# Rural Support Experience of Student-Teachers in South Africa: The Need for Supportive Infrastructures and Language Teaching

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**Abstract**

Rural communities in South Africa have various inadequacies and a lack of social support systems for the people and their inhabitants. Experiences and observations showed that the majority of the student-teachers in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa undergo their teaching practice activities in one or two rural locations, which led to many of them having to suffer from a lack of support and social amenities in their place of teaching practice. This study explores student-teachers experiences, ranging from the challenges and opportunities available for them during the program. Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach was used to underpin the study. The study falls within the transformative paradigm, and participatory research was used to design the study. Convenient sampling was used to select ten student-teachers posted to rural locations for their teaching practice within the Eastern Cape province. Reflection was used to elicit data from the participants, and the data were analysed thematically. The study found that inadequate resources and social amenities, and language barriers are challenges encountered by the student-teachers. The study also found that the provision of supportive infrastructures and the intensification of Language teaching is imminent among rural learners. Hence, the study concludes with recommendations for the provision of supportive infrastructures and the intensification of language teaching as solutions to assist student teachers in rural teaching practice.

**Keywords:** rurality, rural support experience, student teachers, ABCD, Transformation

## 1. Introduction

Inadequacies and lack of social support systems are prevalent in South Africa's rural communities. The challenges that the people of these rural areas face are many and varied, but some of the most pressing issues include access to clean water, education, health care, and employment (Hove et al., 2019; Edokpayi et al., 2018; Vergunst et al., 2017). These challenges are compounded by the fact that these communities are often located in remote areas, far from urban centres where these services are more readily available. As a result, the people of rural South Africa often suffer from poverty and social exclusion (Burger et al., 2010; Du Toit, 2004). While there have been some efforts to address these issues, much more needs to be done to improve the lives of the people living in these communities because these communities have often been seen as places to be avoided. However, there is now a growing recognition of the potential that these communities have to offer. This is particularly true in the field of agriculture. With the right support, rural communities have the potential to become centres of excellence for agricultural production and provide a much-needed boost to the economy (Qin et al., 2022). In addition, providing the right support could help break the cycle of poverty and crime that has been so damaging to these communities (Obi et al., 2012).

The Compulsory Teaching Practice (CTP) is a key component of teacher education in South Africa. Under the CTP, student teachers are placed in schools where they are observed and assessed by their university lecturers. The CTP is mandated by the Department of Education and must be passed in order to qualify for teacher certification (Heeralal & Bayaga, 2011; Leke-ateh et al., 2013). Although the CTP is compulsory, it has come under criticism from some quarters. One of the main problems with the CTP is that it is often conducted in an environment with little resemblance to the actual working conditions of a teacher. This can make it difficult for student teachers to transfer what they have learned during the CTP to their future classrooms. In addition, the CTP can be stressful and time-consuming, which can detract from the overall quality of the teacher education programme (Boadu, 2014). Despite these criticisms, the CTP remains an important part of teacher education in South Africa, and it continues to play a vital role in preparing future teachers for the challenges they will face in the classroom.

The researchers' experiences show that most of the student-teachers in the Eastern Cape province undergo their teaching practices in one or two rural locations, which led to many of them having to suffer from a lack of support and social amenities during the programme. These difficulties included a lack of essential resources such as water and electricity and inadequate transportation and communication infrastructure (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). As a result, many student-teachers could not cope with their teaching practice activities or were forced to remain in the place until the appointed time (Mukeredzi & Mandrona, 2013). This could have a negative impact on their studies,

as well as their future careers. The situation is improving as the universities seem to provide more support for rural student-teachers. In addition, new initiatives are being developed to improve the quality of teacher training in the country. With these measures in place, it is hoped that more student-teachers will be able to complete their teaching practice activities and have successful careers in education, irrespective of the location they find their teaching jobs.

These challenges also affect the mobility of university lecturers who are unfamiliar with the local terrain. Most especially those lecturers with linguistics barriers found it difficult to navigate the rural locations as many of them are located in "deep rural areas". One of the researchers experienced these challenges as a lecturer meant to assess student-teachers during their teaching practice programme in Eastern Cape province. The majority of the locations could not be navigated using Google Maps, and language problems hindered interactions with local community people for directions. However, this is to argue that the locations are within what could be called "deep rural areas" with limited social and educational support systems for the teachers. The researchers' experience showed that schools even assigned more workload to the student-teachers because of low human resource capacity. Some of the students are also found in combined schools where they have to teach grades 1, 2, and 3 in the same class, using the same teaching boards and resources, which indicates that many of these schools lack adequate physical and material resources. This is evidenced in the argument that rural schools and communities in South Africa suffer from inadequate physical resources, such as buildings and classrooms, and material resources, such as teaching aids, among others (Taole & Mncube, 2012). This calls for the communities to remain steadfast in emancipating themselves. Therefore, the place of an Asset-Based Community Development approach is imminent.

*1.1 Theoretical Framework*

The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach has its origin in the work of John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann in the 1980s (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1990) in their quest for self and community reliance, which has been used extensively in community development work. The ABCD approach is built on the premise that communities have untapped assets which can be used to address their problems and bring about positive change (Boyd et al., 2008; Ennis & West, 2010; Haines, 2014). The ABCD approach has been used in various settings, including urban neighbourhoods and rural villages (Forrester et al., 2020; Kobayashi et al., 2020). This study uses the ABCD approach to examine the feasibility of using community assets to develop a community-based support system for student teachers. Given the current interest in student teachers posted to local communities, the communities here could be regarded as the school stakeholders and the schools' locality to which they were posted.

ABCD is a strengths-based approach to community development that builds on the assets and strengths of individuals, families, organisations, and communities (Blickem et al., 2018; Yeneabat & Butterfield, 2012). Its aim is to empower communities by identifying and mobilising their assets and resources (Ware, 2013). The ABCD approach has been successfully implemented in a variety of contexts, including schools. Schools are often seen as places of deficits where students are not meeting academic standards or are not behaving properly. However, the ABCD approach allows schools to focus on their strengths and assets, such as the teachers, staff, parents, and students who make up the school community (Forrester et al., 2020; Myende, 2015). This shift in focus can lead to more positive outcomes for students, as they feel valued and supported by their school community. Asset-based community development is an important tool for educators interested in creating more equitable and inclusive schools. It is an approach that has been shown to improve academic achievement and social-emotional learning for all students (Forrester et al., 2020; Fortner et al., 2021), perhaps because it emphasises the strengths and potentials of individuals and communities rather than their deficits.

The underlying philosophy of this approach is that most individuals and communities have more strengths than they realise, and by mobilising these strengths, they can achieve their development goals. This philosophy is particularly relevant to the challenges of student-teachers who are currently undergoing the teaching practice programme. The programme can be quite demanding and stressful, and it is important for the student-teachers to have a supportive network to fall back on. Therefore, ABCD can help to create such a support system by mobilising the strengths and resources of the community to provide assistance and guidance to the student-teachers. In doing so, it can play an essential role in ensuring the success of the teaching practice programme. Based on this, the study explores the challenges and opportunities available for the student-teachers in rural places of teaching practices towards recommending the possible transformative strategies needed to assist student-teachers posted to rural locations in the future.

*1.2 Research Objectives*

Based on the above problem and the focus of the study, the following research objectives were raised to guide the study:

- The study examines the challenges faced by student-teachers in rural places of teaching practice.
- The study investigates opportunities available to ameliorate the challenges.

## 2. Methodology

This section discusses the methods adopted to implement the study. This includes the research paradigm and approach, the research design and participants, the selected participants and instrumentation—lastly, the method of data analysis and ethical considerations were discussed.

*2.1 Research Paradigm and Approach*

The study adopts a transformative paradigm to lens the study. The transformative paradigm is concerned with understanding how power

relationships shape interactions and experiences and the need to challenge dominant forces to achieve social change (Jackson et al., 2018; Mertens, 2007). This approach has been particularly useful in studies that aim to improve the lives of marginalised groups which is why it becomes relevant to this study, and the study intends to transform the rural experience of the student teachers into a good teaching practice experience. This is implemented using a qualitative research approach. The qualitative research approach is designed to help researchers better understand their subjects through open-ended and interactive communication (Alase, 2017; Teherani et al., 2015). However, this approach can take many forms, but all strongly emphasise the researcher's interaction with participants (Alase, 2017). However, it is often seen as more flexible and personal than other types of research, as it allows researchers to adjust their methods to get the most accurate results (Bouncken et al., 2021). Such flexibility accommodates interaction through face-to-face interviews, focus groups, or participant observation (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). In the case of this study, interaction in the form of reflection was used to elicit data.

*2.2 Research Design and Participants*

The study adopts a participatory research design. This design allows the researchers to jointly find solutions to problems alongside the people facing the problem (Leavy, 2017). The participatory research process is interactive, fluid, and non-hierarchical, providing an opportunity for all voices to be heard (Macaulay et al., 1999). This type of research has been used successfully in various fields, including education, health, community development, and environmental protection (Israel et al., 2005; Lewis et al., 2006; Tapp et al., 2013). The participatory research design offers many advantages, including building trust and rapport with participants, gathering accurate and timely data, and identifying potential solutions that are responsive to the community's needs. Therefore, the participants involved in the study were given the opportunity to assess the problem and the possible solutions to their problem. These participants include the student-teachers that were posted to rural locations for their teaching practice. They are all university students at the time of their programme. Five of them were level 2 students, and another five were level 3 students in a particular university.

*2.3 Selection of Participants and Instrumentation*

Convenient sampling technique was used to select the participants of the study. This type of sampling is done by selecting people who are readily available and willing to take part in the research (Han et al., 2021). The main advantage of this method is that it is quick and easy to do. This is important because the researchers were given access to the students, but many of them are busy reporting the outcome of their programme. We were able to select those that were available and the continents to be reached at the time of the study. However, all of them have the needed information because they all attended the teaching practice at a rural location or the other. Reflection was used to elicit information from the participants. That is, they were asked to reflect on two major issues that may be applicable to them during their teaching practice. This includes if or not their places of teaching practice supported them in achieving their aims and the challenges they faced. The instrument further makes them reflect on the possible solutions to the challenges and lack of support they experienced. Using reflection as a method to collect the data enables the participants to be pure out of their minds by reflecting on all the experiences they have. On the other hand, this method enables the relationships between the participants and the researchers to be cordial without any power-relation issues.

*2.4 Method of Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data from the reflections. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be used to analyse written transcripts from interview responses and topics, from personal experiences to social issues (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This method involves identifying common themes that emerge from the data and organising them into categories (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). However, six steps of doing thematic analysis by Brown and Clarke (2006) was adopted. These include familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and developing the analysis. These steps were adequately followed in making sense of the data.

*2.5 Ethical Considerations*

It is important to ensure that all ethical processes are followed when conducting research (Etherington, 2007). This includes seeking the consent of participants and ensuring that their rights are respected. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals who participated in the research. This means they were made aware of all aspects of the study, including its purpose, procedures, and possible risks and benefits. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw from the study at any time. All these steps are essential to protect the participants' rights and ensure that the research is conducted ethically. Most importantly, their identities were protected throughout the study and represented with codes during the data analysis. That is, the participant was represented with ST1, ST2, ST3, ST4...ST10.

## 3. Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section presents the data alongside the study's findings, which were done in line with the study's objectives. Each objective forms a theme, and each team has two sub-themes. Objective one was to examine the challenges faced by student-teachers in rural places of teaching practices with sub-themes such as inadequate resources and social amenities and barriers in the language of instruction. Objective two was to investigate the opportunities available to ameliorate the challenges with the following sub-themes; provision of supportive infrastructures and language teaching intensification. See the bellow table.

Table 1. Data analysis

| Objectives | | Themes | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Examining the challenges faced by student-teachers in rural places of teaching practices. | 1. | Inadequate resources and social amenities |
| | | **2.** | Barriers in the language of instruction |
| 3. | Investigating the opportunities available to ameliorate the challenges. | 1. | Provision of supportive infrastructures |
| | | 2. | Language teaching intensification |

*3.1 Objective 1, Theme 1: Inadequate Resources and Social Amenities*

From the data collected, it was obvious that there are a lot of challenges confronting student teachers who are doing their teaching practice in rurally located communities across the selected province in South Africa. Among these challenges is the issue of inadequate resources and social amenities. This is evidenced in the below extractions:

> **ST 1:** *"In the location I stayed, there are very limited computer resources which affect our relationships with the university during the practice".*

> **ST7:** *"The school I practised is not in a deep rural area, but there are no resources such as printers and open computers to print documents. We have to go as far as 5km to get things done".*

> **ST9:** *"Firstly, the school need to improve its infrastructure, that school have an electricity problem, and that is disadvantageous to the teaching and learning process".*

Participant ST1 lamented that limited computer resources disallowed them from communicating with the university during the programme. In the same vein, the ST7 also confirm that though the location is not that rural, they still lack electronic resources such as printers to make their work effective. In the statement of ST9, the issue of electricity is a problem and makes teaching and learning ineffective. Apart from the teaching and computer resources, transportation is also a problem, as indicated by S10 below:

> **ST10:** *Learners take time to understand what they are being taught, and some students become upset just because they are far from school or didn't make time to reach school early. Some will be left behind by their transport s as they live far from the school."*

> **ST3:** *"The most effective is the scarcity of water in my area, and during the days where there is no water, the learner's attendance becomes very poor, so it's difficult to continue the lesson with just a few learners present".*

> **ST4:** *"Most of the time, I will be indoors because there is no centre or facility that could attract me. I only leave the house when I am going to school or to the shop, and the shops are far, in the town nearby, but people around me are nice, I'd say".*

From the expression of the ST3, the availability of water in the rurally located communities and the schools around is inadequate, leading to poor attendance among learners and obstructing the lessons because only a few learners are present. On the other hand, the statement of ST4 also confirms that the communities lack social facilities such as supermarkets where people can easily buy things.

Based on the above, the study found that one of the challenges student-teachers face in rural teaching practice is inadequate resources and social amenities. A study by Owoeye and Yara (2011) argued that one of the challenges faced by student teachers in rural places of teaching practice is inadequate resources. Elibariki (2014) also supports this study, which found that rurally located schools are short of infrastructural materials for teaching and learning. As such, it is evident that there is a need for more investment in rural education to provide adequate resources and social amenities for both teachers and students.

*3.2 Objective 1, Theme 2: Barrier in the Language of Instruction*

According to the data collected, another challenge faced by student teachers who were posted to rural locations is language barer among the learners. The language barrier in this context is that the learners are struggling to speak English and/or understand lessons delivered in English, which is the language of instruction. The below transcripts support the claims.

> **ST2:** *"What I faced with the students was that I had to teach them in Xhosa even if something needed to be taught in English, for example, mathematics, and they did not have enough resources to teach them it was difficult".*

> **ST5:** *"I haven't faced any challenges at my school. Almost everything is perfectly done besides having some of the learners that are unable to write and speak or write English".*

> **ST8:** *" I teach grades 8 and 10; they were struggling to speak English every time I set a test, I had to interpret it to Isixhosa for them to understand".*

The statement from ST2 above confirms that the learners find it difficult to relate, communicate and or listen to English lessons, which made the participant use an indigenous language (Xhosa language). This, according to the participant, is also tough to interpret some mathematical concepts in the indigenous language. The statement from ST5 also indicated that the only problem she faces is that the learners cannot speak and write in English. This is also supported by the statement of ST8 that grade 8 and 10 learners struggle to speak

English, which makes the student-teacher translate or interpret tests in the Xhosa language to enable the learners to understand.

Based on the analysis, the study found that one of the challenges student-teachers face in rural locations is language barriers among learners, making it difficult for them to effectively discharge their duties. A recent study also found that learners in rural schools have a low English proficiency level, making it difficult for them to read and write (Casale & Posel, 2011). This is in consonance with another study that found that the level of English usage among learners in rural schools is lower than that of learners in urban schools (Talif & Edwin, 2017). Therefore, the findings suggest that more effort is needed to improve English usage among learners in rural schools.

*3.3 Objective 2, Theme 1: Provision of Supportive Infrastructures*

Based on the objectives indicated above, the study sorts to provide possible solutions to the challenges faced by the student-teachers in rural locations. Hence, one of the possible solutions that the participants proposed was to ensure adequate provision of supportive infrastructures. The statements below are suggestions from the participants:

> **ST1:** *"ensuring that all teaching materials, facilities, and computers are in places with better connections/ This will enable us to prepare for lessons earlier, find adaptive strategies to blend in and make the most of the unfortunate situation, improvise, reach out to educators and not being afraid to ask for help and guidance".*

> **ST2:** *"...because students are lazy when they get to the upper classes as a result of lack of materials, and government must make sure that all the schools in the villages have effective learning materials."*

> **ST3:** *"I think it would be best to advise parents on ways to preserve water so that their children could continue living normal lives during water cuts."*

From participant ST1, agitation was made to that the respective authorities make sure that all the needed academic, social, and physical resources should be available in the rurally located schools to ease their teaching practice activities. The statement of tat government also corroborates this must make sure that "*all the schools in the villages have effective learning materials".* In the opinion of participant ST3, the issue of water could be dealt with by the parent by providing potable water for the children whenever there is no water in the schools. This also supports the idea of ABCD, which indicates that there are solutions to every problem within the same community by the people facing the problem (Haines, 2014).

According to the research, one of the solutions to the challenges of student-teachers in rural places is adequate provision of supportive infrastructures. This means that rurally located schools should be given enough resources for teaching and learning, such as textbooks, laboratory equipment, and computers (Mentz et al., 2012). The researchers argue that this would help student-teachers become more effective in their jobs and better meet their students' needs. This is in line with other studies that have found that infrastructure plays a key role in supporting teaching and learning in rural areas (Murillo & Román, 2011). Ensuring that schools have adequate resources will help improve the quality of education in rural areas and make sure that student-teachers can meet their students' needs.

*3.4 Objective 2, Theme 2: Language Teaching Intensification*

According to the participants, another solution is the intensification of language teaching; that is, the use of language in speaking and writing should be made important in the classrooms. This will enable the learners to get used to it and make teaching learning easy for the student teachers. See the below statements:

> **ST2:** *"I think the department of education should try as much as possible so that the schools in the villages also teach the children the English language so that their education can have a bright future…"*

> **ST5:** *"providing more reading books for all languages would really assist the learners in improving. As a student, you just need to be self-motivated and try to overcome your weaknesses".*

> **ST10:** *"To attend to the problem of language in the schools, as a teacher, I have to repeat my lessons until they understand them, give some familiar examples in both local and English language etc."*

The statement of ST2 suggests that the Department of Education (DoE) should create an atmosphere for rigorous English language teaching among rural learners. In the same argument, ST5 also suggests that reading more books for all languages, including the English language, would assist the learner in gaining confidence in using the English language. The participant also urges the learners to be self-motivated in learning to enable overcome language weaknesses. From the statement of ST10, one could see that teachers, including student-teachers, also have a role to play in making sure that learners learn during classroom activities. This also supports the argument of ABCD that there is an asset within communities capable of solving community problems without external interference (Ennis & West, 2010). Hence both teachers and students have roles to play.

The study found that there is a need to intensify more efforts by both government and the schools in teaching and learning of English language among rural learners to enhance effective teaching in classrooms. This is in consonance with the study by Castro and Villafuerte (2019), which posits that there is a need to improve English teaching in rural schools. The abovementioned finding equally buttresses the claim by Holguín and Morales (2016) that for learners to be competent in the English language, there is a need for intensification of efforts by all stakeholders.

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored challenges and solutions available for the student-teachers posted to rural places of teaching practices with the intention of possible transformative strategies needed to assist student-teachers posted to rural locations in the future. Based on this, the study finds out that student teachers are faced with inadequate resources, social amenities, and barriers in the language of instruction among learners. In the quest for a solution, the study also found out that there is a need for the provision of supportive infrastructures and the intensification of Language teaching among rural learners. Hence, the study concludes that inadequate resources, social amenities, and language barriers are challenges hindering effective teaching practice experiences among student-teachers. On the other hand, the study concludes that the provision of supportive infrastructures and the intensification of Language teaching are solutions that could be explored to assist student teachers in rural communities. Based on this, the following recommendations were made:

- The government and schools' authorities, alongside the communities, should ensure adequate supportive facilities for the student-teachers in their respective schools by exploring the internal and community assets available and inviting external assistance if needed.

- Both government and its agencies, teachers and students should fulfil their respective roles in ensuring that rural learners are exposed to English language usage in rural schools. Therefore, more efforts should be made by both government and schools to ensure that English language is well taught and learnt among rural learners to make them competent users of the language. When this is done, it will go a long way in ensuring effective teaching and learning in rural classrooms.

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