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Rural Online Learning in the Context of COVID-19 in South Africa: Evoking an Inclusive Education Approach

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Abstract

This paper discusses the challenges faced by rural learners in South Africa in the context of the world pandemic commonly known as COVID-19. Rural learners face unprecedented challenges in adjusting to a new mode of life and learning, the latter being characterised by the predominant use of online, learning management systems and low-tech applications. The paper is informed by critical emancipatory research, which argues for social justice, empowerment and social inclusion of all learners in teaching and learning, with the aim of constructing better futures for all learners. To generate data, I used participatory action research. A total of 10 learners and five teachers participated via WhatsApp. The paper answers two questions: what are the learning challenges faced by rural learners in South Africa, and how can online learning be enhanced in the context of COVID-19? The findings suggest that, while the South African government is promoting online learning as the only alternative in the context of COVID-19, this mode excludes many rural learners from teaching and learning, due to a lack of resources to connect to the internet, the learning management system, and low-tech software. Based on the findings of this study, the paper argues that rural learners are critical stakeholders in education and in the fight against COVID-19, and they cannot be left behind in efforts to fight the pandemic. Values such as social justice and the rights of rural learners should not be foregone in the fight against COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, rurality, online learning, human rights, inclusion

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Aprendizaje Rural Online en el Contexto de COVID-19 en Sudáfrica: Evocando un Enfoque de Educación Inclusiva

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Resumen

Este artículo discute los desafíos de los estudiantes rurales en Sudáfrica en el contexto de la pandemia mundial del COVID-19. Estos estudiantes se enfrentan a desafíos sin precedentes para adaptarse a un nuevo modo de vida y aprendizaje, caracterizado por el uso predominante de sistemas de gestión de aprendizaje en línea y aplicaciones tecnológicas. El artículo presenta una investigación crítica de emancipación, que defiende la justicia social, el empoderamiento y la inclusión social de todos los alumnos en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, con el objetivo de construir un futuro mejor para todos los alumnos. El diseño parte de una investigación de acción participativa. Un total de 10 alumnos y 5 profesores participaron a través de WhatsApp. El documento responde a dos preguntas: ¿cuáles son los desafíos de aprendizaje que enfrentan los estudiantes rurales en Sudáfrica y cómo se puede mejorar el aprendizaje en línea en el contexto de COVID-19? Los resultados sugieren que, si bien el gobierno de Sudáfrica está promoviendo el aprendizaje en línea como la única alternativa en el contexto de COVID-19, este modo excluye a muchos estudiantes rurales de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje, debido a la falta de recursos para conectarse a Internet, sistema de gestión de aprendizaje y software de baja tecnología. Con base en los hallazgos de este estudio, el documento argumenta que los estudiantes rurales son actores críticos en la educación y en la lucha contra COVID-19, y no pueden quedarse atrás en los esfuerzos para combatir la pandemia. Valores como la justicia social y los derechos de los estudiantes rurales no deben ser renunciados en la lucha contra COVID-19.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, ruralidad, aprendizaje online, derechos humanos, inclusión.

T his paper was written at the time a pandemic known as COVID-19 was ravaging the world, and which changed the way of life of many people. The pandemic has required drastic measures to be pursued as a way of limiting the spread of the virus. One of the measures taken by the South African government to address the spread of COVID-19 was to prohibit public gatherings, enact social distancing and close schools, which required a move to online teaching and learning. While the move to online teaching and learning, as opposed to the traditional approach to education, was inevitable, many learners in rural contexts now find themselves excluded from schooling and unable to access online resources, due to a lack of infrastructure, the unavailability of electricity and electronic gadgets, and a lack of qualified teachers who can assist with online learning. It appears that online learning favours urban and well-privileged learners, thus, widening the gap between the poor and the rich, instead of uniting the nation in the fight against COVID-19.

South Africa gained independence from British rule in 1994 and, today, most people still live in rural areas. Because there is no fixed definition of rurality, this paper defines it as the composition of human settlements which have agricultural production as the main economic activity, or a place isolated from urban areas. Rural areas are remote places found in the countryside, in forests and mountains. Typically, rural people lack access to socio-economic amenities, such as quality education, good health services, transport, marketing facilities, and even electricity. Rural people often live nomadic lives – they are pastoralists and fishermen (Avila, & Gasperini, 2005). Generally, and particularly with reference to South Africa, rural areas mostly lack the social and economic viability needed to sustain technological improvement (Cristobal-Fransi, Montegut-Salla, Ferrer-Rosell, & Daries, 2020).

Hall (2019) reports that South Africa had 11252 schools in rural areas across the country and, of these, 3060 were secondary schools and 8 192 primary schools. The majority of these schools are in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo, which are mostly rural provinces. These three provinces alone are home to about three-quarters (72%) of all rural children in South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal has the largest child population in numeric terms, with 2.6 million (62%) of its child population being classified as rural

(Hall, 2019). According to the World Bank (2018) 33% of the South African population may be classified as rural. Governments find it more difficult to supply quality education services in rural areas, and various factors weaken the quality of learning and teaching in South Africa's rural areas (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). This observation is supported by the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2015), which explains that rural education formed a large part of South Africa's history. While acknowledging the progress the country has made, not enough attention has been given to rural education, which necessitates redress. Some learners in cities are already using online learning and, all learners will write the same examination at the end of the year. Thus, COVID-19 and the implementation of online learning has magnified the challenges faced by rural learners and teachers. Rural teachers and learners are deprived of useful information, education and skills, which are essential for community development, self-development and the fight against COVID-19. Thus, I agree with Dieltiens (2008, p. 40), that "rural schools certainly have problems particular to them; predicaments which require systemic effort and creative ideas most. Rural areas already face tremendous barriers to high learner attainment and operate in less than favourable policy environments".

Cognisant of the foregoing argument, researchers confirm that the predominant measure against the spread of COVID-19 is ensuring social distancing, self-isolating, and prohibiting people from gathering in large numbers (Krishnakumar & Rana, 2020). These prescriptions represent a blow to rural learners, who are taught using a traditional classroom setup, where a teacher is visible to students, and the teacher monitors learning at close range. Thus, in the time of COVID-19, the traditional approach to teaching is no longer permissible, and there is a need to invent new ways of teaching, such as online learning, using learning management systems (like Blackboard), which, unfortunately, is new to many students in rural areas, leading to the fear that education during the time of COVID will serve a few privileged students who are connected to resources. The situation was exacerbated by the South African government responding to COVID-19 by shutting down what is deemed non-essential services, which affected many rural families whose members earn their livelihood selling vegetables or doing casual labour for wages. I raise this issue, because the lockdown caused

many people to lose their income, which could have assisted them to set up a conducive online learning environment for their children.

To buttress the foregoing, Ebrahim, Ahmed, Gozzer, Schlagenhauf and Memish (2020) argue that the state of lockdown halted the economic services and products of the Global South, including South Africa. To this end, rural learners and teachers are seemingly helpless on how to approach online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown, and, therefore, the chasm between the haves and the have nots gets ever deeper.

The argument of the paper is that, while COVID-19 has made online learning inevitable, and online learning is a practicable alternative to traditional schooling, there is need for an inclusive approach that caters for the lived realities of rural learners. The paper is opposed to instituting measures to fight COVID-19 that isolate some sections of the population merely because they are in deprived communities, with inadequate access to electricity, network connectivity and expertise, which is an integral part of successful online teaching and learning.

Thus, as argued by Nkoane (2010, p. 113–114), I am "opposed to any classroom practices that undermine the rights of rural learners". Informed by this argument, I agree with Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), that there is a need to put strategies in place to improve the working conditions of teachers and the teaching at rural schools, to improve learner achievement across the rural areas of South Africa, and to ensure a better future for and development of human capital emanating from rural contexts.

In short, in the context of COVID-19 and learning, as Shibeshi (2006) suggests, the solutions implemented should respond to the needs of rural people, and should consider their diversity – agro-ecological, geographical and socio-economic and cultural. The paper is unique in the sense that it outlines the lived realities of rural teachers and learners and argues the rights of learners in the fight against COVID-19, and regarding online learning, are respected. The paper is organised as follows. Next, the paper discusses the theoretical framing, which is critical emancipatory research, I will explain participatory action research (PAR), and present and discuss the findings.

Theoretical Framing: Critical Emancipatory Research

I used Critical Emancipatory Research (CER) as a theoretical lens to interrogate learning in the context of COVID-19. CER is an offshoot of the critical theory of Germany's Frankfurt School for Social Research, which had been established at the University of Frankfurt in 1923 and, in particular, CER is based on the work of "Habermas, who was influenced by Marxist perspective on economic and social questions" (Schmidt, 2007, p. 51). Some scholars, such as McKernan (2013), trace the ideas of CER to Emmanuel Kant, a German philosopher, who first hinted at critical theory in 1871.

There is a general understanding among scholars that CER arose as a product of a "Marxist think tank founded by a wealthy son of a German millionaire, Mr Weil, who helped the Frankfurt School to create an innovative brand of philosophically oriented radical social science" (McLaughlin, 1999, p. 109). Nkoane (2013, p. 99) argues that the CER proponents at the Frankfurt School represented a left-wing group that had "philosophical roots in several traditions such as Marx's analysis of socio-economic conditions and class structure, Habermas's notion of emancipatory knowledge and Freire's transformative and emancipatory pedagogy". Demirovic (2009) explains that the CER scholars sought to explain and encourage participation, to shape the world into a better place for all. To do so, CER scholars problematised "historical and social conditions of crisis, oppression, inequality and replace them with emancipatory ones" (Sinnerbrink, 2012, p. 370).

Thus, in the context of COVID-19, and with particular reference to rural learning in South Africa, there is need for conditions that would emancipate learners and promote social and learning conditions. It will enable rural learners to benefit from online learning, which has been seen as a tool to address trajectories during the times of crisis, not only for survival (by communicating essential information on the fight against COVID-19), but also for teaching and learning by members of deprived communities, such as those of rural schools.

I see CER as a relevant theory to address the challenges of learning in the time of COVID-19, because one of the objectives of the theory is to enable marginalised people, such as rural teachers, learners and education

stakeholders, to unleash their human power and potential and transform their otherwise transient situation (Mahlomaholo, 2013). In short, CER is a theory that seeks to ensure that everyone is included in life-transforming experiences that could emancipate individuals, so that they can confront their lived realities, while at the same time respecting rural leaders through promoting values such as social justice, inclusion and human rights in the fight against COVID-19.

Methodology: Participatory Action Research

This qualitative study is located within the broader space of the transformative paradigm. It used PAR to generate data from the participants. I chose PAR methodology because it is an approach that encourages active participation of affected people to construct their new identities. The approach has an underlying philosophy that states that the people with the problem can suggest effective solutions for their problems.

To this end, the participants in this study were rural learners and teachers who were experiencing trouble with online teaching and learning – a problem that was intensified by the presence of the global pandemic of COVID-19. Another reason for using PAR for this study is that it "investigates the actual practices and not abstract practices and learning about the real, material, concrete, and particular practices of particular people in particular places" (Kemmis, S, & McTaggart, 2007, p. 277). By doing so, Cornwall and Jewkes (1995, p. 1674) argue, PAR "identifies the rights of those concerned by the research, and empowering people to set their own schemas for research and development, thereby giving them tenure over the process".

Furthermore, I chose PAR since it resonates well with CER, in that PAR reveals and challenges conditions of injustice (Loewenson, Laurell, Hogstedt, D'Ambruoso, & Shroff, 2014). In short, PAR was chosen as a methodology which avoids univocal research representations, and promotes the adoption of techniques from multiple perspectives, voices, and sources to solve composite class challenges (Rogers, 2012).

To collect data, in line with the need for social distancing, a WhatsApp group was created involving 15 participants, which included 10 learners in Grade 10, aged between 14 and 17, and five teachers at rural schools in the

KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. Purposeful sampling was used for this study. In addition, the snowball or chain method was used to recruit participants, whereby participants were requested to identify other possible participants who could provide useful data for the study (Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

The participation of the group members was guided by two research questions, namely, 1) what are the learning challenges faced by rural learners in South Africa, and 2) how can online learning be enhanced in the context of COVID-19? The following table gives details of the research participants in terms of the age, grade, and general location of their schools. Pseudo names are used to protect the identities.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the participants

Pseudonym	Age	Location of the rural school	Grade or Subject
Sipho (Learner)	16	UThukela	Grade 11
Zuzu (Learner)	15	UThukela	Grade 10
Nnuku (learner)	16	UMkhanyakude	Grade 11
Mpilo (Learner)	14	UMkhanyakude	Grade 9
Velo (learner)	15	Harry Gwala	Grade 9
Dlodlo (Teacher)	40	UThukela	English/ IsiZulu
Zalo (Learner)	17	Harry Gwala	Grade 12
Busi (Learner)	16	Harry Gwala	Grade 11
Mzi (Learner)	15	UMkhanyakude	Grade 10
Rams (Teacher)	44	Harry Gwala	Mathematics
Mzamo (Learner)	14	UThukela	Grade 9
Simiso (Learner)	15	UMkhanyakude	Grade 9
Xoli (Teacher)	30	UMkhanyakude	Life Science
Senzo (Learner)	17	UMkhanyakude	Grade 12
Msebele (Teacher)	52	UThukela	Geography

To ensure ethical considerations, participants were asked for consent to participate in the study. It was assured that pseudonyms would be used, that no-one was obliged to participate in the study, and that they could decide to withdraw from the study for any reason (Fritz, 2008). In addition, collected

data would only be used for academic purposes, and to raise the awareness of the Department of Basic Education about the realities faced by rural learners in the fight against COVID-19, particularly, teaching and learning online.

WhatsApp discussions took place for over five days with the 15 participants, during which we reflected on the two questions for two hours a day. Ground rules were set by all participants so that the group achieve its purpose. As the discussions were going via WhatsApp text message, it was ensured that rural learners remained focused on COVID-19 discussions.

Data generated through PAR was subjected to the thematic approach suggested by Laws, Harper and Marcus (2003, p. 395), which comprises the following steps:

- **Step 1** Reading and rereading all the collected data: The data from the discussions was read and reread, so that I heard the views of the participants.
- **Step 2** Drawing up a preliminary list of themes arising from the data: Major issues and themes were identified and arranged according to the two main research questions of the study.
- **Step 3** Rereading the data. I checked if the themes we had identified accurately represented what the participants had said, and that they related to the research questions.
- **Step 4** Linking the themes to quotations and notes: The themes that emerged from the data were linked to various scholarly views.
- **Step 5** Perusing the categories of themes to interpret them: In the interpretation of data, I remained cognisant of the research questions.
- **Step 6** Designing a tool to assist in discerning patterns in the data in order to triangulate and determine the patterns during data analysis.
- **Step 7** Interpreting the data and deriving meaning: This step mainly relates to highlighting the research findings and arranging material according to categories, which are premised on or guided by the research questions.

To ensure the validity of the findings, I conducted member checking, during which process I presented the analysed data that had been thematised

to participants to obtain confirmation that the data responded to their lived experiences in the context of COVID-19, specifically, teaching and learning using online platform (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007; Gunawan, 2015). This allowed me and the participants to analyse the collected data to see if it reflected their contributions on COVID 19 and rurality. In the following section, I will present data gleaned during the WhatsApp discussions.

Results and Discussion

The first section of the findings will address Question 1, which is, what are the challenges faced by rural learners and teachers on the use of online as alternative during the COVID-19?

Challenges of Online Learning in Rural Areas

In response to the first question, participants raised a number of issues, which are summarised by pointing out the main themes that arose from participating in this research. Next, I discuss the first challenge, the unavailability of network access in rural schools.

Unavailability of network in rural areas. It emerged during the research that, in spite of online learning seeming to be one of the best ways of learning during the COVID-19 period, the innovation is hampered by the unavailability of connectivity in some rural contexts. During the discussion, the participants gave different responses. On the one hand, Muzi[1] reported that "most of the learners in rural areas are experiencing the problem with network, it is hard for them to access online learning material provided by the department of basic education". On the other hand, Senzo added:

> Yaa this is a serious challenge, it is not that we do not want online learning, it is because there is no or sometimes very limited network which makes it difficult for me to teach learners. This thing is only working for those in towns where network is always available.

Gorge said:

> This online learning thing is like giving some one pots to cook without food and expect you have addressed his or her needs. Am scared that this year will be wasted because of COVID-19 and online learning that does favour us as rural learners

The essence of the participants' views is that they are not prepared to do online learning, due to limited or no network access. This implies that, while the idea to use online learning to compensate for the loss of face-to-face contact, is noble, it does not include all learners. To this end, World Bank (2020) points out that the students who will be able to make the best use of online learning are those who are already competent and knowledgeable about using technology tools to support their learning, online sources in particular, who have sufficient access to good bandwidth and connected devices, and who are supported by their family and peers.

It is clear that the COVID-19 arrangement, though noble, is exclusive in its nature, and excludes many learners in deprived communities. Thus, informed by CER, it is an injustice to institute systems and structures in education that exclude some on the basis of poverty, or because they live in deprived communities. In addition, the lack of connectivity does not only place a damper on academic matters, but also on strategies that are implemented in various contexts to fight COVID-19. In essence, the lack of connectivity affects online education and prevents access to information, which is essential in the fight against COVID-19.

Shortage of devices for online learning. Another challenge raised by research participants is the lack of devices to connect for online learning. The devices mentioned by the participants included cell phones, computers, laptops and smart phones that are compatible with low-tech teaching apps, such as Blackboard. During the discussion, the participants made the following comments. First, Simiso, a school learner, said:

> The school head teacher sent a message to us that we will start with online learning, and to me this was new and was confused because at home we do not have even a single laptop or smartphones, the one I am

> using for WhatsApp, is a borrowed phone and the owner can ask for it any time.

Second, Mzamo added that "online learning would be very difficult for me because of the COVID-19 lockdown, I would have visited my uncle in town who would have helped me with a laptop to study, but not I cannot move at all". And Rams, a teacher, added:

> I have a laptop but that would not help much since my learners are not having gadgets to complete the tasks that I would have given them. Sometimes, I try to use WhatsApp, I see that most learners are not online or simply do not have devices to support online learning.

In this regard, I agree with an observation by the World Bank (2020), that the move to online learning at scale typically benefits students already advantaged in various ways disproportionately (e.g., rich over poor, urban over rural, high-performing over low-performing, students in highly educated families over students in less well educated families).

Closure of internet cafés. During the research it emerged that most of the rural learners and educators relied on internet cafés for their online needs, which, according to the lockdown regulations, were closed, which worsened rural learners' access to online learning. During the discussions the participants said the following. Mzi, a rural learner, said that "the closest internet café is closed and if it was opened, I would not have managed to do online learning since it is expensive and overcrowded since everyone in the community uses the internet café". Busi, a learner, added "Besides being closed, internet café has very poor connectivity, is very poor in our internet café and just imagine when I am expected to use online learning for all my ten subjects. That would not work at all."

It is clear that lockdown, as a strategy to fight COVID-19, contributed to the plight of rural learners. Thus, lack of facilities or closure of internet cafés defeats the purpose of championing online learning as a strategy to combat COVID-19. Therefore, it is critical that the Department of Education provides more centres at which learners can access online material free of charge, or at

a limited amount, to ensure that most learners have access to the learning material.

Lack of computer skills of some rural teachers. In addition to the issues relating to lack of internet gadgets and connectivity, the research participants also reported that most rural teachers in South Africa are unable to use online learning apps, which makes it difficult for these teachers to help learners. During the discussion, Mpilo, a teacher, said "In my school, I know some of the colleagues that cannot even operate a computer. He trained as a teacher 30 years ago when computers where not common in South Africa including in teachers colleagues." And Zalo added that "some teachers do not know these things, in my school, I always assist my teachers with software or application for various things, and relying on such teachers to help with online teaching will be a waste of time."

Considering the points raised by participants, it is clear that the effectiveness of any curriculum implementation will be related to the competencies of the user system. Thus, if the training of teachers has been compromised, it will translate to incompetency in curriculum execution. I agree with Schwartz (2006, p. 450) that,

> "curriculum writers, with all good intentions have compiled volumes of well-conceived educational action plans, choosing specific materials and activities for their pre-conceived target, curriculum receivers, students, only to find that the curriculum users, teachers, are not prepared for the innovations".

To buttress the foregoing argument further, World Bank (2020) argues that very few classroom teachers have received training in online instructional approaches and tools. If teachers are to support online learning by their students while schools are closed, they will need to be prepared to do so before schools are closed (World Bank, 2020).

Therefore, as I discuss below, the Department of Basic Education should invest in teacher capacitation, which would assist teachers and learners to engage in online teaching and learning, effectively and efficiently, in the face of COVID-19.

Expensive internet data. During the research, the participants also reported that data is too expensive to facilitate effective online learning. The situation is worsened by the fact that some parents lost their jobs due to the lockdown, which prevents them from buying and selling, which seems to be the main source of income of many rural communities in South Africa. During the discussion, Velo said that "While we wish to engage in online learning as a way to avoid the spread of COVID-19, the problem is that data is very expensive and beyond the reach of many in rural communities". Sipho, who lives with a grandmother, added:

> My grandmother is not working. She only gets government grant and that grant is too little for us to survive a month, what more if that money is also going to be used for buying data. This simple means that some of us have been structurally excluded in schools by this thing of online.

From the discussion above, it is clear that the issue of data is a serious impediment to online learning, and it is critical that the cost of data is reduced to accommodate deprived communities. Alternatively, the Department of Basic Education should provide free access to learning material, to assist learners, or provide data that is tailor-made for learning purposes, should they fear learners will misuse the data for non-academic purposes.

In short, the research revealed that expensive data impedes online learning, which disadvantages learners and teachers, not only in academia, but also in the fight against COVID-19. The following section, I will address research question two.

Enhancing Online Teaching and Learning in Rural Schools in the Context of COVID-19

The paper does not only highlight the problem, but also presents possible solutions suggested by the teachers and learners to ensure that teaching and learning processes continue during the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, in this section, I will respond to Question 2 of the paper, which is, how can online learning be enhanced in the context of COVID-19? The first suggestion was that there is need for all-inclusive education.

Social inclusive learning approach. As part of the solution, the research participants discussed the need for an inclusive approach to online teaching and learning. Inclusive approach, as used in this paper, "concerns quality in the distribution of an education service, and it also concerns the nature of the service itself and the consequences for society through time" (Connell, 2012, p. 681). It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has created or widened the gap between the rich and the poor, or urban learners and rural learners. Education during the time of COVID-19 should not violate the rights of learners, despite their geographical location. This suggestion resonates with Mag, Sinfield and Burns (2017), who state that inclusive education is a child's right, not a privilege, and, as such, any approach to education during COVID-19 must be premised on respect for human rights, that involves that all the needs of learners' are catered for by the teaching and learning process. In a discussion, Zuzu indicated:

> Indeed we want to learn, forgoing 2020 academic year is disastrous to already suffering rural learners who look at education as the only alternative to escape deprived circumstances. Simply I want to finish my studies and, the Department of Basic Education should find ways to ensure I am included as a rural learner.

In this line, Nnuku added:

> The way this thing of online learning is done seems to favour the rich and those in the cities. It won't be fair for us to write the same examination with them since we do not have access to online resources. There is need to ensure that rural learners benefit as much as town learners concerning online learning.

An inclusive approach would be the best, desirable and doable in the fight against COVID-19, and would also ensure that no child is left behind due to this global pandemic. I agree with Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998, p. 74), who argue that the inclusive approach is purposeful, and builds commitment towards positive change.

Oloruntegbe and Collins (2011) state that successful reforms are initiated from the grassroots (bottom-up), particularly by teachers and learners who

have first-hand experience of the realities of online learning in the context of COVID-19. Through such an inclusive approach, the preservation of an oppressive status quo is challenged, and social transformation that values social justice can be achieved (Ngwenyama, 1991).

Equal access to learning resources. One of the suggestions that learners made concerns suppling learners with learning devices to facilitate online teaching and learning. This recommendation was made against the background that some city schools are either buying or lending learners devices to ensure that learning continues in the context of COVID-19 (Parliament Monitoring Group, 2020).

According to Mahlomaholo (2009), CER seems to be one of the most potent means of creating conditions under which this distorted learning environments can be subverted, and a positive academic identity cultivated. During the discussion, Xoli, a teacher said:

> It is important that government assists the less privileged learners in rural schools with devices that they can use for online learning like what is happening with other learners in city schools. I think the government has capacity to assist as long the principle of equity is followed rather than equality

Velo added that:

> Once we get resources and cheap data we can at least try to learn like the city learners. Since the government is able to supply some rural communities with either cheap or free electricity, I am sure they can be able to supply with cheap or free data for rural learners and teachers

Providing data will go a long way to ensure the success of online learning, especially for rural learners. In this way, providing data is expected to address the lived realties of people, offer solutions and facilitate the improvement of human lives (Koopman, 2013; Geduld & Sathorar, 2016; Mbatha, 2016).

Providing teachers trained in online teaching and learning. In this study, the issue of teacher incapacity to handle online learning was raised as a

challenge. The research also revealed that there is need for the Department of Basic Education to cease assuming that all teachers are able to execute online learning. Workshops should be conducted online to equip teachers on the way to handle on line learning. Dlodlo, a teacher, said "All we need is training on online and once we get how it is done, am sure it will be easy for us to assist learners in this regard. In this line, Msebele added "once we get training, the challenges we are facing now as teachers could be addressed and then we begin to help learners"

To this end, I argue that teachers need to be empowered in unthreatening ways, as teacher knowledge is the biggest factor in the implementation of the curriculum (Quyen & Khairani, 2017). In addition, education system managers must be aware of their teachers' ability levels, and must set expectations accordingly (David, Pellini, Jordan, & Phillips, 2020).

Ultimately, I conclude that, while it is important to go online in the context of COVID-19, it is critical to consider the observation of Stabback (2011), that the Department of Basic Education in South Africa needs to take into account where the country is, in terms of the current breadth and depth of the curriculum; learners' attainment levels; the quality of teachers; and the range and effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment practices.

This knowledge will assist to address the challenge cited by De Clercq (2013), namely that, the majority of teachers have deeply ingrained negativity and scepticism towards their jobs and developmental programmes aimed at improving the lives of learners. In fact, if teachers are not equipped with online learning skills, they will become even more negative and sabotage the teaching and learning process, which will, eventually, deprive other rural learners.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the study recommends that rural learners and educators should have access to data that allows them to engage in an online learning process. The greatest challenge faced with online education is that Internet connection is very expensive and, in some cases, very limited. Thus, it is critical that the Department of Basic Education invest in ensuring that all

learners have access to Internet connection to enhance teaching and learning during the time COVID-19 crisis.

In addition, the study recommends that the Department of Basic Education provide learners and teachers with devices they can use for online learning, and to gain access to information that relates to the fight against COVID-19. These devices can include smartphones, tablets, or general phones that support installation of learning packages such as Blackboard. In addition, the study recommends that teachers must be capacitated on online learning, so that they can assist learners.

Finally, the study suggests that the government and the Department of Basic Education should ensure that the global division between the rich and the poor, or between rural areas and the city, is not widened during COVID-19 by concentrating its efforts not only on privileged learners. Lives of rural learners matter too.

In short, the paper outlined the challenges relating to online learning encountered by rural learners and teachers in South Africa during the COVID-19 world pandemic. The paper was couched in CER and responded to two questions. PAR was used as a methodology for the study, in which 15 participants from rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, took part. The study found that learners and teachers have difficulties with online learning, which frustrates efforts to teach and learn.

I argue in this paper that in the fight against COVID-19, it is critical that human rights, especially those of rural learners, are respected. Furthermore, the Department of Basic Education should take an all-inclusive approach to addressing the lived realities of rural learners. When all people are included in all processes, including learning, it will facilitate the easy flow of information, which is essential in the fight against COVID-19.

Notes

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

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