



## Bringing Rural Education into the Fold

### 1. Introduction

South Africa has 25 720 public ordinary schools, of which 11 252<sup>1</sup> are designated rural schools. The majority of these rural schools are situated in three provinces: KwaZulu-Natal (4 040), Limpopo (3 342) and the Eastern Cape (1 832).<sup>2</sup> It is a decade since the publication of the Department of Basic Education's *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education* in which 82 recommendations were made to address the complex challenges of rural education in South Africa. Yet, the 11 252 rural schools are still on the periphery of the education sector, and are still struggling with the same issues identified a decade ago.

In November this year, the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office, in collaboration with the Catholic Institute of Education, hosted a roundtable discussion exploring the challenges of rural education and the response to these from government. This paper will attempt to contextualise rural schooling in South Africa; discuss the rationale for the re-establishment of a rural education directorate; and explore the challenges of boarding schools for rural learners.

### 2. What Is a Rural School?

'Rurality' is a very widely defined concept in South Africa that is problematic for addressing the many challenges of 'rural' schools. This much was acknowledged in the 2005 *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education* when it argued that defining 'rurality' in South Africa is complex because such a definition has to take cognisance of both geography and the dense settlement areas created by apartheid land resettlement policies. In

view of the complex nature of defining what constitutes 'rural', the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (MCRE) settled for a working definition that would aid the State in its endeavours to address the challenges of rural education. An area is defined as 'rural' if it is located within the former homelands (areas that consist of the many tribal lands controlled by traditional authorities) and the former white commercial farming districts. The Department defines 'rural education' as "the provision of quality education in schools in areas with tribal authorities, farming communities and densely populated settlements outside of urban areas".<sup>3</sup>

The National Education and Development Unit (NEEDU) argued in its 2013 report<sup>4</sup> on rural schooling that the working definition was problematic for two reasons: firstly, rural schools in the former homelands share similar challenges to those in small towns in the 'white' commercial farming areas, especially economic challenges; and secondly, "farm schools have a unique history and legal status that sets them apart from other rural schools". According to the Director of the re-established Rural Education Directorate in the Department of Basic Education (DBE), Dr Phumzile Langa, this working definition will have to be revisited and refined if any intervention programmes are to work. In particular, Dr Langa refers to countries like Japan, Scotland and the USA, which clearly define, in legislation, what a rural school is.

In Scotland, schools are designated rural or urban depending on the population size of the community where they are located, as well as their remoteness and inaccessibility. The USA assigns rural schools to three subcategories - rural 'fringe' areas, rural 'distant' areas, and rural 'remote'

areas. The Japanese define and grade their rural schools by how remote and isolated the area is.<sup>5</sup> All three countries have legislation that defines what a rural school is and that determines how intervention programmes should be applied.

This legislative framework is currently missing in South Africa's rural schooling approach. However, Dr Langa indicated that the DBE will investigate such legislative and policy options. There is a need, she explained, for rural education policy or regulations that would "add depth to our understanding of rural schools and improve our approach to transforming these schools".<sup>6</sup> Such policy and regulations should give a "clear direction in what the sector should advocate and promote in pursuit of closing the disparities between rural schools and urban schools as well as within rural schools;" and give "guidance to the development of context-specific, relevant and sustainable strategies to deal with the monumental challenges in rural schools."<sup>7</sup>

### **3. Re-establishing the Rural Education Directorate**

The first rural education directorate was established in 2006 in response to the MCRE's recommendation that the DBE establish a facility that would be responsible for rural schooling. However, the directorate lasted for only four years, disbanding in 2010 on the apparent assumption that urban and rural schools shared similar challenges, and that therefore there was no need for a separate directorate.<sup>8</sup> Despite the disbandment of the directorate, the DBE continued to pursue initiatives that responded to the recommendations made by the MCRE. For example, all rural schools were designated no-fee schools; school infrastructure challenges, such as mud schools, were addressed through the Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI); more than nine million learners benefited from the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), the majority of whom attended rural schools; and post-provisioning in rural schools was prioritised through recruiting rural teachers via the Funza Lushaka Bursary Programme. The MCRE also recommended that rural learners from farms be moved closer to their schools and accommodated in boarding schools. However, as Veerle Dieltiens of the Centre for Education Policy and Development argues, accommodating learners in boarding schools has not necessarily been the best solution (her argument is dealt with later in this paper). Thus,

despite these initiatives the challenges persist, hence the re-establishment of a rural education directorate.

So, how will the newly re-established directorate go about addressing the complex challenges of rural education in South Africa?

The directorate has as its core function the creation of a forum that would encourage intra- and inter-sectoral collaboration between the DBE, its provincial departments, and relevant stakeholders "in identifying, developing and implementing the context-specific and sustainable strategies for rural school improvement."<sup>9</sup> Collaboration between the DBE and its provincial departments is key to the success of the directorate, but such collaboration has not always been at its best – hence the persistent challenges in the education sector in general. Planning ahead, the directorate has set itself some 'immediate to short-term' goals, some of which are currently under way, while others have already been achieved. According to Dr Langa, these goals are to examine how best the directorate can serve rural learners and thus move away from "generalised pro-poor interventions to micro-level interventions, tailor-made for rural schools".<sup>10</sup>

The directorate is planning on:<sup>11</sup>

- creating a database of rural schools by conducting audits and producing reports on rural school teachers;
- rolling-out programmes aimed at teacher development in rural schools. Here, for example, training has already been provided to teachers and subject advisors on multi-grade teaching. A multi-grade toolkit has also been developed that will provide guidance to teachers on how to approach curriculum delivery in multi-grade settings;
- improving ICT infrastructure and ICT skills for teachers in rural schools. A draft concept paper has already been developed for the roll-out of computers to rural schools;
- providing scholar transport. A Scholar Transport Policy was published in June 2015, but it was not well received because, as the opposition parties argued, it was not learner-centric;

- establishing rural education structures and stakeholder bodies at national and provincial levels; and
- analysing learner performance in rural schools so as to develop informed, highly specific and pinpoint-targeted interventions.

These plans by the directorate are a clear indication that the DBE has realised that, without a more focused intervention plan, rural learners will fall further behind their urban counterparts.

To get a wider buy-in from all rural education stakeholders, the DBE is planning a roundtable discussion on rural education to share and discuss government's strategic direction for rural education; to evaluate progress made in the sector; to strengthen partnerships between government departments, NGOs and the private sector; and to reaffirm the role of monitoring, evaluation and research in measuring impact, tracking progress, and informing best practice.

#### **4. The Role of Rural Boarding Schools**

As stated earlier, the MCRE recommended that learners living on farm schools should be accommodated in boarding schools, and for many this solution seemed the most logical. However, a number of studies, among them the CIE's 2009 study of four Catholic schools affected by the rationalisation policy in the Free State,<sup>12</sup> found that the rights of parents and children were often not observed in the creation of boarding schools. While government justified boarding schools by arguing that they protect the right to education and alleviate the effects of poverty, Wits University's Dr Veerle Dieltiens argues the

opposite: instead of protecting the educational rights of children by providing boarding schools, government is violating the right of parents to interact with their children and preventing children from fully integrating with the communities that they have left behind.<sup>13</sup>

Finding an easy alternative to boarding schools is difficult but, as Dieltiens argues, boarding schools are not necessarily bad – the problem is the way government justifies their existence. Dieltiens argues that justification should go beyond just protecting children's rights and "take into account a broader role in social reproduction that simultaneously recognises the rights and responsibilities of the state, parents and communities more generally in the upbringing of children."<sup>14</sup>

#### **5. Conclusion**

While some of the challenges of rural education are the same as those found in education in general, the location of the rural schools exacerbates these challenges. Add to this the dire socio-economic status of many of the rural areas, and the challenges of rural education far outstrip those of their urban counterparts.

Ultimately, while it is heartening that government is refocusing on rural education, the state cannot do it alone. Rural education needs a Herculean effort from all stakeholders to ensure that rural learners are not prejudiced just because of where they live. It is time that they are made to feel fully part of the education family.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Basic Education (2015): Progress Report on Rural Education, June 2015. Presented to the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Department of Basic Education (2015): Rural Education Report to the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education, 23 June 2015

<sup>4</sup> NEEDU (2013): National Report 2013: Teaching and Learning in Rural Primary Schools

<sup>5</sup> Phumzile Langa (2015): Rural Education: addressing the challenges. Presented at the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office's Roundtable on Rural Education, 18 November 2015

<sup>6</sup> Phumzile Langa

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> NEEDU National Report 2013

<sup>9</sup> Department of Basic Education (2015): Rural Education Report to the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education, 23 June 2015

<sup>10</sup> Phumzile Langa

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Catholic Institute of Education (2009): Report on problems experienced at Free State Catholic Schools on Private Property.

<sup>13</sup> Veerle Dieltiens (2015): Grounds for boarding: shifting the responsibility in the education and care of children living on farms. Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities of the University of the Witwatersrand for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

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