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**Contribution of Rural Schools to Socioeconomic
Development in Swaziland's Rural Areas**

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Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of rural schools to economic development in Swaziland. The important linkage between rural schools and their communities is also outlined. The paper shows that successful socioeconomic development should focus on harnessing the resources already in the community to find solution to community problems. The paper is based on secondary information using document methods study. The

results suggest that not only do rural schools educate learners, but they also perform a myriad of other functions within their communities from providing physical resources and facilities, involving community members in activities, sporting and cultural activities of the schools, encouraging learners and community members to work together to develop a greater understanding of their communities.

Key words: rural schools, contribution, socioeconomic development, community leaders, rural areas, Swaziland.

Introduction

Development is primarily a learning process and one group cannot develop another. The only possible type of development is self-development. Development process recognises that all development decisions should include social, economic, environment and equity aspects. If future generations are to enjoy high quality of life, their development plans must include opportunities for future communities (UNCED, 2002). Over the past years, efforts have been made to assist rural schools to become more responsive to the needs of their respective communities. Rural schools should become managed entities that cater and promote rural capacity building for locally sustainable alternatives (Barley and Beesley, 2007). Unless significant support is provided to enhance the role of rural schools in development of rural communities, most of the change in the name of developmental alignment will be like window dressing (Alan, 2000). There can be no successful rural society in Swaziland until rural schools have been capacitated to convey a philosophic outlook. A whitehead notion of a philosophic outlook suggests critical and confrontive attitude which continuously will examine those issues related to rural development of any society, an attitude which appears to be missing in today's approach to education and development in many African countries (Soni,1987). Many authors have emphasized on the importance of involving parents and community in rural schools improvement efforts in supporting the learners' academic achievements (Harmon and Dickens, 2004; Barley and Beesley, 2007; Harmon and Schafft, 2009). Advocating revitalisation of rural schools by building and sustaining strong community linkages with local public rural schools is not a new idea. Many rural dwellers have advocated the need for schools to reform in ways that build on the central role rural schools should play in their communities, if the schools are to be viable and highly valued

local institutions (Beaulieu and Mulkey, 1995; Gibbs, 2005; Schafft et al, 2006; Harmon and Schafft, 2009).

The Problem

Many rural communities in Swaziland face a decline quality of life due to social and economic downturn conditions, including the effects of globalization. The country continues to face many serious socio-economic challenges in terms of businesses closing down, job loss, increased unemployment rate, the prevalence of low levels of skills and negative effects of HIV/AIDS (Boyle, 2005). Both young, non-educated and educated citizens have left rural areas for urban areas, as social services have become cost-cutting measures. All these have created high levels of deterioration in rural economic, social, and environmental well-being of the people (Beaulieu & Mulkey, 1995). A promising direction for reviving the survival of rural communities depends on the creation and sustainability of collaborative partnerships with rural schools (Hobbs, 1991; Miller, 1993). However, the process of building strong partnerships between rural schools and the communities is not an easy task (Budge, 2006). It requires a shared vision about the importance of building a community and the role of rural schools in supporting the long-term changes in the community wide. An overall strategy for development should be designed taking into consideration factors such as alleviation of poverty, creation of employment opportunities, increased disposable income and elements determining labour force mobility. From the viewpoint of education, learning processes in most schools have no greater impacts on learners. What matters is to have education and its learning programmes, logistically derived from an overall strategy of development, and be based explicitly on a country's implied objectives (Miller, 1999). Given the above background, the main purpose of this study was to critically document the ability of rural schools' involvement in development of their communities, even raising it in some case.

Important Questions

The two main questions arising on the types of education and learning approaches in rural Africa include: (i) Is it the type of education where learners are called to use their skills to meet the current challenges of tomorrow's issues? Or learners need to be assisted and be inadvertently prepared and be capable to formulate their views of social development problem? In terms of the answers to the first form of questions, it would

appears that learners have undoubtedly a profound meaning to development initiative and process in their communities.

(ii) Is education concerned only with social control and obedience than with the public goods? Do academics and social scientists neglect their responsibility to be critical of development and educational programmes? The answers to these questions suggest intriguing issues both for education and development goals in Swaziland. Learning is currently equated equally with vocational education for the sake of government and economic ends. The value of “how to” has become more predominant than any other approach to problem solving. Development is a multidisciplinary approach in which education should explore public needs instead of predetermined them by means of societal motifs (Soni, 1988; Corbett, 2007). There are four major areas of concern that need attention to critically examine educational system in the country and to provide for alternatives (Feinburg and Rosemont, 1975; Lyson, 2002). These are mostly:

- (i) the demise of public affairs;
- (ii) the scientific approach to public affairs;
- (iii) the emergence of a market-place ideas; and
- (iv) the education and primacy of institutional actions.

Methodology

This was a descriptive survey study involving rural schools and rural communities in Swaziland. A document method study was used and information obtained from various sources such as magazines, office reports, news paper articles, unpublished and published works. The study focused largely on the issues surrounding the role of rural schools in development of rural communities in Swaziland. The main areas of focus for rural schools in this study are discussed in the following sections.

Rural Schools’ Involvement in the Community

A kind of education needed by rural schools would be to educate rural learners to use their skills to meet the challenges of today’s development issues. These are issues that should be inadvertently preparing learners to be pedantic in their understanding of social development related issues (Gibbs, 2005). What is important in this regard is a multi-dimensional approach which considers education in rural schools and development as exploration of

rural community needs rather than goals predetermined by societal motifs (Soni, 1987). Rural schools should be largely responsible for the assimilation of learners into social and economic fabrics, a strategic way to prepare learners' minds toward locally rural based developments. This view is crucial and it suggests that rural schools should serve two vital roles, namely: to instill norms congruent with the paramount values of the state, and to form cognitive habits including the necessary skills which unquestionably support the development and the continuation of industrial rural society (Feinburg & Rosemont, 1975; Lyson, 2002). Rural schools should provide an education that serves as a conditioning mechanism which insures that when problems occur within the economic, social and political fabrics, they are always addressed as temporary disturbances and accidental, but unavoidable breakdowns in the development and administrative machinery (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Rural Schools at the Heart of Swaziland's Rural Community

Traditionally, rural schools have played crucial role in the lives of many rural communities. Apart from providing for basic education, rural schools have often served as cultural centers and skills training for most of these communities. Programmes such as athletics, drama, music, skills training and other social activities conducted at the rural schools have played a crucial role in the life of most rural communities, and have their identity formation dating back to the 19th century (Miller, 1999). However, the most pressing problem facing rural communities and rural schools these days is a lack of appropriate skills. This is related to the problem of "teacher failure" which can be considered as a subset of the more familiar one of "government failure" (Black & Hosking, 1997). Rural people have been displaced because they lack skills and initiations (Budge, 2006). Without jobs they moved to the cities in search for employment, where they live much more energy dependent life than they had in rural areas (Alan, 1998). In some instances, rural communities and their respective schools have been since collaborating. However this collaboration process could not impart practical experiences to learners to help them both in educational process and development goals of the community (Spears, et al, 1990). A practical way to enhance this type of collaboration would be to get the learners to work with community members (or community task force) in redesign rural capacity building based on local development needs. The participants in this collaboration process should involve community residents, vocational educators, community development officers, extension officers, and architect (Miller, 1993).

Interrelated Approaches to Relationships

Miller (1993) identified three distinctive, yet related approaches that can be used to build and enhance strong relationships between communities and rural schools. Each one of these approaches can be used to assist community members and learners to eliminate their traditional boundaries which separated them for long time. Following is an explanation of each one of these approaches.

The first approach suggests that rural schools can be used as a community center. Everson (1994) supports the idea that rural school should be used as a resource for lifelong learning as well as a vehicle for delivering a variety of services. Appropriate technology, school facilities can be of interest in providing a variety of educational and development training opportunities for the entire rural community. Minzey & Le Tarte (1972), argue that rural schools offered a variety of educational opportunities ranging from day care, adult literacy to normal schooling. Recent thinking should consider rural schools as community center approach, where the development of integrated family services is apparent. Rural schools should be used in collaboration with the provider of social services in meeting the needs for development of rural communities (Stoops & Hull,1993). These social services include health and day care treatments, while the network can facilitate training for health professionals, and will help communities and schools to share scarce resources (Miller, 1995).

In the second approach rural community can be used as curriculum developer for people that put emphasis on the community studies in all its aspects. In the mean time, learners are called to generate relevant information based on community development through needs assessment exercises, studies, investigations into the environment, land use patterns, as well as by studying rural history through essays and interviews. When learners investigate their respective communities and become deeply involved with respective community members, they will understand well the mechanism of how to value their communities properly (Nachtigal, et al, 1989). Smith (1991) argues that the most comprehensive approach to community as curriculum developer is the network which provides training and support services to teachers in rural areas. This network engages learners to study their communities through direct search of their respective history. This approach assists learners to understand how to interview the community members by

summarising findings that can assist them preserve the historical aspects of these communities for future uses.

The third approach should use the concept of school-based enterprise to emphasise the idea of rural school in the development of entrepreneurial skills (Corbett, 2007). This approach requires learners to identify potential development needs in their respective rural communities, to use their skills and to establish economic activities that address such needs.

The rationale for rural school-based enterprise approach should be learning by doing process, with emphasis on how to turn ideas into a practical life situation, from the curriculum programme of various rural schools. Stern et al (1994) have called it “Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning”. The action learning strategy can assist learners to own their small businesses such as car-wash, shoe repair, day care center, coffees shop, and delicatessen, just to name some few. It helps also to create needed employment and services which were not readily available in the communities. A quick look into the above three interrelated approaches suggests greater ideas on how one can think about the manner in which rural schools and their respective communities can work together, formulate development strategies that will mutually benefit all. These development strategies in the long-term can be expanded to include other aspects of rural schools-community collaboration such as: village development committees, community revitalisation committees, leadership development, and renewed civic center and school committees.

Community Development and Rural Schools

The three different interrelated approaches discussed previously can be used as an attempt to initially assist rural schools to foster their collaboration with their communities, and to allow communities to support rural schools' curriculum with development ideas and services needed to educate rural learners (Harmon and Dickens, 2004). The formation of “Rural Education Programme” can help with investigations into different rural development curriculum, to shape up community development model in different rural schools. The model of community development partnership can be designed to build and support rural capacity for renewal and economic development, using available rural district resources, such as teachers, community members, learners, and facilities (Miller,1999). Learners involvement can enhance opportunities for other youth to be involved and work together with

adults, to acquire and develop necessary skills and competencies for successful involvement in local development initiatives (Layson, 2002).

The following three assumptions were made in support of the above arguments:

1. The first assumption assumes that at the core of community development partnership process, values and beliefs of rural communities should be emphasised. Rural people have chosen to live in these areas not because they are inferior, but because there is something they consider to be more important about these areas. The importance about such area may be valued in terms of the people themselves, opportunity to self-sufficiency, small size in isolation, and attractive environment (Alan, 2000). However, whatever could be the reason for the area including what that area means to the people themselves, provide meaningful fertile ground for the building of a solid support. This assumption develops a sense of recognition of common principle which provides a basic motivation upon which we can unite rural community in development initiatives.
2. The second assumption assumes that the implementation of community development partnership model should ensure that community development approaches will adequately address development process more than economics itself (Flora & Flora, 1993). Generally, it is assumed that if we do not put great efforts in improving economic, social, political and environmental aspects of rural community welfare, it is unlikely that sustained development and economic growth will be achieved.
3. The third assumption is fundamentally important. It includes a vision and a consensus in relevant activities formulated to unite rural schools and community in development initiatives. Development initiatives should include aspects such as community-schools readiness, the selection and training of community coordinator and developmental meetings (Weiss, 2004).

This assumption provides the ideas expressed by developmental meetings, it should result in the creation of the necessary structures that can empower rural communities and schools, to formulate and address rural development issues adequately. Learners should be encouraged to take part in these

meetings, to develop and acquire the necessary development skills, which can render them effective members in their communities, people with an understanding of how to initiate and strengthen identities and employability in rural areas (Barley and Beesley, 2007). Spady (1994) identified four interrelated key principles that have to be applied consistently, systematically, creatively and simultaneously to promote any educational system, they include:

- (i) a clear focus on culminating significant outcomes to learners;
- (ii) expanded opportunities and support for all learners to succeed;
- (iii) high expectations for all learners to achieve success; and
- (iv) the design down of developments from the ultimate outcomes.

The principle of high expectations for all learners to achieve success implies that all learners should be afforded the opportunities to reach high standards. This is only possible if the principle of expanded opportunities is also applied. Learners should be afforded multiple opportunities for development through remedial assistance, to reach outcomes of high standards (Weiss, 2004). They should also accept responsibility for their own learning processes and, if possible, provide proofs that they have made additional development attempts to master their works (Van Tonder, 2000). Community development partnership is an important approach to get rural schools involved in playing crucial roles as community development resources, to address community development needs. They can initiate and implement a variety of community projects starting from youth and adults recreation programmes, youth cultural center, skills training projects, at-risk youth rehabilitation, and private fund raising to provide for community development grants. Community members, school administrators, teachers and learners should be involved in these activities, to sustain changes needed in their respective communities (Miller, 1995).

Summary of the Main Findings

This study has shown that a number of factors need attention to enhance productivity in rural schools and to serve as catalyst of development in rural communities. One of the most important factors is the creation and maintenance of community development partnership strategies of development. The rationale for rural schools should be to increase the level of collaboration with community members, to create development partnerships,

a strategy that can impact positively on the relationships that promote socioeconomic development. Both rural schools and community leaders should be prepared to initiate the creation of a support-based system that assists rural communities to be equipped in becoming the basic foundation upon which the lasting community-based learning methods and approaches can be built. The study also suggests that teachers should be engaged in curriculum development that meaningfully link learner's activities to services in the classroom, including community projects outside the classroom. Steps should be taken by learners, teachers and community members to initiate projects as framework upon which big projects can be initiated. Such initiatives can assist learners, teachers and communities engaged to maximise their potential for community-based learning approaches to development. Such initiatives can also call for greater involvement and participation in community development processes. Collaboration helps to critically participate and remain firm on the understanding that, with the creation of community-school-based collaboration, they are called to change the traditional approach to the teaching in their rural schools for the benefit of their people. The overall challenge in rural Swaziland will not succeed if "a go alone approach" is employed. Only through cooperation and collaboration will both rural schools and community prosper.

Conclusion

Transforming rural schools into a workable environment where both teachers, learners and community members can work together in partnership, can promote development and impacts positively on the viability of any community's future. It is more important to create a culture whereby learners are called to work alongside with advanced and learned people, where experience and know-how of development process can be shared, to create a sense of exposing them to many different opportunities. In this way, they can be assisted meaningfully to be committed to contribute to the development initiatives of their respective communities. Rural schools should be transformed into community-based learning process, and should become important structures where both the learning needs of the learners and community needs can be addressed. The state needs to build on the present human social capital of learners in various rural schools, to maximise the potential for development in rural communities. This strategy can assist both the state and communities to produce responsible skilled human capital that can play important role in tomorrow's development process in Swaziland.

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