

Wrestling with complexities of rural school contexts: learning from Deputy principals' leadership experiences

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Abstract

South African communities may be viewed in three categories – rural, peri-urban and urban. These communities are unequal in terms of infrastructure and economic opportunities, among other things. The inequities among the communities extend to schools as microcosms of communities. Schools in urban areas enjoy inter alia better infrastructure, reasonable resources and fundraising opportunities, while schools in rural areas suffer from problems such as poor infrastructure, lack of resources, and high poverty rates. This paper reports on a narrative inquiry that focused specifically on the effects of rural school complexities on the leadership practices of deputy principals. The findings revealed contextual complexities, including, a feeling of helplessness due to the inadequacy of resources, overwhelming workloads, and dealing with learners from below the poverty line households. These complexities constrain the leadership exercised by deputy principals and necessitate a continuous push-back reaction. Thus, the findings also show practices through which the deputy principals defy the complexities of rural school contexts.

Keywords:

Context-responsive leadership, contextual complexities, deputy principal, leadership, narrative inquiry, rural school context

Introduction and background

Achieving equality in South African communities has been desired for a long time, yet does not seem to be achievable. The communities in this country remain unequal, even though the country marked

three decades into a democratic dispensation in 2024. Three categories are generally used to view South African communities, namely urban, peri-urban or township and rural (Ramrathan et al., 2021). Urban areas are located near central cities and are characterised by high-density population and human structures such as houses, commercial buildings, roads, bridges and railways (Adams et al., 1999). These areas generally exclude agricultural activities and unused lands (Adams et al., 1999). Semi-urban or township communities refer to low-cost non-white neighbourhoods (Jürgens et al., 2013) that were designed for black labourers during the apartheid era. The aim was to keep them on city peripheries where they would be closer to their places of employment in cities and towns (Jürgens et al., 2013; Mampane and Bouwer, 2011). The township communities are mostly harried by poverty, violence and crime (Mampane and Bouwer, 2011; Zulu et al., 2021). Rural communities, which are located far from urban areas, with smaller and more dispersed populations (Myende and Maifala, 2020; Redding and Walberg, 2012), are governed by traditional leaders (Myende and Hlalele, 2018). Although people in these areas rely on farming for survival, they often do not benefit much from the agricultural economy since they are small-scale farmers or farm workers (Hlalele, 2012; Myende and Maifala, 2020; South African Department of Land Affairs, 1997).

The inequalities in communities obviously extend to schools as microcosms of the societies in which they are located (Duma et al., 2021). The South African Constitution (section 29(1)) and the South African Schools Act (21 of 1996) stipulate that learners should have equal access to quality education, similar educational opportunities and similar learning amenities. However, this is not the case, as the country continues to witness a great level of disparity between schools. Schools in urban communities, which were formerly meant for white and, to a lesser extent, Indian children (Maringe and Moletsane, 2015), enjoy access to numerous resources and countless educational opportunities (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Schools located in townships lack resources, are overcrowded, and have been characterised by crime and violence, among other things (Mampane and Bouwer, 2011). Those located in rural areas lack very basic teaching amenities and offer inadequate educational opportunities (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). This corresponds with the view of Turweliset al. (2022) who argue that geographical disparities deprive people of equal opportunities and benefits within the same country.

The rural schools, which are most deprived, constitute the context of the study reported on here. Some of the challenges peculiar to rural school contexts are a lack of resources, deficient parental interest in children's education, limited funding from the state, under-qualified educators, and multi-grade teaching (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Adding to these challenges, Myende and Maifala (2020) identify poverty, a shortage or lack of resources and limited fundraising opportunities. Smit (2017)

highlights health issues, poverty and social predicaments as complex challenges affecting the daily operations of rural schools. Despite the government's efforts to redress inequalities in South African public schools, the challenges persist in rural schools. One of these efforts is the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSF), which guides the allocation of funds to public schools (Republic of South Africa, 1998a). This policy acknowledges inequalities among public schools and therefore proclaims differentiated funding provisions according to the poverty status of communities in which schools are located (Blose, 2024; Blose and Naicker, 2018). As a result, rural schools, generally categorised as the poorest, receive funds allocation at a better rate compared to their counterparts in urban areas. However, this does not help much since the funds are linked to enrolment numbers which are generally low in many rural schools. Another initiative is the National Framework of Rural Education; this policy, among other things, aims to improve access to education, as well as the quality of education for all in rural schools (Department of Basic Education, 2022). While the policy seems to be promising, its impact is yet to be seen as it is still new.

Smit (2017) suggests that attention be paid to the leadership of rural schools in South Africa because they daily encounter numerous unprecedented challenges. This view identifies leadership as an important instrument to deal with the challenges in rural schools (Smit, 2017); it echoes the sentiments of Spillane and Healey (2010) that leadership is one of the key elements for transformation in schools. It has been established in the literature that leadership is influenced by the context in which it is exercised and the opposite is true (Blose, 2024; Bredeson et al., 2008; Hallinger, 2018). Highlighting the significance of context in leadership, Bredeson et al. (2008), Hallinger (2018) and Klar, et al. (2020) assert that the context can enable or constrain the behaviour of leaders. From the perspective of rural schools, the context presents numerous challenges which leaders need to grapple with to keep schools afloat (Blose, 2024). We metaphorically liken the pressure of leading against challenges to wrestling, which is a sports code defined as the challenge of sportsmen to establish superiority over each other (Erkilic and Senel, 2019). We thought this challenge resembles leadership in rural school contexts, because, on the one hand, the abovementioned challenges collectively compromise leadership in rural schools; on the other hand, school leaders constantly try to push back and establish superiority over these contextual challenges to keep their schools afloat. Hence our title - Wrestling with complexities of rural school contexts...

In this paper, we explored the leadership experiences of deputy principals in three secondary schools located in a rural context. The position of deputy principal is immediately below that of the principal (Blose and Khuzwayo, 2020), and incumbents appointed to this position are second in command in schools. The literature on educational leadership and management has focused largely on principals,

while the mention of other prominent key players such as deputy principals has been scanty (Bloese and Naicker, 2018; Cranston et al., 2004). Arguing for deputy principals is Jansen (2019) who states that, compared to other leadership and management positions in a school leadership structure, minimal attention is given to the roles and responsibilities of deputy principals in South Africa. Bloese and Naicker (2018) agree that it is quite puzzling that such a senior leadership position, whose incumbent takes over the role of principal when the latter is away, is downplayed in the scholarship of educational leadership.

This paper makes a significant contribution to the scholarship of deputy principals by examining their leadership practices in rural school contexts. It foregrounds a context-consciousness stance in understanding leadership, by showing the relationship between contextual realities and deputy principals' leadership practices. To this end, the paper unpacks the contextual complexities constraining the leadership of deputy principals in rural schools; it also shows how the deputy principals navigate around these complexities. Our point of departure was the premise that a rural school context is demanding, given the challenges articulated above. Although these challenges pose complexities and exert pressure on different stakeholders in these schools, our interest was focused on deputy principals – senior leaders whose role has received little attention in the school leadership context. We therefore attempted to understand not only the contextual complexities experienced by rural school deputy principals, but also the leadership practices they exert to counter such complexities and ensure the functioning of their schools.

Below are research questions that the paper sought to answer:

Research puzzles

1. What are the complexities that rural school contexts pose to deputy principals' leadership practices?
2. How do deputy principals defy the complexities of rural school contexts?

Unpacking rural and rural school contexts in South Africa

It is safe to say there is no single definition of the term 'rural', since rural settings vary from one country to another, based on its form (patterns of land use, economic activity, and buildings) and

content (the particular social life and the subjective experiences of being in a rural place) (Muula, 2007; Gallent and Gkartzios, 2019). In Brazil, for instance, an area is defined as rural if it is beyond the limits and boundaries of an urban area and has less than 20,000 inhabitants in its municipality (Amorim et al., 2017; Braga et al., 2019; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2010). In the United States of America, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) define rural areas (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2017); according to these institutions, a rural area is defined as an area with a decline in population, increase in geographic distance to services and closure of health facilities, which result to a widening gap in the morbidity and mortality rates between urban and rural populations (Meit et al., 2014). In Japan, rural regions are conceived as those that are sparsely populated and underdeveloped, where the chief occupations are predominantly in forestry and agriculture, and where such livelihoods and the environment inspire everyone to live in harmony with one another and together with nature (Rath, 2007).

In South Africa, the concept of rurality remains contested, with varying dimensions that researchers have used to define both rurality and rural schools (Myende and Nhlumayo, 2022). While some view rurality from the dimension of location or place, considering the proximity between the area and the city. Others use demographics to look at rurality; this includes, but not limited to population growth and size, income per capita, and the distance communities travel to access public service (Ebersöhn and Ferreira, 2012; Myende and Nhlumayo, 2022). Apart from these dimensions, a rural area in the South African context is defined by many as any place that is under the leadership and governance of traditional leaders, farmland, and peri-urban areas in which people have high chances to live off the land (Myende and Chikoko, 2014; Republic of South Africa, 2003, Ngwenya et al., 2023). Such areas comprise community-owned segments, former homeland areas and commercial farms in formerly white areas (Human Sciences Research Council et al., 2005). These areas are characterised by inter alia high levels of unemployment, lack of basic service provision, poor infrastructure, low levels of literacy, and limited access to health care and education (Vergunst et al., 2017).

South Africa has multiple such rural areas, and schools in these areas are commonly referred to as rural schools. The concept of rural school is well established in the literature, and scholars such as Poti et al. (2014) characterise a rural school by geographic solitude, being under-resourced and having under-qualified teaching staff and a small school enrolment size. They perceive the geographic remoteness of rural schools as a key impediment to networking and effective curriculum delivery (Poti et al., 2014). Supporting this view are Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) and Shikalepo (2020), who identify various factors that negatively affect the provision of quality education in public rural schools. These factors include (but are not limited to) basic infrastructure for sanitation, physical resources, electricity,

information and communication technology, water, roads and transport (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Apart from this, parents' destitute socio-economic status also renders a disadvantage to learners in rural schools (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019).

Leadership approaches and practices in rural schools

Schools in rural areas remain marginalised even in post-apartheid South Africa. In the above section, we showed multiple challenges confronting rural schools. These challenges pose complexities to and exert pressures on principals and their staff in rural schools. As a result, school management teams and teachers find themselves wrestling with the contextual challenges of rural schools in their day-to-day practices. Supporting this view are Pambudi and Gunawan (2019) who suggest that principals and school leaders in rural schools should devote themselves to addressing issues stemming from contextual challenges such as poverty and the lack of parents' knowledge of the education system and how to support their children's education.

Scholars suggest different leadership approaches that may be exercised by school leaders in rural contexts. The first approach is transformational leadership, which Northouse (2016) describes as the capability of leaders to influence and inspire their subordinates to work beyond their transactional expectations. While this leadership approach has no contextual bounds, Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) identify it as key to getting things done and facilitating change in rural school contexts. The second approach is the leadership of care, which Hayes et al. (2021, p. 5) regard as essential in rural school contexts. These scholars believe that school principals in rural school contexts must evince a caretaker identity in their leadership because they deal with learners and families that need social-emotional support and teachers whose well-being must be safeguarded, among other things (Larson and Murtadha, 2002). This is supported by Blose and Naicker (2018) who assert that care becomes a crucial ingredient in turning learner attitudes around when learners hail from traumatised, unhappy and vulnerable environments.

The third approach is people-centred leadership, which Preston and Barnes (2017) believe is significant in establishing and maintaining relationships in rural schools. These scholars suggest that rural school principals must build rapport among staff members, learners, parents and community stakeholders. This assists in successful school leadership since such a practice nurtures interpersonal relationship within the school community (Preston and Barnes, 2017; Chance and Segura, 2009). The people-centred approach to leadership resonates with relational leadership, which Smit (2017), in her findings, identifies as an approach through which a rural school leader encourages a collaborative

working environment. According to Smit (2023), relational leadership focuses on the quality of relationships within a school environment that principals establish with staff, learners and the community. The building of such relationship entails “relational integrity and responsibility, which means being responsive, responsible, and accountable to others in everyday interactions...” (Smit, 2023, p. 4).

Context-responsive leadership, a conceptual framework

The context-responsive leadership formed the conceptual framework through which we engaged with deputy principals’ experiences in rural school contexts. The concept of context-responsive leadership is drawn from the work of Bredeson, Johanson and Klar, who explored the relationship between context and leadership. This leadership approach is described as “... a practical wisdom in action, which reveals a complex mix of knowledge, skills and dispositions appropriately deployed by effective leaders as they engage in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables” (Bredeson et al., 2011, p. 20). Leaders exercising this approach are called context-responsive leaders, as they recognise that a context can both enable and constrain a leader’s behaviours (Bredeson et al., 2011). For this reason, a leader’s awareness of critical contextual elements is imperative (Bredeson et al., 2011).

The concept of context-responsive leadership emanated from a research project reported on by Bredeson et al. (2011), which focused on district leadership. In this research project, the district reflected the context, which is understood to vary (Bredson et al., 2011). Since the current study was conducted in rural schools, we replaced district context of the framework with rural school context. Bredeson et al. (2011) put forward five context variations to understand the context and these are shown in Figure 1.

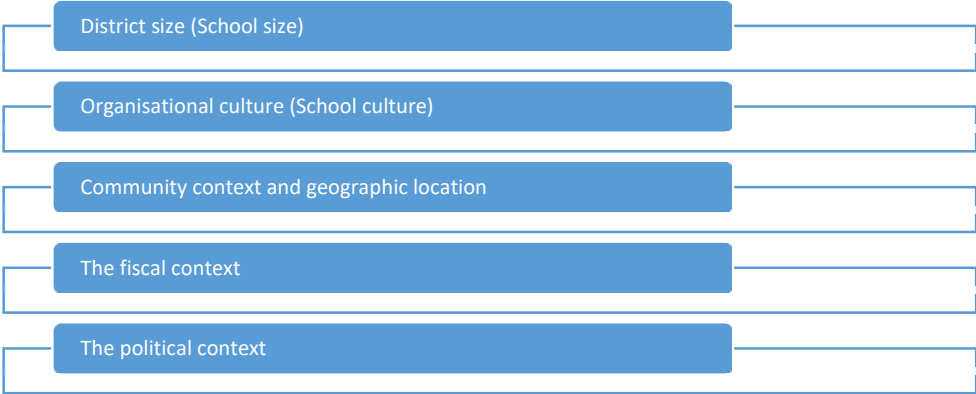


Figure 1: Context variations

Apart from the context variations, Bredeson et al. (2011) suggest four attributes of context-responsive leaders that were used in examining the contextual complexities of rural schools and deputy principals' responses to such complexities. Within the current framework, we looked at the deputy principals as people who are in constant communication with stakeholders in the rural setting. This means that they know what constitutes their rural context; also, they know when they must exert a particular leadership practice to resolve a particular challenge. Figure 2 shows the attributes suggested by Bredeson et al. (2011).

**Four
known
attributes
of context-
responsive
leaders**

They are contextually literate; they are sensitive to and aware of critical elements of context, purpose and actions.

They engage in fluid conversation with situations of practice, and they recognise variations in context.

They understand that variations in context can both enable or constrain their behaviour and they respond to such variations in an appropriate time and manner.

They react to, and, when appropriate, take action to shape their context of practice.

Figure 2: Attributes of context-responsive leaders

Methodology

We as researchers and authors positioned ourselves within the interpretivism paradigm to explore the complexities that rural school contexts pose to deputy principals and the leadership practices that they exert to defy such complexities. The interpretivism paradigm foregrounds an assumption that people construct subjective meanings of their personal experiences. These meanings vary from one individual to another, thus leading to multiple realities (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). For this reason, we paid special attention to each deputy principal's experiences because the meanings they attached to their experiences of leading in rural schools were bound to differ. The narrative inquiry methodology, which is described by Clandinin (2013) as a way to inquire into individuals' experiences narratively over time and in context was utilised to engage with the qualitative lived experiences of the sampled deputy principals. This methodology assumes that people live storied lives, and therefore they share those stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Through the narrative inquiry, we were able to generate storied

experiences from the participants to understand the contextual complexities they experience in rural schools and the leadership practices they use to counter these.

In keeping with the narrative inquiry, we generated field texts (referred to as data in other research methodologies) by using a narrative method known as a narrative interview. The narrative interview is a pertinent data generation method in narrative inquiry. It grants participants an opportunity to relate their stories of experience freely (Adler and Clark, 2008; Clandinin, 2023; Olive, 2014), since it is unstructured in nature. The study we report on in this paper was conducted during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic; as a result, the interview sessions with the participants took place virtually, using the Zoom meeting platform, to avoid the virus spreading. Three deputy principals in three rural schools were purposely selected. To recruit these participants, we targeted a circuit manager leading a rural circuit in the Ilembe district of the KwaZulu-Natal province and requested him to share the list of principals under his supervision. After obtaining the list, the principals were contacted to solicit permission to conduct the study in their schools and also to request them to put us into contact with their deputy principals. Only five principals granted permission and connected us to their deputies. Subsequently, we selected the three deputy principals who had served in their positions the longest, assuming that they had accumulated vast experience. To hide the identities of the participants, their names and those of their schools are not disclosed in this paper; instead, we gave them pseudonyms of Paul, Mbali and Chris.

To analyse the field texts, we utilised two methods – narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. The first method involved organising each participant's field text into a coherent and chronological account using plots that captured episodes of their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2002). The outcome of this process was re-storied narratives, because they were first told by the participants as field texts, and later organised and retold coherently by ourselves (researchers) as research texts (Clandinin, 2013). Due to space constraints we do not present the re-storied narratives in this paper; however, reasonable extractions from these narratives are presented in the findings. The second method involved the scrutiny of participants' re-storied narratives to identify particular instances or themes to provide answers to the research puzzle(s) (Polkinghorne, 2002). This process yielded six themes that we discuss as findings in the following section.

Findings

Below we present the findings of the study in two sections, each answering the related research puzzle.

Section 1: Complexities posed by rural school contexts to deputy principals' leadership practices

Section 1 answers the first research puzzle, which was concerned with the complexities of rural school contexts. To this end, three themes depicting the complexities posed by rural school contexts on deputy principals' leadership practices are discussed below. These themes are: a feeling of helplessness due to the inadequacy of resources, an overwhelming workload, and dealing with learners from households living below the poverty line.

A feeling of helplessness due to the inadequacy of resources

Inadequacy of financial resources appears to be the main drawback in rural schools; this translates to a shortage or lack of teaching and learning resources. The allocation of funds to public schools in South Africa is linked to learner enrolment. Schools in rural areas normally have low enrolment numbers owing to low population density; for this reason, these schools do not receive an adequate financial allocation from the state. Also, the context in which they are located presents fewer fundraising opportunities. The narratives of the participating deputy principals reveal the inadequacy of resources as one of the drawbacks they experience in rural school contexts. Paul explains his experiences in relation to the shortage of resources below:

...the main thing I experience is the shortage of resources. The shortage of resources limits my effective functioning as the deputy principal. I am responsible for purchasing and distributing stationery to learners, and bookkeeping. This task is very challenging with inadequate financial resources in the school. For example, in the case of distributing learner stationery, you only find that due to our high enrolment of learners the stationery does not cover all the learners, and I have to continuously explain that the stationery we had is finished.

The shortage of resources is a key obstacle to leadership in rural schools and it seems to make leaders feel helpless. Sharing similar sentiments as Paul is Mbali, who cites a range of resources that are inadequate in the rural school context:

We lack teaching resources such as textbooks and this has a great impact on the quality of teaching and learning; we mostly rely on chalkboards and we cannot make multiple copies to replace textbooks since this will have a bearing on our paper and ink expenses. Besides, we only have two photocopying machines for the entire school. These issues make my leadership position difficult as I constantly deal with educators who present these challenges to me.

Chris agrees and identifies the shortage of financial resources as a drawback at his school:

Serving in a rural context is a challenge on its own, but the scarcity of resources worsens the conditions. The funds allocated to the school can only cover so much; for instance, when I procure stationery I find myself having to choose significant items and compromise others. Unfortunately, this creates unevenness amongst subjects; for instance, on the one hand, Science subjects are prioritised, while on the other hand humanities and service subjects are neglected.

The lack and inadequacy of resources is a known challenge in rural schools and many research studies attest to this. This is confirmed by Myende and Maifala (2020) who identify poverty, a shortage or lack of resources and limited fundraising opportunities as challenges of rural schools. Also, Mtsi and Maphosa (2016) identify the lack of requisite infrastructure and resources as a challenge in rural schools. The stories of participants in this study do not seem to dispute this challenge but show its influence on the leadership they exercise. The participants' narratives reveal deputy principals' feelings of helplessness when teachers run to them to request fundamental teaching resources and they are unable to assist. This creates a dilemma for their leadership as they want teachers to be effective even though their rural schools are unable to provide adequate resources to this end. All public schools in South Africa are expected to provide quality education through the recognised curriculum; however, schools in rural areas must achieve this with limited and sometimes without resources. Considering this finding, we deduce that the shortage (or complete lack) of resources cripples the leadership exercised by deputy principals and other school leaders. This resonates with Bredeson et al. (2011) who, within the context-responsive leadership framework, affirm that a context can both enable and constrain a leader's behaviours; in this case, the participating deputy principals experience the inadequacy of resources as a constraining factor.

Overwhelming workload

Apart from leadership and management roles, deputy principals are also expected to engage in classroom teaching. According to the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM), 60% of deputy principals' workload must encompass teaching, while 40% must comprise leadership and management duties (Republic of South Africa, 1998b). While this is the case, deputy principals in rural school contexts seem to carry workloads that exceed this requirement. For instance, Mbali's school has a

shortage of teachers, and as a leader at the school, she needs to carry out added teaching duties as learners cannot remain unattended. She explains:

We [also] lack qualified educators; for this reason, I end up having to teach more classes despite being a deputy principal. This extra teaching jeopardises my effectiveness in the deputy principal role as it leaves me with minimal or no time to carry out administrative and management duties. I have a lot of paperwork to do, I attend management meetings, also I need to focus on teaching which has its own paperwork as well, including lesson planning, setting assessment tasks, etc.

Echoing similar sentiments is Chris who also finds it difficult to strike a balance between his teaching and management roles. He had this to say:

It is hard to strike a balance between teaching and management due to loads of paperwork from both sides. Sometimes we are compelled to teach more than we should because qualified teachers are reluctant to teach in rural areas.

Paul also acknowledges the heavy workload he carries as a deputy principal; however, he seems to embrace his work, and looks at it from a non-complain position. This is what he had to say:

My duty as the deputy principal encompasses a lot of other duties. These duties include timetabling, annual teaching plan (ATP), South African School Administration and Management System (SASAMS), induction of novice educators, enforcing learner discipline, educators file checking, organising staff meetings, staff and learner register, monitoring professional development of educators. ...I believe that a leader is a way maker, a leader does not fold arms, and a leader seeks help and goes the extra mile to ensure that teaching and learning take place in the school. This is my mantra.

The above extract shows that rural school contexts contribute to the deputy principals' excessive workload. A contextual demand that emerges from all three participants' stories is a shortage of teachers. The shortage of teachers in rural schools leads to deputy principals teaching more classes than they are supposed to. Consequently, they struggle to strike a balance between teaching and management duties. This finding agrees with that of Masinire (2015) who found that qualified teachers in South Africa are reluctant to go to rural schools because of the assumed social and professional challenges linked to working in rural settings. Unfortunately, the stipulation in the Employment of

Educators Act (76 of 1998), namely that a deputy principal is expected to spend only 60% of their time on teaching, is not always possible in rural areas, due to teacher shortages.

The teacher shortage is a well-known problem in South African rural schools. Recently, the Department of Basic Education developed a National Framework for Rural Education to tackle the many challenges of rural schools, including teacher shortages. This framework proposes a minimum of six teachers to be employed in small rural schools, excluding the principal and reception grade (Grade R) teacher (Department of Basic Education, 2022). This move relieves teachers and members of SMT from additional teaching tasks in rural schools where the learner enrolment does not qualify them for this number of teachers.

Dealing with learners from households living below the poverty line

Apart from limited resources and heavy workloads, deputy principals identified challenges relating to learners' households. Many households in rural communities live below the poverty line and this has a direct bearing on learners. The study participants revealed that the socioeconomic status of parents in rural areas affects also the schools, as parents do not always have the financial means to support their children's education. Mbali recounts her experiences with parents:

I have made several requests to parents to meet us halfway as a school, and the majority of these parents complain about their financial constraints... Given the nature of the rural context, characterised by a low standard of living, I'm compelled to be sympathetic and understand that some of the learners come from critically disadvantaged families. Such families cannot afford to provide for their children, even for school uniforms. Therefore, in worse situations, I assist from my personal funds.

Paul also stresses parental support and parents' financial constraints as a challenge they face in rural schools. He explains:

Due to financial constraints, some learners are compelled to participate in child labour in an endeavour to alleviate poverty. As a result, they drop out of school in search of jobs. This is most prevalent among male learners. There is a great lack of parental involvement here and we as leaders and educators find ourselves dealing with disciplinary cases because parents do not play their role. They do not come to the party in terms of supporting their children's academics.

Chris highlights the lack of learner motivation as another issue he experiences in a rural school and explains as follows:

In this community, I work with less motivated learners which is an indirect contributor to absenteeism and dropout of learners. In line with this difficulty, I motivate learners in school from time to time about the importance of attaining education to the extent that I even share some career opportunities available for various streams. Not only do I motivate learners verbally, but also through leading my life very well and becoming a role model to others. To others, I become a father figure and inspire them.

It appears that the parents' socio-economic status in rural contexts impacts the learner behaviour in schools. For instance, learners absent themselves due to the need to take employment, they are less motivated, they drop out of school and they also wear shabby school uniforms. This supports the view of Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) that learners in rural settings are disadvantaged due to their destitute parents' socio-economic status, and the fact that the majority are living from hand to mouth. Looking at the extracts above, it is evident that the socio-economic background of learners, together with poor parental support, are daunting challenges to be dealt with by deputy principals. The participating deputy principals became sympathetic to the extent that they use their own funds to mitigate the impact of socio-economic issues, learner stress and parental burden. This corroborates with Du Plessis and Mestry (2019: 2) who indicate that "parents in rural South Africa mostly do menial work, have a lower level of education, and usually do not attach much value to schooling. As such, these parents cannot afford additional items that teachers require, which impacts negatively on teaching and learning in these schools."

Drawing from the context-responsive leadership approach, the conduct of the participating deputy principals reflects practical wisdom in action by lessening the impact of parental un-involvement and their poor socio-economic background on learners. This reveals deputy principals as leaders who embody complex mixed "knowledge, skills and dispositions appropriately deployed in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables" (Bredeson et al., 2011: 20).

SECTION 2: Deputy Principals' responses to defy the complexities of rural school contexts

This section provides answers to the second research puzzle, which aimed to understand deputy principals' responses to defy the complexities of rural school contexts. Three themes illustrating the

participating deputy principals' responses were identified from their stories, and these themes are discussed next:

Contextual awareness

The participating deputy principals seem to have ways of keeping the complexities of rural school contexts at bay. One way in which they resist is through developing an awareness of the context in which they operate. Their narratives show that they have developed an understanding of the context of rurality and its features; this understanding enables them to continue leading in this context. Paul expresses his understanding of his school context and how such an understanding assists him:

I am aware at all times that I am not working in space but in a rural community. Here, I need to be two or three steps ahead, by applying creativity and critical thinking in order to achieve our school goals. In order to succeed in this context as a school leader, I need to adjust to the environment you are working in.

Mbali also shows an understanding of her school in a rural setting:

As a leader in a rural school, I need to work very hard compared to my counterparts in other contexts. I adopted a SMART attitude to survive here; everything I do has to be Specific, Measurable, Attainable and Time-Bound. My school context has challenged me to get out of my comfort zone because things do not just happen. As a deputy principal, I work extraordinarily in undertaking all duties assigned to me and those that the principal delegates to me. In many cases, I am compelled to remain behind after school to complete tasks for the day and prepare for the next day. This has become a norm for me because I had to adapt to the demands and challenges of this context.

An understanding of the rural context is also shown by Chris, whose narrative shows his awareness of the many challenges in the rural context. Also, since he knows that the funds they receive can only do so much, his endeavours in the school are informed by this understanding.

Apart from understanding that I am serving in a marginalised context, the paucity of resources worsens the conditions. Being located in a poor economic background prohibits the department of education to inject monies that can afford us an

opportunity to resolve all the challenges we battle with. The allocated funds can only cover so many challenges in my school. ... We try our level best to ensure that we get assistance, so that we provide quality education to the learners, with the hope that in future they will become leaders and prominent people in their communities and transform the standard of their lives.

From the above excerpts, we learn that the participating deputy principals clearly understand the context in which they operate. Their grasp of the rural context influences the leadership they exert in these schools. According to Hallinger (2018), successful leaders adapt their leadership to the needs, opportunities and constraints posed by their work contexts. Considering Hallinger's notion, we can safely regard the participating deputy principals as successful leaders in rural school contexts. Their narratives show that they are aware of all the constraining realities involved; thus, they apply leadership skills and knowledge that respond to the contextual complexities. One of the participants articulated that working after school hours has become a norm for her and this may be viewed as her response to these complexities. The participating deputy principals also come across as context-responsive in their approach, as they reflect Bredeson et al's (2011: 18) characterisation that context-responsive leaders "are responsive to variations in their context and also have the capacity to shape various contexts in their daily work".

Soliciting external assistance

Another way in which deputy principals try to counter the complexities of rural school contexts is by soliciting assistance from neighbouring schools. These deputy principals realise that assistance won't always come to their schools and that they also need to go out in search of aid. One way in which they do this is by engaging in networking programmes where they share knowledge, skills and resources with colleagues from other schools. Mbali stated that as the deputy principal she works with the SMT to organise networking programmes with surrounding schools to access the resources they lack in their own school.

So, as the deputy principal together with the SMT we organise networking programmes with nearby schools that have some of the resources that we lack, especially when there's an urgent assessment that needs to be done like practical assessments, we organise and send our learners there with the subject teacher so that teaching and learning can continue and learners get quality education in spite of the issue of resources in our school.

Paul agrees that as a school they learn not only on their own, but also from networking with neighbouring schools to ensure the provision of quality education to their learners.

Working collaboratively does not mean we only rely on our own capabilities as a school, but it means we also seek help from outside through networking with neighbouring schools; I create a channel of communication as the deputy principal and play a liaison role for the school. I communicate with leaders of other schools as delegated by the principal and provide feedback to the principal who further updates the school at large.

While Paul and Mbali network with neighbouring schools to solicit help related to teaching and learning, Chris works with community stakeholders such as police officers and traditional leaders to fight learner behaviour challenges.

In my school, conflicts among male learners are prevalent. At times these cases escalate to an uncontrollable state. In such cases, we therefore involve superiors and leaders from the community who come to our rescue and resolve the issues by talking to learners. These include among others police officers, traditional leaders and ward councillors. ...I apply collegiality in instances where I work with the community to minimise difficulties I face in school. I do this with the intention of generating a pool of ideas that may assist us; we thereafter make a collective decision making. ...I am actively involved in community activities such as sports and recreation. This works to my benefit as I get to socialise with community members and get to understand them better. Furthermore, this act establishes a rapport as they too find it easy to approach me when they need help be it school or the education of their children.

Regarding the above theme, we learnt that the participating deputy principals understand their rural school contexts and align their leadership practices with these contexts. The practice of soliciting external assistance reflects their awareness of the context in which they operate. This finding shows that these deputy principals do not limit themselves to what they can do or offer; instead, they reach out to gain assistance from neighbouring schools and other stakeholders in the community. On the one hand, Mbali and Paul promote networking to address the challenge of teaching and learning resources. Muijs (2015) highlights that networking allows organisations to utilise other actors' resources and escalate the course of information in a network. On the other hand, Chris collaborates with many stakeholders to influence behavioural challenges of learners in his school. The responses of all three

participants show that they act to shape their context of practice and respond to hurdles. Their behaviour is viewed by Bredeson et al. (2011) as characteristic of context-responsive leaders.

Sharing responsibilities through teamwork

The narratives of the participating deputy principals show that they share leadership in the rural schools where they operate; both formal and informal leaders contribute to the leadership of the school. The participating deputy principals maintain that a leader in a rural school context cannot survive on his or her own and they highlight teamwork as a way to go in terms of leading rural schools. Paul explains how teamwork plays out at his school.

...myself and my principal work closely as a team in almost everything and through this collaboration and teamwork, we achieve a lot. We also receive support from our colleagues who also work in teams in dealing with academic activities and non-academic activities such as conducting extra classes, entertainment activities, learner discipline issues etc. All these teams come in handy when tackling a problem that concerns a school at large. These teams convene in a meeting and views emerging from them are tabled, and the best ones are voted for and taken into further consideration. Teamwork is one of the pillars of our school.

Chris believes that the workload is shared through collegiality at his school. This collegiality seems not to be limited to his fellow SMT members but even extends to teachers at postlevel1.

Collegiality allows an opportunity to delegate some duties to other staff members such as departmental heads and even the post-level one educators to ensure that things are done timeously. This kind of leadership creates unity among our staff members as they feel a sense of ownership of the decisions taken and feel included in the running of the school. Thus, we have improved learner performance in spite of the contextual difficulties we face as a school.

Mbali also embraces teamwork at her school. The use of “we” in many of her statements suggests that collaboration takes place at her school. This teamwork spirit was observable in a statement like “together with SMT, we organise networking programmes...”

According to Ogonnaya (2019), working collaboratively in teams enables team members to establish stronger interrelationships with their peers, to support each other and to achieve greater levels of both productivity and satisfaction. The narratives of Mbali, Paul and Chris show that they embrace team

working in the rural schools where they work. They collaborate with their fellow SMT members, as well as with postlevel1 teachers. The collegial efforts of deputy principals, which may be perceived as their response to complexities in the rural context, reflect qualities of a context-responsive leadership practice. The context responsive leaders understand that variations in context can both enable or constrain their behavior and they respond to such variations in an appropriate time and manner. Also, they react to their context and, when appropriate, act to shape the context of practice (Bredeson et al., 2011). The rural school context poses many limitations or constraints to the participating deputy principals; however, their response of team working and embracing collaboration influenced their context of practice and allowed them to achieve more, despite a demanding school context.

Discussion and conclusion

The study reported on in this paper sought to answer two research puzzles. The first puzzle focused on the complexities that rural school contexts pose to deputy principals' leadership practices, while the second puzzle centred on how deputy principals try to defy the complexities of rural school contexts. Regarding the complexities, three themes emerged. Firstly, a feeling of helplessness due to the inadequacy of resources. There is very little if any, that deputy principals can do when teachers request teaching resources that are unavailable and which schools cannot procure; hence, they feel helpless. Secondly, an overwhelming workload; the participating deputy principals could not stick to the notional teaching workload while there is a shortage of teachers in their schools. As a result, they took an added teaching workload, which is a complex exercise. Finally, dealing with learners from households living below the poverty line. Learners presented numerous challenges resulting from living below the poverty line; among other challenges are a high dropout rate, less motivation and shabby school uniforms. Again, the deputy principals could not ignore these challenges, while attempting to address them without necessary means appeared to be complex. As leaders in schools, deputy principals are expected to influence teachers and learners to pursue objectives desired by them and their schools (Gardner, 2013). However, the challenges they wrestle with in rural school contexts seem to press them against the wall and compromise possibilities of their leadership.

Regarding the second puzzle, the findings showed that deputy principals in rural schools try to deal with the complexities posed by their school contexts. Three strategies emerged in this study; they work on their contextual awareness, solicit external assistance, and share responsibilities through teamwork. Looking at the manner in which the participating deputy principals defy the complexities with which they grapple in their rural school contexts, we deduce that they are context-responsive in their leadership approach. Among other attributes, context-responsive leaders are contextually literate, they

engage in fluid conversation with situations of practice, they recognise and understand that variations in context can both enable and constrain their behaviour, and they act to shape their context of practice (Bredeson et al., 2011). The deputy principals who participated in this study clearly displayed these attributes. We admit that context-responsiveness may be exercised across different school contexts. However, in rural school contexts, the participating deputy principals engaged not only in a fluid but also in an aggressive conversation with their situation of practice. The deputy principals understood that the complexities of rural school contexts could easily constrain their behaviour, thus they acted to mitigate the impact of these complexities, thereby shaping their context of practice.

The participating deputy principals wrestled with the contextual complexities in their practices. As explained in the introduction of this paper, the word “wrestle” was borrowed from the wrestling sport code. An important aim of wrestling is to take down a standing opponent by breaking their balance (Ito et al., 2019). We liken the experiences of the participating deputy principals to wrestling because they seem to constantly wrestle against the complexities of their rural school contexts. Factors such as the inadequacy of teaching resources, shortage of teachers and dealing with poverty-stricken learners could certainly discourage deputy principals and bring them down. However, they managed to contest these contextual complexities by accumulating an understanding of their context of practice, by soliciting external assistance and by engaging in teamwork to share their responsibilities. In this way, the deputy principals held their balance and established superiority over the complexities of rural school contexts.

Implications for further research

The findings reported here emerge from a small-scale narrative inquiry that sought to understand the complexities that rural school contexts pose to deputy principals’ leadership and how the deputy principals countered these complexities. The inquiry involved three deputy principals serving in rural schools in the Ilembe district of KwaZulu-Natal – South Africa. While this sample provided a comprehensive and qualitative insight into the complexities of leading rural schools and the work of deputy principals in these schools, the findings cannot be seen to reflect the experiences of deputy principals across all South African rural contexts. However, it is worth noting that inequalities are still apparent in South Africa and many rural communities and schools continue to operate in different states of deprivation. Considering that the context matters, the leadership exercised in dissimilar school contexts may not be similar. This study revealed some of the contextual complexities with which deputy principals and other school leaders continually wrestle to keep rural schools operational. The

deputy principals who participated in this study appeared to be contextually intelligent and were able to push back against the complexities. But, school leaders who may not possess the contextually intelligence ability may not be able to push back against the complexities and may succumb to these complexities, which may lead school ineffectiveness. We therefore argue that more context-responsive support and policies are needed to aid the leadership of rural school leaders in South Africa. In addition, we recommend that more research be conducted to explore leadership in demanding rural contexts, not only to understand the type of leadership exercised in these school contexts, but also to come up with ways in which leaders in such contexts could improve their leadership practice. To this end, both qualitative and quantitative approaches may be employed. Afloat

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