

**CREATING  
SUSTAINABLE  
RURAL LEARNING  
ECOLOGIES**

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# INTRODUCTION

- South Africa's rural ecologies, like those of many developing and some developed countries' rural ecologies remain disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in urban areas.
- Evidently, underlying the gains of our young democracy are the challenges that are experienced by rural ecologies.
- The Ministry of Education (2005) note that the problems experienced in rural areas of South Africa, though to some extent unique to rural education, are in fact widespread in varying degrees in the previously disadvantaged ecologies

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- According to Spreen and Vally (2006) the quality of education, particularly in rural and historically disadvantaged ecologies should be regarded as a human rights issue [a social justice issue!!]
- Many schools in South Africa are situated in rural areas.
- The rural environment can put learners at a disadvantage.
- It is notably less rich not only in terms of human resource, but also in learning as well as livelihood resources (Lindeque and Vandeyar, 2004)

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- Key features of a rural profile in South Africa include long distance to towns, undesirable conditions of roads, bridges to schools, lack or limited access to Information Communications Technologies (ICTs), lack of services such as running water, electricity, sanitation; health, educational and economic status; access to lifelong learning opportunities.
- One of the most pervasive features of rural ecologies is poverty (Department of Education, 2005). Food security and cost of education are also major problems.
- Furthermore, rural ecologies are characterised by high illiteracy levels.

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- The problems of rurality are further compounded by continued under-resourcing of schools relative to need.
- The government's commitment to equal and fair treatment unfortunately yielded meagre and sometimes inappropriate change for rural schools.
- Attributes of rurality that adversely affect the quality of education include lack of qualified teachers, multigrade teaching, irrelevance of curricula, unreasonable teacher-learner ratios, irrelevant curricula, competing priorities between accessing education and domestic chores.

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- Staff seems to be imbued with poor morale and motivation.
- Teachers may be unwilling to move to rural areas where social and cultural opportunities are limited and salaries which may not contain an enticement peg.
- Sometimes even when teachers are willing to work in rural areas, working conditions are likely to make them reluctant to stay for the long term (Mollenkopf, 2009).
- Despite numerous efforts deployed by countries of the world and the vigorous mobilization of the international community, rural people are lagging far behind in education and are particularly hit hard by poverty and hunger.

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- The slow progress towards universal education is largely evident.
- The above discussion invariably leads to consideration of creation of sustainable rural learning ecologies.

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# THEOTETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

- An ecology may be regarded as an environment that fosters and supports the creation of communities.
- The definition applied to gardening applies well to learning communities: “Ecological gardening is about gardening with nature, not against it.”
- A learning ecology is an environment that is consistent with (not antagonistic to) how learners learn.
- An ecology should be perceived as an open system, dynamic and interdependent, diverse, partially self organizing, adaptive, and fragile.

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- Embedded in an ecology are a collection of overlapping communities of interest, cross pollinating with each other, and constant evolution [and ENERGY!!!]
- For a learning society, interpreting, understanding and assessing its learning ecology first begin with contextual vision-building.
- In each ecology, individuals and collectives would come together to co-create their vision of how they want to live and learn together, both in the present and in the future (informed stakeholder participation).

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- This vision would be based on the unique contexts of that ecology, the unique personalities of the people, and the unique energy and spirit that emerges when they come together in relationships.
- The questions asked would be more like: “Who are we?”; “What values are important to us?”; “Where are we going and why?; What kind of world do we want for our children and grandchildren? and later, “How do we get there?”

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# SALIENT POINTS ABOUT LEARNING

- Learning is rarely linear or planned; it is messy, organic and often spontaneous;
- Learning occurs in authentic interactions and partnerships, which emerge through varied self-organizing processes;
- Learning is unique to the person and the context; it cannot be replicated, because no two learning spaces or relationships are alike;
- Unlearning, self-learning, co-learning are all vital and integrated aspects of a learning ecology;
- Learning grows from a dialogue between meaningful questions and practical mistakes.

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# THEREFORE!

- It should be comprehensible to assume that learning generates and builds upon complex and diverse networks/webs of human existence.
- The foregoing discussion lends itself to the elements of critical research.
- According to Merriam (2009) critical research focuses less on individuals than on context.
- Critical educational research queries the context where learning takes place, including the larger systems of society, the culture and institutions that shape educational practice, and the structural and historical conditions framing practice.

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# PRIMARY AIMS

- We propose that a critical interpretation and understanding of the status quo, with a view to creating sustainable rural learning ecologies should be undertaken. The primary aims of this **basic** qualitative and **critical** study are to:
  - **Explore interpretations and understanding of meanings participants have constructed in respect of their contemporary rural learning ecologies**
  - **Investigate how sustainable rural learning ecologies can be created through informed stakeholder participation**

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- The study is primarily qualitative but both basic and critical.
- A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds.
- The researchers in this study are interested in understanding and interpreting the meaning participants construct (Merriam, 2009) in respect of their (participants') contemporary learning ecologies.
- The critical aspect of the approach to the proposed study speaks to the second primary question.

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# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- According to Merriam (2009) the goal of critical inquiry is to critique and challenge, to transform and to empower.
- Patton (2002) states that what makes critical research *critical* is that it seeks not just to study and understand but to critique and change society.
- **How do participants interpret and understand their contemporary rural learning ecologies?**
- **How can we create sustainable rural learning ecologies through informed stakeholder participation?**

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# CONCLUSION

- Cohort of M & D students
- Research Colloquium
- Long-term qualitative research
- Thank you!!!

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