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Rural teachers' perceptions on challenges and solutions of inclusive education in Zimbabwe rural primary schools

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Abstract

This article interrogated the phenomenon of rural teachers' perceptions towards challenges and solutions of inclusive education in Zimbabwe rural primary schools. Ubuntuism/ Unhuism theoretical lens was used to interrogate rural teachers' perceptions on challenges and solutions of inclusive education in rural primary schools. Furthermore, this is a qualitative study located in the broader space of transformative paradigm. We used Participatory Action Research to generate data from the participants. A purposive sample comprising ten primary school teachers from Gutu rural district in Zimbabwe were selected for this study. Data were generated through focus group discussions as participants responded to two questions: what are the challenges facing inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools? and how can inclusive education be enhanced in rural primary schools? Then generated data was divided into two themes and analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis's three levels namely: textual, discursive and social practice. This paper found that lack of resources such as lack of qualified inclusive education teachers militate against success of inclusive education in rural primary schools. Consequently, this article recommended that, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary schools should deploy competent and qualified inclusive education teachers in rural schools

Keywords: 1 inclusive; 2 education; 3 rurality; 4 learners; 5 Zimbabwe

Introduction and background to the study

In Zimbabwean education system equity and equality in the provision of education is the main thrust (Zimbabwe Education Act, 1984). However, inclusive education goals are still to be realised in Zimbabwe rural learning environments (Chireshe, 2013; Dakwa, 2014; Samkange, 2013). In South Africa rural learning schools are highly disadvantaged in terms of inclusive education as compared to urban schools, as rural schools do not have classrooms that are user friendly to all learners but most urban schools have adequate classrooms (Hlalele, 2014). Therefore, there is clear social injustice and inequalities perpetuated by school authorities and other urban communities on the rural schools. Furthermore, the issue of exclusion and marginalisation of inclusive education in rural set ups is rooted in the political and historical contexts of different countries such as teacher training programs at colleges and universities and political will of Governments (Molestane, 2012) .

Mandipa (2015) noted that, inclusive education in Zimbabwe is human rights model. The human right model of disabilities embraced by Zimbabwe put it under obligation to remove all socially, economically and politically constructed impediments to inclusive education and effectively permit the enjoyment of right to education to learners with disabilities. More so, in inclusive education according to UNESCO, Daka Framework of Action (2000) and Walton and Osma (2018) the school education system should be flexible to meet the needs of learners with disabilities this implies that learners with disabilities should not adjust to meet the school environment circumstances and curriculum. Contrary, as rural educators we observed that the good intentions and purposes of Zimbabwe inclusive education highlighted in studies cited above is still a pipe dream and far from reality in rural set ups. Many rural learners are still excluded in teaching and learning environments and rural teachers' voices have been neglected by inclusive education policy makers in Zimbabwe (Dube, 2016; Hlalele, 2018). Consequently this article sought to explore their perceptions on the challenges and solutions affecting inclusive education. This article is unique in the sense that it outlines the lived realities, challenges and solutions of inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools and argues the rights of rural learners in attaining to quality inclusive education.

Theoretical Framing: Ubuntuism

This study is anchored on ubuntuism theoretical framework. According to Fourie (2008, p.62) ubuntuism is an "An Afro-centric framework, a broader postcolonial intellectual quest to rediscover and re-establish the idealised values of traditional African cultures and traditional African communities". In addition, Ubuntuism is defined by Nussbaum (2003, p.1) as "a unique African moral philosophy, social philosophy, a collective African consciousness, a way of being, a code of ethics and behaviours deeply embedded in African culture". From above ubuntuism is a theoretical framework that shows Africanism, empathy, love and oneness and caring. Ubuntuism originates from Zulu maxim "*umuthu ngumuntu ngabantu*", which means "a person is a person because of other people". Ubuntuism is an African concept, "*I am because of others*". With regards to inclusive education focusing learners with disabilities, two outstanding values

are empathy and collectiveness. Ubuntu concept of empathy motivates rural teachers and community members to treat learners with disabilities as human being, feel for them and accepting them as part of the community (Maboni, 2020). Ubuntu's value of empathy helps community members in treating learners with disabilities as human beings and not sub-humans (Ahluwalia, 2001). Ubuntuism deals with collectiveness (Hamminga, 2005) most Africans believe in collective life and community and not individualism. As a result, in this study, collectiveness of Zimbabwean rural community members helps in teaching and learning of learners with disabilities. In this study, ubuntu theoretical framework helps in fostering tolerance, justice, negotiations and inclusiveness of learners with disabilities in Zimbabwean rural learning environment (Christians, 2005). Ubuntuism emphasis on the values of collectiveness and empathy in dismantling negative perceptions that negatively affects inclusive education thrust in Zimbabwe. Ubuntu encourage Government, non-Governmental organisation, individuals and other stakeholders to provide resources, inclusive education policies and other important aspects in advancing inclusion of learners with disabilities in Zimbabwean rural areas (Wassermam & Der Beer, 2004).

Literature review

In Botswana, inclusive education is thriving both in urban and rural context Government and other stakeholders are providing resources such as books, qualified and infrastructure that is user friendly to inclusive education (Mukhopadhyay & Musengi 2012). In some rural schools in South Africa, the success of inclusive education is premised on the ability of school curriculum to meet the needs of learners with special needs (H.S.R.C, 2005). In addition, In order to enhance inclusive education, the Government of Finland according to Takala et al (2009) has made it mandatory for all schools to have permanently stationed inclusive education specialist teachers. However, another study by Lynch and McCall (2007) found that there are some rural schools in Finland that does not have permanent special education teachers, to mitigate this anomaly, the Finland ministry of education assigns peripatetic teachers to teach in those schools. Hence, we argue that, inclusive education teaching process should be contextually rooted as to empower teachers to understand inclusive education in different contexts. Some studies in inclusive education in Zimbabwe focused on assisting learners with disabilities to acquire relevant skills and international frameworks to promote inclusive education such as Salamanca Framework of Action 1994 (Ncube, Tshabalala & Gazimbe, 2015; UNESCO, 2015).

We acknowledge that Zimbabwe is a signatory to international frameworks that promote inclusive education and have inclusive education policy that cater for both urban and rural schools (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe, statutory Instruments 87 of 1992 and 70 of 1993). However, some studies found that, these statutory instruments did not specifically address the issue of inclusive education for they only focused on inequality and discrimination in Zimbabwe education system (Makurumidze, 2013; Mafumbabte, 2015). We noted that rural schools are still struggling to achieve inclusive education. In addition, most studies cited in this section focus on learners' with disabilities, infrastructure, resources, policies and frameworks as drivers of inclusive education in Zimbabwe and other countries. However, we observed that, there are no studies that focuses on rural teachers' perceptions on the challenges and solutions of inclusive education in rural areas especially where this

study is located, Gutu rural area in Masvingo province Zimbabwe. Hence, there is a need for a study that engages rural teachers as critical stakeholders and drivers of inclusive education in rural primary schools. It is our view that, the exclusion and marginalisation of rural teachers' voices in inclusive discourse in Zimbabwe militates against noble vision of inclusive education.

Methodology: Participatory Action Research (PAR)

This is a qualitative study anchored in on the transformative paradigm. The study used PAR to collect data from rural teachers in Zimbabwean rural primary schools. We are of the view that PAR allows the participants to actively participate in identifying their challenges and offering solutions (Dube, 2016; Mahlomaholo, 2013). To this end, the participants in this study are rural teachers in Zimbabwe who are experiencing problems in implementing inclusive education in their classrooms. In addition, PAR permits the participants to unpack real issues that affect particular people within their geographical space (Shroff, 2014). Furthermore, we chose PAR because it gives participants platform to express their views and gives researchers multiple perspectives and sources to deal with inclusive education challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We created a WhatsApp group as a way to collect data in line with World Health Organisation (2020) maintaining of social distance to avoid Covid-19 infections.

Ten rural primary school teachers were added into the WhatsApp group. There were six females and four males from Gutu rural schools, in Masvingo province. Pseudo names were used to protect the identities of participants. More so, participants signed informed consent forms. The participants were informed that the study is voluntary and for educational purposes only. In addition, purposive sampling technique was used to select participants. Purposive sampling helped us to select information rich participants who work in rural primary school, who have in-depth knowledge about challenges and solution to inclusive education (Dolores & Tongo, 2007). The two questions that guided the active participation of the participants are: *What are the challenges of inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools? and how can inclusive education be enhanced in Zimbabwe rural primary schools.* The discussion on WhatsApp platform took 2 days focusing on two questions mentioned above. Data generated through PAR was done through six steps originally developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which are: Step 1: Familiarisation Step 2. Coding Step 3. Generating themes Step 4 Reviewing themes Step 5 Defining and naming theme Step 6 Writing up. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, we did member checking during the process and gave feedback to the participants to check if the data is a true record of what we discussed in relation to inclusive education (Chireshe, 2013; Tarisayi, 2018). The data was generated using open ended questionnaires. The generated data was analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Mthiyane (2014, p. vii) expounded that the CDA approach "was utilised to analyse written texts and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained and transformed within specific contexts".

From the above citation, CDA helps us in this article to unveil dominance and inequalities in written texts and spoken words by the participants. According to the agenda of this study, using CDA, the data analysis allowed participants to expose societal inequalities and any other oppression against the marginalised

Zimbabwean rural community members with disabilities. Data analysis through CDA, sought to reveal issues that had to do with power relations, inequality and any form of exploitation which might be embedded in inclusive education in rural schools. The data was analysed through three levels of CDA, which are textual, discursive and social practice. In the next section, we present data obtained from WhatsApp group discussions.

Results and discussion

The data generated in this article was put into two main themes and was analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis. Theoretical framework's principles and literature were used in this section. The two themes are: challenges facing inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools and solutions to enhance inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools. These two themes have sub-themes that help to explore them. The next section deals with first theme:

Theme 1: Challenges facing inclusive education in rural primary schools

In response to the question, the participants raised a number of crucial matters which are summarised by pointing out the main themes that arose from actively participating in this research. Next, we discuss the first challenge, the lack of qualified inclusive educators in rural schools.

Sub-theme 1: Lack of qualified inclusive education teachers in Zimbabwean rural schools: It emerged during the research that, in spite of inclusive education being implemented in some rural schools in Zimbabwe, inclusive education is being hampered by the unavailability of qualified teachers. During the discussion, the participants gave different responses

Mrs Jane commented:

"I am a qualified teacher in Early Childhood Development. I did my teacher training 33 years ago. There was no module that specifically dealt with inclusive education when we trained as teachers. Honestly, I lack training in inclusive education".

In addition, Mr Musa added:

"I have taught in many rural areas for the past 26 years, I realised that, there are few qualified inclusive education educators. My view is in Zimbabwean rural areas, there is need of highly trained educators in inclusive education. Universities and teacher training institutions should have detailed inclusive education training modules or programs."

Mr Jani said:

"Inclusive education in Zimbabwe is vital for empowering learners with disabilities. I acknowledge that special needs qualified teachers with degrees shun rural schools because of issues such as lack of accommodation, water and other services."

The essence of participants' view is that, inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools is being ineffective because of shortage of qualified inclusive education teachers. Considering the points raised by the teacher participants, it is clear that the effectiveness of any curriculum implementation will be related to the competencies of rural teachers. Consequently, if the rural teacher training is compromised, teacher incompetency is the end product. We concur the view of Schwartz (2006, p.450) that, "curriculum writers, with all good intentions have compiled volumes of well-conceived educational actions plans, choosing specific materials and activities for their pre-conceived target, curriculum receivers, students, only to find that the curriculum users, teachers, are not prepared for the innovation." To buttress the foregoing argument further, Mazuka (2020) concludes that, majority of Zimbabwean rural teachers are inadequately trained in inclusive education. If rural educators are to support inclusive education, they need to be trained urgently (Chireshe, 2013). This implies that, inclusive education is one of critical tools to empower learners with disabilities and giving the equal access to education, lack of qualified teachers negatively affects. To this end, Hlalele (2018) points out that, adequately trained teachers in inclusive education are essential in teaching learners with disabilities life skills that help them to eradicate poverty in their lives and communities.

Knowledgeable teachers in inclusive education understand the physical, emotional, mental and social needs of learners with disabilities. This view by participants is confirmed in other research studies done in Botswana by Mukhopadhyay and Musengi (2012) and in Zimbabwe by Ncube, Tshabalala and Gazimbe (2015). It is clear that, inclusive education in Zimbabwe is very noble, however, lack of qualified teachers in rural schools and majority of urban schools have qualified teachers shows exclusiveness of inclusive education. Inclusive education is excluding learners in deprived communities. Thus informed by Ubuntuism / Unhuism, it is injustice and uncaring to institute education policies such as inclusive education that exclude others on the basis of geographical space, infrastructure and disabilities or live in disadvantaged communities. Lack of inclusive education does not only negatively affect the academic levels of learners but also their employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. In essence lack of inclusive education in rural areas affects learners' with disabilities' education and accesses to information that is critical in their wellness and development.

Sub-theme 2: Some parents and rural community members lack understanding of what inclusive education entails: Another challenge raised by the participants is the lack of importance of inclusive education by parents and community members of learners with disabilities. The participants mentioned that, parents with learners with disabilities do not send their children to school because they regard them as un-teachable. During the discussion, the participants made the following comments.

First, Mrs Dan said:

"One parent informed me that, she will not send her child with mental disabilities school because the child will not comprehend anything. It is worst of money and resources to send my son with disabilities. I am even struggling to send to school my other children without disabilities."

Second, Mr explained:

"I do not know much about inclusive education. I really need more information and workshops concerning issues of inclusive education. My sister in another rural area also informed me that she does not know about inclusive education."

Thirdly, Mrs Chauke argued:

"My sister in one town has a child with disabilities. The child is learning at one urban school. He is learning with other learners who have no disabilities. In 2018, the child with disabilities was the best student in mathematics."

In this regard, we agree with the observation by Muchiguri (2020), that the move to inclusive education greatly benefits learners with parents who are supportive and understand the importance of inclusive education. The participants observed that currently, in Zimbabwe rural primary schools learners with disabilities are excluded from teaching and learning because of their parents and relatives' lack of knowledge on inclusive education. However, learners with disabilities residing in urban areas are benefiting from inclusive education as they are participating in learning processes. We concur with the findings of Word Bank (2020), that inclusive education has been an instrument used to advantage the already advantaged (urban dwellers) and a weapon to disadvantage the rural learners.

Sub-theme 3: Lack of educational resources in Zimbabwean rural primary schools: The research participants reported that in their schools there are few / no educational resources that a essential in teaching learners with disabilities in Zimbabwean rural schools. Lack of teaching and learning resources disadvantages rural teachers and learners in their quest to acquire quality education. Some school do not have Braille, books with big font size, computers and lifts. During participants' deliberations:

Mrs Rudo was of the view:

"At our school there are very few educational books, chairs, tables and other resources to be used by learners with disabilities. 10 students share one textbooks, some learners sit on the floor because there are no adequate chairs and no tables suitable to be used by learners using wheelchairs."

Mr Agripa added:

"There are no classrooms and toilets with ramps. Learners with walking disabilities find it difficult to access them. This makes teaching and learning very difficulty in rural schools in Zimbabwe."

Mrs Rodha indicated:

"There are no computers at our rural schools. Computers help in teaching learners with disabilities. I noted that, one school in our nearby town has computers and learners with disabilities are benefiting from internet. At our school there is one old computer being used by school typist. Computer helps us to get relevant and updated information concerning inclusive education."

Mrs Mudenda highlighted:

"The teacher – learner ratio in Zimbabwean rural school is too high. I have 43 learners in my class. 2 students have disabilities. I have observed that, I need to pay more attention to learners with disabilities. They are both slow learners. They cannot cope with other learner. However, I cannot give them special attention because my class is too big."

The above opinions by participants showed that the implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe rural primary schools is presently negatively affected by inadequate resources. We agree with findings of Zindi (2007) and Deluca, Tramontano and Kett (2014) that, lack of educational resources militates against implementation of inclusive education. Shortage of resources towards inclusive education was also observed in Namibia by Zimba et al (2007) and in South Africa in research study by Eloff and Kqwete (2007). More so, in Zimbabwe the study by Chireshe (2013) confirmed that, inadequate resources are compounded by the high teacher pupil ration of 1 to 40 in many urban and rural primary schools. The high teacher pupil ration 1:50 in some primary schools in Gutu rural areas was observed by participants as one of factors that affect inclusive education. Also, the negative effects of high teacher pupil on inclusive education, is realised through lack of time to cater for learners with special needs due to high workload. The rural school heads, teachers and school responsible authorities' negative attitudes affects the provision of adequate resources towards inclusive education.

The following section, we deal with ways of enhancing inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools.

Theme 2: Solutions to enhance inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools

This article does not only highlight the problems facing inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools but gives possible solutions suggested by teachers in order advance inclusive education. Therefore, in this section, we respond to the question how can inclusive education be enhanced in Zimbabwean rural primary schools? The first suggestion was that there is need for positive views on inclusive education in rural primary schools.

Sub-theme 1: Positive views on inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural schools: As part of the solution, the research participants discussed the need to have positive attitudes towards inclusive education. Some participants highlighted that positive attitudes contribute to social acceptance of learners with disabilities in Zimbabwean rural schools.

Mr Dondo explained:

"Positive views on inclusive education help teachers, learners, community members to accept and support inclusive education in rural areas. I have observed that most educators and learners in urban areas have accepted learners with disabilities and inclusive education. If negative inclusive education perceptions are removed among rural communities surely inclusive education will succeed. "

Mrs Khumalo argued:

"I have accepted my learners with disabilities. I treat them as human beings with capacity to learn like learners with disabilities. Learners with disabilities in my class interact well with other learners. Learners without disabilities have accepted learners with disabilities."

To enhance the above argument Mr Chiposo testified:

"I am a teacher with disability. I was accepted by my friends, relatives and workmates as a human being. My life changed for the better because of positive attitudes they exhibit towards me. Most learners with disabilities in rural areas have developed positive attitudes towards education. This has helped them to succeed in their learning processes".

It emerged from the above submissions by research participants that social acceptance of learners with disabilities in Zimbabwe rural primary schools have improved due to teaching of inclusive education. Thus, the participants hold that the rural communities should their improved positive attitudes and beliefs towards learners with disabilities. The participation of communities in inclusive education resonates well with the Ubuntuism/ Unhuism theoretical framework's principle of collectiveness (Makopa, 2020). We agree with the sentiments of Nguyet and Ha (2010) that, the effectiveness of inclusive education in primary schools is premised depends on the teachers, school heads, communities and other stakeholders' positive attitudes and beliefs towards it. The social acceptance of learners with disabilities in rural primary schools is caused by learners and teachers without disabilities who have accepted those with disabilities as human being with capacities to learn (Chireshe, 2013). To enhance the the importance of positive attitudes in inclusive education, Mutepfa et al (2007) who concludes that, teachers teaching mainstream classes with learners with disabilities were developing positive attitudes towards them. This is contrary to some past research studies in Zimbabwe which found that there were high levels of stigmatisation and discrimination against learners with disabilities (Deluca, Tramontano & Kent, 2014; Peresuh, 2000).

Sub-theme 2: Enhancing inclusive education among Zimbabwean rural teachers: In this article, the issue of rural teachers' incapacitation towards inclusive education was raised as a challenge. The participants are of the view that the success of inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural learning schools in premised on training teachers on inclusive education. The participants responded to the second question: *how can inclusive education be enhanced in rural primary schools?*

Mrs Khumalo said:

"I recently graduated with bachelor honours degree in special needs at one university in Zimbabwe. The knowledge and skills I got during my studies will enhance my contributions to teaching learners with disabilities in rural schools where I am currently stationed."

Mr Juma argued:

"I really need to be trained in inclusive education. I have four learners with disabilities and I am struggling to adequately teach and assist them. I feel inadequate. The school and Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should provide training workshops for us as rural teacher."

To this end, we argued that, training rural primary teachers in inclusive education empowers them, teachers' knowledge and skills in inclusive education the important contributing factor to the successful implementation of inclusive education in Zimbabwe (Quyen & Khairani, 2017). Failure to equip teachers with inclusive education knowledge makes them to have negative attitudes towards it. The success story of inclusive education in South Africa is premised on the effectiveness of training of teachers in inclusive education in South African universities (Hlalele, 2018). The Ministry of Primary and Secondary School should invest more in training Zimbabwe rural teachers in inclusive education, this will enhance teaching and learning of learners with disabilities.

Sub-theme 3: Equal access to learning resources: One of the suggestions that participants made regards the Government and Non-Governmental provision of learning resources to rural schools in Zimbabwe to facilitate inclusive education. This recommendation was made against the background that majority of town schools have capacity to buy inclusive education materials such as Braille, computers, wheelchairs and walking sticks (Dakwa, 2014). However, rural schools and rural communities are financially disadvantaged and incapacitated to provide such learning and teaching resources. According to Ahluwalia (2001), Ubuntuism / Unhuism's principle of empathy motivates the Government and other education stakeholders to assist the underprivileged rural schools with adequate resources to promote inclusive education.

During the discussion, Mr Taps said:

"It is crucial that the Zimbabwean Government, Non-Governmental Organisation, business community and community at large support rural schools with educational resources. I believe if the generality of Zimbabweans and Government has capacity to mobilise resources such as Braille, computers to assist the disadvantaged rural schools and learners with disabilities."

In addition, Mrs Thandi said:

"If adequate resources are provided, inclusive education goals will be achieved. It is tough to work in rural areas without resources. Lack of resources demotivates teachers and learners in rural schools. The availability of resources motivates us as rural teachers and inclusive education will benefit significantly."

The provision of resources as articulated by research participants in rural schools will go a long way in advancing inclusive education. Consequently, the provision of inclusive education resources in Zimbabwean rural schools will help in addressing lived realities of rural learners, give adequate solutions and led to the improvement of rural communities lives (Dube, 2020)

Conclusion

From the foregoing study findings, it was noted that, there are challenges that negatively affects inclusive education in Zimbabwe rural leaning contexts. In addition, there are also solutions that can be implemented to mitigate challenges faced by inclusive education in rural primary schools. Some of the challenges highlighted include lack of qualified teachers, shortage of teaching and learning resources among others. This article did not only highlight the challenges faced by inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural areas but offer solutions. The Government and other stakeholders should provide resources to assist in advancing the agenda of inclusive education. In addition, teachers in rural areas should be adequately trained in inclusive education trends. Lastly, school authorities should allocate adequate resources towards inclusive education in Zimbabwe rural primary schools. Adequate resources channelled to inclusive education are critical to the advancement of inclusive education. In short, this article outlined the challenges and ways to enhance inclusive education in Zimbabwe rural primary schools. This paper was couched in Ubuntuism / Unhuism and responded to two questions. 15 participants in Gutu rural areas in Masvingo, Zimbabwe took part in this study. The paper found that, inclusive education in Zimbabwean rural primary schools is experiencing many challenges that affect rural learners and teachers. We argue that, rural primary schools should be treated equally with urban schools in provision of resources and other spheres. Inclusive education is a driving force that helps learners with disabilities to overcome life challenges such as poverty, marginalisation and learning challenges.

Recommendations

This article offers following recommendations to enhance inclusive education in Zimbabwe rural primary schools. Firstly, more inclusive education campaigns in rural areas to bring awareness of special needs education. These campaigns make rural communities to understand and appreciate the importance of inclusive education in advancing rural learners' education right. Secondly, the continuous training of new and in service rural educators in inclusive education processes. Educators in rural areas need training workshops and other platforms to get new and appropriate inclusive education knowledge and skills. Qualified teachers in inclusive education will be able to adequately impart knowledge in learners with disabilities in rural areas. Lastly, there is need among teachers, parents and other stakeholders to promote and reinforcement of positive attitudes in rural primary schools among all stakeholders. Negative attitudes towards inclusive education incapacitates teachers and learners in rural primary schools, this is detrimental to the vision of promoting equity and equality among rural and urban schools.

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