

Bricolising Retired Teachers in South Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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KEYWORDS Retired Teachers. Bricolage. Policy Formulation. Poor Performance. Mentorship

ABSTRACT This paper interrogates the challenges and opportunities related to re-engaging retired teachers in mainstream curriculum practice in South Africa. Some rural schools report poor performance, whereas retired teachers in their locality could help to mitigate this challenge. The paper used bricolage as a theoretical lens, because of its emphasis on using available resources to address ambivalence. The qualitative paper responds to two questions: What are the challenges facing integration of retired teachers? and How could retired teachers assist to mitigate poor performance? The paper found that many retired teachers are still active and can assist with mentoring and teaching and learning; however, there is no policy framework to guide their re-engagement. The paper argues that South Africa should tap into best practices of retired teachers through formulation of a policy framework that ensures the knowledge of retired teachers is not wasted, but harvested to address various trajectories, including poor performance.

INTRODUCTION

Poor performance by rural learners is cause for concern in postcolonial South Africa, and various attempts have been made to address the challenge. However, Nkambule et al. (2011) state that, “despite several interventions, education in rural areas continues to face a variety of challenges due to, among other factors, the widely distributed geographic location of the schools, the diversity of learners’ backgrounds and their diverse learning styles”. Perhaps, the reason for the failure to address poor performance in rural areas resonates with Dieltiens’ (2008: 40) observations that “rural schools certainly have problems particular to them; predicaments which require systemic effort and creative ideas, most rural areas already face tremendous barriers to high learner attainment and operate in less than favourable policy environments”.

To provide perspective, what researchers “call rural areas are generally open areas, with low settled population densities, and a high proportion of the unsettled land area being used for primary production (agriculture, livestock, forestry, fishery). Secondly, the residents of rural areas are largely dependent, directly or indirectly, on these primary production activities as their principal, if not their only, source of livelihood” (Adedeji and Olaniyan 2011). These places are characterised by poor performance by learners, which motivates the need to find alternative strategies to address the problem. In this manuscript, which is informed by bricolage

thinking, the researchers seek to interrogate the possibility of utilising retired teachers as a local resource to complement attempts to address poor performance in rural contexts. The researchers are of the view that retired teachers, with their wealth of knowledge, are likely to help promote development, interpersonal relationships and skills development in both learners and young professionals in their localities through mentoring (Mokgolodi 2020).

This study relates to various studies that have researched retired teachers and the curriculum. Ben-Peretz (2002) investigated the feasibility of transformative wisdom in teaching and learning, and found that retired “teachers’ recollections concerning their practice and insights about learning from experience represent cases of practice that can be analysed and discussed in pre-service and in-service courses. They serve to create a sense of professional identity and continuity” (p. 313). Another study by Musila et al. (2019), “sought to examine how retired teachers in Makeni County, Kenya, construct their retirement socially, in spite of the challenges associated with this period. The study concludes that employers need to continually train workers in preparation for retirement; in addition, retirees need to maintain good social relations with others, and that pensions should be paid on time”. Another study by Ayoob and Mahir (2020) found that retired teachers of selected villages in Indonesia played an important role by being enthusiastic about their involvement in activities, by providing financial assistance, and working with schools; however aging eventually

catches up with retired teachers, and renders them ineffective and unable to continue working. The researchers also refer to a study by Githui (2012), which sought to establish the perceptions held by teachers in public secondary schools about retirement. Githui found that the majority of teachers were not prepared for retirement, and that it caused stress and anxiety.

Considering these studies, the researchers noticed a gap that this paper seeks to bridge. In summarising the research reviewed here, the researchers observe that the studies focused on the challenges facing retired teachers, such as poor health, poor financial advice, and isolation from the schooling system. Consequently, the study is unique in various ways. Firstly, it used bricolage as a theoretical lens to interrogate the challenges and opportunities facing retired teachers, and how they can still contribute to teaching and learning. Furthermore, the paper takes an angle that other research has not, which is locating the study in a rural context, and proposing that most retired teachers in rural contexts can be seen as locally available human assets, which can be applied to address learners' poor performance.

Cognisant of the foregoing, the manuscript is arranged as follows: the theoretical framework, methodology of the study, and challenges relating to incorporating retired teachers into mainstream curriculum practice; the manuscript ends with discussing how retired teachers can improve learners' performance.

Theoretical Framing

The study is couched in bricolage, because of its impetus to utilise available resources to address the challenges people face. Bricolage is a concept first considered by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in 1967, as a part of his exploration of the nature of sense-making in some societies (Vanevenhoven et al. 2011: 53). It is a theory that requires people to be sensitive and creative about finding alternatives within their own environment to address immediate needs. To this end, bricolage uses all available knowledge, of immediate interest or outdated, within or outside of the people involved, to solve a given problem (Louridas 1999). Furthermore, the theory advocates that people can construct something out of the little that is available, whether resources or systems, to achieve new goals (Aagard 2009: 84).

In this manuscript, the research locates retired teachers as local, available resources that can be used to address the challenges of poor performance faced by rural learners. Some retired teachers prefer to spend their later life in a rural context, and the researchers believe that retired teachers could be local, found resources that are essential for transforming underperforming schools. According to Duymedjian and Rüling (2010: 142), bricolage argues theoretically about the need to combine resources and systems for new purposes, which serves as a mechanism to drive the discovery of innovations that take the form of new 'services' from existing resources. The theory is relevant for the study, as it argues that "we should make do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities" (Baker and Nelson 2005: 333). In short, in locating this study in bricolage, the researchers agree with Mokgolodi (2020) that retired teachers are a resource that teachers and career counsellors should consider as a tool they could apply in their work. The following section will discuss the methodology of the paper.

METHODOLOGY

The research is located within transformative paradigm, of which the agenda is to transform practice, informed by the principles of social justice, equity and equality (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The research design of the paper is qualitative. The researcher chose to locate the study within this design because "it provides an in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable and observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviours" (Gonzales et al. 2008). The research described in this manuscript took place in the Free State province of South Africa, in a small town called Bothaville. Because of the nature of research involving retired teachers, the researchers used strategic random sampling and snowballing to identify participants who were knowledgeable about the topic being investigated (Onwuegbuzie 2007). The data was collected through focus group discussions and interviews with 12 participants: four principals, four retired teachers and four teachers, over seven days; two hours were dedicated for discussions.

The interviews and focus group discussions were guided by two questions: What are the challenges facing the integration of retired teachers?

and What opportunities are available when retired teachers are integrated into the mainstream curriculum to help address underperformance in rural schools?

The study adhered to the ethics considerations stipulated by the University of the Free State, which included obtaining informed consent (Leavy 2017), giving participants the right to withdraw from the study (Sarantakos 2005), and avoiding identifying participants (DESA 2009; Yin 2014). The study was approved by the University of the Free State as part of a National Research Foundation project. Participants were informed that data obtained would be used for research purposes only, to improve teaching and learning through contributions by retired teachers. No harm was intended with this research (Mertens 2005), and COVID-19 protocols were observed.

The data collected was analysed using the thematic approach suggested by Laws et al. (2003), which follows seven steps:

Step 1: “Read and reread all the collected data, to expose the essence of the possible contribution retired teachers could make to alleviating poor performance.

Step 2: Draw up a preliminary list of themes arising from the data. Major issues and themes were identified and arranged according to the research question of the study.

Step 3: Reread the data, to check if the themes are identified corresponded with what the participants had said and with the research questions.

Step 4: Link the themes emerging from the data to quotations and notes representing various scholarly views.

Step 5: Peruse the categories of themes to interpret them, while remaining cognisant of the research question.

Step 6: Design a tool to help discern patterns in the data, in order to determine the patterns during data analysis.

Step 7: Interpret the data and derive meaning; the identified themes became the subheadings”.

The researchers ensured that the findings reflected the views of the participants, by doing member checking and requesting participants to validate the analysed data (Bygstad and Munkvold 2007; Gunawan 2015). The followings sections will present the themes that emanated from the data provided by the participants. The first section will present data that responds to the first question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this manuscript, the researchers combined the findings and discussions. The following section responds to the first question, which relates to the challenges.

Challenges Facing Retired Teachers in the Mainstream Curriculum

The first challenge is the lack of a policy framework applicable to retired teachers.

Lack of a Policy Framework for Retired Teachers

The reintegration of retired teachers, so that they can participate in curriculum practice, such as practices intended to mitigate the poor performance of rural learners, is affected by the absence of policy. Even though retired teachers have something to offer, there are no avenues available to utilise their services, except having them serve on school governing bodies. This was revealed by Retired Teacher 1, who reported the following:

I still have a passion for teaching and learning although my age does not allow me to continue working, there are occasion I have nothing to do and wish to assist in my neighbouring school, but the principals says there is no way I can assist since there is no policy to guide him on my engagement.

In response, Principal 1 said that,

I have many retired teachers who tell us they want to help us with teaching and mentoring new staff members but we find it difficult to see how we can assist but I do not doubt that some can be of great help.

The responses above indicate a challenge faced by both retired teachers and school administrators in relation to reengagement. This challenge is regrettable, especially because the “government finds it difficult to supply quality education services in rural areas, and various factors weaken the quality of learning and teaching in South Africa’s rural areas” (Du Plessis and Mestry 2019). Other countries, such as the United States of America and Australia, have policies on the reintegration of retired teachers who are still active and have contributions to make to education. However, in South Africa, the Retired Teachers’ Association does not have a policy mandate for reintegration. Policy is central for providing guidance on reintegration, especially for

spelling out terms of reappointment, participation, mentoring and remuneration. This failure to enact a policy has far-reaching consequences for education, such as professional decay of knowledge and experiences that could have been passed to the next generations.

Failure to Acknowledge Epistemology Capital

The second challenge identified in relation to integrating retired teachers into the mainstream curriculum to mitigate poor performance by rural learners, is a failure to acknowledge epistemology capital. Epistemology capital refers to the wealth of experience and knowledge that retired teachers accumulated over time. To illustrate this challenge, Teacher 1 explained:

My mother retired but she is still a pillar of my strength in the teaching profession. There are various problems she helps me to solve and one can tell the value of experience in the teaching field but unfortunate she cannot share this experience with all teachers but few that see and acknowledge base.

The wealth of experience and knowledge of retired teachers is lost, due to the absence of policy. Retired teachers' knowledge remains unharvested, and they die without passing it on to the next generation of teachers, as a way to improve teaching and learning. The government should not underestimate the value of formulating a policy framework to harvest and transfer experience to practicing teachers. The researchers' argument is informed by an observation by Ayoob and Mahir (2020) that, in some contexts, knowledge, experience and pregnant ideas of retired teachers have become a strength of school development. Furthermore, Kelchterman (1993) reports that experiences were perceived by teachers as having a crucial influence on their self and on their professional behaviour.

Absence of a Database on Expertise of Retired Teachers

The absence of a national database of retired teachers, containing information on where they are and what they can offer, is another limitation facing the integration of retired teachers into the mainstream curriculum to mitigate underperformance. The database will enable data to be captured, processed, reutilised and disseminated, and enable the more difficult task to be accomplished

(Figueiredo and Pereira 2016:167). A database is critical for ensuring that professional wealth is not lost, but transferred to practicing teachers.

Principal 2 explained that

In some cases, you go to the Department to locate retired teachers, the officials do not have a database of where the retired teachers. They only rely of referrals but if we value retired teachers, we need a database about them.

Any successful organisation, including the Department of Basic Education, needs an effective database that can account for all retired teachers, which details their experience and what they can offer education. To this end, the researchers agree with an observation by Blankenship (2020: 124), that life challenges, such as poor performance, requires teachers and learners to "start constructing knowledge [collaboratively] by understanding the resources that are available rather than finding resources", which might not originate from government, especially in the context of a dire situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Negative Attitudes Towards Retired Teachers

The researchers raise this point because retired does not mean irrelevant and unable, rather, a reduced output due to advanced age. However, some learners and teachers have the perception that once someone is retired, they are inferior and can no longer make a meaningful contribution to teaching and learning. During the focus group discussion, Retired Teacher 3 said,

To some learners and teachers, retirement seem to be a mockery. They call us names and tell us our age mates are in rural areas doing witchcraft. Such sentiments affects us a lot and it means we cannot share our knowledge with people that call us names. They forget that one day they will retire too.

Negative attitudes towards retired teachers undermine efforts to harvest potential from emeritus teachers, which, in turn, affects teaching and learning, especially in deprived contexts, like at rural schools. Thus, from a bricolage vantage point, retired teachers should be seen as a resource for educational development, and for preserving the knowledge reservoir that can benefit both the retired teachers, and teaching and learning in general. The researchers' argument is informed by bricolage, and states that, in the context of poor performance by learners in rural contexts, efforts should not be

affected by negative attitudes, but rather embraced, since solving social and academic problems require a collaborative approach.

Harvesting the Potential Embodied by Retired Teachers

In this section, the manuscript focuses on the second research question, which relates to opportunities for reintegration of retired teachers in teaching and learning to address poor performance. The researchers discuss these opportunities premised on bricolage thinking, which searches for “practical methods to solve problems making use of what is available or ready to hand, developing strategies, adapting materials and creatively interpreting a possible outcome” (Campbell 2019: 33). In light of the foregoing, the manuscript will discuss complementary support of learners as the first point.

Complementary Support of Learners

With the right policy framework, retired teachers can contribute a great deal to teaching and learning. Retired teachers can complement the work of teachers by providing additional support to address learners’ poor performance. In countries that have a policy that guides the reintegration of retired teachers, retired teachers can be reintegrated into the schooling system and offer support to learners, which is key to mitigating challenges in the education system. In this discussions, Teacher 4 said that

We are often overwhelmed with work especially during this COVID-19 crisis, I believe if retired teachers can at least assist twice a week that will be great support for learners.

In addition, Principal 3, noted that

There are many retired teachers who left the profession while still able to contribute meaningful, if there could be a way to bring them back, I will have done so since they can contribute a lot to teachers and learners.

Informed by the foregoing discussion, the researchers recognise the value of retired teachers. Thus, researchers view retired teachers from a bricolage angle “as a mode knowledge-in-action, who provide value, in many areas of practice where a simple theory could not solve complex problems” (Starr-Class 2010: 10). Shamah and Mac-Tavish (2009) observe that retired teachers often see their own skills as being necessary for the

educational success; instead of exporting urban skills that may not fit into rural environments. A similar view is echoed by Mapesela et al. (2012), who claim “that retired teachers share common interests, that consensus is central to sustainability and development, that inclusive participation and democratic decision-making within the community are necessary, and that it is possible to reconfigure a bright future for rural learners”. In the following section, the manuscript will discuss the promotion of a mentoring programme.

Promote Mentoring Programmes

Another opportunity that could be provided by reinstating retired teachers is enriching mentoring programmes for teachers. The data resonates with the observation “that retired educators’ view [is] that career development of young persons can benefit from retirees’ career transitional experiences, through mentoring” (Mokgolodi 2020). To illustrate this, Teacher 5 noted the following:

Retired teachers have experience which is facilitating effective mentorship for newly qualified teachers

In addition, Principal 4 noted in an interview that *The young graduate in schools fail to adjust easily to the profession. They struggle and this is a contributing factor to poor performance. I am however convinced that retired teachers can provide mentorship that can benefit both educators and learners.*

Effective mentorship by retired teachers emanates from their wealth of experience, which they have amassed over the years. Because “retired educators can have scheduling flexibility to observe or meet with a mentee teacher before, during, or after the school day and are a potentially high-quality, lower cost resource” (DeCesare et al. 2017: 1), mentorship is facilitated. The foregoing resonates with the study of Mokgolodi and Gaotlhobogwe (2020), which argues that “the involvement of retired professionals in mentoring activities post retirement has benefits for the education system, and retired teachers’ health, which reduces government spending on them”. The researchers conclude this point by stating that retirement “provides opportunity for personal satisfaction, proper utilization of intellect and skills as well as for learning, growth in leisure and recreational activities” (Osuji and Nweze 2014: 132).

Next, the researchers will discuss the possibility of retired teachers facilitating moral support.

Facilitate Moral Support

Moral support is important in the teaching and learning space. In this case, it is also reciprocal, in the sense that both teachers and retired teachers need moral support—for the latter it is an essential ingredient for old age. In fact, most retired teachers, especially in the psychological space, face loneliness, have low self-esteem and find their lives meaningless (Osborn 2012; Smith and Moen 2004). To shed light on this phenomenon, Retired Teacher 5 reported the following:

As retired teachers we still need moral support and love even from educators and learners. Life at retirement can be frustrating and lonely at times characterised with financial challenges. Our involvement even at low scale can be of great comfort and reward us even financial.

Principal 5 noted that

When I meet retired teachers, some of them are despaired with old age and loneliness. They show great keen to be involved as SGB [school governing body] members and one can note that it may be isolated life at old age. So participating in different schooling programmes seems rewarding for retired teachers.

From the views expressed above, the researchers agree with Kincheloe (2005), that engagements that “fail to address the ontology of the human existential situation, with all of its pain, suffering, joy, and desire, is limited in worth”. In contrast, bricoleurs search for better ways to connect with and solve human problems using available resources. Through this approach, and arguing from bricolage thinking, as stipulated by Lincoln (2001: 693-694), researchers engage in a “search for the nodes, the nexuses, the linkages, the interconnections, the fragile bonds between disciplines, between bodies of knowledge and partners”, to improve not only the lives of learners and educators, but also that of retired teachers. Thus, considering challenging times, such as the present COVID-19 pandemic, providing moral support is essential for educators, learners and retired teachers, if they are to confront lived realities. Thus, in short, from bricolage vintage, moral support can be a resource for mitigating underperformance through the services of retired teachers.

Value of the Study

The study was part of a National Research Foundation project that sought to ignite conversations on policy formation for retired teachers in South Africa. The paper initiates a conversation on the way knowledge is being lost in Africa because elderly or retired people are routinely relegated out of narratives that deal with sustainable development and, in this case, mitigation of the poor performance of rural learners. The paper is of value, especially in deprived contexts, through its emphasis on a bricolage approach to rethinking available resources to address local challenges. The paper identified retired yet active teachers as human resources that are idle, while they can be used to address various trajectories, including poor performance.

CONCLUSION

The manuscript interrogated the challenges and the opportunities presented by retired teachers’ reintegration into the mainstream curriculum. The researchers identified various challenges faced by retired teachers in the quest to reintegrate them into the mainstream curriculum, among which the absence of a policy framework, the absence of a database, failure to acknowledge epistemological capital, and negative attitudes towards retired teachers by some educators and learners. The paper investigated opportunities that are available when retired teachers are seen as reservoirs of knowledge and experience. To this end, the researchers argue that it is high time that a national policy is crafted for retired teachers, which stipulates how able and experienced retired teachers can offer their knowledge, skills and competencies to address various trajectories faced by the education fraternity, such as poor performance of rural learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the paper, the researchers recommend that there is a need to formulate a policy that could cater for active but retired teachers to be integrated into the mainstream curriculum. Without a policy, it is difficult for principals to remunerate or accommodate the services of retired teachers; a policy will address the challenges mentioned in this paper. The paper recommends the creation of a database containing the particulars of retired teachers, and

detailing their experience and indicating who would be willing to be reintegrated to assist rural learners and teachers. By doing so, the wealth of knowledge and experience of retired teachers can be harvested and passed from one generation to the next, thereby improving performance of rural learners in the areas where retired teachers reside.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was made possible through the support from National Research Fund Reference: TTK200318509938, Grant No: 129837

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Paper received for publication in July, 2021
Paper accepted for publication in August, 2021

Fig. 3. Pattern of cultural reproduction occurring in the realm of local politics
Data source: Primary data after processing, 2019