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**Experiencing language challenges in a rural school:**

**Implications for learners' life aspirations**

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## Abstract

This article reports on an exploration of learners' retrospective experiences of learning in a second language at a rural school. The school was involved in a larger youth project that involved Academic Service-Learning of university students who provided educational psychology services to the Grade 9 learners. Purposive sampling was used to retrospectively select 40 (f: n = 20; m: n = 20) Grade 9 learners from a rural school that was involved in a larger youth project. This project aimed to deliver pathways towards resilience in rural schools through cross-cultural measures for assessments, career guidance, and therapeutic interventions. The project aimed to provide Academic Service-Learning opportunities for the second-year students of a Master's in Educational Psychology programme. Secondary data analysis was employed to explore and analyse the data. The secondary data sources comprised learners' case files collected over a four-year period between 2012 and 2015. Coding and memo writing were used as part of the documentation strategies during the data analysis process. Thematic analysis consisting of six phases was employed in the study. The findings showed that one of the most frequently indicated challenges the learners faced, was limited expressive and receptive skills in English. Although they had dreams and hopes for the future, the learners' lack of language proficiency hindered their career aspirations and life beyond school. The findings suggested that future research should involve larger groups of learners from rural areas and focus on ways to enhance their communicative competences. Their perspective on how best they could be supported should also be explored further.

**Keywords: second language learning; communication skills; rural schools; language challenges; teaching and learning**

## **Introduction / Communication Skills**

Basic communication skills involve the ability to read, write, listen and speak. The development of these skills in learners is often more complicated than it should be, because of language choices in schools. English is the language of learning and teaching from Grade 4 onwards in many public schools in South Africa and other Anglophone post-colonial sub-Saharan countries. In the rural context English remains the medium of instruction, even though it is often the learners' second or third language (Omidire, Ebersöhn, Leask, Konza & du Plessis 2018). This results in a scenario where language becomes a barrier to learning and developing proficiency in both English and the learners' home languages becomes challenging (Brock-Utne, 2015; Mncwango, 2009; Omidire, Bouwer & Jordaan, 2011). The challenges of learning in English are more often compounded for learners in rural areas because of the added high risk, high need, and chronic adversity context (Brock-Utne, 2015). Learners in rural areas also lack exposure to English beyond the classroom, as their home language is their language of choice (Brock-Utne, 2015). Other challenges include teachers not being adequately trained and supported to teach English as a second or additional language. The challenges that are associated with the development of language and basic communication skills often have implications for achievement, career choice and well-being.

Across Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa, access to higher education depends on learners becoming proficient English language users. It is generally held that a high level of language proficiency can be attained through the study of language as a subject, provided that there is adequate teaching and resources (Probyn, 2001). Language proficiency requires learners to have access to the necessary resources in their schools. However, schools often lack these resources – especially in rural areas (Mncwango, 2009). Learners also do not know how to manage and cope with learning in a second language. It is important to explore solutions to the language challenges these learners experience (Nel, Nel, & Lebeloane, 2014). One way to achieve this is by understanding the experiences of learners within the rural context (Probyn,

2001). In order to address these challenges to learning, one must gain a better understanding of rural learners' language experiences.

### **Theory of Rurality and Rural Education**

The theory of rurality provides insights into the risks that rural youth face, and their resilience – against the backdrop of rural contexts. The theory of rurality postulates that understanding the broader context of challenges in rural areas is significant and can provide an in-depth insight into the risk factors that may be identified (Balfour, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2008). Basic components required to access an improved quality of life in rural areas are impeded by both past and present policies (Ebersöhn, & Ferreira, 2012). Education, as a fundamental need for people living in rural areas to buffer risks factors, unfortunately continues to receive little support. In addition to the poor-quality education, other social issues such as poverty and poor economic status apply (Kotzé, 2011). Conversely, although learners in rural areas are faced by various risk factors, Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012) argue that rural areas should not be viewed solely through lenses of deficits, isolation and backwardness. According to Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012), individuals living in rural areas are not passive victims of the adversities associated with a rural setting. To capture the essence of rurality, it is important to consider the dynamic nature of a rural environment. Transactions between various systems as well as individuals living in rural areas play a significant role in understanding risks and resilience in rural settings (Ebersöhn, & Ferreira, 2012).

Rural areas face challenges of resource scarcity that have an impact on the quality of education that the learners receive (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy & Dean, 2005). Consequently, this translates into poor academic performance that does not particularly reflect the true potential of youth in rural areas (Arnold et al., 2005). The urban-rural divide is experienced globally, and the ability of rural youth to adequately surmount the challenges they face is affected by political, economic and social marginalisation. Although it might be argued that

the risk factors faced by youth are not exclusive to a rural setting, it would be unwarranted to assume that the extent of challenges in rural and urban areas are comparatively equal (Balfour et al., 2008). The theory of rurality posits that individuals in rural areas should therefore be viewed in the light of their context (Balfour et al., 2008).

In South Africa, challenges such as poverty prevail in both urban and rural areas. In terms of the theory of rurality (Balfour et al., 2008), a combination of factors such as lack of infrastructure, poor support and neglect could contribute to poverty levels being significantly more intense in rural areas. The theory provides an opportunity to view individuals as entities that grow and develop as they live through experiences. Although individuals might be influenced by their environmental setting, their identities cannot be defined on the basis of the area or the spaces in which they live. The argument is that individuals are capable of making decisions in response to experiences that they come across in life (Balfour et al., 2008).

The learners living in rural areas should not be viewed as victims purely based on their circumstances (Ebersöhn, & Ferreira, 2012). Many of the learners remain motivated to continue with school and pursue their dreams of the future. They view their own future positively, in spite of the challenges that they face. Schools appear to be the agent of social mediation (Barley & Beesley, 2007) in bridging the gaps of social and economic status.

Even in the face of dire social and economic conditions, individuals possess innate characteristics such as emotional and social skills that serve as resources (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). Characteristics like motivation, levels of persistence and temperament play a role in the meaning that the youth assign to their circumstances and their ability to adapt (Moletsane, 2012). Muthukrishna and Morojela (2012) concur with this view, as they argue that the way in which youth perceive risk factors in their environment plays a role in their ability to bounce back from adversity.

Dass-Brailsford (2005) argues that the move by rural youth towards achieving educational success can be viewed as an indication of their resilience. Mapesela, Hlalele and Alexandra (2012) view achievement in education as a buffer against the impact of the low socioeconomic status prevalent in the rural areas. According to Balfour and others (2008), the attainment of resilience by rural learners is facilitated by a constellation of systems in their environment. Institutions such as family, culture and education are among the resources that rural youth could access to buffer the risk factors presented by rurality. Ebersöhn, Loots, Eloff and Ferreira (2014) posit that we need to view theory differently in order to obtain comprehensive insight into the effects of rurality on the youth.

Rural schools in South Africa are governed by the same curriculum and policies as all public schools throughout the country (Gardiner, 2008). However, school systems in rural areas often lack the support and resources required to teach learners properly (Gardiner, 2008). For challenges to learning to be adequately addressed, the school system should aim at supporting learners' specific needs (Swart & Pettipher, 2014). Schools have the responsibility to create a supportive and caring environment in which learners are motivated to attend school and master the work prescribed for them in the curriculum (Bojuwoye, Stofile, Moolla, & Sylvester, 2014). Many schools struggle to support learners in overcoming their specific challenges, because the schools themselves lack resources and efficient teachers (Gardiner, 2008). Schools in rural areas are often hard to reach and the physical school structures are inadequate for teaching. The performance of learners in rural schools is often poorer than that of learners in urban schools. It seems that there is a gap in the support received by school systems in rural areas (Gardiner, 2008).

According to Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012), rural schools manage to deal with poverty and challenges to learning in a number of ways. For example, teachers use their relationship skills to create partnerships across school community systems to provide support services and

fulfil the needs of the learners. Language teachers from across the community work together to address challenges related to language, both in teaching and learning. They do not only present basic education classes to the parents of the learners to teach them to read, but also provide learning support, career guidance and counselling to the learners and encourage them to further their studies after school (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012).

### **The Sociocultural Theory**

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) describes mediation as the means of developing children's higher-level mental ability as they interact with their environment (Van Compernelle & Williams, 2013). The SCT views learning as a semiotic process where an individual's participation in socially mediated activities is important (Turuk, 2008). The SCT is concerned with gaining an understanding of the development of the individual's cognitive processes and is based on the notion that individuals use mediational tools such as language for interaction in sociocultural activities. In so doing, they gain control of their mental activities – something that is fundamental to learning (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Mediation could also be the interaction between the individual/learner and a significant other (teacher, adult or more able peer) within the zone of proximal development. Mediation allows learners to take responsibility for their learning and construct knowledge through the mediation process (De Vos, Delport, Fouché, & Strydom, 2014; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014).

Language socialisation, especially of an additional language, is often problematic and unsuccessful, and leads to tension in the individual's environment. Where the home language differs from the language of instruction, the socialisation process of the second language is likely to have negative outcomes (Zuengler & Miller, 2006).

## **Language Challenges to Learning**

### **The Broader Context**

Teachers who teach second language learners face many challenges. In the USA and Britain, the number of English language learners and limited English proficient learners has grown exponentially over the past years (Khong & Saito, 2013). The diversity of the learners makes educating them a challenge. Other challenges are of a social nature, because the learners bring various cultural backgrounds, language proficiencies and academic experiences (Khong & Saito, 2013) to the classroom. The education system needs to be reformed to accommodate these diverse learners more effectively.

Another area of concern is teacher education. Many teachers are ill prepared to deal with learners who speak English as a second language. Teachers have insufficient training to handle second language learning and to adjust the curriculum in support of their teaching. To teach second language learners properly, more time is needed to work effectively with them. This, however, is not always possible, especially in large classrooms (Khong & Saito, 2013). Not only is communicating with the learners challenging, but the teachers often struggle to communicate with the learners' parents, who themselves have only a limited ability to speak English. In England, many learners who learn in a second language are expected to follow the national curriculum, which offers English as the language of learning (Leung, 2010). Following the national curriculum creates challenges for individuals whose first language or mother tongue is not English. In the USA, persons who have been learning in English for most of their schooling and still have difficulty grasping the English language are called long-term English language learners (LTELLs). Through research, the USA schooling system has found that when learners find it difficult to grasp the English language, it is often the result of their mother tongue not having been fully developed at school and at home (Menken & Kleyn, 2010). Research by Menken and Klein (2010) found that the overemphasis on learning English in schools, and the lack of encouragement to learn in the learner's mother tongue, have



contributed to the slow pace at which learners are acquiring English as a language. The low proficiency in English of many of the LTELLs has led to poor academic performance, which resulted in learners having to repeat the same grade the following year. Learners easily lose confidence in themselves when they consistently fail to acquire English proficiency.

### **The South African Context**

Access to education is a right for all people, regardless of their social, economic or cultural background (Hill, Baxen, Craig, & Namakula, 2012). Hill et al. (2012) confirm the views expressed in the *White Paper 6* (2001) and agree that maximising the participation of all learners in a culture will minimise their challenges to learning. By focusing on equal access to education for all, there has been a move away from merely focusing on ensuring that learners are enrolled in schools, towards ensuring that all have access to quality education (Hill et al., 2012). After South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, the equal right to education was pursued through implementing policies to address past injustices and build a better schooling system (Hill et al., 2012). Although the South African education system has attempted to overcome challenges to learning, many schools are still poorly resourced and many learners who enrol in the schooling system never finish their education (Hill et al., 2012). Documents such as the *White Paper 6* (2001) have recognised that learners have a broad range of learning needs. These needs arise from various factors – one of which is socioeconomic deprivation, which pertains to this study.

Learners often require resilience to overcome their challenges to learning. Rural areas, however, remain inundated with problems and challenges (Balfour et al., 2008). When one thinks of rural areas, one is reminded of isolation, poverty, exclusion and neglect. In their research, Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012) found that teachers in rural schools are usually able to identify areas of support required for building resilience. However, many teachers find it difficult to implement the strategies created for these areas of support, due to the lack of

resources available to them in these rural areas (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). The shortage of teachers, the fact that they cannot offer proper support, and the inadequate resources at many of the schools (Balfour et al., 2008) influence learners' schooling. A report from the South African Department of Basic Education (2014) on the results of learners throughout the country in the Annual National Assessments (ANA) found that learners in Grade 9 were still achieving far below the expected grade level – in both mathematics and language. The reported averages showed how the learners were faring in the various provinces. Many learners failed to gain university entrance because they were unable to pass Grade 12. Even though the South African schooling system is working towards creating an environment without challenges to learning, problems still occur.

### **The Development of Communication Skills**

Language is a medium of expression that enables us to express our ideas and emotions or communicate with others (Hossain, 2016). Communication is usually easiest in our mother tongue or first language. Communication becomes a challenge in the school environment where learners are required to learn and speak in English, which is often their second (or third) language. English as a second language is a discipline that has been established across the world (Leung, 2010). Learning in a second language is understood to be both a teaching and learning issue. To learn a second language proficiently, schools must create an environment that supports learning. Creating such an environment does not happen overnight: it takes commitment and time from the teachers and the learners (Hossain, 2016). The teaching of English and in English is the responsibility of teachers of all subjects where first and second language English learners are held to the same standards in terms of assessment criteria (Hossain, 2016).

For learning in a second language to be effective, teachers are encouraged to ensure that a range of meaningful learning experiences is offered. This, however, is where the

challenge lies, because the needs of second language learners are often not met in the school setting (Mistry & Sood, 2012). In England, for example, schools are required to create more individualised improvement plans for learners who are in the minority and learning in an additional language. The schools are required to identify challenges and resources to best support their learners, especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schools must create an environment where learners who learn in a second language can be helped to achieve academic success (Mistry & Sood, 2012).

Within the South African context too, learning in one's mother tongue is not always possible. Many parents insist that their children attend a school where English is the language of instruction, as an English education is regarded as a status symbol in South Africa (Mashiya, 2010). South Africa is a multilingual country where many individuals speak more than one language. English is viewed as a respected language throughout South Africa, leading parents to choose it as the preferred language of instruction for their child (Nel et al., 2014). English is also perceived as a door to higher education, better employment and a higher status or social class (Gardiner, 2008). Language, especially the adequate use of English, is a tool that learners can use to communicate with those around them. Parents often enrol their children in an English language school from Grade 1 (Nel et al., 2014). These learners frequently experience language as a challenge to learning, because of their limited understanding of the English language (Rossi & Stuart, 2007). Moodley, Kritzinger and Vinck (2017) found that South African parents in rural areas ask the school to teach their children in English, because they view it as the only common language spoken by most South Africans. According to Fleisch (2008), the perception is that underachievement in schools is linked to the learners' struggle to grasp English, the language of learning and teaching. The learners learn and are assessed in a language that they seldom use outside the classroom (Brock-Utne, 2015). This is

predominantly true in rural areas where learners are exposed to English at school but have little to no exposure to English in the home or community environment (Nel et al., 2014).

The demands of the curriculum increase as the schooling career progresses, which places an increasing demand on learners' ability to speak English (Fleisch, 2008). Still, Fleisch (2008) argues that when learners have an inadequate knowledge of their mother tongue, they also struggle to grasp the skills necessary to learn an additional, mainstream language, and will most likely experience challenges to learning throughout their school career.

Learners who struggle with learning in a second language often share core characteristics: they display an inadequate mastery of their mother tongue; they often lack literacy skills; and they display general linguistic deprivation due to their low socioeconomic status. Also, they often do not have access to books, newspapers, educational television and radios, and have not cultivated a culture of reading for leisure (Theron & Nel, 2005). Language learning becomes a problem when the language that the learner is exposed to is not taught accurately, because the teachers themselves have limited proficiency in English (Nel & Müller, 2010). Through this limited proficiency, the learners receive an inadequate language input, which in turn affects their thought patterns and limits their abstract thinking (Nel & Müller, 2010). Language allows people to communicate thoughts and ideas (Hossain, 2016). However, if the teacher's language is inadequate, this inadequacy is transferred to the learners, leaving them at a disadvantage (Nel & Müller, 2010). Learners often learn more effectively if they understand the language in which the teacher is teaching (Brock-Utne, 2015).

Cummins (2014) discusses possible strategies to deal with the challenges to learning, especially for those who are second language learners. Cummins (2014) argues that different strategies, such as scaffolding of the learners' language comprehension, engaging learners' active participation in their literacy, or connecting what they have learnt to their previous knowledge, should be used in the classroom to deal with challenges to language learning.

However, learners also need support from their family and community to deal optimally with learning challenges (Cummins, 2014).

### **Language Learning in a Rural Setting**

Even though many individuals in rural communities worry about issues such as poverty, unemployment and access to basic needs, education is seen as a priority – regardless of these issues (Gardiner, 2008). Parents are eager to ensure that their children receive an education, even if the rural schools lack adequate resources (Gardiner, 2008). Schools in rural areas are often poorly resourced and suffer from high levels of poverty and unemployment (Lemmer & Manyike, 2012). There is often a shortage of qualified teachers, especially for teaching subjects like mathematics and science (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011).

Teachers are seldom drawn to teaching in the rural communities and this leads to a lack of skilled, English-proficient teachers (Lemmer & Manyike, 2012). The unavailability of competent teachers in turn creates a challenge to learning for learners in rural communities. Teachers who teach at rural schools often live in a nearby town, which affects the teacher's time within the school and decreases the amount of time learners have with the teacher after school for purposes of additional support.

### **Protective Resources that Support Learning**

Protective resources are internal and external resources that prevent individuals, especially those living in rural areas, from developing antisocial behaviour (Ebersöhn, 2007). Internal resources help to develop resilience in individuals, because individuals use their inherent hardiness to grow from both positive and negative experiences (Ebersöhn, 2007). External protective resources are supports that are outside the individual, for instance close family relationships, or positive and organised home environments. The community is also

seen as a protective resource. An effective school system, public safety and supportive organisations also fall under protective resources (Ebersöhn, 2007). School environments can be a source of protective resources when they promote healthy development in adolescents and enhance their school performance (Van Ryzin, 2011). When discussing protective resources, we should understand resilience and that resilience is a process embedded in a system. When disturbances or risks occur within the system, the system is required to adapt. Resilience is the amount of adaptation the system can undergo, while still sustaining that change (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). For example, school environments change frequently. Changes often involve altering the nature of the school environment to offer better support to learners and to grow the learners' protective resources over time (Van Ryzin, 2011).

### **Resilience as a Protective Resource**

Resilience refers to people's capacity to navigate their way through crises while using the resources available to them (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & Van de Vijver, 2013). Resilience increases the chances of survival and the protective processes activated by larger systems to help people cope under pressure. Resilience is best understood when looking at it as a process embedded in systems (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). Through resilience, we can identify which system has affected the individual, as well as which system should be adapted to deal with the impact that risk factors have on the system involved (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). A resilience perspective looks at risks as well as protective resources. The protective resources help the individual to deal with risk in order to become resilient (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). Resources come in various forms, such as person-based, family-based, school-based, community-based and society-based (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). To understand the term resilience, one should be aware that relationships play an integral part in sustaining resources and creating systemic strength that enables agency (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012).

In the context of rural schools, it is helpful to identify areas where resilience can be supported. Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012) identify various methods of supporting resilience in such schools. The first is to identify and prioritise needs, and the teachers in the school are required to single out learners who need support in respect of learning, poverty, family circumstances or emotions. The teachers do not group all the learners together in terms of their socioeconomic status, but rather analyse the learners' situations and identify specific areas where they require support (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). Through identifying the learners' specific areas of support, teachers are able to develop support strategies that target specific needs.

### **Resources to Promote Resilience and Well-Being in Rural Schools**

Ebersöhn and Ferreira (2012) argue that resilience in a school can be promoted through teachers' awareness of the learners' lifestyles and the implications that different lifestyles have for effective learning. They also reported on the teachers' realisation of the importance of engaging with the community and gaining insider knowledge from the community to properly benefit and support the learners (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). Through cooperation, the teachers and community could access the resources available to the community and establish a partnership to best support the local learners (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). Support continued in the rural community even when the teachers were not there, as a result of the relationship the teachers had built with the community to establish and sustain resilience in these learners (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012). Unfortunately, the creation of a collaborative partnership with community members often comes with disadvantages, because the community members themselves lack the appropriate resources and may decide to create a partnership merely for financial gain (Ebersöhn et al., 2014).

## **Supporting Language Learning**

Learning support entails providing support to learners who experience challenges to learning (Nel et al., 2014). It includes remedial or supplementary class instruction and educational psychology support through assessing, intervening and offering therapy (Bojuwoye et al., 2014).

Learning support with regard to language is crucial. According to Landsberg (2014), placing second language learners in a classroom and assuming that they will acquire English perfectly through teaching alone, is unrealistic. Landsberg (2014) discusses the challenges of mastering the curriculum and the language simultaneously. Learners should be encouraged to speak English as much as possible. From their side, teachers should use teaching strategies to boost the learners' confidence; for example, the teacher could put the learners in groups so that they can practise speaking English to each other. The learners can also use role-play to practise how to use English correctly in particular situations (Landsberg, 2014).

## **Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study was to explore learners' retrospective experiences of learning in a second language at a rural school. Their school was involved in a larger youth project that involved Academic Service-Learning of university students who provided educational psychology services to the Grade 9 learners.

## **Methodology**

The original data was gathered by Academic Service-Learning (ASL) students who were educational psychologists in training and provided educational psychology services to the learners in a rural school. Each ASL student kept case files for the learners they provided services to. The sources of the data in the files included ASL students' reports, learners' school



reports, Incomplete Sentences Forms and Quadrant Maps completed by the learners, as well as demographic information. The services and data collection were conducted in English.

For the current study, secondary data sources were used to answer and explore the topic. The study used stratified purposive sampling to select case files from the existing data. The selected case files were those of former learners who experienced barriers and buffers to their learning in a second language and with different ages and marks for Grade 9. Sampling decisions were made to obtain the richest possible information to answer the research question (Nieuwenhuis, 2012). The sample size of the client files depended on the richness of the files collected between 2012 and 2015. Before the files were selected, they were examined to gain a better understanding of the challenges the learners were facing – particularly the challenges related to learning in a second language. The inclusion criteria for selecting client files included: home language (mother tongue) different from language of instruction; availability of data on academic achievement; and detailed records of interaction with ASL students. Table 1.

The files of five males and five females were chosen per year, to have an equal number of both genders in all four years. Since the Grade 9 classes consisted of learners of different ages, the researchers chose files of learners between the ages of 13 to 20 years. By selecting files of learners who varied in age, it was hoped to gain a better understanding of the challenges that the learners faced across ages, especially in terms of learning in a second language.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study involved a secondary analysis of the existing data of an on-going project. Permission was sought and obtained from the principal investigators of the project. Institutional approval was also obtained to conduct the study. All conditions prior to approval were adhered to during the secondary analysis.

**Table 1.** Client's information 2015.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Client</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Client's home language</b>	<b>English mark (%)</b>
2015	5	Female	16	SiSwati	28
	21	Male	19	SiSwati	37
	25	Female	14	SiSwati	42
	27	Female	18	SiSwati	48
	29	Female	17	SiSwati	30
	30	Male	17	SiSwati	36
	49	Male	20	SiSwati	15
	52	Male	18	SiSwati	20
	57	Female	14	SiSwati	27
	61	Male	16	SiSwati	28

**Table 2.** Client's information 2014.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Client</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Client's home language</b>	<b>English mark (%)</b>
2014	01	Male	17	SiSwati	<40
	02	Male	17	SiSwati	<40
	05	Female	16	SiSwati	50
	08	Male	15	SiSwati	25
	16	Female	13	SiSwati/Zulu	42
	22	Male	16	SiSwati	50
	34	Female	13	SiSwati	25
	37	Male	14	SiSwati	43
	44	Female	15	SiSwati	<40
	60	Female	15	SiSwati	22

Note. <40 denotes learners whose percentage was unavailable, but who indicated they failed.

## **Data Analysis**

The researchers used coding and memo writing as part of the documentation strategies during the data analysis process. Thematic analysis consisting of six phases was performed in the present study. This method was chosen to make sense of the secondary data, since thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting themes that have been identified in the data. The data was sorted per data source to first generate client/learner information per year. The information consisted of gender, age, home languages spoken, and their examination marks in English language. Through thematic analysis of the quadrant maps, incomplete sentences, ASL reports and school reports, the researchers were able to identify cross-references between the data and themes in the study (Alhojailan, 2012). Table 2.

## **Findings**

### **Challenges and Protective Resources**

The data revealed that the learners were aware of the challenges they experienced and the protective resources that they used, and in our findings we highlighted those identified by the Grade 9 learners during the four years from 2012 to 2015. Through analysing the client files, the researchers found that the learners faced many of the same internal and external challenges year after year; challenges created by the learners' environment; challenges resulting from learning in a second language; and challenges caused by anxiety about their future. The pictures below are examples taken from the quadrant maps of the learners:

Figures 1-3

<p>Warm –hearted Reserved Emotionally stable Assertive Enthusiastic Venturesome Tough-minded Relaxed Cooperative Friendly Resourceful Independent Strong personality Creative Calm Practical Good command of English Can argue within a formal context</p>	<p>Electricity Running water Feeding scheme Teachers Transport to school Soccer and netball fields <b>Community</b> Community sport society Supportive community Social services in the community Church – church choir, youth groups <b>Other resources</b> University of Pretoria</p>
<p>RISK FACTORS ( bars access to advancement)</p>	
<p><b>PERSONAL/INDIVIDUAL LIMITATIONS BARRIERS</b> Slight language barrier (English) Does not want to be lectured to Poor academic performance Ill health</p>	<p><b>ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS</b> <b>Home</b> Disintegration of family life Inadequate parental support – absent father –works in the mines Loss of significant others through illness - mother passed away Poverty – lack of sufficient financial</p>

1

Figure 1. Challenges expressed by P122-12 (Photograph 1)

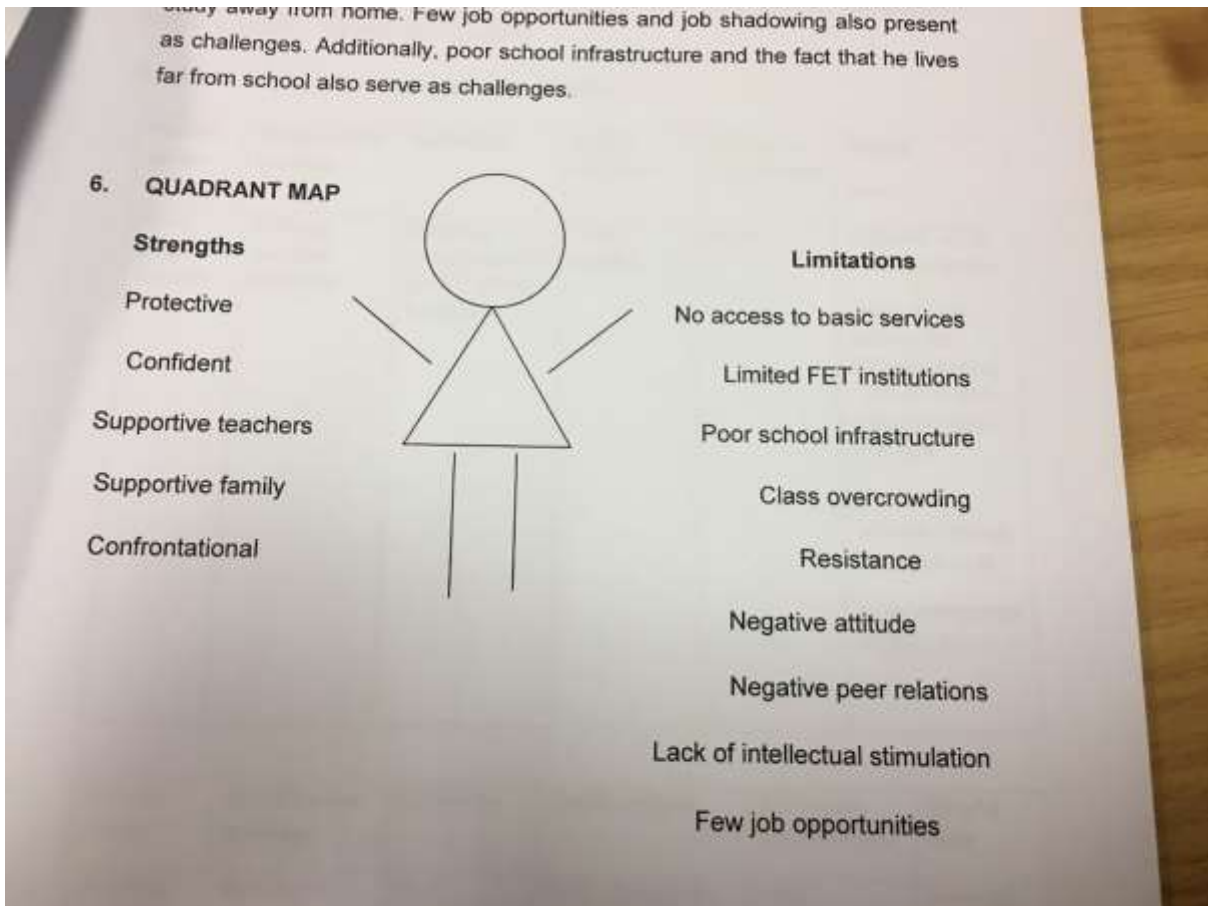


Figure 2. Challenges expressed by P88 – 14 (Photograph 2).

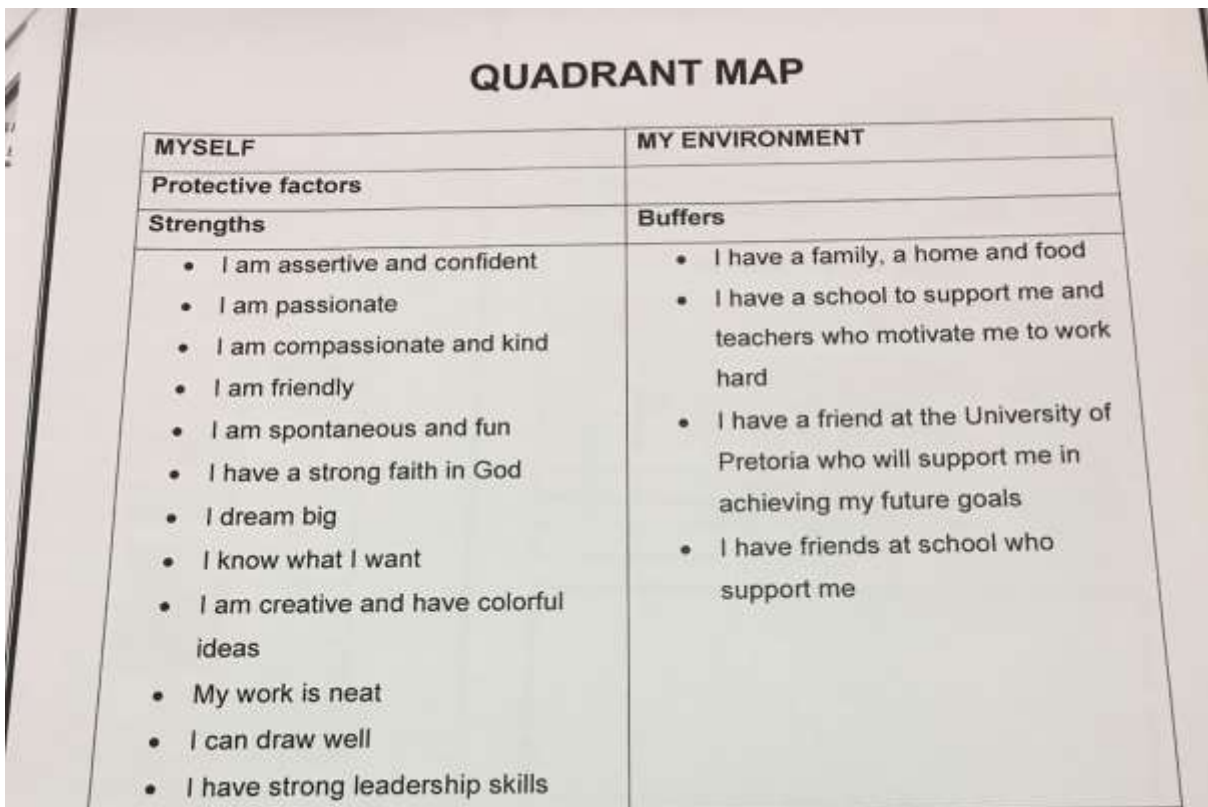


Figure 3. Quadrant map of P60-14's protective factors (Photograph 3).

**Table 3.** Client's information 2013.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Client</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Client's home language</b>	<b>English mark (%)</b>
2013	07	Male	16	SiSwati	30
	08	Male	18	SiSwati	18
	12	Female	13	SiSwati	38
	29	Female	14	SiSwati	26
	38	Male	17	SiSwati	20
	63	Female	14	SiSwati	28
	64	Male	14	SiSwati	23
	88	Male	17	Zulu	19
	89	Female	14	SiSwati	31
	97	Female	15	SiSwati	56

### **Frequently Indicated Challenges**

The most frequently indicated challenges the learners faced were as follows: their expressive and receptive skills in the English language were limited; they were English second language learners; their language of learning at school was not the same as their home language; their academic performance was poor; and their family life was inadequate. Table 3.

#### **Language challenges**

Language proficiency is an individual's ability to communicate through speech and writing by using the grammatical knowledge gained in the school and home environment (Posel & Zeller, 2010). Learning across the curriculum hinges on learners' language proficiency (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2004), and many learners in our study lacked language proficiency in their second language, English. The learners' inadequate English proficiency was visible in their school reports, since many failed the subjects offered in English. The learners and the school appeared to face many challenges, which made it difficult for the learners to perform well academically. To pass, the Grade 9 learners in our study needed to obtain the following marks: 40% for either siSwati or English; 40% for mathematics, and 30% each in 4 other subjects.

Sociocultural theory is based on the notion that learners are unable to participate in normal, everyday activities when they are not language proficient (Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). This applied to the learners in the present study, since their failure to master English as an additional language limited their opportunities for tertiary education. Another challenge involved the fact that they were living far from school, which caused them to be late as well as struggle to concentrate in the classroom due to tiredness.

**Table 4.** Client's information 2012.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Client</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Client's home language</b>	<b>English mark (%)</b>
2012	37	Male	17	SiSwati	7
	96	Female	15	SiSwati	<40
	104	Male	16	SiSwati	43
	111	Female	14	SiSwati	54
	112	Male	15	SiSwati	<40
	115	Male	15	SiSwati	<40
	121	Male	15	SiSwati	<40
	122	Female	17	SiSwati	45
	132	Female	14	SiSwati	<40
	212	Female	17	SiSwati	<40

Note. <40 denotes learners whose percentage was unavailable, but who indicated they failed.



### **Poverty and unconventional family life as challenges**

Poverty is a challenge that consistently featured over the four years. The participants lived in a rural community, where many of them lacked resources such as electricity and running water. Research by Mogotlane, Chauke, Van Rensburg, Human and Kganakga (2010) suggests a link between poverty and quality of family life. Families who live in poverty often have a parent living away from home to provide financially for the family. Table 4.

Many learners lacked conventional family lives, for example they lived in single-parent households or with an older sibling and there was a lack of parent involvement. Households were often without resources such as running water, electricity, transport and health care. The implications for learners who lacked these resources were that they had to deal with various challenges daily. Some of the challenges they faced were physical, for example having to collect water before school. Other challenges were psychological, as they were aware of the learning opportunities they missed due to the demands of their home situation. Research conducted by UNICEF in 2009 found that learners living in rural areas often have poor quality housing and live far from school (UNICEF, 2009). This matches the findings of the present study.

### **Effects of living in a rural area**

The findings of both previous research and the present study confirm that there is a link between the effects of living in a rural area and learners' schooling experiences.

The rural learners' experiences were consistent throughout the four years. The retrospective inquiry suggested that learners perceived their learning environment as overcrowded and lacking in resources and scholastic support. Although the learners were found to have many challenges, protective resources were also identified. Protective resources included motivation, supportive community members and future aspirations.

Learners were aware of language difficulties that affected their receptive or expressive abilities. The data analysed showed that many of the learners found it challenging to express themselves in English and the challenge of learning in English frequently resulted in them failing English. Examples of work written by the learners are shown below. Figures 4-6.

### **Challenges associated with the use of grammar and handwriting**

The short and often illegible sentences that appear in the samples of the learners' writing indicate that they consistently struggled to express themselves in English over the four years of the study. The standard of their handwriting was also often elementary.

An analysis of their sentences, use of grammar and handwriting clearly indicated that the learners found learning in a second language challenging. Learners in rural areas lack exposure to English beyond the classroom. Our study proposes that learning in a second language presented the learners with even more challenges and did not leave them feeling accomplished in their additional language, English. Many of the learners were concerned about their language marks, as they were aware of the challenges hindering their ability to pass their subjects. They felt they had limited exposure to English, as their community did not speak the language. They also believed that there was a lack of support in the classroom and that the classrooms were overcrowded. These learners not only worried about their schooling and whether they would pass Grade 9; they were also concerned about their living environment, their lack of finances and opportunities after school, and their own family situation.

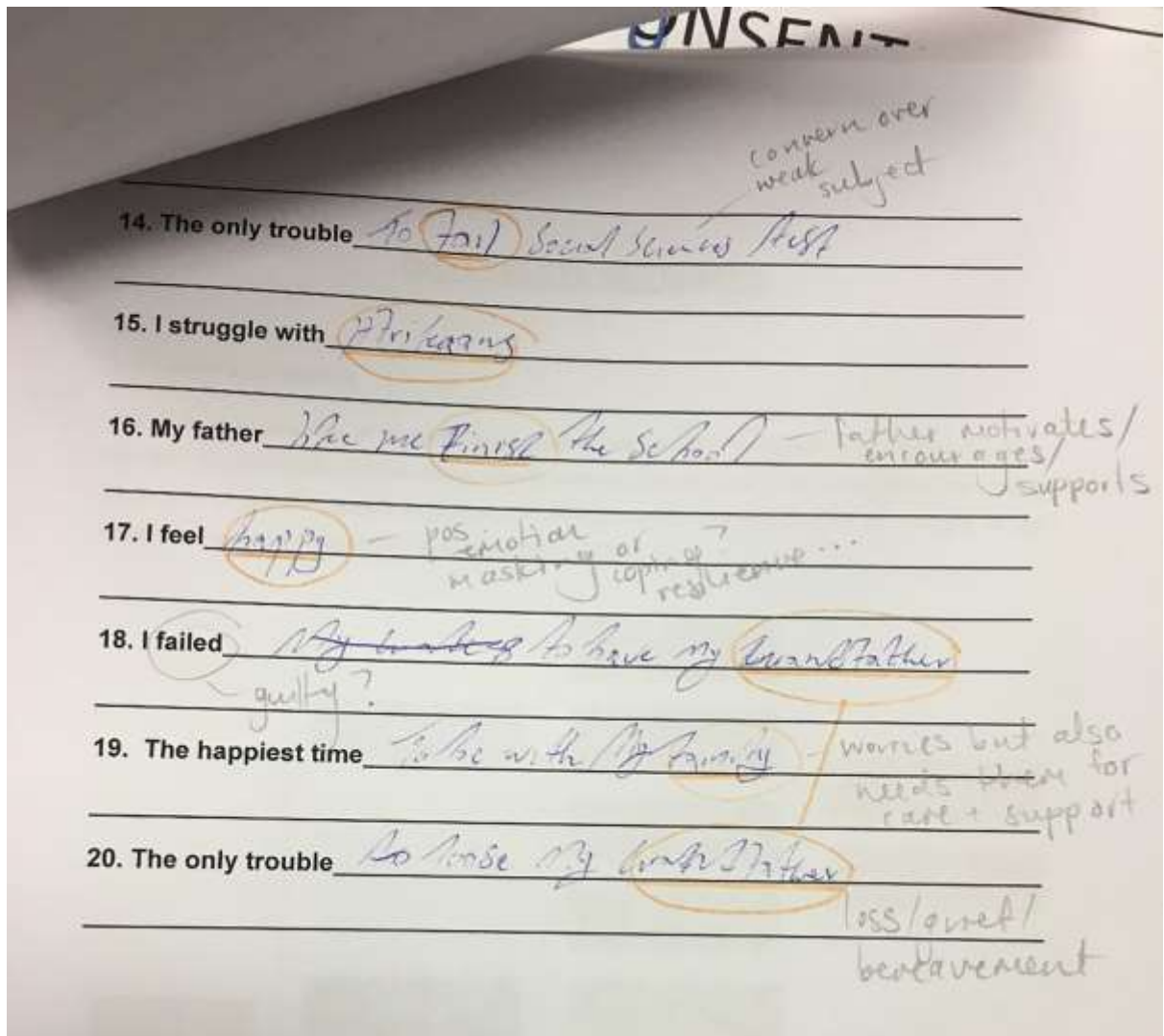


Figure 4. Writing sample, P08-14 (Photograph 4).

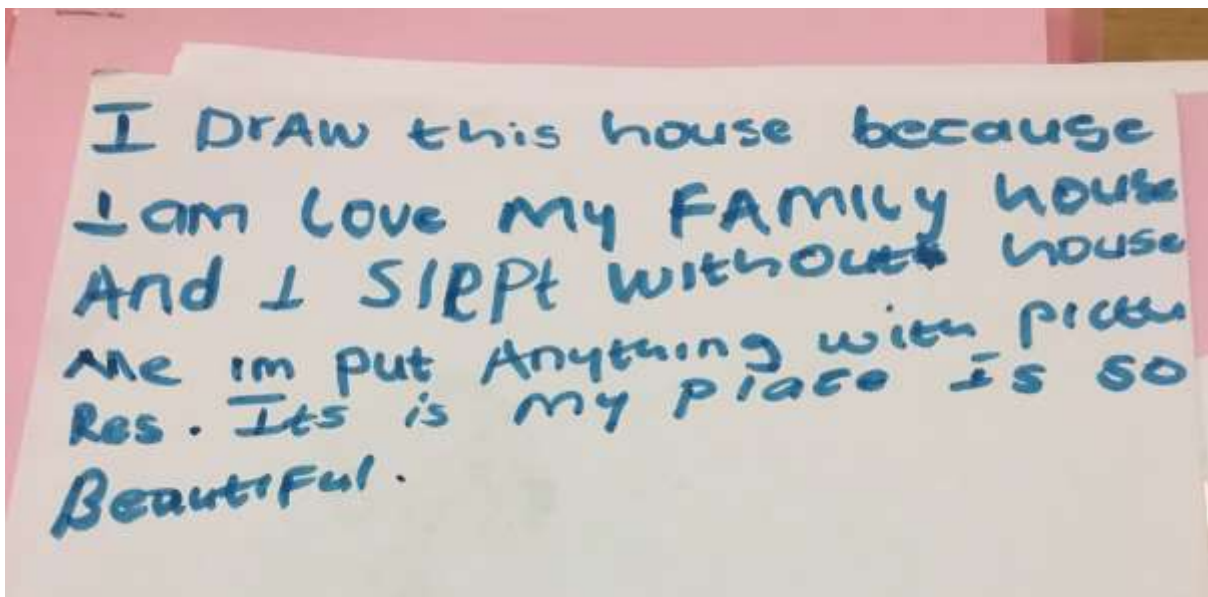


Figure 5. Writing sample, P01-14 (Photograph 5).

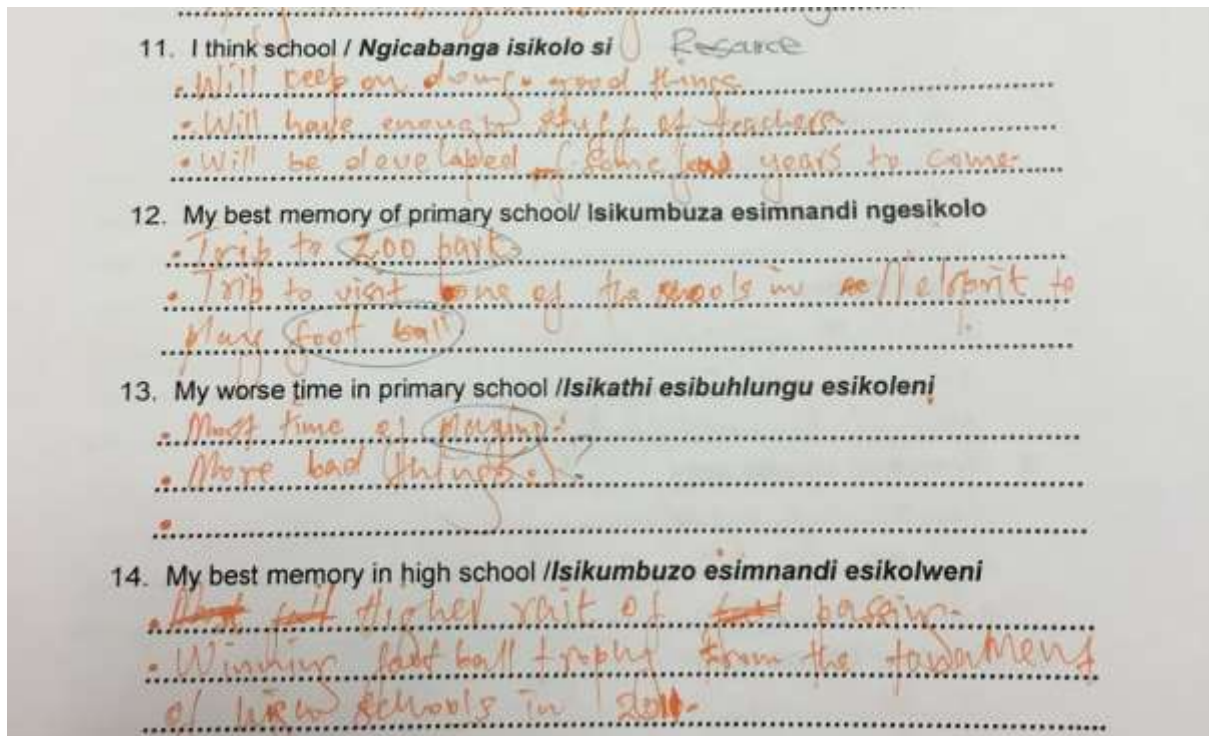


Figure 6. Writing sample, P89-13 (Photograph 6).

## **Protective Resources**

Although they faced many challenges, the participants had access to both internal and external protective resources and they participated in sociocultural activities. Internal protective resources were identified as motivation and honesty. Motivation consisted of a drive to study further after completing school or an incentive to pass Grade 9. Other internal resources were strong leadership skills, dedication, passion and compassion. External resources included supportive families and communities, teachers, and a school feeding programme.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the study was to explore learners' retrospective experiences of learning in a second language at a rural school. The school concerned was involved in a larger youth project that involved academic service-learning of university students who provided educational psychology services to the Grade 9 learners. The findings as discussed below are related to the literature on language challenges in a rural school.

## **Learners' Experiences**

### **Home experiences**

The rural learners' experiences were consistent throughout the four years. The findings suggested that they perceived their learning environment as overcrowded and lacking in resources and scholastic support. In addition, the learners were aware of the extent of poverty within their environment. This finding concurs with research by Surty (2011) and Gardiner (2008) who found that learners in rural areas have to contend with numerous challenges related to schooling and family life. The findings also align with those of Mogotlane et al. (2010) whose research suggests that there is a link between poverty and the quality of family life.

### **Learning experiences**

Many of the learners failed their grade, and especially subjects like English and mathematics. They knew their language abilities were not on Grade 9 level, and this increased their fear of failing the grade. They constantly wondered what would happen if on completion of high school, they still could not speak English properly – a language that is greatly valued and respected throughout the country (Omidire et al., 2018; Nel et al., 2014). Our research showed that, even in rural areas, learners were concerned about their limited English language ability and its effect on their future. They knew they had language difficulties, both with regard to their receptive and expressive abilities. Our study findings confirmed that many learners found it challenging to express themselves in English and consequently they failed English and other subjects studied in English.

The learners' fear of failing could also be linked to the sociocultural theory, which postulates that additional language learners feel a sense of accomplishment when they can communicate proficiently (Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). The learners in our study lacked this feeling of accomplishment, as they knew their language proficiency was below Grade 9 standard. This shortcoming limited their aspirations for a better career.

Furthermore, sociocultural theory is focused on language and the individual's ability to communicate in an additional language, which creates a sense of achievement (Ganem-Gutierrez, 2013). The study in hand suggests that learning in a second language presented the learners with huge challenges and did not leave them feeling accomplished in their additional language, English. Moreover, since learning in English is greatly emphasised in South Africa (Heugh, 2002), many of the learners were concerned about their English marks and the challenges hindering their ability to pass their other subjects. They felt they had limited exposure to English, as their community did not speak the language. They also believed that there was a lack of support in the classroom, which was exacerbated by overcrowding.

## **Learners' Life Aspirations**

The interaction of the learners with ASL students created a sense of hope, even though they were aware that they lacked the resources to fulfil their aspirations for further education. Similar to the findings of Burnell (2003), the learners in our study recognised that they might have to resort to low-income, labour-intensive careers, but still they aspired for something better. This finding is consistent with that of Balfour et al. (2008), in that individuals' identities are not defined by the areas in which they reside – although the influence cannot be denied.

On the other hand, our finding contradicts the work of Irvin et al. (2011), which indicated that learners in rural areas have lower career aspirations and often opt to take jobs in their communities after completing high school. Although the learners in this study were found to have many challenges, protective resources were also identified, such as motivation, supportive community members and future aspirations. The learners' exposure to ASL students raised their awareness of career possibilities and heightened their sense of hope.

## **Recommendations**

Firstly, learners with challenges to learning should be supported as early in their lives as possible (Nel et al., 2014). Learners who do not receive learning support early on may experience backlogs in their learning and school achievement (Nel et al., 2014). Support to address learning difficulties requires the collaboration of multiple role players (Nel et al., 2014). School support is key in aiding learners to overcome their challenges to learning, although support is not always seen as important and often barely adequate. offered in the school curriculum (Adelman & Taylor, 2008). Secondly, for support to be more accessible to learners, especially those in rural areas, resources need to be distributed more effectively. This can be done by having better support plans in place to address challenges to learning, as well as by providing teachers with the correct training to offer support (Adelman & Taylor, 2008).

Thirdly, teachers should not only receive pre-service training to equip them to teach English as a second language, they should also receive continued annual support to ensure they are on the right track and teach the learners effectively (Nel & Müller, 2010).

### **Limitations of the research**

The main limitation of the secondary data analysis was that it did not allow the researchers to explore the findings further by engaging with the learners whose case files had been accessed through interviews. The lack of additional engagement may have led to misunderstanding and misrepresentation of either the learners' situations or the ASL students' comments. Being able to consult with the teachers and give them the opportunity to respond to some of the comments of their learners may well have added value to our study findings.

### **Conclusion**

The current study found that learners in a rural context face numerous challenges in their community, home circumstances and school environment. One of these challenges is a lack of basic communication skills in English, which affects their learning, application of knowledge and ability to excel in their studies. Learners in rural areas need support to help actualise their dreams and hopes for a future where they can move away from their current context. This support will require addressing their limited proficiency in English, which hampers their career aspirations and life beyond school. Our study shows that such a feat seems imminently doable, given that the learners involved already possess and are aware of several protective resources that inspire them to continue to aspire towards a better, brighter future for themselves – resources that are able to help them escape from their current impoverished context and thrive.



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