



1

Rurality in Higher Education in Zimbabwe: Access, Participation and, Achievement

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Introduction

The quest for a parity of access, participation and success by all in higher education is threatened by the uneven distribution of resources. The Zimbabwean society is largely binarised and fragmented into categories of the privileged and the marginalised and/or underprivileged. Among the marginalised are those socially and structurally situated in rural areas: with rurality in underdeveloped Africa associated with impoverishment, reification and essentialisation. Rural schools in Zimbabwe are under-resourced in terms of critically skilled personnel, infrastructure and technology. In this chapter, we theorise and problematise rurality as an

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privileged or non-privileged status (Writer 2008), given the plight of rural students as predicated on their geographical situatedness.

In a bid to disrupt social injustices and unconscionable segregatory and discriminatory tendencies and practices which could be structurally sanctioned, we also reflect on possible ameliorative measures to ensure safe landing into higher education by students from culturally, materially and technologically disadvantaged settings. We also cautiously explore the matter mindful of the temptation to overglorify disadvantage and thus play into the deficit construction of the marginalised. We thus consider mitigatory measures where rural feeder institutions are adequately funded and properly resourced to match the technological and skills and demands characterising higher education. We also explore the emancipatory vision of education where the marginalised and the educators serving them should join forces in pursuit of the practice of freedom despite their situatedness considering that rurality may not necessarily amount to a deficit. For their part, institutions of higher learning could put up bridging programmes to equip the deprived with requisite skills and competencies demanded in their subsequent degree studies. The responsiveness of many an institution of higher learning to the plight of such cases is critical if students from disadvantaged backgrounds are to be allowed not only equal access, but equality of participation and success in higher education.

We begin the chapter by conceptualising and customising rurality in the Zimbabwean context. We proceed to theorise and problematise rurality as it relates to the plight of prospective college students who are in high school. While reflecting on the perceived challenges associated with rurality and preparedness for higher education, we also explore possible survival strategies the socially disadvantaged can exploit despite their situatedness. We thus discuss possible solutions to the puzzle as lying with individuals and communities concerned, as well as institutions – both high schools and universities – and educators and those from the remote areas of the country.

exclusion, change or universalisation and hegemonisation of dominant cultures (Leibowitz 2017). Thus rurality implies a category and set of experiences (Moreland et al. 2003, p. 56) where the concerned are socially, economically and geographically marginalised. Rurality therefore refers to the condition of being rural, a condition which connotes deprivation, and social disadvantage. Although distinguishing between rural and remote rural is difficult (Randall et al. 2015), rurality can also be construed in terms of remoteness from major centres of population (Hayes and Bentham 1982). It tends to be conceptualised as physical space associated with various forms of exclusion, deficit and need. In the sphere of education, many stereotypes such as unsophisticated, low-level intellectual capacity and rearward nature of rural learners and their lack of knowledge regarding technological gadgets are used to express what rurality and rural education entail (Myende and Chikoko 2014). There are a number of variables and/or indices that are used to distinguish between ruralness and urbanness and these include, among others, population density, distance from urban centre, household amenities, provision and accessibility of services (Cloke 1977).

Rurality in the Zimbabwean Context

The idea of rurality in the Zimbabwean context is steeped in the colonial history of the country. The Land Tenure Act of 1979, which saw the creation of the Tribal Trust Lands and 'reserves' with the black majority being removed from the prime land and allocated space on relatively unproductive land where they were crowded: all this being done to create space for the colonisers. Some blacks were allocated small scale commercial farms in areas other than the prime agricultural regions, where conditions are comparatively less favourable for high productivity: which do not make up part of Zimbabwe's prime land, thus remaining effectively as good as rural areas. The rural base expanded at independence with the land resettlement programme where blacks were placed in some planned settlements purportedly to allow for improved provision of essential social services such as health education, transport, water, and shopping centres, among others. The situation moved from bad to worse with the

to the perceived underachievement of concerned cases or could there be other intervening variables? How can the perceived and actual hurdles associated with rurality be addressed to ensure parity of participation (Fraser 2009) by students from rural areas upon entry at university? These and other relevant ideas are the issues under spotlight in this chapter.

We thus proceed to interrogate rurality as a determinant of either success or lack of it in education, particularly how it impacts or compromises high school graduands' readiness and/or preparedness for university education. In the next section we reflect on the plight of students in rural secondary schools, considering their challenges, actual and/or perceived and/or possibility of opportunities.

The Plight of Rural High School Students: Challenges and Opportunities

In the Zimbabwean context, high schools are relatively fewer in rural areas than is the case with urban areas. Students travel long distances to get to school (Nyagura 1993). In most cases the curriculum is restrictive and barely accommodating of multiple students' orientation. This is acute, particularly where it involves science subjects and when the nation is advocating STEM as rural students are crowded out from participation because of the dearth of appropriate infrastructure. Most rural secondary schools do not have laboratories to allow for effective teaching of STEM subjects (Dekeza and Kufakunesu 2017). Thus in the case of rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe, the actual environment makes it extremely difficult for the students to succeed (Berliner 2004). Poverty is a major problem affecting rural secondary schools in developing countries (Harber and Davies 2006): and Zimbabwe is no exception. The dearth of critical resources compromises the opportunities of rural students to, for example, pursue the disciplines they prefer most. The students are thus channelled into areas which do not necessarily reflect their intellectual bent and aptitude.

In terms of access to some potentially rewarding university programmes, they are thus technically excluded when they finally enrol at

2012). As a result, most teachers are either underqualified or unqualified and often barely motivated, thereby adversely affecting the quality of instruction: hence education in rural Zimbabwe lags behind educational development in other parts of the country (Majongwe 2013), and yet the majority of black Zimbabweans live in the rural settings (Chikoko 2006). Although the demography may have shifted with increased rural to urban migration, the situation remains critical and demanding of ameliorative measures.

The problem of staffing may have been neutralised by the economic challenges where the country has produced more graduates who find teaching as the only field of employment available. However, such a scenario is not healthy as most of these caretaker teachers are barely equipped in terms of pedagogical skills and learner management: their commitment to the service and/or professionalism is not only suspect but egregious. Such a scenario exacerbates the situation of disadvantaged rural student, diminishing their bandwidth and chances of competing for place and success at university. This contributes to a restrictive curriculum.

The staffing challenge could also be mitigated if teachers in rural areas are supported and incentivised (Monk 2007; Redding and Walberg 2012). Engaging the communities in a bid to transform the long-held practices allays the fears and suspicion of the teachers as outsiders imposing their own will on the locals allows for improved relations between the institutions (Carlson et al. 2002). This calls for visionary leadership on the part of the school spearheading the engagement. However, ineffective leadership has been observed to be a major stumbling block in the realisation of success on the part of rural secondary schools (Ncube 2014). With effective leadership, the rural secondary schools would rely heavily on resources available in the community (Redding and Walberg 2012): tapping the natural resources, the form of wealth available, for example, fees to be paid in the form of on-land produce and livestock. The school would either convert the material into cash or assist the community in marketing the products. The approach may go a long way in developing both the school and the community, thus allowing for the retention of the quality teaching personnel through improved infrastructural provisions, procurement of appropriate equipment, and as a result, improved instruction. We observe, however, that communities differ and thus

reflects on the state of preparedness of students hailing from a rural background.

State of Preparedness for University Education

In this section our debate focuses on the following topical questions:

1. In what way are students from rural high schools inadequately prepared for university education compared to their urbanised counterparts?
2. What is the effect of students' rurality at the university entry point?
3. What is the impact of technology-driven universities on students of rural background?
4. What is the place of teacher preparation in delivering service to students in rural schools? Are teachers adequately skilled and/or equipped to deliver in their respective areas of specialisation?

What could be the new-look conceptualisation of rurality in schools? The UNICEF (2013) report suggests that education is high even in rural areas although the communities are not adequately resourced to allow for provision of quality service delivery. This is particularly evident in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, Information, Communication Technologies (ICTs) and all the technology-driven aspects of the curriculum. The communities hardly afford resources to provide library services, yet these drive education first at high school level and more so at university level. Factors that prevail regarding education in most rural secondary schools include lack of supplies such as electricity, and internet connectivity; substandard facilities, and thus a less competitive student population (Cicchinelli and Beesley 2017; Mentz et al. 2012; Ncube 2014). Educational equity is based on the principle of justice as fairness (Rawls 1971), and what Fraser (2009) describes as distributive justice, especially in allocating resources, opportunities, treatment and success for every student. The question is, who desires such a situation? Is it attainable? Is it desirable? Is the situation rural secondary school students experience a social accident, an

which demand more protracted approaches. We also observe that universities in Zimbabwe, in terms of curriculum implementation, are at risk of flying past the content in a largely exam-oriented approach evinced through the semesterisation of almost all programmes instead of grounding first years into the university culture gradually and more systematically. Some of the challenges of preparedness on the part of students could be mitigated if institutions adopt need-driven approaches to instruction.

We observe that universities in Zimbabwe parade a homogenised approach to student treatment upon entry into the system. Whether one is coming from an under-resourced rural school or 'rural' within urban areas (Leibowitz 2017), or coming from a well-resourced high school, the treatment is the same. We find this scenario inconsistent with principles of justice espoused by Rawls (Rawls 1971), and therefore demanding rethinking. The situation, however, allows us to see the impact of policies and ideologies that have become obscured by our familiarity with urban and/or non-rural life for what they really are: the losses we have incurred in the process of modernity which, normally taken for granted, are brought to light (Roberts 2014, p. 139). Is there a way to attend to the matter? Is the university system responsive and flexible enough to salvage a solution? We make tentative submissions as a response to the matter.

Rethinking Student Enrolment Criteria

A rigid 'A' Level grades point system disregards the circumstances under which the marginalised rural students operate by expecting them to compete with their relatively privileged counterparts from well-resourced schools in terms of material and personal endowment. We thus propose a preregistration period: a phase in the university that students are taken through to determine their aptitude and placement into respective programmes regardless of what specific subjects they have done at high school. It is in this period that the students are inducted into academic writing and/or communication skills, library skills, technology-driven studying and/or learning and interactive seminars/symposia with professionals in the different fields. We acknowledge, however, that the approach

does not rest with teacher education alone but with the commitment of all stakeholders: with the government, churches and others as key drivers of the same.

Summary and Some Concluding Remarks

Although there is no one all-embracing definition of rurality, we saw it as an existential matter, a product of concrete historical, economic, sociological and psychosociological processes (Soudien et al. 2019). It reflects geographical, spatial and cultural situatedness characterised by want, disadvantage and struggle on the part of the affected. We have thus attempted to explore the elusive concept of rurality in the Zimbabwean context; not as a cosmological problem but an anthropogenic one which, as it emerged, adversely affects humanity's existential situatedness. We also submit that the impact of rurality be explored and understood from the point of view of the affected. As it is socially constructed, demands that relevant social institutions be properly aligned to ameliorate the ills associated with the phenomenon. We further reflected on the matter by problematising the plight of rural high school students in their bid to locate and occupy space in the university regarding their access and success chances given their background. While the Zimbabwean situation is a case with unique features, it reflects general trends associated with rurality in the developing countries. Rural schools lack infrastructure, internet connectivity, electricity supply, quality teachers and leadership, all of which threaten and diminish the students' life chances.

Without magnifying the deficit construction, rurality compromises the students' readiness for entry into the university. The dearth of critical resources, both material and human, diminish the access and success chances where it involves the latitude to pick preferred programmes and particularly STEM-related disciplines and associated university programmes. Students from rural high schools are excluded from the sciences because of their impoverished communities which could not supply them with them laboratories and libraries, let alone attracting and retaining skilled teachers. That they have not studied sciences at an advanced level does not automatically imply that they are weak in the disciplines;

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students' lack of familiarity with the *modus operandi* within the learning spaces (CHE 2010). These formidable challenges impact adversely on their success as university students, thereby widening the social inequality gap. There is a dearth of research that looks into the experiences of rural students, more specifically in relational spaces. In our view, if such spaces are left unchecked, they tend to derail and work against the achievement of epistemological access which South African higher education is currently clamouring for.

What this chapter seeks to address is that it is no longer just a consideration of the physical spaces that students occupy but relational spaces too. The main purpose of this chapter is to highlight that rural students have inert and inherent social capital they bring with them, and universities need to provide conducive spaces for its development and utilisation. Thus, the chapter explores the nature of the relationships that rural students have with other people on campus and how these relationships reduce or worsen the barriers they face as they enter higher education.

The key objectives are:

- (a) To unveil, through reviewing literature, the rurality discourses and related existing studies;
- (b) To explore, using student voices, how and why students interact with others and academic staff on campus;
- (c) To establish the effects of the bonds, the links and the bridges emanating from rural students' interactions with others on campus; and
- (d) To explore the implications of such interactions to the university.

This chapter points out that to survive and thrive on campus undergraduate students, especially first years from rural areas, resort to what they grew up learning – the creation of relational space. The term 'relational space' refers to patterns of peer support, building of shared goals and mutual respect that emerge through some distinct configurations of networking (Gittell 2003). When this fails, some students enter into 'mute space' – a situation where silence takes precedence over interaction between the students and some members of the academic staff (Ndofirepi 2015). In this case, issues of pedagogic distance, teacher immediacy, transactional distance, social presence and social exclusion (CHE 2010),