

Is Decentralisation a Suitable Response to Improve South African Rural Education?

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Abstract. South Africa (SA) has a decentralised education system. It is generally assumed that decentralisation improves the effectiveness and efficiency of education by responding to the needs, values, and expectations of both local and rural communities. A large part of SA could be described as rural and a large number of learners attend rural schools. This makes rural education a significant part of the South African education context. With education being decentralised, and with decentralisation being heralded as the panacea to the problems faced by rural communities as well as rural education, the assumption is that rural education should be of a high quality. This desk-top paper assesses the potential of decentralisation to improve the quality and effectiveness of South African rural education. This it does by locating decentralisation within neoliberalism which this paper argues is the impetus behind the decentralisation of South African education, and the reason for the decline in the quality and effectiveness of rural education. The paper also highlights certain tensions between the various decentralised spheres of governance, namely the central and provincial Departments of Education and school-level governance structures. The paper further indicates how these tensions potentially hamper the effectiveness and efficiency of rural education. The paper concludes with some recommendations aimed at improving rural education.

Keywords: decentralisation; neo-liberalism; rural education; South African education policy

1. Introduction

A recently published report by Amnesty International (2020) paints a grim picture of basic education in South Africa. Entitled *Broken and Unequal: The State of Education in South Africa*, this report indicates how dilapidating and visibly unsafe buildings, extremely overcrowded classrooms, lack of sufficient textbooks, lack of decent sanitation, the use of pit toilets, and the lack of libraries, laboratories and sports facilities hamper quality education delivery in rural and urban schools. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) seems committed to improve the poor

quality of education in rural areas. Hence a Rural Education Policy has been developed which, although still in a draft form, aims to ensure “rural schools provide quality education for all learners” (RSA-DBE, 2017, p.8).

This policy is supposed to function within a decentralised education system. It is assumed that decentralisation will improve the quality of education in general and that of rural schools in particular. With this desk-top paper this assumption is interrogated by demonstrating how decentralisation, as a tenet of neo-liberalism, has potentially contributed towards a decline in the quality and effectiveness of rural education. This paper starts with a definition of the concept ‘rural’. Thereafter decentralisation is located within neoliberalism. Some of the tensions caused by decentralisation in rural education are highlighted. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and some recommendations.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on a desk-top study using secondary data from various literature sources, articles, books, official documents of the South African government and policies from the South African Department of Education. These sources and documents were sourced from the Internet where they are easily accessible. In the reading and analysis of these documents and sources, it was endeavoured as far as possible to adhere to certain ethical considerations. The writers further ensured that the findings were reported honestly, that information was not falsified or fabricated and that any form of plagiarism was avoided.

3. The concept ‘rural’

It is difficult to pinpoint a specific definition for the concept ‘rural’ because of its context specificity. While some view rurality in terms of location or place by considering the proximity between the area and the city, others use demographic factors such as income per capita, population growth rate and size, the distance communities travel to access public services or demography (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012; Glover et al., 2016). The concept of rural is possibly best described by using filters. Ashley and Maxwell (2001) classify ‘rural’ as the following:

- a space where human settlement and infrastructure occupy only a small share of the landscape;
- natural environment dominated by pastures, forests, mountains and deserts;
- settlements of low density (about 5-10,000 persons);
- places where most people work on farms;
- the availability of land at a relatively low cost; and
- a place where activities are affected by a high transaction cost, associated with long distance from cities and poor infrastructure.

According to estimates by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD netFWD, 2019), one out of three children in rural regions in sub-Saharan Africa are out-of-school, with children in these areas having to travel long distances to reach the nearest school. SA has a large rural context, with over one-third of its population living in rural areas (RSA-NDP, 2012). These areas are a product of the South African history of unfair racial and discriminatory policies,

and they are primarily occupied by black South Africans. Hlalele (2012) links SA rural areas directly to apartheid and the colonial policies of dispossession, resettlement and exclusion from opportunities. Rural areas tend not only to be deprived and excluded, but they are also characterised by severe and concentrated poverty (RSA-NDP, 2012). For SA any definition of 'rural' should therefore necessarily take into consideration the impact of apartheid policies which not only dispossessed many people of their land, but which also excluded them from the economy and other opportunities.

SA has a significant rural education context, with 11 252 schools in rural areas (Hall, 2019), of which the majority are in rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. Likewise, conditions in South African rural education are characterised by a lack of necessary physical resources and roads, transport, and information and communication technology, low teacher morale (Baleghizadeh & Gordani, 2012), poor quality teachers, low levels of school visits by educational advisers and low student enrolment with high dropout rates (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). It could therefore be asserted that rural schools have a very low capability to educate their learners effectively. This situation was to be reversed and improved by educational decentralisation which envisioned an improvement in the quality of education by sharing and extending decision-making power and by reducing inequalities (Sayed et al., 2020). However, it seems that in SA, decentralisation did not improve the quality of rural education; rather, it contributed towards an increase in inequality in rural education. This argument is informed by the close link between neoliberalism and decentralisation, and the principles that inform neoliberal education. In the following section education decentralisation is located within neo-liberalism.

4. Decentralisation and neo-liberalism

In general, the concept of decentralisation embraces a variety of meanings, guises and complexities (Mwinjuma et al., 2015). Despite its variations, decentralisation principally concerns the "centre-periphery" and more specifically, a movement from the centre to the periphery (Karlsen, 2000, p.526). For Mwinjuma et al. (2015) and Saunders (2018), it refers to an increase in autonomy and responsibility of lower level entities. McGinn and Welsch (1999) define decentralisation as the transfer of authority and decision-making powers from the central government to provincial, districts, municipalities and schools. As such it encompasses where power and authority are located and who holds responsibility for the decisions emanating from that power. Similarly, in education, decentralisation connotes the transfer of decision-making powers and responsibilities from a central education department to local government and schools (Mwinjuma et al., 2015).

Education decentralisation is rooted within neo-liberal education policy reforms (cf. Giroux in Bessant et al., 2015). These reforms promote decentralised decision making and less direct influence of central government at local level. Promoted by various international financial agencies as a 'one-size-fits-all' remedy to poor quality education and inefficiency, education decentralisation is heralded as "relevant in all contexts, even remote rural areas" (World Bank, 1995:126). This makes it attractive for and positions it as the panacea to all educational challenges experienced in rural communities. Pogge (2010, p. 26) warns against neoliberal

educational reforms promoted by international financial agencies the reform strategies of which “are designed so that they systematically contribute to the persistence of severe poverty” in developing countries in general and in rural areas in particular. Such reforms compel states to transform their education systems according to the logic and rationality of neoliberalism with subsequent negative effects on education.

5. Neo-liberal market rationality and educational decentralisation

Neoliberalism gives prominence to the economy and to the market. Hence, Harvey (2007, p. 2) defines it as a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.” With its liberal democratic principles, neo-liberalism disapproves of a welfare state and public goods (Baez & Sanchez, 2017) because it regards welfare states as the arch enemy of freedom, wanting to govern society, dictate to free individuals, regulate the market, or intervene with (free) individuals’ right to make profits and accumulate wealth (Van der Walt, 2017). It subsequently opposes social democratic values, which amongst others promote equality and equity through the equal and fair distribution of educational resources and equal access to education (Small, 2009). Rather, it promotes the “thinning of the state’s role” (Adams, 2006, p. 9) and a withdrawal of and reduction in the state’s involvement in society.

By enabling the state to operate from a distance, thus decentralisation, neoliberalism enables the state to be released from its socio-political responsibility of providing social goods such as good quality education to all. Rather, this responsibility is conferred onto local communities, structures and business. In the process, neoliberalism disregards structural inequality in society (Angus, 2017; Brathwaite, 2017) and in education, and it relinquishes the state from its responsibility of eradicating and addressing such inequalities. This relegates rural communities which are less capable of providing quality education, to “barren hinterlands coldly and deliberately demarcated by institutional structures to maintain their subjugation” (Maistry, 2014, p.63). In this way, through its policy of decentralisation, neoliberalism ruthlessly impacts the most disadvantaged schools located in poor and low resourced rural areas, without any prospect of improving the quality of education in these areas.

This is despite promises that decentralisation will increase the efficiency and the quality of education (Makara, 2018), respond to local needs (Astiz et al., 2002), give schools more decision-making power (Lee & Samuel, 2020), improve service to communities (Pomuti & Weber, 2014), and enhance stakeholder involvement in the management of school resources (Mwinjuma et al., 2015). That very little of these promises seems to have realised under neoliberal decentralised education systems could be attributed to neoliberalism’s hidden agenda with education decentralisation – which is primarily to “off-load financial responsibilities” (Chang, 2010, p.8). Financial motivations rather than democratic or equity considerations therefore drive decentralisation (Huang et al., 2016). It was also

economic considerations, influenced by SA's macro-economic policy, which played a role in SA's adopting a decentralisation education system.

6. Decentralisation of SA education and the impact on SA rural education

South African macro-economic policy and subsequent education policy changes are informed by neoliberalism (Badat & Sayed, 2014). According to Motala and Pampallis (2005, p.21), SA adopted education decentralisation in order to promote "the ideology of markets and consumer choice and reduce the regional financial burden on central government by sharing it with regional and local authority or parents". To this effect Ndimande (2016) blames current inequalities amongst schools, also those serving rural learners, on the adoption of neoliberal policies.

The SA decentralised education system comprises three spheres of governance – the national, provincial and local government. These spheres are interconnected and interdependent and are concurrently responsible for education governance (RSA, 1996, Schedule 4). As such, these spheres exercise particular responsibilities. The national Department of Basic Education (DBE) is primarily responsible for the development of national policies, to fund education, to set national standards, to monitor compliance with national policy and legislative frameworks and, if need be, to intervene when constitutional or statutory obligations are not fulfilled. Provincial Departments of Education (PEDs) are responsible for financing, controlling and managing provincial schools and for developing relevant policies. Although provinces are autonomous, they exercise their powers within the regulatory framework set by the DBE. At school level, school governing bodies with considerable devolved powers govern schools through context-specific policies that serve the needs of the school community (Teise & Kiel, 2019).

Although education decentralisation in SA was done with the assumption that it would improve the quality of education, conditions in rural education seem not to have improved because the "great majority of children in rural poor communities [still receive] less than is their right [to education]" (Nelson Mandela Foundation [NMF], 2005, p. viii). The reason for this is believed to be located in the tensions that are created by the decentralisation of South African education as a manifestation of the neo-liberal policy positions SA adopted. These tensions exist in relations between the central and provincial governments, between provincial governments and the schools, and among stakeholders within the schools.

Tension between the central and the provincial departments of education

As a national policy, SASA envisions an education system which will
redress past injustices in educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all people's talent and capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism ...protect and advance our diverse cultures and language, uphold the rights of all learners, parents and educators and promote their acceptance

of responsibility for the organization, governance and the funding of schools in partnership with the state (RSA-DoE, 1996a, Preamble).

It plans to realise this vision through a decentralised education system, whereby national and provincial governments “co-operate with one another in mutual trust and good faith by fostering friendly relations; assisting and supporting one another; informing one another of, and consulting one another on, matters of common interest; co-ordinating their actions and legislation with one another” (RSA, 1996, Sec. 41: h: i-iv). As such, it assumes a devolution of power from the central to the provincial education departments (PEDs) and ultimately to the schools (SGBs). While a devolution of power seems consistent with decentralisation, Walker (2002; also cf. Saunders, 2018) maintains that decentralisation implies that resources also be transferred and not only authority and power.

In SA, the funding of education is the primary reason for the poor quality education and the deep-seated inequalities in education. Inequality in education funding during apartheid resulted in whites-only schools receiving significantly more per learner than the poorest black schools (De Waal, 2013). To reverse these inequalities therefore requires a national education funding model that would promote equity and redress. However, it also requires a commitment from and the ability of PEDs to realise equity and redress through the equitable distribution of allocated funds. Sayed et al. (2020) maintain that in SA, discussions about decentralisation in education took place with the view that it would improve equity, efficiency and redress in education. PEDs therefore have a responsibility to ensure that sufficient funds are channelled to rural education.

National government is supposed to “fund schools from public revenue on an equitable basis in order to ensure the proper exercise of the rights of learners to education and the redress of past inequalities in education provision” (RSA-DoE, 1996a, Section 34[1]). The allocation of these funds is currently guided by the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF). Despite criticism against it (Mestry, 2014; Badat & Sayed, 2014), the NNSSF intends to redress social injustices and inequity in South African schools. For this reason, it ranks schools into five different quintiles based on the average income, unemployment rates, and general literacy levels of people within the schools’ feeding and geographical areas (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019). This categorisation assumes that provinces would make available 60 per cent of the available funds and resources to the poorest 40 per cent of learners in schools classified as quintiles one to three schools. As such it allows for an equitable distribution of funds, with those schools serving well-off learners receiving less funding than the schools serving learners from low-income families. It also assumes that rural schools where poverty is concentrated would receive more funds than urban schools.

However, the decentralisation of SA education creates what Sayed and Soudien (2005, p.117) call an “ambiguity”, which negatively impacts on the allocation of funds. This is because provincial governments and their departments are autonomous entities, and decisions on the allocation and the spending of funds

from national government are the responsibility of the provincial governments and departments (RSA-DoE, 2006, Section 33). This autonomy is acknowledged by the National Education Policy Act (RSA-DoE, 1996c, Section 3[2]) which requires from the DBE to “take into account the competence of the provincial legislature...” in the management and allocation of funds. Within this decentralised system, the national DBE therefore only plays an oversight and monitoring role in provincial funding. Therefore, whilst the national DBE lays down funding guidelines through the NNSF, it has no guarantee that rural education will be sufficiently funded or even funded at all. This is because it does not manage these funds at provincial level. Within this context, central government’s power to interfere in how provinces manage their allocated funds is severely curbed, and its vision of a transformed national education system is exclusively subjected to the favour of PEDs. Since funds from national government, which are intended to realise national equity and redress targets in rural education, might never reach rural education the national DBEs constitutional duty and responsibility, to “safeguard the right to education of all South Africans” (RSA-DoE, 2006, Section 34), is jeopardised. In this way, education decentralisation results in a blurring of lines between the roles and expectations of the national DBE and those of the PED. This hampers the capability of the former to deliver on national equity and equality targets.

Tension between the PED and the school

As the second sphere, PEDs are supposed to strengthen decentralisation by establishing sound relationships with and support and assist rural schools. However, indications are that relationships between some PEDs and rural schools are at times not conducive to this collaboration.

Findings from the NMF (2005) suggest that in most cases provincial offices are not supportive, and that officials respond negatively and rudely when approached by rural schools. Rural schools also feel that they are not getting the necessary support from the PED (Public Service Commission [PSC], 2015). In addition, provincial officials tend to be remote, not accessible, unfriendly and cold towards rural schools and their principals, and they hardly visit these schools (NMF, 2005; PSC, 2015). The lack of support from PEDs is also evident in the lack of empathy they display when they call rural educators into workshops, leaving these schools without contingency plans for learners (NMF, 2005). These conditions inevitably result in negative perceptions and feelings towards PEDs. One would assume that, given their context, PEDs would be aware of and be sensitive to the conditions in rural schools and that rural schools, which are fundamentally under-resourced, would benefit from all the assistance that they can get from the PEDs.

In addition, there are indications that officials in PEDs lack knowledge and skills in school financial management (Giese et al., 2009), and that some PEDs consistently perform unsatisfactorily in their use of the budget from the DBE. These PEDs have ongoing problems with the distribution of resources to schools (Sayed et al., 2013) and newly elected SGBs are hardly trained on their powers and their responsibilities (Tsoetsi et al., 2008). These issues are problematic, especially as principals and SGBs of rural schools do not always seem to have the capabilities to manage schools’ funds themselves. The perceived inability of PEDs to

strengthen decentralisation and to effectively perform their duties impacts negatively on education in rural areas, fuelling perceptions that rural schools are a low priority to PEDs.

Tensions at school level

From the provinces, governance power is further devolved to SGBs comprising a majority of parents at school level. Therefore, through the SGBs, parents possess considerable powers to govern schools through managing school funds, developing policies, interpreting and implementing national policies, maintaining schools and infrastructure and recommending the employment of educators and additional staff (Xaba, 2011). The devolution of power to SGBs is supposed “to grow great relationship[s] between the school and communities” (Van Wyk, 2007, p. 132). Moreover, it is expected to improve the quality of rural education. This assumes that SGBs have the capability to exercise their powers.

However, effective governance and the ability of SGBs in SA rural schools to exercise their powers are hampered by various challenges. According to the PSC (2015), the NMF (2005) and Xaba (2011), some SGBs in rural schools are dysfunctional and challenged in their capacity to govern or engage in governance matters, and they play a limited role in governing schools and executing their powers (Sayed et al., 2020). Research by Mohapi and Netshitangani (2018) suggests that illiteracy amongst the parental component of SGBs limits their effectiveness and the extent to which they can actually govern their schools. Maile (2002) regards the illiteracy among the parent component of SGBs in rural schools as one possible factor which contributes to their inefficiency. Xaba (2011) reiterates claims that SGBs, particularly those in less advantaged areas, do not have the required knowledge, skills or experience to exercise their governing powers. This is confirmed by Khuzwayo and Chikoko (2009) when stating that their “commonly low levels of education and unfamiliarity with governance matters” also prevent parent-governors from executing their functions. Illiteracy, especially amongst rural communities, results in a lack of confidence and it precludes parents from accessing relevant information, severely impairing their ability to make contributions to the governance of the school. It is the impact of illiteracy on the functioning of SGBs that prompted Heystek and Nyambi (2007) to express reservations about the allocation of decision-making powers to schools in areas where there are high rates of adult illiteracy.

Sibanda (2017) also alludes to the fact that parents feel marginalised and that they are hampered by principals in the execution of their governance functions. Illiteracy amongst parents creates conducive conditions for an abuse of power by teachers and principals who marginalise, undermine and dominate SGBs by taking critical governance decisions on issues that fall within the decision-making powers of the SGB. As a result, SGBs struggle to govern their schools and to execute their roles, responsibilities and decision-making powers in accordance with the demands of their context. Under these conditions, SGBs opt rather to transfer their decision-making powers to the principal (Mohapi & Netshitangani, 2018). Khuzwayo and Chikoko (2009) deplore this situation and

describe parents in SGBs as “very ineffective and [who] play minute roles in discussion-making”.

Tension in rural schools is further created by the role of chiefs and traditional leaders in these schools. Chiefs and traditional leaders are integral to and they enjoy significant power within rural communities. Owing to their position within the community, they are also integral to the governance of rural schools. However, their involvement in rural schools poses particular challenges to decentralisation, the locus of control and on the power of SGBs. The NMF (2005) claims that chiefs wield authority and power which contribute towards the marginalisation of parents in SGBs. This silences parents and leaves them without any governance power. With power centred primarily in the principal, teachers and chiefs, the power that parents exert in governing rural schools can at best and rightfully be described as “ceremonial” (NMF, 2005, p.120).

7. Discussion

In SA, the decentralisation of education and the subsequent devolution of decision-making power from central to provincial government, and ultimately to school governance structures is premised on the assumption that decentralisation will improve the quality of education. However, in rural education decentralisation seem to have caused certain tensions and anomalies. These tensions have failed not only rural education, but they have failed to redress the social inequalities and social injustices which decentralisation was supposed to address. Badat and Sayed (2014) confirm that decentralisation in South Africa has contributed to inequalities in public (rural) schools and that it has exacerbated rather than reduced educational inequity. Decentralisation subsequently created a two-tier public education system with one tier consisting of relatively well-resourced urban schools and the other comprising poorly resourced, neglected, marginalised and over-looked rural schools. Moreover, it also contributed towards urban schools improving and the already disadvantaged rural education becoming even worse off (Galiani et al., 2008).

The failure of decentralisation to achieve its intended outcomes could be linked to its close proximity to neoliberalism. Neo-liberalism uses decentralisation to govern schools within a paradigm of cold, distal and clinical business rules (Angus, 2017). As such, it creates an educational orientation that is in sharp contrast to the view of education as a liberating force, a public good and a public service for the liberation of human beings and the betterment of society (Giroux, 2009). It also fails in leading rural learners towards living a life rich in social significance (Nussbaum in Maistry, 2014). Moreover, it creates an educational perspective that does not enhance humanity or social justice in education.

Mindful of its responsibility to eradicate injustices, the national DBE promulgated the NNSSF with the aim of facilitating equitable funding for education. Given its historic underdevelopment, rural education is supposed to be funded in an equitable manner. Badat and Sayed (2014, p.141) are of the opinion that “without well-funded and effectively targeted equity measures, equality of opportunity for students (largely black) from working-class and impoverished rural social

backgrounds will continue to be severely compromised". It has been noted that decentralisation limited the effectiveness of the NNSSF in addressing past injustices in education funding, and that it subsequently contributed towards the plight of rural education. It has also been noted how context-specific factors such as the roles of chiefs and the illiteracy of parents negatively impacted on decentralisation, rendering it ineffective – at least within rural contexts. It is thus fair to conclude that the policy of decentralisation is a stumbling block in realising effective and quality education in rural areas. While it is assumed that a new policy would improve practice, there seems to be no guarantee that it would. This is especially true when the (rural) context in which policy implementation takes place, as well as those responsible for policy implementation (rural communities) are not taken into consideration. Under such conditions, policy aimed at improving and transforming a situation and at realising equity and equality may ultimately obstruct the realisation of these aims and objectives. Policy decisions, such as the adoption of a neoliberal policy orientation and the subsequent decentralisation of SA education, should therefore have been taken with due regard for and sensitivity to the realities of the South African rural context and those of rural education. With decentralisation being rooted in neo-liberalism one cannot ignore the view of Bottery (2004, p.94), namely that neo-liberalism is anti-egalitarian, and that it variously contributes to "crippling the learning organisation" or in this case, rural education in SA.

8. Conclusion

Decentralisation is promoted as the panacea to all the challenges education systems are facing in developing countries in particular. With this desktop paper the plight of rural education under neoliberal decentralisation has been highlighted as well as demonstrating that decentralisation might not be a relevant response to the plight of rural education. Ndimande (2016) claims that under apartheid, South African education played a major role in creating social inequalities and poverty. This paper postulates that with its decentralised education system, the current government is sustaining inequality and increasing poverty in rural communities. In order to turn the tide in rural education, it is therefore necessary to acknowledge that provincial autonomy might not be realised in all provinces in the country, and that poorly resourced rural provinces might need to have tighter central control and monitoring. It is also necessary to acknowledge that rural areas in general but rural schools in particular have problems unique to them which require systemic efforts and creative solutions to solve them (Dieltiens, 2008). The SA rural context is a fairly under-researched area. While awareness and research about the rural context is increasing, much still needs to be done to raise consciousness about rurality and education within the rural context in particular. The contribution this paper makes is in adding towards the increased number of voices that highlight the plight of rural education in an effort to improve it. Moreover, it also adds to the many voices that are critical of neoliberalism and its impact on education in general, and on rural education in particular.

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