

Success Through Leadership Resilience: Qualitative Exploration of a Selected Rural High School

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Abstract

Failure and drop-out rate in rural high schools (RHSs) in South Africa remains a prevailing crisis. This has been attributed to issues such as poor/limited infrastructures, poverty, unemployment, among others. Thus, this case study explores the issue of a purposively selected South African Rural High School (RHS) with 15 years' success rate at terminal examination known as Matric. Qualitative method was adopted, hence, interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected staff members of the school: one principal, one deputy principal, three departmental heads, two teachers and one senior admin clerk. The collected data was coded, categorised, thereafter thematically analysed. The findings of the study showed that resources in the selected rural high school are limited, and dropout impacts the school negatively. Nonetheless, with resilience and collaborative efforts of the school leaders: principal, deputy principal, teachers and other staff members, as well as limited reliance on government learners can be supported to succeed, thus increasing pass rate. The study therefore, recommends among others the need for school leaders to believe in their abilities, be resilient in their pursuit of ensuring learners' success and if need be, rely minimally on support from the government.

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Introduction

The rate of dropout in South Africa is a major crisis (Dyomfana, 2022; Mokoena & van Breda, 2021), especially in rural high schools which is also known as previously disadvantaged schools (de Hart & Venter, 2013; Mandi, 2012). For instance, BusinessTech (2023) reports that 31.8% of dropout rate was recorded in the year 2022. However, alluding to the report by the Department of Basic Education, Stoltz (2023) states that “The rate at which learners drop out of school in South Africa improved by 10% in the 2022 academic year compared with levels in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic” (par. 1). Meanwhile, Stoltz (2023) referring to rural areas using the case of a selected South African Province further states that “rural areas ... did not have enough secondary schools, forcing learners to drop out if there were no schools near them” (par. 12). This suggests the critical state of rural areas.

Following the submission of Marongwe, Kariyana and Mbodila (2020), the contributory reasons for the high dropout rate in South African institutions of learning include emotional factors, lack of infrastructures, inclusive of accommodation, as well as poor teaching and learning venue. The work of other scholars showed that other factors responsible for increased dropout include poor socio-economic background (Strumpher, 2018; Hartnack, 2017; Mohlouoa, 2014), lack of adequate funding from the government (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019);, parental issues, lack of qualified teachers (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019);



Mohlouoa, 2014), teenage pregnancy (Hartnack, 2017), school and community factors (Mokgosi, 2016), transport and accommodation challenges (Strumpher, 2018). This is in congruence with the work of (Deleted for the integrity of the review) which shows that distance and by extension transportation is a challenge for students studying in rural institutions of learning. Meanwhile, reviews of the works of Metelerkamp (2022), Gatsi (2021), Gubbels, van der Put and Assink (2019), show that dropout impacts negatively on the learners themselves, members of their families, their immediate communities, and the society at large.

On the other hand, Metelerkamp (2022) holds the view that “While everyone in South Africa is impacted by the phenomenon, everyone has the potential to be part of the solution” (par. 1, italics added for emphasis). This implies that the solution to reducing or possibly eradicating academic failure and by extension rate of dropout in different parts of a nation is a collective responsibility of all individuals, rather than the common notion of the government being responsible for such. Thus, the reason for this study which explore the case of a selected rural high school (RHS) ensuring success for over 11 years. The question is: how did a rural high school (RHS) manage to ensure consistency in good pass rate in terminal examinations? It is believed by the researcher that for the selected rural secondary school to have recorded precisely 15 years success rate regardless of the limitations and other challenges peculiar to secondary schools in rural Africa, there are lessons to be learnt. The lessons are believed to possibly help capacitate the leadership of secondary schools with similar context. Thus, the reason for this case study. The study is guided by a research question: what strategies have the selected rural high school (RHS) put in place to enhance good pass rate? The study



is sectioned into the following: conceptualization of terms, theoretical framework, methodology, findings and discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptualization of terms

Rural High School (RHS): In the African context, rural high schools (RHSs) are institutions of learning at high school level situated in rural environments (Mofokeng, 2019). They are also described as disadvantaged (Maila & Ross, 2018), thus, in some instances they are categorised as part of the historically disadvantaged institutions of learning (Mofokeng, 2019). In this study, rural high schools (RHSs) are used to mean secondary schools situated in rural areas of South Africa.

Resilience: this refers to the ability of an individual to adapt positively to different negative situations or experiences of adversity (PsychCentral, 2022; Southwick, et al 2014; Herrman et al. 2011). It also means “the protective factors and processes or mechanisms that contribute to a good outcome, despite experiences with stressors shown to carry significant risk for developing (Herrman et al 2011, 259-260).” In this study, resilience implies, ability of an individual or group of people to cope with difficult challenges and thrive to succeed.

Terminal examination: In the context of South African rural secondary schools, as well as this study, it is known as “National Senior Certificate” which is commonly referred to as ‘Matric’

Resilience theory

Resilience theory according to Moore (2019, par. 2) “argues that it’s not the nature of adversity that is most important, but how we deal with it.” In other words, the way and manner in which individuals or a group of people tackle difficult or challenging situations are more



crucial than the situations themselves. Moore (2019) further posits that “When we face adversity, misfortune, or frustration, resilience helps us bounce back. It helps us survive, recover, and even thrive in the face and wake of misfortune, (par. 3).” In congruence, Li (2022) states that resilience entails how individuals or group of people are able to “...bounce back in life after experiencing an adverse situation in a strength-focused approach (par. 1).” According to scholars like Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) and Fraser, Galinsky and Richman (1999), resilience theory is the product of a shift in paradigm which helps to explain what and how promotive factors function in order to enable people or group(s) to overcome any negative impact(s) of exposure to risk(s). Li (2022) submits that resilience is characterised by the following as presented and explained below:

1. *Static Traits Vs Dynamic Process*: resilience goes beyond personality traits of individuals. Li (2022) citing the work of Masten (2013), states that “resilience is the capacity of a dynamic process adapting successfully to disturbances that threaten ... development (par. 16).” This implies that resilience is an ever changing adaptation procedure.
2. *Extraordinary Asset Vs Ordinary Resources*: According to Li (2022), factors such as gender, intelligence, and temperament which are considered as extraordinary assets of individuals contribute to resilience. However, external factors of individuals often perform substantial role(s) in determining an individual’s ability to positively or negatively adapt to situation(s). Examples of such external factors which are described as resources include: parental support, family, community, among others. In the context of this study, the question remains, how well are rural schools able to draw from external factors otherwise known as ordinary resources?
3. *Fixed Vs Variable*: This characteristic explains the possibility of an



individual or group of people to adapt well in an environment but fail in another. Thus, if the staff members: principal, deputy principal, teachers and admin clerk, in the selected rural high school adopted for this study are taken to another environment: rural or urban, will they be able to cope and still achieve the same success?

4. *Resilience Theory Vs Resiliency Theory*: resilience theory entails a dynamic process as well as most protective factors which come from outside of a person (Li, 2022). The process is referred to as resilient adaptation. Resiliency theory on the other hand entails the quality of the individual. Thus, for this study, the dynamic process adapted by the participants in ensuring the success of the learners despite the challenges are explored.

The foregoing implies that resilience theory focuses on the adaptive features capable of helping people or group(s) overcome challenges in order to achieve success amidst difficult situations. The subsequent section presents the methodology adopted for data collection in this study.

Methodology

Qualitative method was adopted for this study. This is in congruence with the submission of Kumar (2019) and Creswell (2014) who state that the use of qualitative method in a study enables the collection of in-depth information. The study is a case study which was conducted using one selected rural high school. Purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the institution of learning. Purposive sampling was adopted because it supported and allowed for the deliberate act of choosing participants based on their qualities. The selected rural high school shares similar features with other rural South African secondary schools. Among these features are the



location, untarred roads, poor road network, as well as limited or poor infrastructures. The eight (8) participants of this study who were purposively selected deliberately based on certain inclusion criteria marked by the researcher. The inclusion criteria are: virtue of knowledge, years of teaching in the selected secondary school, as well as their leadership positions. This was in an attempt to ensure that the responses from the participants would be able to proffer answers to the research question which guided the study. Additionally, the time schedule and willingness of the participants to take part in the study were taken into consideration.

Thus, the participants for this study comprise the principal, one deputy principal, three departmental heads, two teachers and one senior admin clerk. The two teachers though not holding leadership positions were considered important to enable the triangulation of responses retrieved from the leaders. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted for each of the participants. Semi-structured interview was adopted in order to give room for additional follow-up questions where possible and considered necessary by the researcher. The retrieved data was coded, categorised, thereafter themes were generated and used for analysis. This process is in alignment with the view of Saldaña (2016) who posit that data be coded, categorised and themes generated. Following the codes identified from the data collected from the participants, a careful scrutiny was done and certain patterns emerged. The patterns were categorised, thereafter themes were generated.

Ethical consideration

The researcher ensured to adhere to ethics guiding research. Hence, permission was first sought from the provincial Department of Education (DoE), thereafter a message was sent across to the education



district office which requested that the principal of the selected rural high school (RHS) be contacted. The researcher contacted the principal of the selected school, explained the research, what it entailed, and presented a copy of the ethical clearance received from the Provincial DoE. Once permission was granted by the principal, the selected departmental heads, teachers and admin clerk were approached and issued the informed consent form before arrangements were made for the interviews. The informed consent forms had attached to them an introduction of the researcher as well as a summary of the study. The potential participants were informed of that anonymity was going to be maintained all through, thus, their names or the names of their school or any identifying feature would not be released at any point in this study. After, the consent of the potential participants had been received, due arrangement was made for interviews. With the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were audio recorded following the position of Kural (2020) who states that “Recording doesn't only help you retain the information you find relevant at an interview, but also gives you the chance to re-listen and discover new themes and answers you haven't thought of during the interview (par. 7).”

Data credibility

To ensure the credibility of the data, the researcher endeavoured to adhere to the following procedures outlined by Shenton (2004):

Familiarity with the culture of research site and trust building: The researcher first ensured that there was an appropriate early familiarity with the culture of the selected rural high school (RHS) before any data collection. According to Shenton (2004), this is achievable by consulting the right documents. Thus, the researcher consulted



education policy documents of South Africa in order to know what was obtainable as the appropriate practice. The researcher also carried out a search about the selected rural high school online. Also, Shenton (2004), citing Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993) as well as Lincoln and Guba (1986) explains the need for prolonged engagement between the researcher and participants. This is envisaged to help the researcher in ensuring adequate understanding of the research site and at the same time build a relationship of trust with the participant(s) (Shenton, 2004). This is in congruence with the adaptation by Forero et al. (2018). Thus, for this study, the researcher ensured to engage with the principal of the school who was one of the participants and a link to others. The relationship between the researcher and the principal prior to the time of data collection lasted for over three months.

Triangulation: Shenton (2004) supports the need for triangulation, especially using observation in addition to interviews. Shenton supporting the work of Brewer and Hunter (1989), buttresses the notion that adopting different methods for data collection in a single study helps to take care of issues bordering around limitations in retrieved data. For this study, the researcher endeavoured to observe things by staying in the selected school from about seven in the morning until after the close of work (about half past two) in the afternoon on days of visiting the school. The researcher had the opportunity of attending classes with one of the teachers to see how lessons are conducted, and move around to speak with teachers and other non-academic staff who were non-participant in the study. Also, the responses of the two teachers who were purposively selected as participants of the study were used to triangulate the information retrieved from the other participants who held one leadership position or the other.



Iterative questioning: This is a strategy described by Shenton (2004) as one which can be adopted in an attempt to uncover lies during data collection. It can be done by rephrasing certain questions to find out if the same answer would be given (Shenton, 2004). In this study, the adoption of semi-structured interview gave the researcher the opportunity of asking one question in different ways by rephrasing the statement.

Description of the research site: Shenton (2004) advocates for the description of the research site to enable readers familiarize themselves and know the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other possible similar situations. Hence, the next section presents a description of the research site.

The research site

Attempt is made to present certain cogent useful information about the selected rural high school without making mention of its name or any feature capable of making it identifiable. The school was established in 1989 by members of the community considering that there was no high school around the community at that time. The learners in the school come from different communities. For some, the possibility of travelling daily is enormous, hence, they had to rent houses around, while some others travel long distances daily. The rate of transport making rounds daily are regulated. Designated bus come to drop and pick specific learners daily. Similarly, teachers have to travel in common bus as taxes hardly access the environment. This implies that once a teacher or learner misses the designated transport for the day, s/he may have to wait until the following day. The school is a Quintile 1 school which is a non-fee paying school and the lowest in the ranks of schools in South Africa where Quintile 5 which is fee paying ranks the highest and always situated in developed areas. The



selected rural high school has 12 classrooms, 24 teachers, 731 learners and have maintained 15 years of successful pass rate in terminal examinations called Matric. This accounts for one of the reasons people from other communities come all the way. The community lacks internet facilities, thus, signal of telephone service providers are poor and in some instances, do not exist. There are two toilets in the school, hence, staff members and the learners share the same toilets. There are tanks seen around the school premises which aids the availability of potable water. The school environment is porous, giving room for vandalism.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented following the six themes generated from the coded and categorised data collected from the interviews conducted for the participants. The first three themes are used to provide background information about the selected school based on the responses of the participants. Other themes are thereafter used to present the strategies employed by the selected secondary school. The identified themes from the analysed data are as presented and explained below.

Theme 1: Limited support

One of the findings of the study showed that the school received limited support from government, Department of Education (DoE), and community members. For instance, one of the participants reported saying “We hardly receive support, not even from the councillor. I have personally spoken to him to support us like at least, fix the road in front of our school, he rather said that it’s not a local but national road.” Another participant has this to say: “I approached certain companies to assist us but they declined saying that we are out



of their radius coverage of support.” This finding is in congruence with the works of Marongwe, Kariyana and Mbodila (2020) du Plessis and Mestry (2019) as well as Mohlouoa (2014) who hold the view that lack of support from relevant education stake holders cause failure and increase the rate of dropout in institutions of learning. Meanwhile, Li (2022) describes such support as part of the external factors which are crucial in ensuring resilience.

Theme 2: Limited infrastructure

Similar to the theme 1, another finding of the study is the lack of resources such as classroom, library, comfort rooms (toilet), among others. One of the participants reported saying: “We only have 12 classrooms.” In congruence, from observation, it was discovered that there is no library and in one of the classes, there were 52 learners. Meanwhile, the recommended learner to teacher ratio (LTR) in South African schools is 30:1 (Kosie, 2022). According to Nkosi (2022), it was believed generally that the Department of Basic Education had a benchmark of an ideal situation of 35 learners to a teacher. However, reporting the words of the minister of Basic Education in person of Motshekga, on the subject of learner teacher ratio Nkosi (2022) reports “The post provisioning norms apply what is referred to as *ideal maximum class size for each subject which ranges from six learners per class in the case of music, to 37 for subjects that accommodate large class sizes* (par. 6).” This implies that the class size of 52 remains outrageous even if taken to mean the laid down description of large class size. Similarly, on lack of infrastructures, a participant reported saying “we only have two toilets in this school, so the teachers share with the learners....” This finding is in congruence with the works of Marongwe, Kariyana and Mbodila (2020), (Deleted for the integrity of the review) as well as (Deleted for the integrity of the review) which show that rural



institutions of learning lack infrastructures which are contributory to the high rate of failure, consequently dropout. Suffice to state that one factor that is expected to have affected the pass rate of learners in the selected rural high school is the lack of infrastructure. However, the case seems not to be so, as the school has been able to maintain a pass rate for 15 years.

Theme 3: Impact of dropout

The finding of the study shows that learner dropout impacts negatively on the school and community. For instance, one of the participants reports that “There was a time that computers were donated to the school, they didn’t even last one month.” Another participant reporting on the perpetrators of crime says that “... part of those vandalising the properties of the school and breaking in to steal are learners who dropped out.” In furtherance, another participant reported saying: “... the crime rate is high because some of the learners drop out and go to town in search of small jobs like pushing trolleys, and then engage in drugs, and the crime rate starts to increase.” By extension, high rate of dropout increases the level of unemployment in the community. This finding of the study indicates that learners dropping out eventually affects the school negatively. This finding is in congruence with the finding of the works of Metelerkamp (2022), Gatsi (2021), Gubbels, van der Put and Assink (2019) which show that learners dropping out of school have negative impacts on the community, which in the context of this study includes the school from which the learners dropped out.

Theme 4: Non-reliance on government

One of the findings from the analysed data shows that the selected rural high school (RHS), tends not to rely totally on the



government for all their needs. One of the participants reported saying “We can’t wait for the government for everything. For example, if a window is broken (pointing to the window in the office), waiting for the government to come fix it may mean waiting endlessly, whereas, it can be easily fixed.” This corroborates the work of Metelerkamp (2022) who states that “While everyone in South Africa is impacted by the phenomenon, *everyone has the potential to be part of the solution* (par. 1, italics added for emphasis).” This implies that every individual has a role to play in assisting to ensure that the necessary factors are put in place to avoid high rate of dropout, rather than leave everything to the government.

A participant also reported that considering the literacy level of the parents of learners, assignments are not done at home, hence, “... must come on Saturdays to guide them to do the work.” The interviewee further states that “During breaks, call and ask them the question individually so as to know where they are lacking and how to help them” Additionally, it was reported that the need for a subject like agriculture which is not in the curriculum was seen, hence, included as part of what is taught to learners. During the interviews, three of the participants recurred that they make do with whatever the government provides through the Department of Basic Education (DoBE), however, they try not to rely on them, rather they make other possible efforts. The foregoing suggests non-reliance on government for instance in making arrangement for extra classes for learners, but taking initiative to make available what is considered important and needful to the learners.

Theme 5: Collaborative effort

The effort of all education stakeholders are needed in combating the rate of dropout (Metelerkamp, 2022). This coincides with one of the



findings of this study which suggests that part of the resilience mechanism adopted by the selected rural high school in ensuring increased pass rate for the learners for the past 15 years has been collaborative efforts. From the observation of the researcher, the teachers seem to live like a big family. The researcher attributed this to their travelling together in common transport since there are no very few or no commercial vehicles plying that area at will. Hence, teachers had to contribute to get a taxi which picks them at a specified location every morning every school day and takes them back after school hours.

During one of the visits of the researcher, teachers were seen eating from the same bowl of food. The researcher therefore concluded that these are factors helping them to bond with one another. To support this, during the interviews, one of the participants reported that "... the school is trying to make all learners look equal. We buy uniforms for some learners who don't have. With this, you cannot see the type of family a learner is coming from: poor" This suggest collaborative effort in making learners emotionally strong as not having good uniforms can hamper their esteem.

Meanwhile, Marongwe, Kariyana and Mbodila (2020) posit that emotional factors are part of the reasons for dropout in South Africa. From observation, the researcher concluded that collaborative efforts may be possible for the staff members considering how they all relate with one another. For instance, teachers share things in common. In brief, from observation, the school seems to be ran like a typical traditionally African family where the principal functions as the 'father' of the house, while the deputy principal who happens to be a female, together with the departmental heads and teacher function as the 'mother' of the house and the learners are considered as the

children of them all. This observation perhaps accounts for the reason behind the care given to the learners, and such having effect on the pass rate of the school.

Theme 6: Resilience: a necessity for success

The findings from the study shows that the staff members: principal, deputy principal, admin clerk and teachers tend to be resilient in managing what is available to them to support the learners to succeed. One of the participants reporting on issue of comfort room says "... sometimes, you get to the toilet, only to find out that learners have thrown stones inside....." This suggest one of the challenges faced, yet overlooked in order to focus on the main goal which is the success of learners. Another participant with regards to seeking support reported saying "I travelled to a paper making company in a nearby town seeking for support for our learners, but they declined saying that our school was out of the radius of communities that they support. I was forced to tell them that whenever, they come to cut the paper trees in the rural areas around our us, we won't allow. It was at this point that they obliged to support us in some ways."

Considering the challenge of network, a participant reporting on what has been done so far said "We have approached service providers to come erect their mast. After much back and forth, writing of letters to and through the district, they have finally agreed. We are waiting for them to fulfil their promise." Additionally, from the observation of the researcher, there was an occasion in which there was limited space in a vehicle conveying some of the teachers in the selected rural high school, and there was no space to accommodate one more teacher who was left, a male teacher allowed a female colleague to carry him on her laps while they journeyed to school. This can be considered as resilience on the part of the teachers. In other words,



what matters is that they get to school to discharge their duties to enable their learners learn and perform well academically. Surviving and succeeding in such conditions as expressed by interviewees can be tantamount to resilient adaptation as referred to by Li (2022). Suffice to state that rather than give up or do nothing or wait for the government, resilience makes a person or group(s) to explore various options on what can be done to achieve the desired results, which is what has been embraced by the leadership of the selected rural high school.

Conclusion and recommendations

Challenges in South African schools continue to linger, especially in rural settlements due to the high rates of illiteracy, poverty, unemployment and other features that characterise them. However, with resilience, success is considered achievable as is the case with the selected rural high school (RHS) considered in this study, rather than believe and wait on the government for solution(s) to every challenge. Meanwhile, in ensuring resilience, collaborative efforts are needed from the leadership of the school as they are at the forefront and their in/action(s) is capable of making learners feel motivated to work towards achieving success or dropout. Nonetheless, the dropout of learners is bound to have adverse effect on the school, community and others. To this end the following recommendations are made:

- Rural high school (RHS) leaders should believe in their abilities, determine to be resilient in their pursuit of ensuring learners' success.
- School leaders, especially those situated in rural areas should strive not to rely on the government for support. While government support is pivotal, it may be lacking in many instances or come late. Thus, school leaders need to be



proactive, take initiative, make efforts by considering other possible avenues towards getting solutions to challenges.

Delimitation and suggestion for further study

The study was delimited to one rural high school (RHS) and qualitative method. Thus, studies can be conducted in this regard through the use of other research approaches such as quantitative or mixed methods. This can be conducted using two or more rural high schools within the same or different education districts and/or provinces.

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