the trends and themes that emerged. During the day I used earphones to listen to my data so that I could mentally begin the process of identifying patterns. This took the form of a preliminary analysis, which gave me an idea of how to prepare my questions and topics for informal chats and also how to bring focus to my observations and know which important themes to focus on as I continued observing and interviewing. The data were then analysed manually by repeated examination of the field notes and interview transcripts. All the data were labelled with specific codes for reference purposes so that I could move backwards and forwards through them. Categories were developed from these coded data.

The process of identifying, coding and categorising the primary patterns in the data was done repeatedly. I categorised the selected material into themes and produced an analysis of how the various themes interwove. Extracts from the raw data were selected and paraphrased or quoted to illustrate patterns. I then started to develop themes that indicated shared views. As an ethnographer, I therefore developed a description of the culture-sharing group and analysed data for themes that indicated

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shared patterns (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As the interviews and most informal chats were conducted in IsiZulu a decision had to be made bout translation. I had huge volumes of data from field notes and interviews so translating all of that into English would have been an enormous task. I then decided to do the analysis in an IsiZulu version of the data and only translated the excerpts that I was going to use for my dissertation. In the final analysis, the data were presented in a thematic format with the final analyses and interpretations presented in three main themes with subthemes.

4.9 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data was assured by adhering to two criteria. The first criterion was triangulation through the use of multiple methods of data collection: participant observation, semi-structured and focus-group interviews and documents review. The second criterion that was adhered to was that feedback from participants was continually sought during fieldwork and by means of several post-fieldwork visits to the school to seek clarity and verification and to ascertain meaning of statements and behaviour.

4.10 Summary

This study intended to understand how rural people perceived underperformance in a rural school. In this chapter I discussed the research design as well as the methodology that was employed in the study. Guided by the propositions derived from theoretical frameworks discussed in the previous chapter, the study was located

within an interpretive paradigm and employed a qualitative approach to research. An ethnographic design involving observations, interviews and documents analysis was adopted to enable me to capture the experiences, interpretations and meanings that participants gave to school underperformance in their rural context. To assist in understanding and interpreting the data collected, a detailed description of the research site was given. The data analysis method used was described. The ethical issues that had to be addressed in the study were eluminated. These issues included: gaining access to the research site, negotiating access, seeking permission to conduct the study, gaining the trust of gatekeepers and participants, informed consent and termination of the data collection process.

The next chapter elucidates the findings based on the analyses of the data.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE INFLUENCE OF COMMUNITY CONTEXT ON THE SCHOOL

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of the study was to understand the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school. In the previous chapter I discussed the research design and methodology employed in this study. In Chapter Five and Six, guided by the propositions developed from the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, I analyse, interpret and discuss the findings of this study using data generated from interviews, observations and document reviews.

This study was premised on the notion that the influence of context on rural people's perspectives on underperforming schools would be significant. This chapter examines the relationship between the rural school and rural context and the way in which this relationship influenced schooling and the views that rural people had on an underperforming school. Available research suggests that contextual factors play an important role in learner performance and subsequently school performance (Beck & Shoffstall, 2005; Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005; Petty & Green, 2007; Patton, 2008; Chance & Segura, 2009). This chapter argues that the perspectives of rural people on school underperformance are shaped by their socio-economic context. The investigation that is reported in this chapter was informed by two propositions. The first was based on the compensation hypothesis as posited by van de Grift and Houtveen (2006) which recognises the importance of external factors in school underperformance. Such external factors include the complexity of a school's location and the socio-economic conditions in the community. Moreover, it focuses

on the fact that schools in deprived areas face the challenge of dealing with learners'
basic needs before they can work on educational issues. It builds on the premise that
rural schools need to make up for what the learners do not have due to their
disadvantaged circumstances. Perspectives on underperforming rural schools might
be based on the proposition that schools should employ corrective measures to
compensate for the deprived social and economic background of their learners. This
means that rural people might look for schools to offer what is lacking in their
learners' lives outside school. The second proposition is based on the contingency
theory and the compensation hypothesis as proposed by van de Grift and Houtveen
(2006). Both are rooted in the argument that, for schools to be successful there is a
need to look for the best match between their internal (schooling) and external
(contextual) factors. School activities should be seen as bringing together the
educational process and the school's situational factors. This implies that schools in
rural areas should operate in such a way that their internal processes complement
their rural context.

In this chapter I focus on perspectives on rural school underperformance but
concentrate on the relationship between the school under study and its rural context. I
use the term 'context' in this study to refer specifically to the circumstances,
conditions, situations and factors that define this rural area (as discussed in Chapter
Four). This relationship is examined through the connectedness of the rural
household, community and the school as well as that between the school and its rural
setting. Research points out that an understanding of context is vital if we want to
understand how rural schools function and if we want to determine what the causes
of rural failure are (Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997). The identification of contextual

factors was important in this study as they seemed to play an important role in how people perceived underperforming schools. The chapter is organised into the following two main themes that emerged from the data:

- Perspectives on the relationship among the rural household, the community and the school; and

- Perspectives on the role and value of schooling in a rural setting.

5.2 Perspectives on the Relationship among the Rural Household, the Community and the School

Learners' success, positive change and progress are not only influenced by the school they attend, but also by their parents, the broader family, peer groups and neighbourhood influences (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). It is therefore important for schools to understand the rural communities they are serving and to ensure that the vision of the school is shared by all stakeholders (i.e., learners, parents and the community). This will ensure that parents and other community members are involved in school activities and that schools function well as a consequence. When communities are not directly involved in setting up, supporting or overseeing a school, the latter is often seen as a 'foreign' institution within the community and something which is not part of the community which it serves (Gershberg, Meade & Anderson, 2009). This section analyses the data which were obtained with regards to the relationship between the home, parents, the community and the school. It highlights the perceived lack of connectedness between the rural home and the school and illuminates how this disconnectedness impacted negatively on parental and community involvement in school matters.

5.2.1 Rural Household

The study found that a lack of a harmonious connection between home and school practices had a negative impact on how rural people viewed schooling in general and rural school performance in particular. First, the section focuses on the experiences of participants in relation to the ways in which, on the one hand, school experiences tended to contradict and often undermine what happened in the rural household. On the other hand, the data also suggested that what happened in the rural household had an influence on schooling. This dichotomy is supported by Van Wyk and Lemmer (2009) who comment that schools and families do not seem to have common perspectives on what is needed or wanted in the child's best interest. They argue that the rural household is often not conducive to the learning that which schools expect as an extension of classroom activities (e.g., homework, assignments, etc.). The data analysed in this study suggest that what happened in the rural household was often in conflict with what happened in the school. As a result, children did not get sufficient opportunity to learn as opportunities at home were restrictive in terms of extending and supporting what they learnt in school. Various factors within the households led to this situation such as poverty and a lack of basic necessities like water, sanitation, electricity, family dynamics, household chores and parents' expectations. The data revealed that these factors showed an interrelatedness that had a collective negative impact on schooling.

Firstly, the poverty that was experienced by most people in these rural households impacted negatively on the schooling of the learners at the school under study.

Learners came from a very poor socio-economic background where there was great need and deprivation and this affected their study plans at home.

As one of the teachers in a focus group interview explained:

> *Most of our learners come from very poor families. They cannot even afford things like calculators, study guides or even cheap things like pens and rulers. As a teacher you cannot even ask parents to buy additional important study material like Atlases, dictionaries which are very important because they cannot afford them. So as a Maths teacher what is the point of giving them homework if they do not own calculators. They will end up doing that homework here at school during other teachers' lessons. If even my best students are giving me the same excuse of not having calculators then I know it is the truth.* (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010)

One of the learners in a focus group interview also stated:

> *If I ask my grandmother to buy me a book that my teacher recommended, she shouts at me and ask me if I would eat books for supper. I even feel bad for asking because I know my granny is struggling to support all of us.* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010)

Secondly and also related to poverty was the lack of basic necessities like water, sanitation and electricity which made life hard for these learners. The rural households in this school community lacked some taken for granted 'luxuries' like televisions, radios, light for studying purposes, newspapers, computers, etcetera, which otherwise would have contributed greatly to the learners' studies.

For example, in the focus group interview one of the teachers stated:

You see, sometimes it seems like our learners live in another 'world' because they are not even aware of what is happening in their own country because they do not even watch the news on television. As a teacher during lesson time you also need to find time to discuss current news in the media. They depend on us teachers to keep them up to date about the latest debates in the media whether it's about politics, national disasters and the like. The only thing that they are always knowledgeable about is soccer. (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010)

Thirdly, the data revealed that family dynamics impacted on perspectives of underperformance. In the area under study double-parent (i.e., both mother and father residing with their children) households were unique which meant that children lived with their grandparents or family members as their parents were either dead, working far or remarried and living with their new partners. This meant that young children had to be actively involved in household chores. When these young children got home they took on the responsibilities of taking care of the home. The following extract from RCL focus group interview one of the learners stated:

I am a boy but I still have to do house work like cooking, cleaning and fetching water from the common tap because if I do not do it no one will. I'm the eldest at home so I have to take care of my younger siblings.... My mother does not stay with us because she has a new husband and she has to take care of him. But she comes on weekends to check on us and to make sure that we are okay. (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010)

The fourth factor is therefore also linked to poverty, lack of basic necessities and unique family dynamics. The fact rural children took on the responsibilities of household chores meant that they did not have sufficient time to study at home. Doing household chores and parents' expectations in this regard were in conflict with the school's expectation that children should continue learning at home (e.g., by completing assigned homework and projects). As a result, tensions existed between the home and the school in terms of school work versus household experiences which resulted in a lack of sufficient study time at home. Parents are left in a dilemma because although they have a positive attitude towards schooling, this is overshadowed by the home situations or home needs. The lack of basic necessities like water and electricity in this area meant that children spent a considerable amount of time doing household chores. Taps were few and far between and young people had to walk long distances to get water. Water was a very important commodity in their homes because they used it to wash dishes, their school uniforms, and to clean and bathe. In the afternoons I observed both young boys and girls carrying 25 litre containers and walking long distances in groups to taps and boreholes. When they got there they washed their uniforms, especially shirts and socks. These tap points became a social gathering point for young boys and girls in the afternoon. I observed long queues at the taps and on the side they did their washing and chatted. When they had finished, they took their washed uniforms, put the water containers on their heads and walked the distance back home. Most of the learners I observed had only one set of uniform so they needed to wash the items every day. They would hang them in the rondavel or kitchen at home where they dried from the warmth of fire made for cooking. Most of these young children would make a water trip more than

once so they could fill up a bigger container in the house. If the water supply ran out it meant another trip in the morning before they went to school. When they got back home it was cooking time and they had to prepare supper and wash the dishes and prepare for the next day. Parents / grandparents took this responsibility seriously and expected their children to do these chores without complaint. The following extract reveals a grandparents' concern about the fact that the children always made a big deal about their responsibilities in the house. Doing these chores was viewed as part of growing up, as one of the parents in a focus group interview stated:

> *My granddaughter is always complaining and tells me she needs more time to study but she goes to school for the whole day and at home we also have to live, I need her to go at least three times to fetch water so we can have enough for cooking, dishes, bathing in the morning for herself and her brother and I also need to have some left to use during the day when they are at school. I'm not sure why it's a big deal because in my time we walked longer distances because there were no taps; we got water from the river...* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

This discourse revealed that parents believed that their children should respect the responsibilities that they had and not to use schoolwork as an excuse not to do chores at home. They clearly stated that the home situation and rural situation did not allow for children to spend all their time studying. According to these parents, there should be clear boundaries between the work that is done at home and the work that is done at school. They believed that doing house work was part of growing up and they were training their children to be responsible adults. They believed that, as children spent a large amount of time at school, it was enough to cater for their learning needs. For example, when asked whether homes should be used by children to do

their school work, one lady's response was that "*…a school is a school, home is home, work needs to be done* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

Although I generally found that parents had a positive attitude towards schooling and were happy to support their children, there seemed to be a conflict when it came to time spent studying. This is because there was no other way for children other than to be actively involved in household chores. Very few learners had young parents who were always available to assist with housework, so most of these learners took that kind of responsibility. Concerns about the amount of housework were only expressed by learners who felt that they needed more time to do their school work at home as teachers gave them large amounts of homework and projects which they had to finish at home and housework seemed to be a distraction. For example, a learner explained:

> *Parents do not understand that if you are studying Matric or Grade 11 you need to get more time to study. They just continue to give you domestic duties and if you complain they would tell you that others passed and they were doing their work* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

In a focus group interview one of the learners also asserted:

> *Parents are very strange, when you try to study they would tell you to go to the river (to get water) or prepare food for your siblings. If you tell them that you are studying they would tell you that you can't just sit there and study. They tell you that they've had children who were also in Matric who did their chores but still passed,[and ask]: Are you special?' If you want to go to evening study at school they would refuse to allow you to go. That causes a*

lot of stress and you end up failing. Even if you come back from school late they would shout at you and ask you why you are coming home late (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

Teachers did not seem to be sympathetic regarding the domestic situation of their learners. They saw learners as not being serious about their work and as only committed to studying at school and not at home. They also complained about learners not completing their homework or projects that they had to do outside school hours. Teachers saw this as a sign that learners were not serious and committed to their school work. They saw this as a lack of commitment from both the learners and the parents. For example, one teacher stated:

Learners do not bother themselves with studying at home; they only study here at school (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

The home situation prompted learners to depend solely on the school for studying. I observed no or very little continuity between the home and school as learners did not get enough time to study as they had to do housework. The home therefore became a separate entity and was divorced completely from learners' schooling. In the rural context under study the school was seen as the only active venue for learning, especially in terms of formal education. In turn, the school was also insensitive to what parents and learners were experiencing in their homes. The kind of learning that happened at home as children learnt to cope with responsibilities was not viewed as relevant to schooling and the school did not take domestic education into consideration when it evaluated children's academic outputs. As a result of this lack of connectedness, parents did not see the connection between the school and the

home and therefore not much was done for the two to complement each other. In this regard, there has to be open communication about the roles of parents and teachers and these roles need to be reconciled so there can be effective teaching and learning of children both at home and at the school.

The section below analyses the data that focused on the challenges faced by the school in terms of parental and community involvement.

5.2.2 Parental and Community Involvement

Families are known to have the most powerful and lasting influence upon the attitudes, behaviour and academic performance of children. Much of the knowledge and skills that children eventually acquire are determined in the home (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). As such, this thesis argues that effective learning is guaranteed when families and schools work together in a mutual venture. This can be done through effective parental involvement.

Definitions of parent involvement vary according to different researchers. Some define it simply as good parenting which a child experiences at home, while others see it as communicating with teachers whilst yet others define parental involvement as parents' total participation in school functions and school governance (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). As discussed in the previous section, in this rural community it was mostly grandparents and children who were burdened with the responsibility of 'parenthood'. However, the school seemed to continue to assume the presence of the

traditional mother and father in the homes of the learners. They still expected parents to be immensely involved in their children's education through attending school meetings and helping and supporting their children with their school work. However, a poor relationship between the school and the home (as discussed in the previous section), impacted negatively on rural people's attitudes towards the school and this, in turn, affected parental and community involvement. The data revealed that there was poor parental involvement in the school. Participants attributed this to the lack of communication between the school and the home. as well as the fact that the benefits of schooling were not yet evident in this rural community.

The findings of this study further suggest that there was lack of or poor communication between the school and the home. Parents (mostly grandparents) did not seem to understand their role in the school as this had not been clearly communicated to them by the school. The data also pointed to a lack of communication between the school and parents regarding how the school expected the parents to be involved. This resulted in the parents staying away and not being part of the school activities. As the school activities and teaching and learning strategies were not communicated to the parents, a learning culture among the learners was therefore not possible. This lack of communication raised a concern among the participants. For example, in a learner focus group interview one of the learners stated:

> *Parents and the principal should work hand in hand. They should inform him what they want their children to do or what they do not want their children to do* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

This lack of communication also resulted in parents not fully understanding schooling activities and therefore not complying with what the school required of them. As a result learners missed out on the opportunities for learning arranged by the school. In the following extract from focus group interview with learners, one of the learners reiterated:

> *Parents can work on their own or with the principal to give each other advice. Take for instance my case, you see if I want to go to school in the afternoon, my mom would say: "You are not going anywhere". So they must inform each other that if a child goes to school in the afternoon, why do they go there and what do they do when they get there and why that is important* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

This lack of communication also meant that parents lacked knowledge about what went on in the school as they were not fully informed about school activities. Hence, the participants felt that the principal needed to inform parents about all the school activities [and educational objectives] so that all learners could participate fully. Participants also felt that if parents were enlightened about all aspects of schooling, they could play an active role. As it was, however, parents in this school did not attend meetings; they only come if there was a problem and the child had misbehaved. Even then some did not care to come. Moreover, their participation options seemed to be limited but participants felt that if there was effective communication, parents would take the initiative and be present in school more often. One RCL learner stated:

Parents should not wait until they are called to a meeting; they should just come to school anytime to check if there is effective teaching and learning in the school. (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

Even learners felt that in a good school parents would work hand in hand with the teachers and other learners. If invited they would come in big numbers. Learners expressed a great need for the school to work together with their parents. They felt that this lack of communication resulted in parents and the school operating in different worlds when, in actual fact, these two environments should be brought together. They felt that the school should plan in such a way that its role and the role of the parents matched each other.

The fact that the school and the parents did not share a common understanding of their roles resulted in parents not feeling responsible for playing an active role in their children's education. Learners felt that their parents/caregivers were not giving them enough support as they did not interact with them about school activities. They also felt that parents did not share in their educational aspirations and this impacted negatively on their work as they felt that their parents did not motivate or encourage them to do well in school. The detrimental effects of this are unarguable because a learner's attitude towards education and expectations of education are rooted in the home as well as in his or her own efforts. Also, a large part of the educational impact of parents is mediated by their aspirations and the level of parent-child interactions (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). In the study parents were viewed by their children as lacking motivation and as not sharing in their goals. As parents did not give themselves enough time to check learners' work, to see how they were doing at

school and to determine if there was something wrong, they failed to share in the educational vision and aspirations of their children. They did not interact with them about schooling or about their future plans. For these reasons they were seen as not encouraging and motivating their children. The following extracts illustrate the feelings that learners expressed about their parents' attitude towards their work:

Learner 1:   *If we come back from school parents do not check our books. If they checked them we would be motivated and work harder because we would want them to see good work when they check our books.*

Learner 2:   *They are not close to us. Between a child and a parent there are no signs that you are close; parents do not talk to us, your parent does not share your vision because he does not know it - he has never asked you. If people ask him what you want to do when you finish school he does not know.*

Learner 3:   *I think parents should always encourage us so we can be successful. But if you are at home parents do not motivate you even if you are in Matric; they just keep quiet and never talk about your schooling. You lose hope and you realise that they do not care. If maybe they encouraged us and told us to do well we would be encouraged and work harder.*

(Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010)

What transpired in my discussions with parents was that as much as they supported schools and thought they were bringing something positive to the community, the positive attributes of schooling had not yet fully materialised in this community. Their expectations of schooling were still a dream. (This will be discussed fully in the next theme). This resulted in parents' reluctance to involve themselves in school activities that called for their attention. Parents had had experiences of children failing Matric or passing Matric and not getting jobs, so the reality they seemed to accept was that the school was not of much value. Some cited that they never went to school but were surviving and that children who had attended school did not earn much to make a living. Moreover, there seemed to be no direct connection between the school and community achievements so the school was seen as a separate institution that was not serving the needs of the community, resulting in a disinterested parent body. The minutes reflected that parents did not attend school meetings and they did not even go to school when invited to attend hearings about their children's behaviour. One parent noted:

Sometimes I notice that parents do not have love for their children. You see, if they are called to the school some parents say they do not have time for that, and [they] let the child go by herself (Parent semi-structured interview, 19th May 2010).

Learners themselves also noted parents' poor attendance of school meetings. In a focus group interview one learner noted:

If parents are called to the school for a parents' meeting they do not attend which is a big problem. But then again, most of the times meetings are for Grade 12 parents only. We've never had all parents called to talk about their learners'

behaviour for all learners in the school... Parents are called and they talk about other things and they are not told about the fact that at home they need to continue where the school left off (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

Research has shown that children do well in school if the parents involve themselves at school, support their learners and encourage education and learning at home, regardless of the educational background or social class of the parents (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). Even teachers believe that parents are an important tool for learner performance. However, the activities that the school community offers should be such that the parents will be able to participate. It is therefore important to take context into consideration when planning for parent involvement.

Not surprisingly, the data suggested that there was lack of community involvement in this school. Community forms an important part of the school. Parents and schools alone cannot ensure that learners receive the education they deserve; they need the community to be involved in their children's education. According to Van Wyk and Lemmer (2009), community involvement is viewed as going back to the ancient African truth that it takes the whole village to raise a child. Community involvement can be formal where the school works together with business people and organisations, or it can be informal where friends and family members of learners at the school become involved (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). The participants perceived community involvement as a situation where community members gave support to the school in terms of working together with the school to monitor learner behaviour,

protect school buildings, and motivate and encourage learners to do well. However, this was not happening. As one learner in a focus group interview stated:

> *'Parents are intimidated by the school situation, they feel that what is happening inside the school is the responsibility of the teachers and they don't want to interfere with that. Most parents believe that their responsibility is in the home and what happens at school is the teachers' responsibility. Schools are not doing much to accommodate our parents because they are illiterate and are intimidated by school situation'* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010)

School activities did not cater for community involvement. The only contact with outside people was when they were employed to offer certain services to the school like fixing doors, painting, etc. However, these things rarely happened. As discussed in the previous section, the school seemed to be a 'foreign' institution that happened to be situated in this area but that was not really connected to it. The school and the community were seen as two separate bodies. As a result, community members, including community leaders, did not feel part of the school. This had a negative impact on the potentially positive relationship that the school and the community could have.

Learners who participated in this study also suggested that community members were not supportive of their schooling at all. Instead, they felt that they were discouraged through ill talk (i.e., "bad mouthing") by members of the community. Learners indicated that they wished that the community could motivate and

encourage them to do well and to transform their lives. Instead, some community members humiliated them by putting pressure on them and making fun of them just because they attended school. Community members such as former learners who had finished school accused current learners of thinking they were better than them just because they had not achieved success when they were still at school. A learner explained:

> *When we are studying here at school and we finish late, on our way home we find people sitting in shops and when they see us they discourage us and say: "We will see whether you are going to pass". That discourages us and makes us even less motivated* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

Participants felt that the community could support the school by monitoring evening study, especially because most teachers commuted so they could not stay late to monitor evening study. They also felt that adult community members should not allow learners to be outside the school premises during lesson time. They should question and tell learners off if they saw them truanting. This would assist in reducing truancy. In a focus group interview one parent commented:

> *We should not allow learners to walk around the neighbourhood freely when they are supposed to be in school. We should stop and ask them why they are outside school during school hours. I am old but I talk to them and they know it. I stop them and ask them why they are not at school and they would lie and give excuses but at least I ask them* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

Participants expressed further concern regarding the lack of community involvement in schooling matters, particularly in disciplining and guiding learners and supporting their schooling. The problem was highlighted that parents, and by implication community members, did not get involved even when they saw things going wrong (e.g., when children were not in school when they were supposed to be). Participants believed that the community members should not allow learners to buy from shops when they should be in class and learning. Some found it strange that learners behaved in this manner in the presence of older members of the community but that they would never say anything. Parents agreed that they could not discipline other people's children and that they could only concentrate on their own children. This abdication of parental and community authority would impact negatively on the schooling of the children within a community.

Even learners were critical of the lack of authority exerted by community members. In a focus group interview one learner commented:

> *Also when, as older people, they see that shops are close to the school, why can't they tell off learners when they see them there? Why can't they ask them why they are not in school but sitting in shops during school hours? Even the shop owners – yes, of course they need money - but why are they selling and allowing us [to buy] cigarettes and alcohol?* (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

Participants expressed the view that all parents should discipline learners if they saw them on the road doing something against the school rules, regardless of whether they knew those learners or whether they had children who went to the same school.

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The data revealed that community members were major contributors to the challenges experienced by the school, especially in terms of disciplinary issues and truancy. To illustrate, regardless of legal age restrictions the shop outside the school premises would sell alcohol and cigarettes to learners during school hours. Learners were allowed to buy such substances while wearing full school uniform during lesson time. This implies that shop owners were not concerned with supporting the school but with making a profit. The principal even tried to strike a deal with shop owners about not allowing learners to buy illegal substances or during school hours, but in vain. Learners played snooker and jukebox at the shop even in the morning before they came to school, resulting in late arrivals. One of the learners expressed the following view:

> *The community is very careless like for instance if a person owns a shop, you will find that the shop owner does not care even if you go to his shop wearing a full school uniform and buying beer. You buy beer in your full school uniform and you also buy cigarettes. The shop owner does not care; he is only focusing on making money* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

As a solution, the learners suggested that the community members should assist the school by guarding against learners who frequented shops and bought alcohol during school hours. For example, in the RCL focus group interview one member stated:

> *I would request the community members, especially those who are always sitting in shops, not to allow learners to sit in shops and buy alcohol in their presence. Even the shop owners should have specified times to attend to learners; they should not be selling alcohol to people in a school uniform*

because after that, that person will not be going to school to learn but to disrupt lessons and disturb other learners (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

Even parents raised concerns about shop owners selling alcohol and cigarettes to young people. Parents commented that when the school came out, some of the learners behaved in an unruly manner.

Linked to the above concerns was the perception that community members did not take the school time and schedule seriously. To some, the school was a place where they could go any time. Parents visited the school at odd times. For example, during data collection it was common to see parents coming to take their children out of school during lessons or just hanging around the school. The RCL members commented on this:

> *RCL member 1:*   *Those who have done Gr. 12 and finished schooling, they come to school just to walk around the school premises.*
>
> *Interviewer:*   *To motivate you?*
>
> *RCL member 2:*   *No, just to walk around. Some even come here to propose to girls.*
>
> (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010)

I was puzzled by this behaviour of community members who were not part of the school but who would come in and hang out even during lesson time. I would see them just standing outside the windows in full view of the learners, watching as the teacher taught. On one occasion, when I was monitoring and chatting with one class, a strange visitor watched us through the window, but the learners assured me that the man meant no harm and was just curious, maybe because he saw me for the first time in the school. The teachers later told me that this happened a lot and that they were used to strangers walking around the school. However, they were quick to tell me that it never happened when the principal was around because the community members were scared of him.

The involvement of parents in school activities is determined by the value that the community in general and parents in particular put on education or on the process of schooling. The data in this study suggested that parents and the community were passive when it came to involvement in school activities or in the education of their children. The community was not concerned about what happened in the school.

This section highlighted the fact that the value that rural people put on schooling was based on the relationship between the school and the community. As discussed in the previous sections, this negative relationship was a concern as it had an adverse effect on the level of participation and commitment rural people gave to their children's learning. The system of schooling at the school under study and the attitudes of some community members did not allow full participation by the community in the life of the school.

Participants in this study felt that the school was failing the community because there was a disjuncture between what the school did and what the community valued. The internal activities of the school did not complement those of the community. The home situation was not considered when school and homework was planned. Teachers did not plan the work in a way that would show an understanding of the challenges that learners and parents experienced at home. As a result, the school and the home were in a tug-of- war situation where both pulled in a different direction. Not much was communicated to learners' parents, therefore they did not feel obliged to be part of the school. The community was also not fully involved in and supportive of the school and its activities.

These findings were likely to impact negatively on learner performance and subsequently school performance, as schools and families need to have a common understanding on what is needed or wanted in a child's best interests. This is important as learner achievement is positively shaped by the school as well as by the parents, family and neighbouring influences (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). So, it is important for all of them to work together as this would lead to learner and school success.

5.3 Perspectives on the Role and Value of Schooling in a Rural Setting

An understanding of context is vital if we want to understand how rural schools function and when we want to determine the causes of a rural school's failure to achieve well (Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997). The findings of this study suggested that contextual factors were important in shaping perspectives on a school as they seemed

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to play an important role in how people perceived this underperforming school. Participants felt that the school should directly address the context/space in which they were located. The findings also illustrated the way in which challenges experienced in rural contexts had a bearing on how rural people perceived an underperforming school. They suggested that the contextual/environmental challenges that were experienced by this rural community had a direct effect on schooling and determined the opinions formed by rural people on the school's performance/underperformance.

According to the participants, schooling was important as it could promote development that would bring about positive change in the lives of learners, their homes and in the community as a whole. However, the participants pointed out that the benefits they associated with schooling were not yet evident but that it was something that they believed should be happening. The participants seemed to associate being successful in school with living a good life. For these participants, no schooling would mean being doomed to remain poor. With regard to the extent to which this school was successful in promoting the development they deserved, the participants indicated that several factors in the environment stood in the way of this happening. These included poverty, poor infrastructure, and a lack of community development.

5.3.1 Poverty and Poor Infrastructure

To understand the challenges associated with schooling, including school underperformance, the problems facing the community should be understood

(Mmotlane, Winnaar & waKivilu, 2009). Such community problems have a direct effect on schooling as schools are inseparable from the communities they serve (Emerging Voices, 2005).

Firstly, the rural community under study was characterised by poor infrastructure. For example, the data suggested that a lack of facilities such as a library, clean tap water and electricity, as well as a poor infrastructure like gravel roads and a lack of transport, had a direct impact on learner performance and subsequently school performance.

In terms of infrastructure, I observed that there were no libraries or any other facilities to assist school-going children with learning support material. In this regard one teacher asserted:

> *There are no resources like libraries in the community to feed these learners with general knowledge. There are not even youth centres where learners can meet and develop each other; as a result most of the time these learners do not know anything other than the subjects taught at school. Yet in some subjects they require exposure to general knowledge. This becomes a disadvantage to learners* (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

The principal agreed:

> *There are no educational facilities in the area. Learners are only taught at school; once the teacher is out of the classroom and, worse, when the learners are out of the school nothing reminds them of school. They do not even have libraries in this area to allow them to study or gain knowledge on*

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their own. If the school gates are closed, that is it for a rural child (Principal semi-structured interview, 14th June 2010).

The fact that there were no facilities in the community that could expose learners to education outside school and support or enhance learning meant that the school was the only institution that was relevant to formal education. The fact that the school itself lacked these facilities meant that the learners were deprived of the necessary opportunities to learn and succeed.

Secondly, the lack of good roads resulted in a poor transport system. This impacted on transport for learners and teachers to and from school. Learners walked long distances and by the time they got to school, they were too tired to concentrate and they were already thinking about the long walk home. This also meant that they came to school late and on rainy days the school was not easily accessible. In the following interview extract the learner highlighted the challenges caused by lack of good roads in the community:

Interviewer: What do you mean rural poor environment affects you?

Learner: Like walking long distances to school.

Interviewer: Ok, how long does it take you to walk to school, 30 minutes?

Learner: No, 30 minutes is nothing, I walk to school for more than an hour in the morning because I stay far away. You will be shocked to see how far some of these learners are staying. This is one of the reasons why other learners get to school late. You get to school late and in the first few periods you are too tired to concentrate. Again in the last periods you [are] thinking of a long

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distance that you still need to walk home and the chores that you need to do when you get home and it becomes difficult to concentrate (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

Even teachers were affected by this problem. Most teachers did not live in the area. Most relied on public transport to get to school. This became a problem because transport was scarce and the roads were bad. To cope with the costs, they organised group transport (or lift clubs). This had its own challenges because if the teacher whose car they used was late, they were all late. If the driver was absent from school they had to use unreliable and scarce public transport. On rainy days, travelling became a huge problem and most people who owned cars chose to stay away. This increased teacher absenteeism in the school. For example, in the following extracts from teacher focus group interview teachers expressed the challenges they faced:

Teacher 1: It's very hard for us, we travel long distances to school, for instance, I wake up at 5o'clock in the morning, get a taxi to where I will get a lift from Mr A who is a principal in a primary school. Because we pay him monthly if he is absent for meetings or leave early to fulfil his management duties like submissions at the circuit office we have to spend extra money on public transport and this can be expensive.

Teacher 2: On rainy days most of us can't come to school because the roads are not accessible. And you can imagine how much it rains in summer. We used to try and walk from the tar road to the school but we realised that it does not make much difference because it is a long distance so we get to

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school late, and we leave early and most of the learners would be absent. And

no one wants to walk in the rain on a muddy road which is slippery.

<div align="center">(Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010)</div>

Thirdly, lack of electricity was also revealed as a big challenge for learners and teachers. Participants highlighted the concerns they had regarding some of the Matric intervention programmes available on radio which most schools benefit from but which are not accessible to rural learners. For example, the DBE, together with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), organise revision lessons for Grade 12 (Matric) learners which are aired on radio and television. Learners stated that this was a facility that most rural pupils could not benefit from because most families could not afford to have radios or television sets; those that did have them used them sparingly to save on batteries. The norm that was observed was that the adults in the home would listen to the news and their favourite broadcasts, leaving the children's needs uncatered for. One of the parents felt that government needed to intervene:

> *The government needs to assist us with electricity, maybe our children will*
>
> *gain something through listening to radio or TV. There is no electricity. You*
>
> *find that the radio is off because the battery is finished. Because she stays*
>
> *with me I have to wait for pension day before we can buy another battery.*
>
> *Electricity is a necessity so that our children can learn from radio or TV*
>
> (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

From a curricular perspective, the teachers agreed with the above concerns:

Learners here lack knowledge; even this rural environment affects them. They don't have TVs so are not exposed to information. TV has a major role to play in enlightenment because sometimes you see new things that you never thought you will know about. The fact that learners here are not exposed to TVs impacts negatively on their schooling (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

Most of the challenges that affect rural communities tend to be transferred to schooling. Issues of late coming and absenteeism that are of great concern to rural people cannot be totally solved as the environment contributes to them. This means that the improvement of infrastructure is essential. Mmotlane, Winnaar and waKivilu (2009) point out that provision of infrastructure is essential in the improvement of schooling and education, as lack of basic infrastructure affects schools greatly.

The next section focuses on the participants' perspectives regarding lack of development and its impact on schools in rural communities.

5.3.2 Lack of Development and its Links to School Underperformance

Education has always been perceived as an agent of transformation, development and social change (Teffo, 2008). As such this study contends that rural communities tend to judge schools based on their understanding of what an improved or developed rural community ought to be. They see the school as a symbol of improvement, progress and development. They believe that the school is expected to bring positive

changes to this rural community. This is supported by Hargreaves (2009) who posits that if one purpose of the school is to be part of the cause for development of sustainable rural communities, there is therefore a need to educate learners to be capable not only of finding jobs, but most importantly of creating jobs. The community participating in this study was no exception. All the participants agreed that when it came to schooling, positive gains could not yet be seen but that schooling had long term benefits. In other words, they believed that the main benefits would only be seen long after the children had left school.

To illustrate, learners and parents expressed the view that schooling should create opportunities for learners to live a better and improved life. According to them, the school should equip learners with skills that would allow them to improve their lives. The school should help young people to discover their talents and improve their lives and ultimately those of the community. Indicating that parents wanted their children to live a better life than they did, one of the parents asserted:

> *Some of us as parents did not get a chance to go to school to learn. We do not like our children to live the kind of life we are living. We want them to have a better life* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

Furthermore, the parents expressed the view that education brought enlightenment to their children and that, when this happened, these children would live better lives than those of their parents. Another parent stated:

> *We might not see any gain from schooling now in our lives but the main purpose is to see my child not suffering like us, not living the kind of life we are living now. The child will gain by having a bright future; as parents we*

wish for our children to live well, for a child to be able to live a good life with his family. This will make me happy because as a parent you would not be happy if your child is suffering (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

One of the reasons given by parents for the importance of schooling was that education allowed people to improve and to be exposed to different careers. In this regard in the parents' focus group interview one of the parents asserted:

I think it's important for a child to learn because if I die I will leave him with provision for the future. Even if I do not have anything a child would go to school to prepare himself for the future (SGB focus group interview, 10th September 2010).

Another added:

Yes, they develop important skills and identifying their talents like if a child has a gift of poetry, he can use that to be independent and make a living out of it. Without school they'll never have the ability to see what they are capable of (SGB focus group interview, 10th September 2010).

On the one hand, the findings suggested that the parents viewed education as leading to a better life; on the other hand, they also acknowledged that there was not much difference between a person who went to school and a person who did not. Specifically, learners were of the view that in rural areas there was no difference between a person who had completed secondary school and one who had not, as they argued that most people ended up doing the same jobs. For example, most people in

rural areas worked as taxi drivers or conductors as they could not access other job opportunities, whether they had completed school or not. To illustrate, a learner stated:

> *Most of the former students who have passed Matric are just walking around doing nothing and those who happen to find jobs start as taxi conductors and if they are lucky they become taxi drivers. This is something that anyone can do, you do not need Matric to work there* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

Teachers believed that there was a huge difference between those who were educated and those who were not. Although most successful business people in the area such as taxi owners and shop owners were not educated, teachers believed this served as a disadvantage to them as they could not access some of the amenities available to them, including banking and other services. Although teachers believed that finishing secondary school was important as without this job access would be a challenge, they were quick to point out that even if learners passed Matric, they still wanted to work as taxi conductors in the area. This could be because professionals were limited in the area as most people moved to urban areas. As a result, learners had no role models as most successful people in the community were not educated. Teachers felt that this served to de-motivate young people from finishing school. One of the teachers expressed this view:

> *I think the problem is that a number of successful people are not educated. You see most people are not educated. You see most people are taxi drivers and taxi owners and they own beautiful houses. Some of them have businesses*

but they have never been to school. So our learners dream of being like them, so this means school becomes irrelevant (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

Confirming but also extending this view, the principal raised a concern that the current education system was more about self improvement than community development. Learners were encouraged to concentrate on developing self and not the community. He felt that for rural areas there was a need to encourage learners to improve their lives for the purpose of developing their communities. He asserted:

Education improves the life of a child and makes it better but should also improve the life of those around the child. So the future becomes bright maybe a parent has never been to school. The child will be enlightened and realise that they can improve their lives and that of the community (Principal semi-structured interview, 14th June 2010).

Participants in this study generally believed that schooling should be part of improving the lives of the learners so that they would be able to change their lives and those of their parents by improving their homes and making them better. According to them this would bring positive change to the community. For example, in a focus group interview an RCL member stated:

We all want to have a bright future and also to look at ourselves and say one day I want to own my own things. We all want success at the end of the day but you will never be successful if you do not go to school. Another thing is that if you look closely at the rural areas you will find that most people are uneducated. So parents and the community are happy that there are schools here and they want us to learn. So we can live a better life. Everyone would

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love that one day when you show people your home it will be good and attractive, a home that everyone can wish for (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

For the parents, the school symbolised a bright future for their children which would also bring good fortune for them as well. They expressed the hope that, when their children were educated, they would even afford to buy a house for them. One of the parents asserted:

You see, my house is built of mud. Sometimes I am deep in thoughts thinking if my children complete school I will leave this mud house I am living in with my children and sending them to school. I look at what we eat at home, look at how our lives are like and think one day change will come if my children continue and finish school (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

However, parents raised the concern that when their children were educated, they left the rural areas and never improved the lives of their parents. They cited evidence in the community where parents with educated children experienced no home improvement as their children had left the rural area to live in an urban area. One parent lamented:

We can't make our children to live here. Most of the time, our children leave the rural areas. They don't want to stay here if they are educated. They buy houses in the urban areas and they stay there. When they come to visit they stay in these dilapidated houses they grew up in. Their beautiful houses are in

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the urban areas. They just run away from here, I do not know why (Parent semi-structured interview, 19ᵗʰ May 2010).

Wanting them to elaborate on this, I probed further:

Interviewer: *How can we encourage them to come back? How can you make them come back?*

Parent 1:   *There is nothing we can do even if we want them to come back we hear them saying: 'I was born here, grew up here, and you want me to die here?' They will tell you about their needs which are not available here. They even forget to build beautiful houses for us. Your child sees you as a nuisance.*

Parent 2:   *There are many homes here with the same problem. In my uncle's place they still live in the same house that was built by my uncle even though their daughter is a land surveyor and has a beautiful house in Pietermaritzburg. But at home when she visits she is still in the same house that my uncle built. One of her sisters is a nurse and the other a policewoman but the house is still the same. When she dies they will rent tents even for cooking. When she graduated she did not want to have a party here but in Pietermaritzburg. But one day she will die or a parent will die and she'll rent tents because the house is not in a good condition. You see the father had built a strong and beautiful house but it was like that back then, it should be even better now* (Parent focus group interview, 23ʳᵈ August 2010).

Participants also believed that schooling should bring about community development. This means that all stakeholders should be enlightened enough to assist with bringing basic necessities to the community and also assisting with bringing service delivery to improve infrastructure. Whether a school is judged as performing or underperforming is based on whether it is able to produce learners who will be able to do these things successfully. Participants believed that a community gained respect when there was a school in the area. For example, the learners dreamed that when they were educated and working, they would come back to contribute to community development. Parents, on the other hand, believed that if their children were around, they could assist with language translation should someone outside the community who did not speak IsiZulu came to the area for service delivery. This ideal was based on the fact that most people in the community did not speak English. In this way their educated children would help communicate with such persons. The learners pointed out that they would love to be of help to their parents by coming back and building houses for them. They also envisaged bringing electricity to the area. This meant that people's lives would improve as the infrastructure of the area would improve. One learner stated:

> *We will be able to assist in the community when we are working. We will build our houses and maybe finally bring electricity to the area, if community members are not able to communicate with Eskom. I can do it for my house and that will make it easier for other community members who cannot afford or cannot communicate and will gain from my efforts, and they'll also get it* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

Participants believed that the community gained respect if it had educated people. This was expressed by one SGB members in the following manner:

> *I find that in a school a child learns but it ends there it does not change anything at home there isn't much that they learn from school that has a direct impact on our lives. Like I said before if a child has completed schooling and is now working and earning a salary, that is when he can be a provider and give you stuff; that is when you can see that schooling has benefits* (SGB semi-structured interview, 8th June 2010).

On the one hand, parents expressed the wish that their children would stay and contribute not only to their self development but also to the family and community. They believed that this could happen if their children continued to be part of the community because if they left it became easy for them to forget where they were coming from. As one SGB member stated:

> *They [our children] should stay here and develop this area, what they do is they leave this area and when they come to visit they'll say, 'Why is this area not developing? Even now there is no development'. They say that but when they leave the area who do they think will improve it?* (SGB semi-structured interview, 8th June 2010).

Concurring with this view, learners asserted:

> *Learner 1:   Most people do not come back here; they live in the urban areas so some houses here are empty especially if parents*

> *have passed away. Children go to tertiary institutions, pass*
> *and find jobs there and never come back.*

> *Interviewer:*   *Why is that?*

> *Learner 2:*   *There are no work opportunities here, no development, no*
> *electricity, no running water and worse, the road is gravel.*
>
>   (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010)

The findings suggested that the children dreamt of a better life outside the rural areas. To these children *'coming back'* meant visiting and not staying in the rural areas. One learner stated:

> *It may happen that here in school we all learn to achieve different things, it*
> *may happen that one of us is here so he can contribute to community*
> *development, in that way he can come back. No it's not all of us who can*
> *come back, but that one person would be representing all of us who are in*
> *this school* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

There seemed to be different views between parents and teachers on how this improvement of self, family and community should happen. While both groups of participants believed that education brought rural development, teachers believed that the answer to rural development was that children should go to tertiary institutions and then come back to work in the area. For teachers schooling meant self improvement, home improvement as well as community development if learners found jobs and gave back to their community. They revered urban conditions as they also highlighted the fact that schooling and education should allow learners to bring

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the 'urban' to rural areas. To them the fruits of schooling were seen when kids realised that their lives should be like those of kids in the urban areas. They were very sceptical about learners who passed Matric but remained in the rural areas, which they perceived as failure. In a focus group interview one of the teachers explained:

> *If there are skills there is development, because learners gain knowledge, go to tertiary institutions. When they come back they can promote community improvement, bring rural development and bring developments which are new in the rural areas because here development comes slowly. But if learners are educated they will bring development* (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

Parents, on the other hand, wanted their children to remain in the rural areas. They believed that children gained knowledge at school about various job opportunities and stood a better chance of being employed and improving their homes. If children were not educated their future was dim. One parent stated:

> *Success means you know where you are coming from and you come back to help others in the community* (Parent semi-structured interview, 19th May 2010).

Parents also expressed dreams for their children which did not necessarily involve going to tertiary institutions. They envisaged that their children should use the knowledge they gained from school to start their own businesses. In the SGB focus group, one parent stated:

Our children do not necessarily have to be employees; they can be self employed. For instance, if you have a catering company you can improve your life. Even if you can't afford to go to university you can use what you have learnt from school. My eldest daughter was trained here in this school and she is now self-employed as a trader. If it goes well she can even grow her business and employ many people (SGB focus group interview, 10th September 2010).

An entrepreneurial vision and entrepreneurial incentives should therefore be created for learners in rural schools.

The findings revealed that participants linked school underperformance with the rural setting; particularly with the lack of infrastructural development in the area. Participants believed that schooling should create opportunities for learners to live a better and improved life. They envisaged that schooling should bring about self improvement, home improvement and community development. Stakeholders acknowledged that schooling did not make a significant difference to current conditions in this rural area, but they hoped for and dreamed of more constructive long term effects flowing from their children's education.

The next section focuses on the participants' perspectives concerning the benefits from schooling.

5.3.3 Societal Benefits of Schools

Participants expressed the view that schools were meant to empower rural people to better deal with societal issues. In their view an underperforming rural school was one that failed to bring positive attributes to its community. They mentioned that a well performing school should keep learners constructively busy so that they did not have time to commit crime or engage in sexual relationships. This would result in reduced teenage pregnancy as well as in a better understanding of environmental and health issues.

To illustrate the views of the school as a deterrent against crime, in a focus group interview, one of the learners asserted:

> *If there were no schools in the area, this could increase the crime rate because if young people do not go to school they will use their time thinking of making quick money and they will steal, break into people's houses and pickpocket* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

Most of the learners agreed that schools contributed positively to the community. For them, if there had been no school there would have been a lot of hooligans and thieves who would rob people of their possessions. A second learner elaborated:

> *I think school helps learners to learn good behaviour. Like now I am here at school, if I wasn't here maybe I would have involved myself in lots of bad things. So because I'm in school I just focus on school work. If I have school work even at home I do not get time to loiter around the neighbourhood and be tempted to do bad things like stealing. I just stay at home and work* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

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Parents also agreed with the view that schools helped learners and taught them about good behaviour. To illustrate, one of the parents in a focus group interview elaborated:

> *If a person is educated they would not be tempted to break into people's houses to steal but will afford to buy their own things and live a good life and be able to buy what they need* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

Another significant contribution of the school to the community, according to the parents, was that it prevented teenage pregnancies and early marriages. One of the challenges experienced by the youth in this rural area was the high rate of pregnancies. Many young girls of school going age fell pregnant and had babies. One of the parents in a focus group interview observed:

> *If there were no schools in the area we will miss out on a lot of things. If an area is not developing and people are not educated, the rate of crime increases, if in that area young people do not go to school the rate of pregnancy would increase because all they do for the whole day would be to make babies and rush into traditional cohabitations at a young age* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

The learners agreed as an RCL member stated:

> *Without schools young people will only think of one thing only. They will be having babies because that will be the only thing on their minds* (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

The same views were expressed by teachers. In the focus group interview, one stated:

Traditional cohabitations are a problem. Most of the girls in this school live with their partners and they also love school so they want both. You also find that at home a child now has her own 'ilawu' (hut), they stay there with a child and the child's father, that destroys everything. There is that tradition that at a certain age you are expected to have a boyfriend or girlfriend even if you are still in school. After the girl has accepted a boy as her partner a boy or man hangs a white handkerchief in the yard as a sign of informing everyone that you have accepted his proposal and you are now officially his girlfriend and thereafter a girl will send a basket to the family as the beginning of a relationship (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

However, parents argued that people were now misusing this tradition. In the past, when the symbolic act of exchanging a handkerchief and a basket of gifts had occurred, a man would then begin the process of wooing a girl in order to ask for her hand in marriage. According to the parents, these days it only took a basket of gifts and children were allowed to live as husband and wife. This resulted in many girls and boys of school going age living together as married couples and having babies, with dire consequences for effective and successful learning.

Another benefit that schooling had for the community was the knowledge that children brought with them into the home which contributed to better hygiene and environmental education. For example, participants felt that school exposed learners to information that was useful in their day-to-day lives at home. They were made aware of hygiene and health issues and, in turn, helped their parents with such issues.

What was learnt at school was used by everyone in the home. Three learners highlighted some of these positive gains of schooling in the community:

> *Learner1: These kids help us a lot and tell us 'wash your hands', 'don't drink this water'. They know things that we were not even aware of. Although sometimes they would exaggerate* (SGB semi-structured interview, 8th June 2010).

> *Learner 2: School helps us to be aware of environmental issues that affect our health. We now know that water pollution is dangerous as it would give us diseases so we know that we need to keep our water clean all the time ... and that electricity kills and you need to be careful* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

Parents appreciated the new knowledge that their children brought to their homes. The learners also acknowledged the relevance of some of the subjects that they did at school which, in their view, made schooling relevant to the community as well.

5.4 Summary

This chapter presented the perspectives of stakeholders on school underperformance, focusing on the relationship between the school and its rural context. The findings suggested that these perspectives were shaped by the participants' socio-economic (contextual) experiences. This was reflected in how they measured school

performance against their experiences in rural households and in their rural setting. Firstly, the chapter focused on the relationship between the home, parents, community and the school. The lack of connectedness between the rural home and the school and the ways in which this disconnectedness impacted negatively on parental and community participation in schooling matters were discussed. It was found that the conditions in rural homes, coupled with the social commitments of learners in these homes, broke the educational link between the school and the home. Moreover, the lack of communication between the home and the school also exacerbated the situation. This breakdown resulted in the fact that parents and the community regarded themselves as outsiders to the school; hence they were loath to take part in school activities. Secondly, the chapter looked at how participants viewed the existence of schools as representing progress and rural development. To them schools were meant to improve the lives of rural people, serve their needs and empower them to deal with challenging societal issues. However, they pointed out that, while the school was helping them to deal with societal issues, other expectations had not yet been met by the school but were anticipated in the future. This suggests that the school was not yet meeting the expectations of these rural people in terms of bringing progress and rural development. Thus, informed by the evidence presented in the chapter, this thesis argues that the lack of connectedness between the school and community impacts negatively on the value that rural people put on education and schooling.

In the next chapter I explore the participants' perspectives of the school's status as an underperforming school within a rural context.

CHAPTER SIX

PERSPECTIVES OF UNDERPERFORMANCE IN A RURAL SCHOOL

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that the perspectives of rural people on school underperformance were tied to their context and socio-economic experiences. In that chapter I presented these perspectives, focusing on the relationship between the school and its rural context and highlighting the way in which this relationship influenced the views that rural people had on the underperformance of their school. In this chapter I continue to illustrate this influence of context on rural people's perspectives as I focus on the participants' conceptions of an underperforming school and the reasons for these perspectives.

The decision to focus on the perspectives of rural people on school performance was influenced by the proposition that learners in underperforming schools are not given sufficient opportunities to learn (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). This proposition holds that the reason for underperformance in rural schools might be embedded in internal factors and the school situation. In rural schools, these factors (issues inside school) are influenced by the rural community. Thus, to allow for a deeper understanding of what school performance means for rural schools, the study aimed to solicit the views of stakeholders from a rural school.

6.2 Understanding Schooling in Rural Contexts

The focus of the investigation that is reported in this chapter was premised on the notion that the views of rural people and their expectations of schooling were influenced by their experiences in rural settings. Available literature suggests that, generally, school performance/underperformance is mainly understood as involving academic performance. Conversely, however, the findings suggested that the stakeholders in this study (i.e., people in and around the rural school) perceived school underperformance as involving more than academic outcomes based on exams and test scores (Nicolaidou & Ainscow, 2005). This confirms the views of scholars in the field who have concluded that focusing exclusively on academic outcomes tends to disregard other outcome measures and the larger cultural context of living, of which formal education is just a part (Apple, 2001; McNeil, 2000, 2001). The literature further suggests that such a perspective also ignores the socio-economic background of learners and other factors which have a significant influence on student learning (Petty & Green, 2007).

To the participants in this study, schools were much more than just places where children should be taught subjects and pass grades. When asked about an underperforming school, the starting point for all the participants tended to focus on academic results. On the other hand, when asked about good schools and quality education, their perspectives broadened. Participants viewed successful schools as having a significant role in character building and in moulding the behaviour of their learners, thus socialising them towards being productive adults within rural communities. The participants assessed the school's underperformance in respect of

the activities that happened or did not happen in the school. They measured school performance against their understanding of the purpose of schooling.

6.3 Conceptions of an Underperforming Rural School

Participants in this study mainly viewed school underperformance as linked to four aspects: academic results; the school environment/context and learning prospects; learner conduct and school routine; and curriculum relevance.

6.3.1 Academic Results as a Measure of School Underperformance

Underperformance of schools is viewed within various communities, among stakeholders and in the literature on school education as having one indicator, namely that of academic performance (Jansen, 2001; Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005; Petty & Green, 2007; Downey, Von Hippel & Hughes, 2008; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009; Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay & Ciuffetelli-Parker, 2010). As stated in the preceding chapters, in South Africa a standardized measure of school performance is used whereby a secondary school is labelled as performing or underperforming with reference to its Grade 12 examination results. In the school under study that had been measured as underperforming based on its Matric results over at least three years, this label tended to have an influence on the participants' perspectives on underperformance. In other words, this embedded connection between school performance and exam results greatly influenced how participants viewed their underperforming rural school. The learners, parents and teachers identified the Matric results as an indicator of school performance and the participants were

concerned about the Matric results as the official and publicised way of measuring their performance and getting people's attention. A member of the RCL observed:

The results that get people's attention is (sic) the Grade 12 results (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

Similarly, teachers also recognised the significance of the Matric results. One teacher observed:

The department is interested in Matric results, I guess that is where we have to do well. At the end of the day everything else you do doesn't matter; if your learners don't do well in Matric your school is out (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

Participants acknowledged that the end of the year examination results were an important factor that determined whether their school was underperforming or not. They felt that it was important for a school to produce good results because that was the ultimate goal for all learners. They believed that if a school obtained good results, it was well respected and many learners would be attracted to it, which would work positively for such a school in terms of enrolment. However, their opinions on the importance of examination results as a tool to measure school performance differed. On the one hand, parents believed that Matric results were an important criterion to measure school performance. For example, one parent stated:

A performing school, you see as December is approaching Matric results will be out in the newspapers - that is how we are going to see that even here in

the rural areas we are doing well (Parent semi-structured interview, 19th May 2010).

The parents' views tended to be influenced by the exposure the school received through the publication of the results in the media. They seemed to be aware of the fact that the eyes of the community would be on them through this exposure. This awareness of the effect of the publication of the Matric results could be coupled with parents' meetings where the issue of the *'Matric results'* was a common item on the agenda, revealing the influence that this had on how the success – or lack of success - of the school was measured. The minutes of meetings that I reviewed revealed that the most common kinds of meetings the school held every year were an annual general meeting for parents, SGB meetings and Matric parents' meetings. Discussions around the issue of results were common and always focused on the strategies that the school employed to improve Grade 12 results.

Conversely, learners and teachers expressed the view that the emphasis to measure the school should not be put on Grade 12 results only, but that the school should produce good results across all grades. They believed that the school should consistently achieve good results in all grades and that there should be a link between what was done in Grade 8 and what was done in Grade 12. For example, an RCL member observed:

The school is said to be underperforming if it has bad Grade 12 results but the focus should be on all grades (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

According to these participants, all grades in the school should be given an equal status and the school should strive to produce good results across the board.

Participants believed that too much attention was given to the Matrics and that this compromised the quality of education offered in the lower grades. Even the school's intervention programmes to improve results were aimed only at Matric learners and this meant that other grades were often left unattended. By the time the younger learners reached Matric, no matter how hard the teachers worked, it would be fruitless as these learners would have spent most of their secondary school life being ignored. One learner explained:

> *I think schools should be judged from Grade 8 because that is where secondary school starts. Learners do not take their work seriously when they are in Grade 8, again not serious in Grade 10 [sic]. When they are in Grade 12, that is when they think strongly about passing but the problem is secondary school learning is a progression through grades, so if you were not serious from the beginning you will not know anything because you were neglecting your work. Schools do not encourage learners to take lower classes seriously; some learners are condoned in the lower classes but are expected to pass at the end* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

The data also suggested that the DBE strongly influenced perspectives on underachievement is it valued Matric more than other grades as a measure of judging school performance. For example, some of the government's initiatives tended to drive schools to concentrate on Grade 12 only. Teachers felt compelled to give more attention to Matric learners so as to produce 'acceptable' end-of-year results and to avoid their school being categorised as 'underperforming'. In this study, teachers

were not happy with the fact that only Grade 12 results were used by the DBE to measure performance, especially because they felt that there were contextual factors that affected performance and that these should also be noted. A teacher noted:

I think judging schools through Grade 12 pass rates is an unfair judgement that one, maybe they (Department of Education) don't yet have a good criteria to judge good performing schools because what happens sometimes is that you find that the school is underperforming according to their criteria but if you look closely at the school you find that everyone is working hard and you can't find a clear reason why the school is underperforming. So the judgement that uses pass results only is not the right one to judge whether a school is performing or underperforming (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

Two others added:

Teacher 1: Because they are judging schools with Grade 12 the whole school becomes Grade 12. The teachers, the principal and other learners do not matter, they just look at Grade 12. If that one Grade 12 group did not do well then the whole school did not do well. They do not even look at their primary school education, no one even looks at the pass requirement for other grades which are totally different from the Grade 12 one (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

Teacher 2: Pass requirements let us down; we do not have special schools in the area so primary school teachers condone learners because they are not allowed to keep them in the same grade for long. So even learners with disabilities they pass even if there are no special teachers for them. I had a

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learner who was almost deaf but we had to pass him until he reached Gr. 12
and he obviously failed there. We had to push him up to Gr. 12 because that
is what policy says and we also did not know what to do with him but he
failed Gr. 12 which was okay because he could not come back to repeat
(Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

The above perspectives were influenced by the fact that the Matric results were the ultimate goal of formal schooling and that this measuring system put pressure on secondary schools to do well in the Grade 12 examination. This then automatically became a starting point in all discussions on school performance. The school was labelled as underperforming by the DBE because it had obtained less than a 60% pass rate for Grade 12 over three years or more, and all participants were aware of this fact. They were clearly influenced by policy requirements that foregrounded Grade 12 pass rates as the dominant and publicly valued measure of school performance. However, in this study the participants went further and identified other factors of measuring performance that were of value to them. These are discussed below.

6.3.2 The School Context and Learning Prospects

The data suggested that the school faced many challenges such as poorly qualified teachers, insufficient numbers of teachers, dilapidated buildings and a lack of resources. These challenges affected the extent and quality of learning experienced by learners in the school. Such conditions are illuminated by most researchers who see rural schools as suffering from great inequalities and facing the problems of poor school infrastructure, inadequate resources, and the poor quality and shortage of

teachers which impact negatively on teaching and learning (Lindeque & Vandeyar, 2004; Emerging Voices, 2005; Pennefather, 2008; McQuaide, 2009; Hlalele, 2012). Such adversities result in disparities in learner performance which are credited to inadequate resources and poor school infrastructure (Jansen, 2001).

The findings of this study suggested that there was usually a great shortage of efficient teachers in the school under study. All the participants concurred that the school never started a year with a full staff complement as there was always a delay in teacher employment. This was sometimes caused by the DBE's procedures in teacher employment and sometimes by difficulties in recruiting teachers to this rural area. This became a huge obstacle in teaching and learning, especially because there is always a link between teacher quality and student achievement (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005). In relation to teacher shortages, a parent lamented:

> *Sometimes the principal would tell us that there is a shortage of teachers for certain subjects they are still trying to recruit and he always tell us when they have found that teacher but there is always a delay* (Parent semi-structured interview, 19th May 2010).

Government policy was also cited as a problem and cause for teacher shortages in the school, particularly as Post Provisioning Norms (PPN), whereby teacher allocation to a school depends on learner enrolment, was rigorously applied by the DBE. Even when teachers had been recruited and the staff allocation requirements for the school had been met, the DBE would allocate fewer teachers to the school based on the number of learners and not the number of subjects taught. So, in a small rural school like this one, the number of subjects taught did not match the number of teachers

allocated to do the job. For example, the SGB chairperson voiced the effects of teacher shortages as follows:

> *We are given insufficient teachers; learners are few, yes, but there are many subjects so teachers end up teaching subjects they do not know so learners complain and if teachers teach something that they do not know learners can see that* (SGB semi-structured interview, 8th June 2010).

The principal also expressed concerns regarding teaching staff shortages. The fact that the school had low enrolment numbers like most rural schools meant that few teachers would be allocated to the school. The low number of teachers in the school meant that teachers ended up teaching subjects that they were not qualified to teach. This was not good for the school because it meant that there were more subjects than teachers to teach them. One teacher pointed out:

> *I was trained to teach Mathematics and Biology but I also teach a little bit of Technology and Arts and Culture because these are new subjects and no one is qualified to teach them, but I try my best* (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

This teacher has to be commended for her positive attitude as the sheer volume of preparation for these subjects seems to be insurmountable.

External factors also impacted on teacher availability. The principal and SGB expressed the view that it became very difficult to recruit teachers to the school because the area was far from the urban settings from where most teachers were recruited. Moreover, there were no proper cottages or residential facilities for teachers so most of them commuted to school every day. Moreover, there was a high turnover of staff as the teachers were always looking for posts near their homes in

urban areas and as soon as they found such a post they left the rural school. The principal stated:

> *An important part of our work as rural school principals is to recruit new teachers. We are always looking for new teachers. This year alone I have three new teachers in the school because three teachers left last year. We do not even have that much option, you need to take whoever is willing to work in your school otherwise you will go for weeks with no teacher. We rely mostly on under-qualified teachers because at least they will stay and only leave when they get their proper qualifications* (Principal semi-structured interview, 14th June 2010).

Teachers also concurred that they travelled long distances to school and that, by the time they got to school, they were already tired and thinking about the trip back home in the afternoon. This affected their performance. One teacher commented:

> *It is very difficult to work here; it is not only expensive but also tiring. You spend most of the time in an uncomfortable bakkie travelling to school and back. As a result you are always tired, and you cannot work well if you are tired. Really, no one can do this for a long time, you will get sick. The school is ok but the distance is the problem, which is why if people get a post nearer to their homes they do not think twice about leaving* (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

I found that teacher absenteeism rates were high in the school. This was often caused by official duties that had to be performed outside the school like attending workshops and moderation sessions for grades 10 to 12 organised by the DBE. The fact that there were few teachers in the school meant that almost all of them taught

all the grades, and that if a teacher was absent, all the grades would not be taught the relevant subjects on that day. Moreover, the school did not have enough teachers to monitor the classes of absent teachers. I also observed that even if teachers attended workshops which started in the afternoon, they would absent themselves from school for the entire day because if they came to school in the morning they would struggle to find transport to take them to the workshop venue on time. Teacher absenteeism was also caused by poor infrastructure (e.g., poor roads, a lack of transport facilities, and the fact that most teachers did not live in the community but commuted from the city on a daily basis). Regarding teacher absenteeism and its impact on teaching and learning, the principal reported:

> *One of the challenges of managing a rural school is that there is a high level of teacher absenteeism in the school. The challenge is that most of the time is it is beyond the teachers' control and as a principal you are powerless, especially if you are also part of it and you understand what is happening. For example, if roads are not accessible you cannot force people to walk on muddy roads. Unfortunately, it is the learners who suffer because they lose hours of learning time which affects their performance* (Principal semi-structured interview, 14th June 2010).

Participants in this study raised a concern regarding the poor quality and inadequacy of resources in the school. According to them, the fact that the school could not afford to buy adequate textbooks for learners affected the teaching and learning process and rendered the school deficient. Although this was a Section 21 school that could procure textbooks and stationery, the funds allocated to the school depended

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on learner enrolment (fewer learners meant less money). With the high cost of textbooks, this meant that the school was often unable to buy enough of the required textbooks for the learners, which meant that the available textbooks were never enough. An SGB member commented:

> *Rural schools always delay in getting books and when they finally deliver books they are not enough* (SGB semi-structured interview, 8th June 2010).

The teachers also lamented the inadequacy of textbooks for teaching and learning. For example, one teacher complained:

> *It is difficult to teach when not all learners have text books. As a teacher you are the main source of information and that limits your teaching style, it really makes teaching difficult. You cannot even give them work to do at home.* (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

The ever changing curriculum also meant that new textbooks would be needed, thus requiring the school to keep buying new textbooks as previously bought ones had become obsolete. While the school had a book retrieval policy which clearly stated that learners should return all the textbooks that had been allocated to them at the end of the year, the school appeared powerless when it came to dealing with learners who could not or simply did not return books. When asked about the book retrieval system, teachers expressed concerns that this was not working as they could not do anything if a learner lost a book. For example, one teacher stated:

> *Before we used to withhold results until a parent buys a lost book for the school but we cannot do that anymore. Now things have changed the DBE warns that no learner should be punished for losing a textbook and learners and parents know this* (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

Learners argued that they did not lose books deliberately but that books sometimes got wet inside their bags on rainy days. Sometimes a book could get wet at home if the roof leaked and they were embarrassed to return tatty books and then explain what happened.

Linked to the shortage of textbooks was the lack of library and laboratory facilities. This was a great concern among the participants who argued that this deficiency impacted negatively on their learning. Learners even stated that they would have loved to have a library in the school so as to spend some time there studying and gaining knowledge, rather than walking around the school yard doing nothing. To illustrate, a learner asserted:

> *If we had a library we would spend most of our free lessons there studying and doing projects* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

For the learners the fact that there was no library meant that for work like projects they had to rely on insufficient information obtained from teachers. One learner explained:

> *The fact that we do not have a library means that we do not have access to extra information to do for an example projects* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

To illustrate the negative impact of these shortages, participants attributed the high failure rate in Science subjects to the lack of laboratories and laboratory equipment. By way of an example, an RCL member stated:

> *Teachers are teaching but let me make an example: in Physics we do not have anything [equipment]. If Miss A wants to do an experiment she has to borrow from other schools. Sometimes we are told that we cannot do something because there is nothing to use* (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

In a separate interview, a parent concurred:

> *You see, resources are not enough, let me make an example we are told Science is difficult but our children only listen to teachers but they cannot see what they are learning about because there is no laboratory* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

In my experience, rural schools do not have the financial capacity to procure library books and complete science kits because they receive less funding from the DBE and have to use those limited funds to do so much. My observations revealed that there was a room called a laboratory which had a few posters on the wall and old bottles of different left-over chemicals. This room was used for science lessons; hence it was called a laboratory.

Poor school infrastructure was also identified as a problem in this school and the effects of rurality were visible. This was a concern to the participants because they thought if the situation was different learners would be exposed to a better education.

Their concerns are supported by Gustaffson (2006) who posits that there is a link between the quality of schools and physical infrastructure and performance. This author warns that it is difficult to separate the effects of rurality and poor quality of education because evidence suggests that the physical environment has an effect on schools. In this regard an SGB member stated:

> *You see, in this school windows are broken, during lesson time it is even windy inside the classroom, there are no doors and if the weather is too windy even the roofs make a funny noise; if it is raining there are too many leaks in the roof* (SGB semi-structured interview, 8th June 2010).

Similarly, a teacher argued:

> *The school environment has to be conducive to learning; here it is not... even the buildings are damaged and look old ... windows are broken ... no doors* (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

Poor infrastructure also led to absenteeism and truancy among learners. For example, uncontrolled entry and exit through the school gate was a concern among all the participants, including the learners. The fact that there was no gate control promoted truancy among learners. A parent explained:

> *There is no security guard at the gate, learners come and go as they please and it is not easy for teachers to control them because they are teaching* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

Because of this uncontrolled entry and exit of people in and out of the school, learners left the school premises any time they felt like it, even during lesson time. As mentioned in the previous chapter, even community members tended to come in and out of the school premises without reason. It was common for community

members to listen in when teachers were teaching. Learners also bunked classes and left the school premises to go to the nearest shops to hang around.

6.3.3 Conduct and School Routines

Looking beyond Matric results as a measure of achievement, the participants in this study linked school underperformance to how learners, teachers and the principal conducted themselves in and around the school. According to them, learners, teachers and the principal should always be on their best behaviour and conduct themselves vis-à-vis school routines. To illustrate this point, the participants put strong emphasis on the need for all learners to wear their full and proper school uniform as a sign of respect and care for the school and their education. They seemed to share the sentiment that if learners wore their school uniforms properly, it was an indication of being a good and well-behaved learner. When asked how they would go about identifying a good school, one parent responded:

> *If it is a good school, you will see it by learners wearing a full school uniform* (Parent semi-structured interview).

In addition, during a focus group interview with members of the School Governing Body (SGB), the following views were expressed:

> *You see a good school by first seeing learners wearing a full school uniform as this is a sign of respect for the school* (SGB semi-structured interview, 8th June 2010).

On their part, the learners also echoed these sentiments. To illustrate, one learner had this to say:

> *In a school learners should behave well. Learners should, for example, wear a full school uniform and be clean because how you wear your school uniform tells people the kind of person that you are and the kind of life you are living. If learners come to school wearing takkies, with no tie, not presentable as if it is a school for hooligans, you will not learn anything if you are wearing something other than a full school uniform. A uniform makes you and other people believe that you are in school and are determined to learn* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

The learners highlighted the importance of looking neat and they were outspoken against learners who wore their uniforms like 'ordinary people who are not school goers'. According to them, there was a special way to wear a school uniform which distinguished learners from other youths. As the learners pointed out, things like big earrings, beanies, scarves and takkies (sneakers) should not be worn with the school uniform as this was a sign of disrespect. To them, the school uniform and the way it was worn symbolised a good education.

The learners also linked school performance/underperformance to stakeholders' commitment and respect. They regarded a school as a performing school when its learners were taught about and demonstrated respect in their conduct. To illustrate, for one learner this meant the following:

> *Another thing that we gain from coming to school is respect. You see if there was no school here people would not respect each other, we would not have the respect that we learn from school. Because here in school we don't just*

learn what is in the books but we are taught respect; to respect not just older people but to respect younger people as well. Even a person who comes to school for the sake of whiling away time ends up mixing with people who have goals in life who want to be something in life and ends up being motivated and also ends up dreaming to be something in life. We come to school because we want to achieve our goals. No one comes to school just because everyone is coming. We all have goals now (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

In addition, the learners pointed out that a school would be underperforming if its learners did not show commitment to their work and did not respect teachers and the principal. A learner expressed this sentiment thus:

In school learners should have respect because respect is important; if you have respect you gain a lot, you get blessings... we don't respect teachers, we don't come to school on time, if the school finishes at 4 or 5 (for extra lessons) we don't want to do that. If we do stay you find that we are on our own, we end up not studying but make noise and chat... Sometimes we just don't want to study our books, I don't want to lie, sometimes we just don't want to study, like everyone we also get lazy to study our books I don't know why... As you can hear them now, learners are making noise but this is lesson time but they are just making noise you can see that no teaching is taking place, they had their break time they should now be in class learning (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

Similarly, teachers also expressed the view that learners contributed to a school's underperformance when they showed a lack of commitment and discipline in and around the school. In this regard, one teacher stated:

> *What I think contributes mostly to underperformance is lack of self discipline from learners. Learners should be disciplined and know that when they are given a project and they are guided to do that project they have to do it. If a learner decides not to do that project, that is the problem because you cannot force someone to do work* (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4ᵗʰ June 2010).

Parents concurred with the view that learners were not committed to their school work. One parent said:

> *As a person who is here in school regularly I usually see that learners are not serious about their work. They do not have respect for teachers* (SGB semi-structured interview, 8ᵗʰ June 2010).

My observations in the school also suggested learners' disrespect for authority. This was evident from the noise levels in classrooms (which mostly happened in those classes where there was no teacher in the class, an issue which I return to later in this chapter). Parents and teachers in this study viewed learners in the school as not caring for their school work. The sentiment was expressed that most learners tended to succumb to peer pressure and were coerced into bad behaviour by their fellow schoolmates who were not interested in their school work at all.

Participants in the study also identified bad behaviour and lack of discipline as contributing to school underperformance. They defined a good school as one which had an effective code of conduct or system of monitoring learner behaviour. In such a school learners would always be well disciplined. Conversely, they viewed an underperforming school as one which did not have strong school rules to monitor learner behaviour and where learners were not well disciplined. They were cognisant of the fact that, in underperforming schools, learners behaved in ways that disrupted teaching and learning; no disciplinary measures were taken against unacceptable behaviour; and school authorities were not strict, thus allowing learners to misbehave. This was the opposite of a good school where learners would be encouraged to show good conduct and where they were mostly at their best behaviour. In effective schools learners were always warned against and guided away from bad behaviour. All the participants believed that a school should teach learners about good behaviour. For example, teachers pointed out that it was the school's responsibility to teach learners good behaviour and to ensure that learners knew wrong from right. They felt that it was their responsibility to ensure that learners were always at their best behaviour. For example, one teacher stated:

> *Teaching is not just about academic work and written work only, we also need to teach them [learners] about good behaviour so they know how to make good decisions about good and bad behaviour* (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

Another added:

> *We also need to give them moral lessons, we don't just teach from textbooks. We talk to the learners about morals, so we mould them to be responsible*

people and to survive in the outside world. We tell them that for you to live a good life you need to behave in a particular manner (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

Learners also agreed that good behaviour was important as it prepared them for life outside schooling. One learner commented:

Here in school we come for an essential need which is to learn but we also learn about life issues like how to behave. Teachers are able to give us advice on life issues like good behaviour as they were also learners once and they know what we are going through (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

A second learner added:

From schooling we gain because we are taught about good behaviour. If you go to school even in the community young children look up to you and say they also want to be like that well behaved person. Older people [in the community] also look at how well behaved we are and see that we are really educated (RCL focus group interview, 25th August 2010).

A third learner concluded:

School is very important. A school is not a place where you carry your books and study them only. At school you learn good behaviour; you learn that you need to behave in this manner. Even if you are around educated people you know how to behave around them (Learner focus group interview,18th August 2010).

On their part, parents tended to see the school as grooming learners to behave 'like educated people'. For them, educated people behaved well all the times. They believed that uneducated people were unfortunate because they would always behave like '*amaqaba*' (barbarians), a term for people who are not enlightened enough to know the difference between acceptable behaviour and unacceptable behaviour. According to one parent, schooling was important because:

> *There is a lot that our children learn from school like good behaviour...*
> *amaqaba [people who have never been to school] just shout when they are*
> *talking, educated people don't do that, we don't want our children to behave*
> *like that* (Parent semi-structured interview, 19th May 2010).

A member of the SGB added:

> *If a child goes to school he learns respect, to respect older people and*
> *different types of children he meets at school. He learns the correct way of*
> *talking with other people and learns to speak to other people in an*
> *appropriate manner*   (SGB focus group interview, 10th September 2010).

Furthermore, learners believed that good behaviour would help them to cope in the workplace when they were older. In a focus group interview, learners were asked: "What if in a school there is no order and learners are allowed to get away with mischief and bad behaviour but still pass well at the end of the year?" The following responses emerged:

> *Learner 1:   I don't think there is a problem as long as you pass because*
> *that is the reason why we come to school.*

> *Learner 2:   I personally think that is a big problem because in a school you also need to learn good behaviour. When you are now working you will be asked to do something if you refuse you'll then lose your job.*

> *Learner 3:   I agree with that; you will learn and pass well and at work you will continue with what you were doing at school. You find that you do your work in your own time or maybe you do not come to work on time. At work it is not about doing your work well but also about being punctual. You will always come to work late and be dismissed and lose your job.* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010)

Participants in the study identified late coming, truancy and absenteeism as some of the factors that determined poor school performance. They seemed to share the view that bad behaviour, and subsequently poor school performance, could be measured against the rates of late coming, truancy and absenteeism. According to them, a good school would be one where all learners observed school routines according to set rules. They rated bad behaviour as prevalent in an underperforming school when learners did not seem to respect the school times. My observations revealed that learners came to school late in the morning and did not respect the school bell after break time when they were seen to be in no rush to return to classes. Learners were also seen to be outside classrooms during lesson times and many played truant by leaving the school premises without permission from the school authorities. Absenteeism was also a problem as learners absented themselves from school without permission or due reasons. According to the learners, most of them bunked classes if they did not like the teacher; therefore they did not gain anything and, in

the end, failed that subject. Learners loitered in shops during school time and played juke box, smoked and consumed alcohol.

Good behaviour was interpreted as when learners observed all school routines and respected the people in authority. The participants viewed late coming and absenteeism as indicators of an underperforming school. When asked about a good school, the participants identified a performing school as follows:

> *…where learners are well behaved, not loitering around the school during lesson time, and also that when teachers ensure that when it is their lesson time they honour lessons and teach learners. If the bell rings after break the learners respect it and return to class. In the morning they are punctual and get to the school assembly on time. If morning lessons are organised they respect and attend those lessons* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

In a focus group interview with learners, they explained:

> *Researcher: How would you describe a good rural school?*
>
> *Learner 1:   Measuring school performance starts with school rules. You see, if a school comes out at 12 and again another day it is out around 10. If you walk past the school learners are all over the yard during lesson time. The school starts with the rules that have been made inside the school which determine routine before we can look at what is happening inside the classrooms.*

Researcher: *Ok, what else?*

Learner 2:   *Break time should be break time and lesson time should be lesson time at school. If the bell rings we have to respect it. Not that when the bell rings learners just loiter around the school and wait until the teacher comes and tells them to go inside the class rooms.*

Researcher: *Ok?*

Learner 3:   *I will see a good school by the fact that during lesson time learners are all inside the classroom, no learners are all over the school premises as if it's break time.*

Researcher: *Alright.*

Learner 4:   *Learners should also know and respect the school starting time and the finishing time.* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010)

Parents also shared the same sentiments. To illustrate, one observed:

Children should make sure that they do not absent themselves from school and also be in school on time (Parent semi-structured interview, 19th May 2010).

From the participants' perspectives, the school was clearly underperforming as it exhibited the opposite attributes to what they envisaged a good school to be.

As far as teachers were concerned, the participants in this study believed that for a school to be regarded as performing, they needed to instil discipline and discourage bad behaviour; in the process they should lead by example. If teachers did not discipline learners for not doing their work and for bad behaviour, then the school was viewed by the participants as underperforming. When asked how he would see an underperforming school, one learner responded:

> *Learner:*   *I can say that an underperforming school is where learners can misbehave without being punished.*
>
> *Interviewer:*   *So in your opinion an underperforming school is a school that lets learners misbehave?*
>
> *Learner:*   *Yes, anyhow.*
>
> *Interviewer:*   *What do you mean by anyhow?*
>
> *Learner:*   *Like when learners come to school late, having not done their work but teachers say it is none of their business and they do not reprimand learners.*
>
> Interviewer: *Ok?*
>
> Learner: *... and when learners bunk classes and be outside where teachers can see them but teachers choose to ignore them.*
>
> (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010)

Participants saw their school as underperforming because, according to them, teachers were not honouring their lessons, were not committed to teaching and did

not respect the school times as they came to school late. My observations during this study also suggested that the rate of teacher absenteeism was high in the school. Moreover, if the principal was not at school, which was quite often, classes were disrupted and no learning took place. Teachers would sit in the staff room and learners would either wander around the school or leave the school premises altogether. During the time of the study, learners would sometimes be in school for the whole day without a single teacher teaching them, particularly on the days when the principal was not there. Because of the high rate of teacher absenteeism, some classes were often left unattended for long periods of time.

According to the participants, a good school should have hard-working teachers; teachers who would be in class on time, teaching effectively and ensuring that learners understood the lessons and passed all subjects. Moreover, they felt that good schools possessed teachers who worked as a team and who taught, modelled and rewarded good behaviour and encouraged good progress among learners. In this regard, a learner explained:

> *A teacher should be organised, come to class on time to teach if it is his period, if he gives learners work he marks that work on time... a teacher who does not absent himself from work unnecessarily, who is always present, comes to school on time, respects learners and other teachers... teachers do not honour their lessons, even if the teacher is busy he needs to send work so that learners are kept busy and they do not make noise* (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

According to the learners and parents, teachers in the school under study did not respect learners. They gave learners work to do without explaining it first. They used old teaching methodologies which were not conducive to accessing the new syllabus. Sometimes a teacher would just 'teach' for the whole lesson without giving learners a chance to contribute to the lesson. Some would give learners written notes about the work without explaining the work. Moreover, teachers were not marking learners' work on a regular basis. Both the parents and the learners believed that teachers should be dedicated and do their work effectively. This seemed to be the view of all learners in the focus group interview, as one learner asserted:

> *'Sometimes we feel that teachers just come to class because they have to and not because they have a passion for teaching. There are some teachers who are dedicated but some (pause) I am not sure why they come to school in the first place.'* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

According to the participants, although teachers were judged by learners' results, they were not supposed to just teach learners and make them pass. Rather, they should also mould learners into responsible adults. They could do this by being examples (role models) of good behaviour. In a focus group interview one of the parents stated:

> *'Teachers should be good role models to our children, they should behave well and be responsible in front of their learners. Our children look up to these teachers because they are educated and they learn a lot from what they see them doing.'* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

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Further, learners felt that for teachers to be able to teach effectively, they should network with teachers of effective schools. Some of the teachers acknowledged this, as one observed:

> *Teachers have lost their conscience. You encourage and motivate learners to do their work until you give up and say to yourself, "By the way, this child is not my relative; why should I be so concerned and stress myself this much? Why should I waste my energy chasing after a child who does not want to work?" You give up because if you continue to do that learners would hate you. This then makes teachers to be demotivated. Learners are not willing to do their work, we try hard as teachers but they don't want to work* (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

There was a feeling among the teachers, learners and the principal that the DBE should visit schools to assess teachers' work and to make sure that teachers were teaching effectively. This would assist teachers to also assess their own performance. I surmised from this that the DBE did not have enough human resources to allocate support visits for all schools.

The findings of this study also identified the role of the principal as key to school performance. According to the participants, the role of the principal should include the following: making sure that the teachers did their work, providing for learner needs, providing safety and security, and ensuring that the school had classrooms that were conducive to teaching and learning. They felt that it was also his/her responsibility to ensure that the school had an effective code of conduct and that

learners who misbehaved were disciplined. All the participants believed that the principal was '*too nice*'; they concurred that he had a kind heart but that he appeared to be 'a pushover'. When asked to explain, they suggested that he tended to accept teachers' lame explanations and excuses for their absenteeism and for not doing their work. On the positive side, he was regarded as 'a hands-on' man who assisted teachers with their teaching if they were teaching subjects that he was familiar with. For example, one teacher explained: I DELETED ONE SENTENCE THAT WAS NOT RELEVANT TO THIS SECTION

> *The principal is a very hard-working person; he tries his best and unlike most principals he assists with teaching Maths, but the problem is that he is too nice. He allows teachers to get away with unprofessional behaviour. They make excuses about being absent and also about leaving school early or coming to school late. Some teachers take advantage of that* (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

Like the other participants, the principal expressed some concerns about his own leadership skills. He pondered:

> *Maybe my leadership style impacts negatively sometimes. I don't have leadership skills, although I can motivate people but maybe I use shortcuts. Although I speak (motivate) to learners now and again, I think it's the style I am using that creates challenges or maybe people do not understand my vision for the school* (Principal semi-structured interview, 14th June 2010).

Teachers agreed, as one stated:

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Our principal is too nice. Learners want someone they would be scared of. I have given up on taking learners to the principal's office because he just laughs it off. Learners prefer to be sent to the principal's office than being dealt with by teachers and they would ask you to send them to the principal's office. They need a principal that they would be scared of, a principal who is decisive, a principal who will be taken seriously if he tells learners to get their parents, for an example (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

Significantly, some of the parents believed that the principal contributed to the school's underperformance. One charged:

Our principal might also unconsciously contribute to underperformance because he is too polite and has a good heart and this makes him gullible to learners' and teachers' explanations and excuses (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

In spite of these sentiments, the participants pointed out that the principal was very popular and well liked by both the parents and the learners; this was because he was a hard-working person and his actions showed clearly that he had the school's best interests at heart.

The findings as presented in this section suggested that the participants in this study related school performance/underperformance to the nature of the behaviour of the learners, teachers and the principal in and around the school. They also linked school

performance/underperformance to stakeholders' commitment and respect. Participants associated bad behaviour and lack of discipline with school underperformance. They also named late coming, truancy and absenteeism as some of the factors that determined poor school performance. The findings of this study also identified management style as a determinant of school performance.

The next section focuses on the participants' perspectives regarding curriculum relevance.

6.3.4 Curriculum Relevance

A third factor identified by the participants as contributing to the school's underperformance was the extent to and ways in which the curriculum was relevant to the needs of the learners and the community. In this regard, the participants lamented the limited subject choices available to the learners in the school. They reported that learners were forced to take subjects that they were not good in. For example, the learners interviewed expressed unhappiness about the limited subjects offered in the school. They felt that they needed a choice of subjects other than Physical Science and Business Studies and argued that the school should offer subjects outside these two streams such as Drama, History and Religious Studies, especially as some learners could not cope in science and commerce subjects. One learner explained:

> *There are learners who are good in Drama, people have no choice but to do Physical Science and they fail because they are not good in Physics. Some*

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learners are good in History and write about historical events well and they are capable of doing well if they are given a choice to do History but because there is no History in this school they are forced to do Physical Science (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

Even those learners who were admired by their teachers because they were doing well in these subjects had reservations about the limited choice of subjects in the school. One explained:

I am also doing Physics and Maths and I am doing well but that has nothing to do with what I want to do when I finish school. I am very talented in the Arts so I would have loved to do Music and Drama because that is where my talent is. When I finish school I want to be a radio deejay or music producer because I am very talented in those things. Everyone expected me to do Science because I am intelligent so that is what I am doing but it is not relevant to my future plans. There is a school that offers these subjects but it's too far and I cannot go to that school because it is far (Conversation with a Gr. 12 learner, 14th September 2010).

In spite of these reservations, the participants identified subjects that were mostly appreciated by everyone in the school. These included practical subjects like Hospitality Studies and Computer Applications Technology. Participants felt that these subjects assisted learners to leave school with the skills that would help them to easily get employment. They also felt that learners could use the skills that they gained from these subjects to start their own businesses and to employ people to work for them. A member of the SGB observed:

> *Even if my child does not become an employee she can be self employed*
> *because if you have catering (Hospitality Studies) you can develop yourself.*
> *If you take this subject exactly as it is and keep it you see even if she cannot*
> *go to university but she can use that skill and have progress in life* (SGB
> focus group interview, 10th September 2010).

Teachers also felt that these subjects would assist learners after Matric and that even those learners who did not pass Matric could use these skills for business opportunities and job creation.

Second, linked to the above, the participants observed that there was a need for skills based education as this would be an answer to the problem of unemployment experienced in the community around the school. The learners felt that some of them already had talents and they would appreciate opportunities to develop these talents in the school. Explaining this view, one learner stated:

> *There are learners who are already talented in certain skills; they can make a*
> *new shoe from scratch, make a T-shirt or jersey as if bought from a shop but*
> *for those people to be successful a school needs to support them by offering*
> *subjects that would benefit them and make them successful in those areas*
> (Learner semi-structured interview, 17th May 2010).

Parents also showed interests in skills based education. They suggested that the school could offer courses in electrical work, craftwork needlework as they believed that these would assist their children not to necessarily work for other people, but to start their own businesses. For example, one parent suggested:

We want our children to leave the school with skills like being electricians, artists, etc. that they have learnt here. We want them to use those skills to open small businesses (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

Teachers also cited skills like woodwork and bricklaying as of great importance in this regard. They believed that education should focus more on skills as most rural learners finished Matric and stayed at home because their parents could not afford to send them to university. One lamented:

I thought education was going to change to allow learners to finish Matric, use 5 years of high school and leave with skills such as being bricklayers or electricians. While the academic part of education is there, the practical part should be there as well where there is a serious production of skills of some kind. You see as we are teachers, in Grade 12 if I need a child to fit tiles or roof for me I can get them from school and pay them... If I need someone to fix my car I will do my car service here. That is the kind of education I want implemented in South Africa. That is what we are hoping for, really if you look at the system of education we have it is not good because a child leaves Grade 12 with nothing (Teacher focus group interview, 14th September 2010).

Third, the participants identified their aspirations for a curriculum that would address the needs of the learners and the community. For example, there was an outcry from learners, parents and teachers for Agriculture to be part of the school curriculum. According to them, there was a great need for this subject in the school. They

believed that only then would the school be regarded as really serving the needs of rural people. For example, when asked what quality education for rural people would look like, one parent stated:

> *Quality education in the rural areas would be agriculture which used to make children work on land and develop love for land* (Parent focus group interview, 23rd August 2010).

Expressing a similar view, a learner observed:

> *I think here in the rural areas, it is where people mostly use land to farm. It is where when you look around you, you see that people are using land but not for profit. That kind of business is done by Afrikaners but if people can be introduced to it through agriculture people can open businesses out of land use So agriculture as a subject is a necessity* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

The participants believed that agricultural skills would make learners self reliant and rural areas would be developed without being transformed into urban areas. According to them, this would also assist in preventing young children from leaving rural areas in search of work in the urban areas as they could be self-employed. It would also instil love for the land among the young children who seemed to look down upon work associated with land. Agriculture would equip learners with knowledge of gardening, farming, forestry, and raising poultry live stock for commercial purposes. It would also create opportunities for the establishment of small businesses such as selling vegetables and other produce from the land. A parent stated:

I so wish they could do Agriculture, they can end up not even working for someone but owning their businesses... We want them to learn different skills, these skills that people look down upon as if people who studied them are nothing. Poultry is important because people can buy stuff like eggs, chickens from you. A person can improve his life through poultry (Parent semi-structured interview, 19th May 2010).

The principal also felt that the current education system promoted individual development and not community development in terms of the curriculum offered. According to him, the subjects offered by the school were unfortunately guided by the kind of teachers already in the school and by the number of teachers the school should have in relation to the number of enrolled learners. He argued that rural schools would always be at a disadvantage because most of them had a very low learner enrolment. The principal, like the learners, parents and teachers also aspired towards a school that offered subjects in electrical, welding and plumbing skills. However, the latter two skills are no longer offered in subjects in the South African curriculum whereas Electrical Studies requires a specialist teacher and sophisticated and expensive equipment on site – something few rural schools can afford. Although the principal had a science background, he felt that rural people saw subjects like Mathematics as abstract and of no relevance to their lives. These subjects were therefore unpopular with the learners. According to him, a technical school would be much better in the rural context as current subject choices did not seem to be relevant to rural people, leaving them unmotivated as a result. He stated:

In the community they use land a lot for farming but the school is not providing agriculture as a subject. Why? Because we don't have teachers who can teach it (Principal semi-structured interview, 14th June 2010).

Fourth, co-curricular activities were also identified as significant in determining a school's status as performing or underperforming. For example, although the parents interviewed in the study did not mention any co-curricular activities, both the learners and the teachers believed that sports should be an important part of their school life. They believed that a school would be guaranteed to offer quality education if a child got developed mentally (academically) and physically. One teacher observed:

Schools should have a sports coordinator because even if teachers are there they are not trained to teach sports. Learners get tired of academic work only and most teachers, especially LO teachers, are not trained to teach sports; they just take learners to the sports field as a procedure and they don't do much. So it is important to have sports facilities in the school so all learners will develop fully, mentally and physically. It would be good for the school to have its own sports field (Teacher semi-structured interview, 4th June 2010).

According to the teachers, for a school to be seen as taking sports seriously it needed to have a dedicated sports coordinator and well equipped sports facilities. According to them there were a lot of talented learners with the potential to do well in sport, yet the school lacked the facilities and human resources to mine this treasure. This meant that sport was not given any attention in the school.

Similarly, the learners felt that not all of them were academically gifted and that some had talents outside academia. They felt that those talents should be nurtured by the school. They also expressed the hope that sports facilities would be built at the school. One explained:

> *There are people (learners) who have talents but they do not pursue those talents and be successful because school ignores sports. There are people who are really capable in sports. No one invites 'big shots' in sports to watch learners as they play so they can identify their talents. Learners just play without anyone spotting their talents so it just ends there... those learners end up being frustrated because they are talented but they do not pass grades so they end up taking drugs and dropping out of school* (Learner focus group interview, 18th August 2010).

Concern was expressed that learners who did not do well in school subjects did not feel that they were part of the school. They got frustrated and dropped out of school. The opinion was voiced that you could only be successful in sports if you left the rural area and stayed in urban areas where schools offered sporting facilities.

6.4 Summary

This chapter presented the perspectives of rural people on rural school underperformance, concentrating on internal or schooling factors. It focused on how the rural context had some bearing on rural schooling matters and how this consequently shaped the views of rural people on schooling and school underperformance. This chapter showed that rural people's opinions on schooling were influenced by issues pertaining to rurality. Firstly, I looked at the internal

factors that negatively influenced teaching and learning. These factors affected quality teaching and learning in the school under study. The school experienced the same misfortunes as most rural schools which tend to leave them in a state that is unfavourable to teaching and learning. These factors included poor quality of teachers, inadequate teaching resources and a poor infrastructure. An evaluation of the data suggested that rural people assessed school performance as going beyond tests and examination results. Although they listed academic performance as a measure of school performance, they had a clear concept of other values and standards that they expected their school to teach their children and that they hoped would be used to gauge school performance. For example, they valued respect and good conduct and expected the school to mould their children into respectful and well behaved citizens. The findings further suggested that rural people were dissatisfied with the curriculum that was currently offered in the school as they preferred a curriculum that would be relevant to their way of life and that would assist the learners to work towards rural development and possibly self-employment. The argument raised in this chapter was that rural people's views and expectations of schooling were inextricably linked to their rural experiences, needs and attributes.

In the next chapter I present the conclusion to the study

CHAPTER SEVEN

UNDERSTANDING AN UNDERPERFORMING RURAL SCHOOL: SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

7.1 Introduction

The aim of the study was to explore the perspectives of rural learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural secondary school. In Chapters Five and Six I presented a thematic analysis as well as interpretations and discussions of the findings that emerged from the data. In this chapter I begin by presenting a synthesis of the study, focusing on the purpose, rationale, development of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks guiding the study and highlights of the findings. I then illuminate the key issues that emerged from the data using my conceptual and theoretical framework. I also reflect on the research process and conclude by identifying the study's key contributions to the field and offering some recommendations for future research.

As this study reiterated, after decades of democracy South Africa is still a country that is characterised by huge inequalities and socio-economic challenges. These challenges are mostly pronounced in the rural areas which still suffer from great poverty, poor infrastructure and unemployment. As microcosms of the larger context, rural schools tend to bear the brunt of this poverty. In addition, these schools also face the challenges of poor quality teachers, poor school infrastructure and inadequate resources. However, despite these inequalities suffered by rural schools, the National Department of Basic Education has adopted an accountability systems approach to measure school performance. This means that the performance of

schools is measured by learner performance in national examinations, particularly the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination that is written by Grade 12 learners at the end of each year. This practice persists in spite of the growing critique of this uniform system of measuring school performance (Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Gray, 2004; Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005; Petty & Green, 2007; Downey, Von Hippel & Hughes, 2008). School performance measurements continue to ignore the many contextual factors (e.g., learners' socio-economic background, the school context and others) which impact on the nature and quality of teaching and learning, particularly in rural schools. It is therefore unsurprising that most rural schools, like the one under study, continue to perform poorly and are seen as underperforming.

This research was important especially because the majority of school going children in this country are located in rural areas (Emerging Voices, 2005; Department of Basic Education, 2011). The study was premised on the notion that most of the challenges that rural schools face emanate from contextual problems. In the context of the post-apartheid educational reforms, these contextual factors are largely ignored or poorly addressed. When they are addressed, interventions are often imposed on rural schools and the views of the people living, working and learning in these contexts are ignored. This study was therefore premised on the understanding that using examination results only does not fully reflect the failure or success of rural schools in serving the needs of their rural communities. It is for this reason that this study aimed at examining underperformance in a rural secondary school from the perspectives of rural people. The study was guided by one critical question:

- *What are the perspectives of rural learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school? What informs such perspectives?*

7.2 Reflections on the Research Process

As a principal of a rural secondary school serving learners from economically disadvantaged families and as an educator whose teaching experience included teaching in a rural school, an independent school for girls and a township school, I became conscious that these schools were totally different from one another in terms of resources, quality of teachers, learner socio-economic background and the like. This made me question the uniform accountability systems approach to assessing academic performance and school performance as it only considers the examination results of Grade 12 (or Matric) as a performance measurement tool. Moreover, the issue of underperformance in rural schools needs to be fully understood before any measures to transform them are taken. My rationale for conducting this study was therefore three-fold: First, this research would contribute to my professional development as it would inform the decisions I would take in my future quest to sustain the favourable performance of my school. For me, this now means ensuring that a secondary school should not just perform according to the formal accountability measures, but it should also serve the needs of the community within which it is located. Second, the study should contribute to the currently limited debates around the issue of underperformance in rural schools. Third, the study should also be useful to policy makers, school managers and others who are involved in the improvement of rural education.

This study was premised on the notion that the influence of context on rural people's perspectives on underperforming schools would be significant. Thus, informed by the literature reviewed for this study, I came to the realisation that the measures

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currently used to assess performance in rural schools in South Africa were inadequate. For example, a review of the policy governing the measurement of school performance/underperformance and of the approaches used to measure school performance in the new education system in South Africa has revealed the predominance of the accountability systems approach. Second, the literature review suggested that measuring school performance through the accountability systems approach was biased against rural schools as it ignored context; particularly contextual factors such as the socio-economic status of the community in which the school was located. Furthermore, the literature review suggested that context in general and the rural context in particular, was significant in understanding school performance. The literature review made it particularly clear that a rural context impacts negatively on learner performance and subsequently on school performance.

Therefore, emerging from the literature review, I could identify theoretical frameworks for understanding the perspectives of learners, teachers and parents on an underperforming rural school. These frameworks included theories of underperformance (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006), the opportunity to learn theory, the compensation hypothesis, the contingency theory, and the generative theory of rurality (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008). In terms of underperformance, the opportunity to learn theory centres around factors that are particularly shaped by internal school systems which hamper learners' opportunities to learn. The compensation hypothesis asserts that schools in economically disadvantaged areas (including rural areas) have to compensate for the fact that learners enter school lagging behind their peers in urban schools. Therefore, these schools have to work towards providing for these learners' basic needs before they can work on making

structural improvements to educational processes. This means that these schools need to make up for what the learners do not have due to their disadvantaged circumstances in the home and community. Third, the contingency theory is built on the assertion that the success of an institution relies on the harmonious link of the institution's internal and external contingency factors. This theory argues that these two factors should complement each other for a school to be successful. The second framework used in this study, namely the generative theory of rurality (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008), is based on the view that challenges facing rural communities require their active role as agents of transformation. This theory envisions rural people as having the ability to transform their lives and who, given a chance, could propose ways in which the direction of their education might take.

Informed by these frameworks, I developed four broad propositions which I used to frame the study and to guide the data collection and data analysis. These propositions were broadly based on macro policy factors, contextual (external) factors and schooling (internal) factors as the three important aspects influencing school performance/underperformance. The first proposition was based on the opportunity to learn theory which holds that the perspectives on underperforming rural schools might focus on internal (schooling) factors that can be influenced by the rural school situation (See Figure 1 in Chapter 2). Informed by this theory, this study was premised on the notion that there were internal factors in rural schools which were influenced by rural contexts that would negatively influence the opportunities of rural learners to learn.

The second proposition was based on the compensation hypothesis which is centred on the idea that schools in disadvantaged areas must provide for learners' basic needs before they can work on making structural improvements to educational processes. Informed by this theory, this study argues that there is a lot that schools need to offer learners to make up for rural challenges before they can concentrate on teaching and learning as required by policy. Guided by policy, context and schooling matters, a school that wishes to be successful should have the capacity to do this.

The third proposition was based on the contingency theory which is informed by the argument that for schools to be successful, there is a need to look for the best match between their internal (schooling) and external (contextual) contingency factors. Informed by this theory and based on the findings, this study argues that in rural schools there seems to be no connectedness between schooling processes and the rural context. Rural schools operate as foreign institutions that have no connection to rural spaces except in terms of their geographical location.

The fourth proposition was based on the generative theory of rurality which conceives that challenges facing rural communities require the active role of these communities as agents of transformation. Informed by this theory, the fourth proposition holds that rural people's views on an underperforming school depends on the nature and quality of opportunities and participative decision making that the school presents to allow for rural people to take an active role in defining good rural schools and quality rural education.

Guided by these propositions, as a researcher I had to use a methodology that would allow me to look into the multiplicities of the rural contexts as well as the perspectives of those stakeholders (parents, teachers and learners) who lived, worked and learnt in them. In particular, the study had to take into account the experiences of this rural school and its community, the identities formed, the schooling experiences and how these translated into their understandings of school performance. In addition, informed by the above theories, the study needed to ensure that the voices of the participants were heard in terms of their particular understandings and experiences of school underperformance. As such, a naturalistic method of inquiry, namely an ethnographic study, was adopted. I used an ethnographic approach because it was important to capture the meanings that rural people gave to schooling in their particular context. Furthermore, the approach I adopted was informed by the notion that the ways in which people describe, explain and present their perspectives are derived from relationships with one another and their environment. In sharing their views on an underperforming school, these rural people shared their experiences of life inside and outside school, highlighting what was of value to them, their needs, their socio-economic status and how all these influenced what happened inside the school and consequently how they viewed schooling and school performance.

Despite the fact that I had my own preconceived ideas about school underperformance and was conscious of my own experiences as a principal of a rural secondary school, the fact that I stayed in this particular school (my research site) for an extended period of time allowed me to distance myself from my own perceptions and to understand and value the views, perspectives, opinions, prejudices and beliefs of the participants I was studying (Delamount, 2002). As an ethnographer, my

interest was to observe my participants in the school context and to try to reconstruct their experiences, beliefs and understandings from their own standpoint (Smith, 1998). This process enabled me to draw together the complexities of the participants' lives in and outside school and to harness an understanding of the ways in which these learners' school, social and home lives related to their perceptions of the nature and quality of the performance of their school.

Using a multi-method approach, I observed various activities mostly within and sometimes outside the school, conducted semi-structured and focus group interviews with learners, parents, teachers and the principal and reviewed relevant documents. Guided by the need to ensure the quality of the data collected within the school, I sometimes went beyond the school borders to observe what transpired from conversations, informal interviews and observations outside the school premises. For example, I observed the activities of this rural community in the early mornings before the school started and in the afternoons long after the learners had been dismissed. I would also stand on the main road during school hours to capture the location and behaviour of the learners during school hours. I also went beyond what had been planned in order to capture the various activities and views in this community. For example, when the opportunity to have a conversation with an elderly gentleman who had been part of the founding school committee presented itself, I went to his house to speak to him. This interaction proved to be invaluable in procuring background information for the study.

Ethnography as a research method allowed me to become deeply involved in and to share the lived experiences of this rural school community (Smith, 1998; Henning, 2004). It allowed me to reflect on these rural people's perspectives on school underperformance and also to discover and understand the meanings that they made of their rural context, vis-à-vis schooling. From these perspectives, I was able to construct what I consider to be meaningful insights towards our understanding of the notion of underperformance in rural schools.

7.3 Perspectives on Rural Schooling and Performance: Summary and Discussion

The purpose of this section is to summarise and highlight the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school, to identify their reasons for such perspectives and to draw tentative conclusions on what these perspectives mean and how they contribute to a better understanding of underperformance in rural schools. I begin this section by presenting a discussion on the findings as guided by the propositions framing the study. I then present my views on how the study will contribute to the pool of knowledge in the field of performing/underperforming schools. To conclude the section, I address the implications of the findings for a place-sensitive approach to understanding and addressing school underperformance in rural settings and elsewhere.

7.3.1 Perspectives on the relationship among rural households, the community and the school

The first broad theme organising the findings in this thesis pertains to participants' views on the relationship between rural households and the school and how this relationship impacted on parental and community involvement in the school. In this regard, the findings suggested that there was a disconnection between the home and the school in this rural community. It was found that where schools generally expect the home to function as an environment where school learning is extended and enhanced, the experiences in these rural households tended to impact negatively on the activities of the school rather than to support them. To illustrate, due to the very poor socio-economic conditions that prevailed in most homes in the community, learners' study plans at home were often disrupted and/or curtailed by the numerous chores they had to perform. Moreover, the lack of basic facilities like electricity and water in the homes made life hard for these learners. Resources which arguably enhance learning such as television, radio, electricity, newspapers and computers were luxuries that most households could not afford.

The literature has revealed that the family structure in rural communities is often negatively influenced by micro-systems such as the migrant labour system (where most adults from rural areas live and work in urban centres away from their families for most of the year), illness (for example, the impact of HIV and AIDS) and the phenomena of child-headed and/or grandparent-headed households (due to the death or absence of the biological parents). Within this context, the data revealed that from a very young age, children in this rural area had to take on household chores which, in more affluent settings, are regarded as adult roles. As a result, tensions were created between the home and the school in terms of school work versus household experiences, resulting in a lack of sufficient study time at home for many children. It

was clear that neither the school nor the families (particularly parents and other adult caregivers) shared the same view of what was required to serve the best interests of the learners, as is corroborated by Van Wyk and Lemmer (2009).

The findings of the study also suggested that the poor relationship between the school and the learners' homes impacted negatively on the parents' and community members' attitudes towards the school. This affected parental and community involvement in school activities. Families are known to have the most powerful and lasting influence upon the attitudes, behaviour and academic performance of children (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2009). The fact that the school and the parents did not have a common understanding of their roles might have been the cause why parents did not feel responsible for playing an active role in their children's education. There was no direct connection between the achievements of the school and the community as the school was seen as a separate institution that was not serving the needs of the community. The findings suggested that the parents did not attend school meetings nor responded positively when invited to the school to be informed about their children's progress and/or behaviour. Moreover, the participants in the study viewed community members as part of the problem rather than as allies. As Mmotlane, Winnaar and waKivilu (2009) point out, the school and the community should be understood as a single body rather than as separate bodies with different agendas in the society. If this does not happen, as was the case in this school, the community members, including community leaders, do not view themselves as part of the school and may instead view the school with some suspicion. This in turn impacts negatively on the supportive relationship between the school and the community which is necessary for the school to function effectively. In the case of the school

under study, the dysfunctional relationship between the school and the community contributed largely to the participants' perceptions of their school as underperforming.

Thus, informed by the evidence from the current study and the literature reviewed, this thesis argues that the desired involvement of parents in school activities is determined by their view of the role of schooling and the value that they and the community put on the process of schooling. In turn, the value that rural people put on schooling is based on the relationship between the school and the community. The study confirmed that a lack of a harmonious connection between the rural home situation and school practices has a negative impact on how rural people view schooling in general and rural school performance in particular. In the school under study, evidence suggested that the stakeholders viewed the school as not serving the needs of the learners and the community and, as such, they were reluctant to participate in the activities which the school saw as important for enhancing teaching and learning and, in particular, academic performance at the end of the school year. As van de Grift and Houtveen (2006) argue, there should be a harmonious connection between educational processes and a school's situational factors. The external environment remains an important influence in schooling, and unless accommodated and planned for, it may continue to impact negatively on educational matters or schooling activities. This in turn contributes to the school being labelled as underperforming by its constituents.

7.3.2 Perspectives on the role and value of schooling in a rural setting

The second broad theme organising the findings in this thesis pertains to participants' perspectives on the challenges experienced by people living, working and learning in this rural setting and the impact that these challenges had on schooling as well as on their expectations of schooling and development. First, as demonstrated in the above section, in less resourced schools such as the rural school under study, what happens inside the institution is likely to be influenced by external factors (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). In this regard it was found that the lack of basic educational facilities and infrastructure in the community had a profoundly negative impact on the school and its teaching and learning activities. In particular, it had a huge impact on academic performance throughout the school in general and on the performance of Grade 12 (Matric) learners in particular. Although there are intervention programmes (such as the ones aired on radio, for example) that are supported by the Department of Basic Education at national and provincial levels, learners in this school reported that this was a facility that most rural children could not benefit from because most households could not afford radios or television sets. Moreover, those who were fortunate enough to possess such facilities had to use them sparingly to save on batteries as there was no electricity supply to many households. Having to travel long distances for services (including the journey to and from school) and resources such as water, also meant that learners were compelled to spend more time doing house chores than on studying. It also meant that both teachers and learners arrived late for school and on rainy days the school was not easily accessible due to muddy and/or flooded roads. These data confirmed that environmental challenges that communities experience have a direct effect on schools and that what happens in the community impacts on what happens in the school (Harris & Chapman, 2004;

Emerging Voices, 2005; Reynolds, Harris, Clarke, Harris & James, 2006; Chapman & Allen, 2006; Harris, Chapman, Muijs, Russ & Stoll, 2006).

A significant finding of this study relates to the ways in which, and the reasons why, the participants viewed the role of the school in terms of its potential contribution to improvement, empowerment and development. This is in line with Teffo's (2008) view that education has always been seen as an agent of transformation, development and social change. Similarly, the participants expected the school to bring positive change to its learners' lives and subsequently to the rural community itself. Contrary to the official view held by the Department of Basic Education that the school was underperforming, the participants argued that the school generated positive benefits within the community. These benefits included the fact the school kept learners busy (so that they did not have time to commit crime or forge sexual relationships which might lead to teenage pregnancies), and it educated them on environmental and health issues which the community was currently grappling with.

Thus, the participants' views were that the school had the potential to turn around the challenging situation in this area. However, despite the positive attitudes and expectations they had of the school, the findings also suggested that these positive expectations had not yet materialised. Parents in particular raised concerns that when the children were educated, they left the rural areas for urban areas and never returned to improve the lives of their parents and others in the community. According to them, the community suffered the fate of children leaving the area to work in the urban areas since there were more job prospects there. This contributed

to the vicious cycle of poverty and underdevelopment in the area. In this regard, the available literature (Howley & Howley, 2000; Burnell, 2003; Gruenewald, 2003; Flora & Flora, 2004; Emerging Voices, 2005; Howley, 2006; Corbett, 2007; Hlalele, 2012) has long pointed to the significance of place in the quality of rural education. The argument is clear that education should empower rural children and people for socio-economic development within their own rural communities as opposed to educating them for work in urban centres.

In summary, this thesis was premised on the notion that rural peoples' perspectives on schooling matters are shaped by their rural values, rural situation and rural expectations. The findings in this study clearly foregrounded context as an important factor that influenced the participants' perspectives on underperformance in this rural school. In this regard, it was illuminated that factors that impeded learning prospects in this rural school emanated, amongst others, from the surrounding rural community, particularly as a consequence of its low socio-economic status. Similarly, the poor quality of teachers, inadequate resources and poor infrastructure were reflections of the disadvantaged community within which the school was located and which it was serving. Nemes (2007) posits that the values that rural people attribute to schooling are informed by cultural norms and traditions which emphasise such values as good behaviour, respect and commitment. In this regard the findings revealed that the participants' views on and their need for curriculum relevance were influenced by their context-specific needs and values. For example, the rural people in this study dreamt that their children would be taught and inspired to remain in their area, but there was a deep sense that they were indirectly taught to leave. This became evident in the subject preferences (i.e., the need to teach

agricultural and hands-on skills) and the reasons behind it. These findings therefore confirmed that rural people's perspectives on schooling (internal) factors are influenced and shaped by their rural context.

With the rural area under study being characterised by poverty, unemployment, an ageing population and poor infrastructure, the relationship between the school and the community was characterised by alienation. The findings revealed disconnectedness between the rural household and the school, as there was no continuity between what the children were taught in school and what they were exposed to in the home and the community. To illustrate, teachers' expectations that children would do homework to extend what they had learned in school were not realistic for many because care givers (parents and grandparents) expected them to be engaged in household chores and other traditional roles when they got home from school. These responsibilities took time because of the long distances from basic necessities like clean water and shops and a lack of facilities such as electricity. As a result, the school and the home functioned as two separate entities that did not connect. Ironically, parents viewed the school and the home as two entities that should not disturb each other. As a result of this disjuncture, the parents and the community refrained from involving themselves in school matters.

The findings further suggested that the people in rural communities have unique expectations of schools and schooling. To illustrate, in their view the school represented progress and development. In particular, the participants in this study believed that schooling represented and facilitated progress but that it was currently

only attainable in the far away urban areas where their children needed to go if they wanted to be successful. Conversely, they also saw the role of the school as alleviating the various social issues that negatively impacted on communities such as the high rates of pregnancy, crime and poverty.

7.3.3 Perspectives of underperformance in a rural school

The findings of this study suggested that the participants (all stakeholders in the rural secondary school studied) had particular perspectives on schooling, especially on what constituted a performing or non-performing school such as the one in their context. First, the findings suggested that their views were informed by the context in which they lived, worked and/or learnt. To illustrate, in terms of the context, the findings from observations and interviews with stakeholders suggested that there were circumstances in this rural school that disrupted activities in the school and therefore impacted negatively on the quality of teaching and learning. This finding is corroborated by, for example, Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, and Russ (2004); Emerging Voices (2005); Gustaffson (2006); Mashau, Steyn, van der Walt and Wolhuter (2008); and Ebersohn and Ferreira (2012). Such conditions included poor quality and shortage of teachers, inadequate resources and poor infrastructure, among others. In particular, this school suffered from inadequate staffing and this, coupled with unfavourable working and living conditions, tended to promote absenteeism, late coming, fatigue and low morale among teachers and learners. For example, teachers travelled long distances to and from school daily. Obviously, the fact that they commuted to work had its own challenges. It meant that most of the time they arrived late for they shared public transport with community members. It also meant

that, because of the poor road conditions, they were unable to access the school on rainy days. If or when they did get to school, they were already tired from travelling and were already worried about transport taking them back to the city or neighbouring town.

These conditions also led to a high turnover of teachers as the teaching staff was always looking for better job prospects in and around the city or bigger towns. Furthermore, these conditions meant that it was difficult for the school to recruit and/or retain qualified teachers, leaving it mostly with un-/under-qualified teachers. Thus, the findings seemed to confirm Gustaffson's (2006) view that links the quality of school (and community) physical infrastructure with the quality of teaching and learning and hence with school performance. The study therefore confirmed the notion that, within a rural context, learners are at a disadvantage and do not get adequate opportunity to learn (van de Grift & Houtveen, 2006). This accounts for their poor performance and, consequently, their school's underperformance.

Second, the findings of this study also suggested that the stakeholders in this rural school looked beyond academic achievement to identify indicators of school performance/underperformance. When asked whether they saw their institution as an underperforming school, their starting point was good Grade 12 (Matric) examination results; but they went beyond this measure to include other yardsticks within the school and schooling that should be employed to measure success or lack thereof. For example, they identified certain values and standards that they expected the school to teach their children and their own ways of judging whether the school

was successful in achieving these. The values that they illuminated included respect and good conduct as they expected the school to mould its learners into respectful and well behaved citizens. The participants, particularly the parents, measured the success of the school based on what they saw happening in and around the school, focusing mostly on learner behaviour and teacher conduct.

This view of the parents is supported by critics of accountability approaches who argue that although testing is useful, there are many other measures (including community impact and values) of school success that are important to parents but that are disregarded at the expense of standardized tests (Downey, Von Hippel & Hughes, 2008). This is because schools also contribute to other learning which is not reflected by academic results but which may nevertheless have a profound effect on the future life of   learners (Petty & Green, 2007). Based on this notion it may be argued that this school, that was labelled by education officials as underperforming, might in fact be a performing school in the eyes of the community as it fulfilled many of the expectations that they attached to schooling. The challenge lies in how the two perspectives can be brought together to develop and implement educational programmes that will benefit children in this rural context, an issue that I return to later in this chapter.

Third, the findings suggested that curriculum relevance was a key indicator of how successful the school was in the eyes of the various stakeholders. According to most of the participants in this study, the subjects offered by the school were not relevant to the needs of learners and the community in this rural context. For example, data from the various interviews suggested that the participants favoured a curriculum that

would be relevant to their way of life. Most expressed great interest in subjects like Agriculture which would assist in developing a love for the land among the learners and which would, in turn, address the issues of poverty, food security and nutrition in the community. They also wished that the school could offer skills-based subjects like electrical studies, plumbing and needlework, believing that these subjects would help their children to start their own businesses in the area instead of abandoning the rural areas for the urban areas in search of work. According to the participants, being taught irrelevant subjects did not motivate learners to stay in school; instead, they were 'forced' to take subjects that did not bear any immediate benefits for them or their community. The parents were also sceptical of the relevance of the subjects taught as they felt that these did not mirror the nature and needs of a rural community. These findings are supported by advocates of place-based education who argue that education for rural people should address the needs of rural people and that schools should work towards improving the possibilities of success and fulfilment for rural young people who want to remain in rural areas (Burnell, 2003, Gruenewald, 2003; Corbett, 2007).

7.4 Towards a Place-Sensitive Approach to Understanding and Addressing School Underperformance

The UNESCO action theme on rural development focuses on education for rural development with the emphasis on education as the most powerful tool for sustainable development in rural areas (Education Today, 2004). If this has to be successful, education should reach out to those who live in isolated rural areas. To understand the plight of rural people and to find solutions to the challenges they are

experiencing in education, there is a need, as Nelson Mandela pointed out in the preface to Emerging Voices (2005), to exploit the ignored possibilities of rural people and to take the lead in the transformation of their lives. It is therefore important to work together with rural communities and schools to ensure that education policy makers take seriously the voices of rural people who are meant to benefit from such policies and interventions (Emerging Voices, 2005). Further, this study and others before it suggest that education policy makers tend to give little attention to the role of place in education. Therefore, there has been calls for education interventions to take into consideration the significance of place in the education of rural people, as place is pedagogical and should occupy a more central role in the way we think about and deliver education (Gruenewald, 2003; Corbett, 2009; Greenwood, 2009). To corroborate this, the findings of this study clearly revealed a disjuncture between policy around school performance/underperformance and schooling factors (i.e., what actually happens inside a rural school); contextual factors (rural people's experiences); and rural people's perspectives on school performance/ underperformance. This calls for a new approach to understanding school underperformance in rural areas that will encourage the harmony between policy, schooling and contextual factors.

The findings of this study further corroborated the view as expounded in Emerging Voices (2005) that education policies tend to ignore rural people's way of life and what they value in education. It is argued in this thesis that, when it comes to measuring school performance and identifying underperforming schools, education policy only considers one approach, namely the accountability systems approach, leaving no room for the consideration of any other factors (Department of Education, 1996; 2007). The identification of an underperforming school is done in respect of

the academic performance of that school in relation to the minimum outcomes and standards and procedures of assessment as determined by the Minister of Education and clearly defined in the NCS (Department of Education, 1996; 2007; 2009). However, a simple interpretation is that the only measure used to identify underperforming schools is the Grade 12 (Matric) examination results. In essence, a school which achieves less than a 60% pass rate in Matric is labelled as underperforming. Other indicators, including those identified by the rural people in this study, are ignored. To illustrate, the findings revealed that the rural school under study interpreted and accepted policy requirements in labelling their school as underperforming, doing so at the expense of the consideration of contextual factors. The school valued examination results, particularly at Grade 12 level, giving little or no attention to learning at the lower levels. Schooling activities such as school meetings, extra tuition and spending were concentrated on Matric achievement at the expense of achievement in other grades and phases. Moreover, teachers insisted on adherence to school routines such as punctuality, regular school attendance, completion of school projects and homework regardless of learners' contextual situation, an issue that most learners struggled with. To exacerbate the situation, teachers ironically proved incapable of adhering to these school routines themselves.

The values that people in rural settings attach to education and other issues are largely tied to their context or rural situation. In this regard place, land and culture are very important and of great value to them. This is reflected in the findings of this study which suggested that there was much more than examination results that the parents, teachers and learners in this rural school and community valued as part of schooling. When confronted with probing questions, examination results were just

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one of several measures that they used to assess the success or failure of their school with respect, good behaviour and other values featuring prominently among the indicators they illuminated. In particular, the vision and mission statement of the school placed strong emphasis on cultural values and good rural citizenship as keys to providing good education and achievement. Ironically, this vision and mission statement was contradicted by contextual issues such as subject and teacher provision in the school, both of which were 'forced' on the school by external agents such as the National and Provincial Departments of Basic education. My findings therefore support the notion as expounded by Downey, Von Hippel and Hughes (2008) that rural schools serve the needs of outside forces rather that those of the rural people themselves, as other measures of success in this school, such as community impact and values, were ignored.

7.5 Conclusion

In this study I worked with rural learners, parents and teachers in their rural school context. My aim was to try to understand their perspectives on rural school underperformance and the reasons behind their perspectives. This was an in-depth study exploring underperformance of a school as understood by rural people themselves. I argued that examination results only give a limited perspective on rural school under/performance as this form of measurement ignores contextual factors, such as socio-economic conditions, which are important in education matters. What was of critical importance to this study was to take advantage of the largely ignored ability of rural people to offer insights into the potential for development that could

improve rural learners' and communities' education. Hence, the study gave a voice to rural people as they took the lead in sharing their perspectives of rural school underperformance.

Answers were sought to the following critical question:

 What are the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on an underperforming rural school? What informs such perspectives?

Hence the study adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach. This approach was considered to be most appropriate as this study stressed the significance of context in exploring the views, meanings and interpretations that rural people gave to school underperformance. I employed an ethnographic study methodology which allowed for this purpose. As an ethnographer, I spent an extended period of time with my participants and during this time my interest was to observe and interact with them for the purposes of exploring their experiences, values, attitudes and understandings from their own standpoint. The period of time I spent with them also allowed me to look at the rural context in its totality and to extend my observations beyond the physical school boundaries. I observed the entire range of school activities, the relationship between school and social activities, and the link between expectations of schooling and a rural context. Through the methodology I employed, I was successful in ensuring that all the voices of the participants were heard through the interviews and conversations that I had with them. This method also allowed me to capture the activities that were happening inside and outside the school so that I could attach meaning to them.

However, my reflections on the research paradigms as well as on the ontological and epistemological elements I encountered raised several issues. For example, one of the critiques aimed at interpretive researchers is that their studies involve the researcher as the more powerful and knowledgeable presence in a group of *powerless* participants in need of help (Mertens, 1998; Robson, 2002). Although my participants were given a chance to make certain choices, for example choosing a venue and times for the interviews, the research process did not allow them to participate in planning and decision making regarding the research process. Further, although the methods used gave voice to these rural people in terms of defining school underperformance, the study did little to empower them to deal with the situation they were currently faced with. While acknowledging the relevance and effectiveness of the paradigm and methods used in this study which resonated well with its purpose, in the final analysis it is important to acknowledge that an emancipatory paradigm would have been more valued. This paradigm would have stressed the relationship between the researcher and the participants as empowering, especially in terms of the participants who are always portrayed as powerless in research (Mertens, 1998). Methods used within the emancipatory paradigm would have allowed for more constructive conversations and reflections. This might have served the aim of emancipating these rural people and improving their lives by showing bias and inequity with the aim of changing the situation. Notwithstanding this shortcoming, the research will clearly contribute to the theories of understanding school underperformance as it resoundingly advocates a context/place sensitive approach to understanding and addressing rural school performance.

In South Africa the new education system that came with the new curriculum after the demise of apartheid was a symbol of hope to the previously oppressed and marginalised groups, the majority of which lived in rural areas. This was because the principles of this new education system were based on the equity and redress values embedded in the constitution (Department of Education, 1997). Education now aimed at correcting the historical inequalities of the previous education system which included educational, social and economic inequalities. However, after years of democracy and with a curriculum that has been revised twice, the situation in educational matters still mirrors that of the apartheid era. Rural learners are still lagging behind their urban counterparts and they do not seem to be getting the quality education they need in order to promote equity and redress. The democratic government has failed to address the challenges experienced by rural communities in general and rural schools in particular. These challenges are ignored and not considered in education policy matters. Moreover, exacerbating this failure in bringing equity and redress to rural schools, school performance is measured by an accountability systems approach that uses Matric results as a yardstick for performance. This practice persists despite a growing critique of this approach as it ignores contextual factors in determining success or failure. Therefore, the way in which school performance is measured in South Africa works against rural schools where most have been labelled as underperforming. This travesty occurs because the approach used to measure performance ignores the significance of place/context in rural schooling.

Congruent with Corbett's notion of the significance of place in educational matters including policy, instructional practices and curriculum (Corbett, 2009), I premised

my thesis on the notion that place is an important factor in understanding and addressing school under/performance. There is a growing international scholarly critique of the accountability systems approach that uses academic performance, particularly examination results, in measuring school performance as such an approach ignores context/place. Also, places are pedagogical because their contexts shape people's experiences of learning and belonging (Greenwood, 2009). Moreover, especially in rural areas where people have a salient attachment to place, place should be at the centre of educational thoughts, including on school under/performance, particularly because place/context has great influence on school performance. In the light of this, the findings of this study clearly revealed that, in rural areas, a disjuncture exists among policy factors, schooling factors and contextual factors. This emanates from the fact that rural values, needs and expectations tend to be ignored in education policies which, in turn, have an impact on the values and standards used to view school under/performance.

The findings further revealed that the policies adopted by the DBE since 1994 have tended to work against rural schools. For example, the school was coerced into using academic performance in Grade 12 as a marker of school achievement in line with the accountability systems approach used by the DBE. This clearly ignored the significance of the school's rural context.

Similarly, DBE policies such as the NNSFF impact negatively on rural schools. This was evidenced by the low enrolment in the school under study which meant that it was allocated less funding and fewer teachers despite the fact that it needed these more to redress its rural and historical backlogs. Moreover, the lack of funding and

teacher provision impacted negatively on the curriculum the school was able to offer and, ultimately, on its performance in terms of the national measure.

7.6 Implications for the study

The findings of this study have several implications for educational policy, practice and further research. First, there is a need for educational policies that resonate with schooling in rural contexts. Given the challenges that rural people face, for example poor quality of teachers, inadequate resources, poor infrastructure and curriculum irrelevancy, policies need to be reviewed to reflect the context in which these schools are located. For example, the fact that the National Norms and Standards for Funding are dependent on learner enrolment leaves rural schools at a disadvantage because they have low enrolment. This policy also affects curriculum offerings because the fewer the number of teachers the school has, the fewer subjects it can offer. Linked to this is the fact that, unlike schools in more affluent areas who charge school fees, communities in rural areas cannot afford school fees and therefore schools cannot employ additional teachers. Were they able to raise extra school fees, rural schools would be able to offer a relevant curriculum that would reflect their rural context and address the needs of their learners and hence their communities. Incentives in the form of a rural allowance could also be provided for teachers to teach in rural schools. Reasonable subsidised accommodation should also be offered for these teachers so that they are able to reside in the vicinity of the school and perhaps commute to their urban residences only at weekends.

The findings also have implications for the professional development of teachers who teach in rural schools. It was revealed that most teachers employed at the school

under study lived in urban areas and commuted to school every day. These teachers tended to have a poor understanding of the dynamics of rural households and communities. This meant that they were often, through no fault of their own, unable to meet the needs of the learners and communities in and around their schools. Professional development programs which address these aspects, in addition to equipping them with adequate subject and pedagogical knowledge, are therefore needed.

Further, programmes that would encourage parental and community involvement are also a necessity. The findings revealed that there was lack of parental and community involvement in the rural school as these people did not feel part of the school. There were no school activities that encouraged their involvement and not much provision was made by the school authorities to accommodate parents and community members. Interventions should recognise that rural people (parents and community members), literate or not, are active members of the community who can play supportive role in the education of their children. They have the ability to support the education of their children despite the challenges they are experiencing. However, the odds are against them as schools are currently viewed as separate entities within the community. For example, schools should allow for constant consultation and partnerships with traditional leaders and community leaders to help them to understand the context, needs and expectations of the communities they are serving. While also addressing issues of buy-in from community members, these partnerships would ensure that rural schools continue to serve the needs of rural people. As indicated earlier, the relationship that rural schools have with rural households has a profound impact on the parents' attitudes to school and their children's work ethics.

With the growing worldwide focus on education as a powerful tool for development in rural areas, government initiatives must specifically focus on this. These initiatives could include the formation of partnerships between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Rural Development and Land Reform. These ministries could work collaboratively to address the role that education could play in rural development. The findings of this study suggest that, despite the current disjuncture between the community and the school, rural people have a positive view of the role of the school in terms of its potential contribution to learner empowerment, rural development and career opportunities.

7.7 Implications for Further Research

The study was based on the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers in one rural secondary school. As such it was limited to a sample of only one school in a rural area. The study unfortunately had to exclude the unheard voices of traditional leaders and community leaders as well as other important stakeholders in education such as DBE officials. However, important lessons, as outlined in this thesis, can be learned from the study. The gaps in this study have implications for further research.

This study provided only glimpses into the lives of rural learners at home and outside school and it illuminated how this affected schooling. These findings highlight a need for a more comprehensive study which would provide a fuller picture of the rural household, concentrating on the lives of rural children outside school. It would

be important to engage in a deep exploration of the link between schooling and rural households so as to find out whether education could be planned in such a way that it does not disadvantage rural children. This would provide insights into how current educational policies could be restructured to provide a context conducive for effective teaching and learning and for desired educational outcomes for rural people.

Based on the insights of the participants in this study concerning schooling and school under/performance in a rural context, there is also a need for further research to explore rural people's perspectives on educational matters in order for us to understand how best the schools can work towards serving their needs. There is a great need for research among rural people rather than on or for rural people.

This study did not focus on gender as a construct, however, it would be important to address questions such as: do women and men, and boys and girls understand and experience rural schooling and the performance of rural schools differently? Future studies could therefore investigate the role played by gender in the rural people's understandings of schooling and performance in schools.

7.8 Final Reflections

This ethnographic study highlighted the significance of context/place in school underperformance issues. The findings highlighted the fact that context/place plays an important role in how rural people view school performance. It emerged from the findings that current measures of school performance tend to ignore the contextual

realities of the rural environment and it was highlighted that there is a disjuncture between educational policies, schooling and the rural context.

Informed by the literature reviewed for this study and the findings, this thesis argues for a consideration of context and place in measuring school performance. Linked to context, the thesis argues for strategies that will increase and enhance the participation of local rural communities in planning and decision making regarding issues that concern the affairs of rural schools, including curricular and extra-curricular aspects. This would reflect the values rural communities attribute to schooling and facilitate the development of a curriculum that is relevant to the needs of not only urban and affluent schools, but also of rural learners and communities.

Finally, informed by the above, this thesis proposes an improved theoretical lens for assessing rural school performance and advocates a place-sensitive approach to understanding and addressing school under/performance. This approach should put at its centre the context/place in which rural schools operate and allow for conciliation between policy, schooling and contextual factors. For this to be achieved, the involvement of rural people in planning and decision making in rural schooling/education is key. Such an approach recognises rural inhabitants and stakeholders as agents of change in their own lives, including schooling. It is only when our research, policies and programs take the voices of rural people in planning development and implementation seriously, that these would stand a chance of success in improving rural education generally and the performance of rural schools in particular.

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APPENDIX A

26 November 2010

Ms. PPN Langa (9903350)
School of Education and Development

Dear Ms. Langa

PROTOCOL REFERENCE NUMBER: HSS/1352/010D
PROJECT TITLE: Exploring an *underperforming* school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District.

<div align="right">**EXPEDITED APPROVAL**</div>

I wish to inform you that your application has been granted Full Approval through an expedited review process:

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

....
Professor Steven Collings (Chair)
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

cc. Supervisor – Prof. L Ramrathan
cc. Mr. N Memela

APPENDIX B

Phumzile P. N. Langa

Home Tel: 0315031791 / Cell: 0726277831

Email: pumilanga@ymail.com

The Superintendent General

KZN Department of Education

Private Bag X9137

Pietermaritzburg

3201KwaZulu-Natal

Dear Sir

<u>Application for permission to conduct research on the title: 'Exploring an underperforming school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District'</u>

I am a secondary school principal who is currently enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for a PhD. I am conducting a research study as a fulfillment for this degree. The aim of the study is to understand the perspectives of teachers, learners and parents on underperformance of a rural school and to understand how these perspectives could be used to understand these schools. It is an in-depth study exploring *underperformance* of a school as understood by teachers, learners and parents in rural context. This study makes an important point that it is critically important to engage with and listen to the voices of rural communities to understand their experiences better. I hereby request permission to conduct research at Simunye Secondary School, Phambela Ward, Ndwedwe Circuit, at Ilembe District from August 2010 to July 2011.

As an ethnographer I will be conducting observational research, which means I will become heavily involved in and share lived experiences of the school community so I will spend extended periods of time in this school. The research will take the form of semi-structured and focus group interviews, observations as well as document review. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the school principal, SGB chairperson, RCL chairperson, Gr12 parent, Gr12 learner, and Gr12 teacher. Focus interviews will also be conducted with SGB members, RCL executive members, 6 Gr12 learners, 6 Gr12 parents and 6 GR12 teachers. These interviews will take about 45 minutes each. Before the interview, I will arrange a time and place for the interview that is convenient to my participants. During the interview, I will ask questions and make some notes on responses. With the participants' permission I would tape the interview to help me remember what was said and these tapes will be erased once the specified storage time has elapsed. After writing up the data I would discuss it with the participants to check that it accurately reflects their viewpoint. The interview data will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only and the school, the principal, teachers, parents and learners will not be named. I will do observations of SGB meeting, staff meetings, school-based professional development sessions, co-curricula and extra-curricula activities. Observed critical incidents occurring in the school that are relevant to school performance will be identified, recorded and discussed with participants. Document review will include the school meetings minute books; school policy and the code of conduct for learners; Turnaround Strategy, School Improvement Plan and IQMS Records. I will use reflective journal to do regular informal writings documenting interactions with teachers, learners and parents and school occurrences and critical incidents.

Permission to work at the school will be sought from the principal. Letters of informed consent will be given to all participants i.e. teachers, parents and learners. Letters will be sent to parents/guardians of participating learners seeking permission to work with their children.

You have my assurance that the research will not infringe on your normal school programme or have any financial implications for your school.

I thank you for your time and hope that my request meets with your approval.

Yours faithfully

_____   _____

Phumzile P N Langa   Date

Phumzile P. N. Langa

Home Tel: 0315031791 / Cell: 0726277831

Email: pumilanga@ymail.com

The Principal
Sample Secondary School

Ndwedwe Circuit

Ilembe District

Dear Sir

<u>Request to conduct research at your school</u>

I am a secondary school principal who is currently enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for a PhD. I am conducting a research study as a fulfilment for this degree. The title of the study is 'Exploring an *underperforming* school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District'. It is an in-depth study exploring *underperformance* of a school as understood by teachers, learners and parents in a rural context. This study makes an important point that it is critically important to engage with and listen to the voices of rural communities to understand their experiences better. Your school has been identified as a valuable source of information for this study. The findings of this research will certainly be of value to you, your school and the participants. It will assist policy-makers to make meaningful policy and other intervention programmes that are aimed at dealing with *underperforming* rural schools.

I humbly request your permission to conduct research at your school and assure you that the data will be used for research purposes only and that the school, the principal, teachers, parents and learners will not be named. Please be informed that I have sought the necessary permission in advance from the KwaZulu Natal Department of Education and has been granted. As an ethnographer I will be conducting observational research, which means I will become heavily involved in and share lived experiences of your school community so I will spend extended periods of time in your school. The research will take the form of semi-structured and focus group interviews, observations as well as document review. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the school principal, SGB chairperson, RCL chairperson, Gr12 parent, Gr12 learner, and Gr12 teacher. Focus interviews will also be conducted with SGB members, RCL executive members, 6 Gr12 learners, 6 Gr12 parents and 6 GR12 teachers. I will do observations of SGB meeting, staff meetings, school-based professional development sessions, co-curricula and extra-curricula activities. Observed critical incidents occurring in the school that are relevant to school performance will be identified, recorded and discussed with participants. Document review will include the school meetings minute books; school policy and the code of conduct for learners; Turnaround Strategy, School Improvement Plan and IQMS Records. I will use reflective journal to do regular informal writings documenting interactions with teachers, learners and parents and school occurrences and critical incidents.

You have my assurance that the research will not infringe on your normal school programme or have any financial implications for your school.

I thank you for your time and hope that my request meets with your approval.

Yours faithfully

_____   _____

Phumzile P N Langa   Date

Phumzile P. N. Langa

Home Tel: 0315031791 / Cell: 0726277831

Email: pumilanga@ymail.com

Sample Secondary School

Ndwedwe Circuit

Ilembe District

Dear prospective participant

<u>Letter of informed consent</u>

I am a secondary school principal who is currently enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for a PhD. I am conducting a research study as a fulfilment for this degree. The title of the study is 'Exploring an *underperforming* school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District'. It is an in-depth study exploring *underperformance* of a school as understood by teachers, learners and parents in a rural context. This study makes an important point that it is critically important to engage with and listen to the voices of rural communities to understand their experiences better. You have been identified as a valuable source of information for this study. I humbly request your participation in this study in your capacity as an SGB chairperson of the school. You have my assurance that the data will be used for research purposes only and that your name and that of the school will not be named. Please be informed that I have sought the necessary permission from the Department of Education and the principal of the school. The findings of this research will certainly be of value your school. It will assist policy-makers to make meaningful policy and other intervention programmes that are aimed at dealing with *underperforming* rural schools.

As an ethnographer I will be conducting observational research, which means I will become heavily involved in and share lived experiences of the school community so I will spend extended periods of time in this school. Observed critical incidents occurring in the school that are relevant to school performance will be identified, recorded and discussed with participants. Interviews will be conducted and these interviews will take about 45 minutes each. Before the interview, I will arrange a time and place for the interview that is convenient to you. During the interview, I will ask questions and make some notes on your responses. With your permission I would like to tape the interview to help me remember what was said and I assure you that these tapes will be erased once the specified storage time has elapsed. After writing up the data I would like to discuss it with you to check that it accurately reflects your viewpoints. The interview data will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only and neither you nor the school will be named.

Permission will also be sought from your principal, should you be willing to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

I thank you for your time and look forward to a mutually rewarding experience with you.

Yours faithfully

_____   _____

Phumzile P N Langa   Date

Phumzile P. N. Langa

Home Tel: 0315031791 / Cell: 0726277831

Email: pumilanga@ymail.com

Sample Secondary School

Ndwedwe Circuit

Ilembe District

Dear prospective participant

<u>Letter of informed consent</u>

I am a secondary school principal who is currently enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for a PhD. I am conducting a research study as a fulfilment for this degree. The title of the study is 'Exploring an *underperforming* school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District'. It is an in-depth study exploring *underperformance* of a school as understood by teachers, learners and parents in a rural context. This study makes an important point that it is critically important to engage with and listen to the voices of rural communities to understand their experiences better. You have been identified as a valuable source of information for this study. I humbly request your participation in this study in your capacity as an RCL member in the school. You have my assurance that the data will be used for research purposes only and that your name and that of the school will not be named. Please be informed that I have sought the necessary permission to work with you from your parent/guardian. The findings of this research will certainly be of value your school. It will assist policy-makers to make meaningful policy and other intervention programmes that are aimed at dealing with *underperforming* rural schools.

As an ethnographer I will be conducting observational research, which means I will become heavily involved in and share lived experiences of the school community so I will spend extended periods of time in this school. Observed critical incidents occurring in the school that are relevant to school performance will be identified, recorded and discussed with participants. Interviews will be conducted and these interviews will take about 45 minutes each. Before the interview, I will arrange a time and place for the interview that is convenient to you. During the interview, I will ask questions and make some notes on your responses. With your permission I would like to tape the interview to help me remember what was said and I assure you that these tapes will be erased once the specified storage time has elapsed. After writing up the data I would like to discuss it with you to check that it accurately reflects your viewpoints. The interview data will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only and neither you nor the school will be named.

Permission will also be sought from your principal, should you be willing to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

I thank you for your time and look forward to a mutually rewarding experience with you.

Yours faithfully

_____   _____

Phumzile P N Langa   Date

Phumzile P. N. Langa

Home Tel: 0315031791 / Cell: 0726277831

Email: pumilanga@ymail.com

Sample School

Sample Secondary School

Ndwedwe Circuit

Ilembe District

Dear prospective participant

<u>Letter of informed consent</u>

I am a secondary school principal who is currently enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for a PhD. I am conducting a research study as a fulfilment for this degree. The title of the study is 'Exploring an *underperforming* school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District'. It is an in-depth study exploring *underperformance* of a school as understood by teachers, learners and parents in a rural context. This study makes an important point that it is critically important to engage with and listen to the voices of rural communities to understand their experiences better. You have been identified as a valuable source of information for this study. I humbly request your participation in this study in your capacity as an educator in the school. You have my assurance that the data will be used for research purposes only and that your name and that of the school will not be named. The findings of this research will certainly be of value your school. It will assist policy-makers to make meaningful policy and other intervention programmes that are aimed at dealing with *underperforming* rural schools.

As an ethnographer I will be conducting observational research, which means I will become heavily involved in and share lived experiences of the school community so I will spend extended periods of time in this school. Observed critical incidents occurring in the school that are relevant to school performance will be identified, recorded and discussed with participants. Interviews will be conducted and these interviews will take about 45 minutes each. Before the interview, I will arrange a time and place for the interview that is convenient to you. During the interview, I will ask questions and make some notes on your responses. With your permission I would like to tape the interview to help me remember what was said and I assure you that these tapes will be erased once the specified storage time has elapsed. After writing up the data I would like to discuss it with you to check that it accurately reflects your viewpoints. The interview data will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only and neither you nor the school will be named.

Permission will also be sought from your principal, should you be willing to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

I thank you for your time and look forward to a mutually rewarding experience with you.

Yours faithfully

_____   _____

Phumzile P N Langa   Date

LETTER TO THE PARENTS

Phumzile P. N. Langa

Home Tel: 0315031791 / Cell: 0726277831

Email: pumi_langa@yahoo.co.uk

Sample School

Sample Secondary School

Ndwedwe Circuit

Ilembe District

Dear prospective participant

Letter of informed consent

I am a secondary school principal who is currently enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for a PhD. I am conducting a research study as a fulfillment for this degree. The title of the study is 'Exploring an *underperforming* school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District'. It is an in-depth study exploring *underperformance* of a school as understood by teachers, learners and parents in a rural context. This study makes an important point that it is critically important to engage with and listen to the voices of rural communities to understand their experiences better. You have been identified as a valuable source of information for this study. I humbly request your participation in this study in your capacity as one of the parents of learners in the school. You have my assurance that the data will be used for research purposes only and that your name and that of the school will not be named. The findings of this research will certainly be of value your school. It will assist policy-makers to make meaningful policy and other intervention programmes that are aimed at dealing with *underperforming* rural schools.

As an ethnographer I will be conducting observational research, which means I will become heavily involved in and share lived experiences of the school community so I will spend extended periods of time in this school. Observed critical incidents occurring in the school that are relevant to school performance will be identified, recorded and discussed with participants. Interviews will be conducted and these interviews will take about 45 minutes each. Before the interview, I will arrange a time and place for the interview that is convenient to you. During the interview, I will ask questions and make some notes on your responses. With your permission I would like to tape the interview to help me remember what was said and I assure you that these tapes will be erased once the specified storage time has elapsed. After writing up the data I would like to discuss it with you to check that it accurately reflects your viewpoints. The interview data will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only and neither you nor the school will be named.

Permission will also be sought from the school principal, should you be willing to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

I thank you for your time and look forward to a mutually rewarding experience with you.

Yours faithfully

_____   _____

Phumzile P N Langa   Date

Phumzile P. N. Langa

Home Tel: 0315031791 / Cell: 0726277831

Email: pumi_langa@yahoo.co.uk

Sample School

Sample Secondary School

Ndwedwe Circuit

Ilembe District

Dear prospective participant

Letter of informed consent

I am a secondary school principal who is currently enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for a PhD. I am conducting a research study as a fulfilment for this degree. The title of the study is 'Exploring an *underperforming* school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District'. It is an in-depth study exploring *underperformance* of a school as understood by teachers, learners and parents in a rural context. This study makes an important point that it is critically important to engage with and listen to the voices of rural communities to understand their experiences better. You have been identified as a valuable source of information for this study. I humbly request your participation in the study in your capacity as a learner. You have my assurance that the data will be used for research purposes only. The findings of this research will certainly be of value to the school. It will assist policy-makers to make meaningful policy and other intervention programmes that are aimed at dealing with *underperforming* rural schools.

As an ethnographer I will be conducting observational research, which means I will become heavily involved in and share lived experiences of the school community so

I will spend extended periods of time in this school. Observed critical incidents occurring in the school that are relevant to school performance will be identified, recorded and discussed with participants. Interviews will be conducted and these interviews will take about 45 minutes each. Before the interview, I will arrange a time and place for the interview that is convenient to you. During the interview, I will ask questions and make some notes on the responses. With your permission and that of your child I would like to tape the interview to help me remember what was said and I assure you that these tapes will be erased once the specified storage time has elapsed. After writing up the data I will discuss it with your child to check that it accurately reflects his/her viewpoints. The interview data will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only and neither your child nor the school will be named.

Permission will also be sought from your parents/guardians, should you be willing to participate in this study. Your are free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

I thank you for your time and look forward to a mutually rewarding experience with you.

Yours faithfully

_____   _____

Phumzile P N Langa   Date

LETTER TO THE PARENTS OF LEARNER PARTICIPANTS

Phumzile P. N. Langa

Home Tel: 0315031791 / Cell: 0726277831

Email: pumi_langa@yahoo.co.uk

Sample School

Sample Secondary School

Ndwedwe Circuit

Ilembe District

Dear Sir/Madam OR Parent/Guardian

<u>Letter of informed consent</u>

I am a secondary school principal who is currently enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal for a PhD. I am conducting a research study as a fulfilment for this degree. The title of the study is 'Exploring an *underperforming* school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District'. It is an in-depth study exploring *underperformance* of a school as understood by teachers, learners and parents in a rural context. This study makes an important point that it is critically important to engage with and listen to the voices of rural communities to understand their experiences better. Your child has been identified as a valuable source of information for this study. I humbly request your permission to conduct research with your child as a participant. You have my assurance that the data will be used for research purposes only. The findings of this research will certainly be of value to the school. It will assist policy-makers to make meaningful policy and other intervention programmes that are aimed at dealing with *underperforming* rural schools.

As an ethnographer I will be conducting observational research, which means I will become heavily involved in and share lived experiences of the school community so I will spend extended periods of time in this school. Observed critical incidents occurring in the school that are relevant to school performance will be identified, recorded and discussed with participants. Interviews will be conducted and these interviews will take about 45 minutes each. Before the interview, I will arrange a time and place for the interview that is convenient to you. During the interview, I will ask questions and make some notes on the responses. With your permission and that of your child I would like to tape the interview to help me remember what was said and I assure you that these tapes will be erased once the specified storage time has elapsed. After writing up the data I will discuss it with your child to check that it accurately reflects his/her viewpoints. The interview data will be treated with strict confidentiality and will be used for research purposes only and neither your child nor the school will be named.

Permission will also be sought from your child, should you be willing to allow him/her to participate in this study. Your child is free to withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

I thank you for your time and look forward to a mutually rewarding experience with you.

Yours faithfully

_____   _____

Phumzile P N Langa   Date

CONSENT FORM

(For Parents to sign on behalf of their Children)

CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

I_____ **parent/guardian of**

_____

consent to her/his participation in the research study: 'Exploring an underperforming school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District' conducted by Miss Phumzile P N Langa, a PhD student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I understand that the child's name will not be used and that he/she has a right to withdraw anytime.

Parent's/Guardian's name:

_____

Signature : _____ Date: _____

Witness : _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX L

CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

I_____

(Full Names) consent to participation in the research study: 'Exploring an underperforming school in the context of rurality: An ethnographic study of a secondary school at Ilembe District' conducted by Miss Phumzile P N Langa, a PhD student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I understand that my name will not be used and that I have a right to withdraw anytime.

Name   : _____

Signature   : _____   Date: _____

Witness   : _____   Date: _____

Semi-Structure Interview Schedule for Learners

This interview schedule is designed to obtain information from learners about the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on underperformance of a rural school.

PART 1

1. Why is school important for you?
2. Why is school important for your community?
3. What benefits does the school bring to the community?
4. Is there any connection between what is learned from school and the needs of the community?
5. How would you describe a good school?
6. What type of opportunities do you think the school provide for learners?
7. What type of learning do you think children should get from school? Why?
8. Do you think what is learned from school is enough? Elaborate.
9. In your view what is an underperforming school?
10. In your opinion what are the causes of underperformance in rural schools? / Who contributes underperformance? / How does the school contribute to underperformance? / How do parents contribute to underperformance? / How do learners contribute to underperformance?
11. What structures do you think the school should have to deal with underperformance?
12. What the responsibilities of all stakeholders of all stakeholders in school performance?

PART 2

13. In your opinion what is quality education?

14. Do you believe you are getting quality education as you see it? Why? (please explain your response)
15. Whose responsibility is it to ensure quality education?
16. How do you think you should be supported to do well in school?

Semi-Structure Interview Schedule for Parents

This interview schedule is designed to obtain information from parents about the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on underperformance of a rural school and how these perspectives can contribute to the understanding of underperforming rural schools.

PART 1

1. Why is school important for you?
2. Why is school important for your community?
3. What benefits does the school bring to the community?
4. Is there any connection between what is learned from school and the needs of the community?
5. How would you describe a good school?
6. What type of opportunities do you think the school provide for learners?
7. What type of learning do you think children should get from school? Why?
8. Do you think what is learned from school is enough? Elaborate.
9. In your view what is an underperforming school?
10. In your opinion what are the causes of underperformance in rural schools? / Who contributes underperformance? / How does the school contribute to underperformance? / How do parents contribute to underperformance? / How do learners contribute to underperformance?
11. What structures do you think the school should have to deal with underperformance?
12. What the responsibilities of all stakeholders of all stakeholders in school performance?

PART 2

13. In your opinion what is quality education?

14. Do you believe your child is getting quality education as you see it? Why? (please explain your response)

15. Whose responsibility is it to ensure quality education?

16. How do you support your child to do well in school?

Semi-Structure Interview Schedule for Teachers

This interview schedule is designed to obtain information from educators about the perspectives of learners, parents and teachers on underperformance of a rural school and how these perspectives can contribute to the understanding of underperforming rural schools.

PART 1

1. Why is school important for you?
2. Why is school important for your community?
3. What benefits does the school bring to the community?
4. Is there any connection between what is learned from school and the needs of the community?
5. How would you describe a good school?
6. What type of opportunities do you think the school provide for learners?
7. What type of learning do you think children should get from school? Why?
8. Do you think what is learned from school is enough? Elaborate.
9. In your view what is an underperforming school?
10. In your opinion what are the causes of underperformance in rural schools? / Who contributes underperformance? / How does the school contribute to underperformance? / How do parents contribute to underperformance? / How do learners contribute to underperformance?
11. What structures do you think the school should have to deal with underperformance?
12. What the responsibilities of all stakeholders of all stakeholders in school performance?

PART 2

13. In your opinion what is quality education?
14. Do you believe learners are getting quality education as you see it? Why? (please explain your response)

15. Whose responsibility is it to ensure quality education?

16. How do you think learners should be supported to do well in school?