IMPROVEMENT FROM WITHIN: THE ASSET-BASED APPROACH AND RURAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract

Rural school reform in South Africa is largely driven by frameworks that are insufficiently sensitive to the realities of rurality. Twenty-three years into democracy, the government's approach to the challenges of rural schools has been top down, excluding rural school stakeholders' ideas and proposals regarding reform in these schools. This approach has failed. This article explores the application of an asset-based approach as an alternative for rural school improvement. It establishes the conditions that are conducive to the application of an asset-based approach and the factors hindering or enabling this approach. A qualitative case study employing discursive oriented interviews with the participants from a rural school was used. Data analysis followed inductive and deductive approaches. The findings suggest that the kind of leadership that exists in schools is critical for the application of the asset-based approach. From the findings, I conclude that rural schools cannot be distanced from their communities and the school and the community must be treated as one entity. Further, the empowerment of all potential contributors is crucial for the success of an asset-based approach. This empowerment requires schools to create space for every stakeholder to lead.

Introduction and Background

Rural school reform in South Africa is largely driven by frameworks that are insufficiently sensitive to the realities of rurality (Department of Education, 2005). Twenty-three years into democracy, the South African government's approach to the challenges of rural education has been top down, excluding rural school stakeholders' ideas and proposals regarding reform in their schools (Department of Education, 2009; Myende & Chikoko, 2014; Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). According to the ministerial committee report on rural education, there has been a 'blanket approach' to improving rural education based on the idea that all education challenges, no matter what the context is, can be addressed using a 'one-size-fits-all' approach (Department of Education, 2005). In its report published in 2005, the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (MCRE) states that success in improving rural schools can be achieved provided there is a shift from deficit models and a one-size-fits-all

approach to multifaceted approaches that draw from the multifaceted qualities found within the rural context (Department of Education, 2005).

Confirming the value of drawing from rural qualities and multifaceted approaches to rural education challenges, the Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005) reminds us that rural communities have a plethora of untapped resources that can be used to transform both their community and their educational institutions. These resources can be catalysts for addressing rural challenges in general and education challenges in particular. The Ministerial Report on Rural Education (Department of Education, 2005) defines a 'multifaceted approach' as being a people-centred approach, which acknowledges the wealth of indigenous knowledge and other positive capabilities that the rural constituency provides. Building on this approach, the Department of Education acknowledges the structurally created conditions of oppression and deprivation in rural areas, but argues that finding solutions begins with understanding rurality as spaces with people who can drive their own reform (Hlalele, 2012). Bearing in mind this multifaceted approach, there is a growing discourse that for sustainable rural education reform to be achieved, rural education reform processes must move from deficit approaches to be driven by asset-based approaches. Building on this advocacy, this article explores the conditions that are conducive to the application of an asset-based approach to improving rural schools. It further explores the factors that may enable or hinder the application of such an approach. The following critical questions guided the study reported in this article:

- What school conditions are conducive to the utilisation of an asset-based approach to rural school improvement?
- What are the factors that promote or hinder the application of an asset-based approach to rural school improvement?

The article contributes literature to the debate on the application of an asset-based approach in school improvement from an educational leadership and management perspective. There is a plethora of literature on the asset-based approach locally. Liesel Ebersöhn, Irma Eloff, and Fumane Khanare, for example, are just some of the scholars who have written research articles that address the asset-based approach from a psychological perspective. Internationally, research on asset-based approaches is dominated by community development studies (Burke, Murphy, Lanigan, & Anderson, 2009; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Few scholars have written on the asset-based approach from an educational leadership and management perspective. Thus, this article contributes partly to closing this research gap by considering the asset-based approach as an additional existing leadership approach to school improvement.

The Value of the Asset-based Approach

It is important to conceptualise assets in order to contextualise the assets that are available within the context of the school that formed part of this study. Assets include the tangible and intangible belongings of an organisation or individual

(Myende, 2012). In the context of this article, tangible assets refer to the people and the organisations found in the community and their material possessions that schools can use for improvement. Intangible assets, on the other hand, are the skills, talents and capacities of individuals both in and outside these organisations. Despite the 'brain drain' that has affected rural communities, rural schools are found in areas where there are many underutilised buildings, unemployed people with knowledge, and local leaders and organisations with different forms of capital (Hlalele, 2012; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). This article looks how these different forms of capital as assets can be utilised for school improvement. To further assist in the understanding of assets in these schools, Chikoko and Khanare (2012) inform us that schools, including rural schools, are found in areas where they are exposed to three tiers of assets. These are primary, secondary and tertiary assets. While the asset-based approach acknowledges the tertiary assets, it argues for the use of primary and secondary assets before tertiary assets are used. In this article, this is what I regard as improving the school from within.

Research on the asset-based approach and its contribution to addressing bottlenecks in the delivery of quality education have gained currency in South Africa. Many studies (Chikoko & Khanare, 2012; Ebersöhn & Mbetse, 2003; Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2006; Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2001; Emmet, 2000; Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2011; Khanare, 2009; Loots et al., 2012; Myende, 2012; Myende & Chikoko 2014; Ryan, 2008; Venter, 2010) have argued for the value of an asset-based approach in addressing the various educational challenges faced by learners in general and in rural schools in particular. Drawing from these studies, I argue that an asset-based approach to rural school improvement has many advantages and possibilities. The advantages include community building for sustainable livelihood based on community-driven initiatives (Haines, 2009; Mathie & Cunningham, 2005), and the creation of conditions in which the community becomes aware of individuals' and organisations' gifts, skills and capacities that are available in their context for them to draw on. An asset-based approach has much to offer to school improvement in the current era, where schools' survival is increasingly dependent on their ability to harness local assets. Scholars such as Loots, Ebersöhn, Ferreira, and Eloff (2012), Khanare (2009), Chikoko and Khanare (2012) and Myende and Chikoko (2014) (amongst others) have documented the gains of the asset-based approach in the context of education. However, a literature review reveals that while there is a growing focus on the benefits of an asset-based approach in addressing social challenges in the school context, there are no studies investigating the detail of how schools can become places where local skills, gifts and capacities can be combined for school improvement. Furthermore, the factors that hinder or promote the asset-based approach have not been addressed.

An Asset-based Approach to School Improvement

The need for an asset-based approach stems from shortcomings in the traditional approach ('needs-based') to school improvement. According to Kretzmann and McKnight (1993, 1996), Eloff and Ebersöhn (2001), Ebersöhn and Mbetse (2003), Keeble (2006), Boyd, Hayes, Wilson, and Bearsley-Smith (2008), Burke et al. (2009),

Venter (2010) and Loots (2011), a needs-based approach centres on agencies, universities, the government or other donor groups that intervene to remedy school problems. These researchers further posit that employing a needs-based approach firstly results in communities that are unable to acknowledge their strengths, capacities, assets and resources. Secondly, this type of approach results in social service providers perceiving communities in terms of their problems and needs. Thirdly, such an approach creates communities who are consumers rather than the producers of their solutions. Thus, communities with this perception will pay attention to their deficiencies instead of the possibilities for deploying their assets for the improvement of their schools. They will always remain at the receiving end, hoping for external 'experts' to address their issues. This generally leads to unsustainable intervention strategies, with sustainability depending on long-term support and the presence of external service providers. In other words, communities remain helpless when external donors or service providers have left and whatever support they have been providing dwindles, as the community believes it is not capacitated to address its needs.

The Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (Department of Education, 2005) confirms that the above approach (needs-based) has dominated the government's strategies to address rural education challenges. It is evident that since 1994, the South African government has dedicated significant effort to improving the status of rural education by addressing social challenges (Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay, & Moletsane, 2011). However, quality education has remained a concern for the country in general and the rural context in particular (Hlalele, 2012; Myende & Chikoko, 2014). Evidence, as provided above, shows that little is gained if the needs-based approach is the adopted path for revitalising rural schools.

The conditions required and the factors that hinder or promote the asset-based approach are well illustrated in an extensive enquiry conducted by Kretzmann and McKnight (1996), of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, on successful communities. This research gives an indication that successful communities followed an asset-based approach, although the same enquiry acknowledges that the communities inadvertently sometimes presented a one-sided negative view that communities are needy and require external help. This view hindered rather than promoted community capacity building (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003, p. 476). This study is an example of strong advocacy for the asset-based approach. The study shows that if we fully embrace the asset-based approach we have to understand the factors promoting and hindering it. This understanding will help us to avoid using the approach as well as to arrive at solutions that are based on deficit principles.

The Ministerial Report on Rural Education (Department of Education, 2005) has indicated that one of the reasons for the failure of the state to address rural education challenges is the employment of deficit models (needs-based approaches) in dealing with challenges. Deficit models consider what the government assumes will be a suitable intervention without an assessment of what rural people think will address

their problems. These models further ignore the fact that rural and deprived communities are characterised by resourcefulness, which positions them as agents of change within their own context (Mahlomaholo & Netshandama, 2010). For Gegeo (1998, p. 289), development initiatives grounded in deficit models are developments in disguise and lack sustainability. As shown by Nkambule et al. (2011) and the KZN Department of Education's National Senior Certificate schools' report for 2011 and 2012, the state's initiatives have not led to sustainable solutions for rural school improvement. The major question which remains after the needs-based approach has dominated for such a long time is what can schools do from their own resources in the absence of (or reduction of) support from external agencies such as the provincial department? Thus, the need for an asset-based approach as an improvement in the rural context is relevant. The premise of the asset-based approach is that rural school improvement is possible and sustainable when local community members are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort (Khanare, 2009). The asset-based approach further links with the notion of decentralised school governance because it draws from the potential contributions made by the local school community. This does not ignore the deficits of the rural context but acknowledges the importance of localised assets and initiatives and calls for looking at rurality beyond the deficits. Decentralised rural development is based on a call for local management of resources on the assumption that schools will, therefore, look after those resources better (Scoones & Wolmer, 2003).

The South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (SASA) (Republic of South Africa, 1996) acknowledges the role of all stakeholders (teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, school governing body [SGB] members and other members of the community) in the education of a child. In section 34, the Act also posits that the state cannot provide to schools with all the resources they need and is therefore supportive of fundraising initiatives led by SGBs as a way to supplement state-provided resources. This is evidence that government believes that locals should have in themselves the skills and capacities to run their schools without relying fully on the state for support. Scoones and Wolmer (2003) and Rainey and Honing (2012) rightly point out that an asset-based approach is ideal in the era of decentralised school governance. Central to an asset-based approach is to transcend the school boundaries (primary tier of assets) and look to the important secondary tiers and outside tiers of assets in developing the school (Chikoko & Khanare, 2012). Based on the premise of transcending the school boundaries but also avoiding external support only, the asset-based approach aligns itself to the school-based management (SBM) approach. According to Rainey and Honig (2012), SBM shifts control of schools to a broader community level and is further linked to increased school capacity to attend to relevant needs. The asset-based approach, therefore, provides the means through which the involvement of the local community will not be merely 'window-dressing' but will be a channel through which local assets can be harnessed in the cause of school improvement.

School Improvement in the South African Context

The literature shows that reform within the South African context may be triggered by, among other things, the evaluation of results such as schools' performance in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and National Annual Assessment (ANA) (Bantwini, 2010). In the context of rurality, the academic performance of many schools, as measured by Grade 12 results, has shown that rural schools underperform compared to their urban counterparts (Myende, 2014). Thus, rural school improvement has generally been driven by dissatisfaction with the way these schools perform compared to their urban counterparts. The intention has always been to upgrade the standard to bring it in line with that of urban schools. This therefore confirms Bantwini's (2010) argument that evaluation results are what trigger reform in the South African Education fraternity.

The Ministerial Report on Rural Education (Department of Education, 2005) was published in 2005. One of the recommendations it makes for rural education improvement is the employment of asset-based approaches. Arising from this report, the directorate for rural education published guidelines for the merger and closure of rural and farm schools in 2009 (Department of Education, 2009). The Directorate's guidelines were framed by section 12(a) of the SASA, which provides for the merger of public schools, and section 33, which provides for closure (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The intention of these mergers and closures was to improve rural schools and ensure the efficient use and deployment of the human and physical resources that were invested in these schools. However, in so doing a top-down approach was deployed, which ignored the needs and dynamics in rural schools, and no suggestions or recommendations were sought from the local people. A top-down approach is the opposite to an asset-based approach, which advocates a bottom-up approach to rural school improvement. Proponents of the latter approach, John Kretzmann and John McKnight, argue that this approach is important for the creation of working and sustainable community improvement initiatives (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Such an approach also contributes to the development of community power (Kretzmann, McKnight, Dobrowolski, & Puntenney, 2005). I share these sentiments and regard this approach as relevant for school improvement.

Research Design and Methods

This article is derived from a qualitative study which explored the application of an asset-based approach to improving academic performance in a rural school. This article focuses on just two elements of this broader study which emerged during the data generation and analysis. The elements are the conditions conducive for the application of the asset-based approach and the factors enabling or hindering the application of the approach. Qualitative researchers are concerned with the subjective study of realities (Silverman, 2013) and their study of these realities is interpreted and dependent on text and image data (Creswell, 2014). This study was concerned with the perceptions of the members of the school management team (SMT) (principal, three heads of department, three teachers and a group of eight leaners) of a particular rural school. I believed that the viability of the asset-based approach in their context could only be understood from these participants'

subjective meanings. The interpretive paradigm, which guided this study, regards truth as being socially constructed, multifaceted and dependent on the context, time, culture and other experiences of the participants (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, Poggenpoel, & Schurink, 2002). Moreover, because this study was conducted with an intention to make meaning from the participants' experiences as members of the focus school, instead of narrowing meaning to a few categories the study looked for complexity of views as drawn from the participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2014).

A case study approach suited this study because case studies are conducted in real contexts and their intention is to investigate experiences bound by the context within which the studies are conducted. Case studies also provide rich insights into particular situations, events, organisations or even persons (Rule & John, 2011). This article is based on a case study of a rural school that was involved in a participatory research project, which examined how the asset-based approach could be used to improve academic performance in the school. Because of the unique experience of this project, findings from this school cannot be generalised or compared to research generated from other schools that have not tested the asset-based approach in any improvement initiative. Therefore, as supported by Rule and John (2011), this is a single case of a particular instance.

Participants were selected by means of purposive sampling, which, according to Creswell (2012), entails the researcher intentionally selecting individuals or research site(s) for the study guided by the principle of 'fitness for the purpose'; that is, the identification of participants who are relevant to what the study is trying to achieve. As indicated above, the research site and the people who were selected are relevant in that they were part of the school that was involved in a project which employed an asset-based approach strategy for school improvement. Because of their involvement in this project, the participants were 'information rich' with regard to providing in-depth insight on what conditions are conducive for the application of an asset-based approach and what factors promote or hinder this approach to school improvement. The data used in this article was generated from the school principal, two heads of department, three teachers and eight learners.

Data Generation

Discursively oriented interviews (DOIs) were utilised as a data generation method, using "talk as social action" (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004). The DOI methodology is suitable for studies in which participants are social actors who interact with the researchers and at the same time are involved in discursive practice and communicative action. They are treated as co-constructors of knowledge. This form of interview allowed participants to have an unrestricted conversation with the researcher and this suited this form of study in that they were able to voice their experiences as constructed from the case. An added advantage as observed in this study is that DOI also allowed participants to reflect on their discussions and they were able to ask me questions for clarity. The flexibility of participants being able to

ask questions created a space in which they could talk confidently and openly to me (Henning et al., 2004, p. 58). Learners were interviewed as a group three times and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The principal, heads of departments and teachers were interviewed individually for two sessions and each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

To analyse the participants' responses, I employed both inductive and deductive qualitative data analysis. Firstly, I transcribed the data verbatim from the audio recording. Relevant extracts of the transcribed text were highlighted and then grouped without comment under themes. Thereafter, the themes were clustered into categories and compared with relevant literature. Finally, extracts were paraphrased and suitable quotations were selected to illustrate the categories. The actual words of the participants are used in the article to ensure that evidence is clear and the voices of the participants are not lost.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research, especially within a social science context, has an ethical-moral dimension that researchers are obliged to follow (Maree, 2007; Neuman, 2006). I obtained ethical clearance and permission from the university where I was employed, the provincial Department of Education, and the school. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Considering that learners were minors, letters were written to their parents to obtain their consent. Letters to parents were written in isiZulu, which is the language these parents best understood. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the names of the participants and the school used in this article are fictitious.

Findings and Discussion

The results show that an asset-based approach is an ideal framework for rural school improvement, as posited in the earlier sections of this article. With regard to the conditions that are conducive to improving schools from within, the results suggest that the leadership of the principal is central to creating conditions under which the asset-based approach can be utilised. Similarly, the factors promoting and hindering the use of an asset-based approach for school improvement are linked to the kind of leadership that exists in the school. A detailed discussion of the results is presented below under the themes that emerged during data analysis. These are: (a) promoting invitational and participative leadership approaches; (b) making the school and the community a single entity; and (c) the empowerment of potential contributors.

Promoting Invitational and Participative Leadership Approaches

As part of the research, participants worked on the process of identifying the assets available in and outside the school. Several assets were identified (not the focus of this article) and participants were asked to brainstorm and think about what was required in the school in order to make the asset-based approach work. Emerging from this were views that suggested that SMT members, especially the principal, needed to promote invitational leadership practices in the way they led the school. Participants (especially teachers) perceived invitational leadership to mean that the principal encouraged innovative views from everyone as leaders in the school, and he/she put him/herself in the space of others to see how they did things and what they would like to see happening in the school. One teacher (Suzan) stated that sometimes it was not easy to suggest innovative ideas because they were sabotaged:

> *It also becomes very difficult to come up with innovative ideas because they are sabotaged.*

Supporting the views of Suzan, Zithulele, another teacher, pointed out that sometimes one ended up saying nothing and doing things one's own way because what was suggested was not welcome. An example involving school uniform was used to explain the need to promote invitational and participative leadership approaches:

> *You know if I can tell you the truth, sometimes you end up not making suggestions. You end up saying I will do what I came here for. I can make an example using school uniform. There is a time where we had to tell learners about the way they needed to wear their school uniform. You could see that our leaders did not accept our idea because they went behind our back to allow learners to wear what we had asked them not to wear.*

From the above examples, one can see that the innovative ideas could have had value for the school as they would have enhanced the way the SMT led other teachers. The two heads of department also supported the views on school leadership adopting invitational leadership practices. They were of the view there is huge distance between the school and the community, which challenged the functioning of the school. The extracts below explain this position:

> *We as leaders, we need to come together and look to each other and see what we can harvest from each and every one of us. This will happen if our leader (principal) can include us in leadership and listen to our views* (Zikode).

Ms Magalela, another head of department, echoed the sentiments expressed by Zikode:

> *I think it begins with us as leaders of the school. Some of us have good ideas but they don't get accepted. If we can give each other a chance and support one another all can be well.*

It is argued elsewhere, drawing from the SASA (Republic of South Africa, 1996), that school leadership is no longer the sole responsibility of the school principal but is a process that should be shared among those who are members of the school (Myende, 2013). The teachers' and HoDs' calls for a more invitational and participative approach to leadership are thus justified. This has been witnessed elsewhere by other scholars. For example, Grant (2006, p. 511) posits that the SASA has promoted a shift from centralised control and decision-making to a school-based system of education management. I argue here that this is in line with the asset-based approach as it advocates an approach in which everyone is believed to be empowered, skilful, resourceful and able to participate in decision-making. Moreover, this approach addresses the power imbalances that exist in centralised school governance and management. Leaders who are invitational and promote participative leadership approaches, ideas, skills and capacities will contribute to the process of school improvement. The literature also shows that for an asset-based approach to work, those individuals who lead schools should be tasked with creating an environment in which all members of the school feel valued (Sanders, 2006, p. 34).

It is further shown that improving the interaction among and between teachers and principals is a significant factor in the school improvement process (Chikoko, 2011). Chikoko (2011) rightly posit that invitational leadership approaches enhance a leader's ability to harness the potential in others and defeat those factors that thwart potential. This is inclusive in nature and connects with decentralised school improvement plans and the asset-based approach. The former challenges the suppression of others and the latter promotes drawing out the potential of different members of the school. Invitational and participative approaches to school leadership should not only accommodate those within the school boundaries but also go beyond these boundaries to touch those in the community. The next section of this article addresses the aspect of making the school and the community a single entity.

Making the School and the Community a Single Entity

Data obtained from the participants repeatedly confirmed that the school is found within an environment in which people have the potential to make invaluable contributions to its improvement. What emerged is that harnessing assets found in the community has been made difficult by the school's failure to create connections between itself and the community. The division that existed between the school and the community emerged right at the beginning of the study, during the meeting the I had with the principal to request permission to conduct the study. The principal said:

> *Now tell me don't you want to expose us to this people (school community)? You know they don't like some of us here in the school and*

> *while you might say you came here for good, some people may use this opportunity to raise their agendas and how are you going to act on that?*

From the above extract it appears that there was a 'them and us' attitude (the school and the community). In the principal's point of view, the school is an entity that is separate from the community. According to the SASA (RSA, 1996) and the site-based management approach, as indicated earlier (Rainey & Honig, 2012), schools belong to the people in the area in which they are situated. For this reason, the need for inclusive governance was identified as a way to ensure that the voices of the people where the schools are located are taken into account in taking the school forward. This is even more crucial and inevitable in the context of rurality, given that the schools in this area in which this study was conducted are situated on communal land controlled by Amakhosi and they are forced to account to the community.

To corroborate the picture created by the principal, when asked about possible strategies to make the asset-based approach work in the school, all the participants indicated that the school was confronted with a situation in which it existed in isolation from all other structures in the community, and no relationships had been formed. Other research studies (Bhengu, 2013; Epstein, 2011; Hlalele, 2012; Naicker, 2011) confirm that schools are the lifeblood of the community and vice versa. From these studies it can be argued that the failure of one unit, be it the school or the community, will lead to the failure of the other unit.

Participants agreed that separating the school and the community was not an ideal situation and it needed to be addressed if the intention was to improve the school using the asset-based approach. During their focus group interviews, the learners stated that the school and the community had no mutual understanding nor did they support each other. This concern was raised by one of the learners (Sizwe) but all the other learners confirmed it. Adding to this, one of the heads of department and the two teachers maintained that the school leaders should bring the community to the school and vice versa. These participants stated that there was no mutual relationship between the school and the various members of the community.

> *Our group identified that there should be connections between the school and the people from the community for them to see that they have a role to play … In our opinion, there is a gap between the school and the people we identified as assets* (Sizwe: learner).
> *There is no relationship that exists, the only one that exists is that we hire them (community members) if there is something that needs to be done in the school only* (Wonder: teacher).
> *The community don't know who we are … I personally think that our leader (principal) needs to connect us with the community by attending community events and also bring people from the community to our events* (Magalela: head of department).

Hyman's (2002) framework of community building posits that building a community is a prerequisite for tapping into the assets that groups and individuals possess. For

Hyman (2002), building a community involves drawing together members who have well-developed relationships and creating a space in which concerns and aspirations are shared. This results in enabling the community to pool their assets as a strategy and to build bridges to other resources required for academic performance. Glanz (2006) supports the creation of one entity comprising the school and the community, arguing that leaders need to establish and sustain continuing, meaningful and effective school–community relations if the school is to tap into community assets. Ebersöhn and Mbetse (2003), in their levels of community assets assessment, identify a community capacity inventory as being the first level of asset assessment. At this level, the intention is to generate the specific capacities, skills, talents and experiences of stakeholders in the community. I argue here that this will not take place in an environment where the people possessing the assets are divided.

While my argument in this article is based on what an asset-based approach can offer, I also acknowledge the 'half realities' of the rural context and these did emerge from the data. One of these realities is that people in the rural context can offer much to improving their school, but they need to be empowered.

Empowerment of Potential Contributors

There are challenges relating to contributors' capacity to participate both inside and outside the school. With regard to community participation, it was noted that, as a result of the 'brain drain', the existing population in rural areas is dominated by people who need empowerment or awareness in order for them to realise their possible contributions. The voices of teachers and learners confirmed the above:

> *Another problem we have is that while people in the school can have contributions, some of them especially the outside community are not aware what they can do and there will be a need to educate them about their importance and the role they can play* (Zithulele: teacher).
> *… Our parents have a huge role to play but the problem is that most of them are not educated and this causes them not to be aware of things they can do about our education. In our group we thought it will be a good idea to educate them about the role they can play* (Andile: learner).

While the above views confirm the lack of awareness among parents and community members of their potential contributions, what seemed to be untapped by the participants in the study is the fact that rural people have managed their lives and have survived against all odds in the rural context for hundreds of years (Hlalele, 2012). I do not underestimate the value of formal education, but what is generally forgotten is that rural people have indigenous knowledge (Chakwizira & Nhemachena, 2012; Maila & Loubser, 2003; Mapara, 2009; Olatokun & Ayanbode, 2009) that has equipped them to traverse all rurality-related challenges. From an asset-based approach perspective, this kind of knowledge sets rural people apart as important contributors to their own issues, including educational challenges. Taking the viewpoint of the participants, one may then argue that the problem is not that

they have less knowledge to contribute, but rather that there is a lack of awareness that their ways of knowing can play a pivotal role in improving their schools. A kind of awareness, which is also empowering, must be created in order for rural people to participate in improving their schools.

Conclusion and Implications for Leadership

Emerging from this study is the observation that a close relationship between the community and the school can result in homemade solutions, since all the assets required for school improvement are to be found in the school and the community. From the participants' views as discussed, it would appear that a gap between the school and the community has resulted in the school leaders appearing to 'sing a solo' (lead alone). This gap is mainly attributed to the lack of stakeholder empowerment. On the other hand, the gap between the SMT members and teachers at the school was mainly attributed to the SMT's inability to practise participative leadership and invite others onto the leadership terrain. Although the study focused on school improvement, school–community relations were revealed to be crucial in ensuring that an asset-based approach is used for school improvement. Internationally, there is agreement that school–community relations are particularly important in schools where resources are scarce (Epstein, 2011; Sanders, 2006) and this study has shown how these relations are crucial when using an asset-based approach in a rural context. The findings are therefore critically important for both the local and the international context, given the importance of education improvement in society.

Regarding favourable school conditions, the study found that there was a need to promote invitational and participative leadership approaches in the school. Furthermore, it was found that there was a need to ensure that the school and the community treated each other as sub-units of the same system. Lastly, it was found that as much as stakeholders are aware of their value in the life of the school, their ability to use their skills, gifts and capacities to make a contribution was limited by a lack of empowerment. Therefore, it is recommended that empowering potential contributors would allow the school to utilise the assets that are available for school improvement.

In tapping into an asset-based approach for rural school improvement, this article presents one overarching idea; that is, that school leaders need to create a balanced relationship between the school and its stakeholders. Such a relationship requires a particular type of leadership that will deconstruct power relations and establish new ways of doing things in the organisation. The findings indicate that leadership needs to be invitational and, as part of this discussion, I position an asset-based approach to school improvement as being consistent with this leadership typology. Invitational leadership theory allied with an asset-based approach to school improvement shifts the aspect of power and influence in the leadership terrain. Contrary to existing practice, this approach promotes collaboration and shows compassion and respect for individuals in the educational system. Through collaboration, compassion and respect, those enstrusted with formal leadership positions will have an opportunity

to conduct a skills survey and identify those skills within the school and the community that are critical for school improvement. Moreover, once individuals in the school and the community realise their potential they will willingly allow the school to tap into this potential.

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