CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate those aspects of the learning culture of resilient schools which are particularly beneficial for schools within rural communities in Mpumalanga. Since 1994, the government's concern has been to improve the culture of learning in South African schools especially in rural communities. This presented a formidable challenge for teachers and communities. Rural hardships and histories are prevalent and seem to weigh heavily against educational resiliency in these communities. Despite all odds, some schools are functional and are able to overcome the most difficult challenges while similar schools in the same stressful communities are failing to do so.

This study therefore aims at investigating how and why certain rural schools in Mpumalanga are succeeding while similar schools in the same rural community are failing to improve their learning culture. In this chapter, an attempt is made to present the research problem, which defines this investigation, and addresses the research design and methodology, as well as the definitions of the principal concepts. The last part of this chapter provides a summary of the study as a whole.

1.2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.2.1   BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

As schools in South Africa and specifically in the rural communities of Mpumalanga strive to overcome and withstand rural hardship in order to enhance the culture of learning, the issues of self-managing and educational resiliency have become increasingly important as the main challenges facing the South African schools. Since 1994, within the broad context of transformation, the national Department of Education

has refocused the vision and direction of the South African education system through a series of policy initiatives, some of which have been formalised in legislation (Department of Education 1996a, p.11). The South African Schools Act of 1996, for example, provides the basis for placing school governance in the hands of the school community – the parents, teachers and learners. At the heart of this Act is the principle that each school should take control over its own affairs. The consequence of this policy initiative is that many South African schools are unable to take control over their own affairs. The situation was found to be acute in rural schools of Mpumalanga. Some schools were still managed hierarchically. This ethos inhibited the teachers and learners to take ownership of their teaching and learning. While these hierarchies exist in many schools, there are some few schools in the rural communities of Mpumalanga that have started a process of implementing the new policy on school management.

Their styles of operation appeared to be in line with the new national and provincial policy frameworks and legislation which make it clear that governance and management need to be shared with all stakeholders at all levels of the school (Lumby, Middlewood & Kaabwe 2003:3). This is a paradigm shift in terms of devolution of powers and responsibility to a school level where it did not previously exist. This implies a profound change in the culture and practice of schools. For example, school principals and school management team have now a leadership role to play in ensuring that a culture of learning occurs. Therefore, it is imperative for principals to encourage collaborative organisational planning, problem solving, and to allocate responsibility and accountability for decision making to members of school community. However, this is not the case with some rural schools in Mpumalanga. Some school principals exemplify those people who are reluctant to relinquish their authority to subordinates.

The government's vision is to see schools improving its culture of learning despite exposure to adversities. Two issues have become evident here: self-managing and educational resiliency. These phenomena remain a critical challenge for rural schools in South Africa and in rural communities of Mpumalanga in particular. As Thembela (in Biyela 2004:107) indicated: *Let us release our creative imagination and build structures*

that are our own without anybody's help. The most damning thing is that each time we want to do something for ourselves, we look outward and ask someone else to assist us. In fact it is sinful to bury one's talent and expect other people to do things for oneself.

Considering the historical background of rural communities in South Africa and specifically in Mpumalanga, the issue of educational resiliency – a concept first developed by Margaret Wang and colleagues (1996) working in inner-city schools in the USA has increasingly become an important challenge for South African schools. Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1994) in (McRobbie & Ellett (1997:343) define 'educational resiliency' as *heightened likelihood of success in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions and experiences*. It is clear from this definition that every learner in the rural communities in Mpumalanga and in South Africa as a whole, indeed every person young and olds needs to develop resiliency. Studies showed that some average ability learners do well despite coming from economically disadvantaged home environments.

The educational, community and family problems facing learners in rural schools in Mpumalanga present a formidable challenge to teachers. While the South African Schools Act of 1996 requires that schools and learners should be developed on an equal basis, there are massive historical inequalities in the rural communities of Mpumalanga which cannot be addressed overnight. These are most evidence in the provision of the infrastructure. For example, some urban schools have excellent facilities while others, notably in rural communities lack electricity, water, sanitation, telephones and basic equipment. Instead of improving, the provision of infrastructure continues to deteriorate. However, some schools have managed to improve the culture of teaching and learning despite the lack of infrastructure.

The fact that some schools are able to succeed while similar schools from equally stressful environment are failing to improve their culture of learning has given impetus to this study.

1.2.2 AWARENESS OF THE PROBLEM

As considerably more authority and responsibility for decision-making has been devolved to the school level than was previously the case, this implies a profound change in the culture and practice of schools. The South African Schools Act of 1996 (SASA) requires principals to work in democratic and participative ways to build relationships and ensure efficient and effective teaching and learning. However, this policy has resulted in school principals being under-prepared for their new role and has eroded their confidence in managing their schools (Lumby et al 2003:5). Many school principals in rural schools in Mpumalanga have little idea of what would be required of them to restore the culture of learning, especially as they have been consistently at the receiving end of top-down management structures, working in a structural milieu and receiving direct instructions from departmental officials. They are unable to translate this policy into practice.

In addition, schools in Mpumalanga vary enormously, with some being extremely well resourced. Although all principals share the new management challenges as a result of recent policy and legislation, these have affected them to different extents. In many schools teachers, principals, learners and sometimes the parents or community are in conflict and blame one another for the breakdown in the culture of teaching and learning. Many principals find it difficult to change from a highly authoritarian, hierarchical structure to one that requires a sharing of control with teachers, parents and learners. (I have been a school principal in this area for more than twenty three years, have served as the chairperson of the principal's forum for three years, and gained experience of what has transpired in schools).

Unfortunately, what sounds good in theory does not always translate well into practice. Therefore, simply changing the organisational structure of the school does not result in more autonomy for those on the lower rungs of the organisation (Sackney & Dibski, 1994:105).

As considerably more authority and responsibility for decision-making has been devolved to school level, the issue of how these powers and responsibilities have been implemented in Mpumalanga rural schools has become part of this study primarily because rural schools are a relevant area of practical policy application.

1.2.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

On the basis of the above background, this study addresses the research problem as follows: How do resilient schools generally improve the culture of learning in the rural communities of Mpumalanga?

The following questions facilitated the demarcation of the problem more clearly:

- How do these schools go about trying to improve the quality of their learning?
- Are there contextual challenges that hinder the improvement of the culture of learning and if so, how do these schools address their challenges?
- What are the main characteristics of these resilient schools which could be implemented by others to improve their learning culture?

1.3 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

In the light of the above research problems formulated, this research aims to explore the culture of learning of resilient schools in the rural communities of Mpumalanga. In this study I want to make explicit what characteristics of resilient schools are and how these characteristics can be implemented to improve the culture of learning in rural schools against many odds.

The specific aims of this study are:

- To conduct an empirical investigation into the learning culture of resilient schools in the rural communities of Mpumalanga
- To determine through literature the factors that contribute to the improvement of a learning culture of resilient schools
- To investigate how these schools improve their culture of learning
- To investigate the contextual challenges that hinder the improvement of the culture of learning and how these schools solved some of these challenges
- To find out what these schools have achieved
- To present findings and recommendations which emanate from the study

1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS OF THIS STUDY

A detailed description of the research methods used for this study is covered in chapter four of this dissertation. This section, however, is a preliminary overview of the research design and methods that were used in this study.

The investigation was conducted in rural communities within the Mpuluzi circuit in the Mpumalanga Province. This study comprised a qualitative exploration of the culture of learning of resilient schools within rural communities in Mpumalanga. Two secondary schools within the rural communities in Mpumalanga were selected for in-depth study, according to purposeful sampling and that is where the richest source of information would be elicited. These include highly and average performing schools. The school that had obtained above 70% matric pass rate for the past three consecutive years and the school that had shown signs of improvement in terms of the matriculation results i.e between 40% & 50% for the past three consecutive years are included in the study. These schools were selected according to criteria of resiliency such as functioning effectively despite exposure to rural hardships and histories.

I gathered the relevant data concerning the research problem from primary and secondary sources. I also used recently published materials in collecting data. The literature was critically analysed, examined, categorised and objectively recorded.

Principals, teachers, learners and members of School Governing Bodies of schools were interviewed to obtain their views, perspectives and experiences concerning the research focus.

This was done according to the following procedures:

- Interviews with two principals, six teachers, and four members of the governing body in the two selected secondary schools were conducted to explore how they experience teaching and learning at their schools.

- One focus group interview with the teachers and two focus group interviews with parents were conducted in each school to examine, in detail, how they think and feel about a learning culture at their school and also to establish how and why their school was functioning well despite exposure to severe adversities.

- Twenty four questionnaires were distributed among twenty four learners and were completed in my presence. Two questionnaires were distributed to two principals and six to teachers and were all completed in my presence.

The data was collected and analysed according to the following stages:

1.4.1   Phase 1: Planning

The problem statement was analysed in terms of the functioning of resilient schools within the rural communities of Mpumalanga. The anticipated questions relating to the problem were analysed. The research sites comprised of two selected secondary schools in the Mpuluzi circuit in Mpumalanga.

Recommendations for how the functioning of rural schools in South Africa and specifically in Mpumalanga could be improved were derived from the findings. This effort entailed five months of intensive field research.

1.4.2   Phase 2: Beginning data collection

During the first days of the research, I initially established rapport, trust, and reciprocal relations with the individuals and groups, which were to be observed. The data collection began by interviewing the principals, teachers and parents. Six questionnaires were distributed to teachers and were all completed and four to parents and were completed. Twenty four questionnaires were distributed to learners and were all completed.

1.4.3   Phase 3: Basic data collection

Tentative data analysis began by mentally processing many ideas and facts while data were collected in the selected site. Conceptualisations and descriptions of data were transformed and summarised. As initial patterns began to emerge, ideas and facts were identified which needed further corroboration in the closing phase of data collection.

1.4.4   Phase 4: Closing data collection

The termination of the data collection phase occurred when the data reached a point of saturation. More attention was then given to the interpretations and verification of the emergent findings with key informants.

1.4.5   Phase 5: Completion

Data analysis began with the construction of the facts as found in the observed data. This involved the creation of initial diagrams; times charts, and network diagrams to provide a holistic integration of the fieldwork and which rounded out the study.

1.5 DEMARCATION OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted in two selected secondary schools in the rural communities in Mpumalanga. These two secondary schools which succeeded while similar schools in the same rural community were failing to improve their learning culture, were investigated in depth. It was assumed that these schools would render information-rich data with some applicability to rural schools in South Africa and specifically in the rural communities in Mpumalanga.

1.6 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

1.6.1 Learning culture

The concept 'learning' is difficult to define in a single sentence. There are various definitions that exist. As Howe (in Masitsa 1995:111) states, it is not easy, and perhaps impossible, to define learning clearly and unambiguously in a way that makes it possible to distinguish between learning in its varied forms and some other causes of change.

Smith & Pacheo (1996:3-5) refer to the culture of learning as attitudes learners have towards learning and the spirit of commitment to the school which arises through the joint effort of the personal characteristics of learners, factors in the family, school-related factors as well as societal factors. A 'culture of learning' in this study refers to a climate, attitudes towards learning that facilitates or inhibits learning.

1.6.2 School culture

School culture in this investigation refers to the ways schools are doing things, which are unique to themselves. According to Peterson (1988:251) school culture refers to the values, norms, patterns of values, beliefs and roles that people take on within a human organisation.

1.6.3 Resiliency

The concept *resiliency* in this study refers to as the attainment of positive outcomes despite exposure to adversities or sustained competence under stress. Resiliency is thus defined not as the absence of risk or dysfunction but as *successful adaptation despite adversity* (Fraser 1997:14).

1.6.4   Resilient schools

In this context, resilient schools refer to those schools that are able to flourish under the most severe conditions while similar schools often in the same community flounder. Most of these schools are located in both rural and urban communities where poverty, high unemployment, crime, social problems, lack of resources, and violence are most likely to occur.

1.6.5   Resilient learner

Resilient learner in this study refers to a learner who succeeds in school despite coming from economically disadvantaged home environment.

1.6.6   Self-managing school

Self-managing school is defined as the *one for which there has been significant and consistent decentralisation to the school level of authority related to the allocation of resources. This decentralisation is administrative rather than political, with decisions being made within a framework of local, state or national policies or guidelines. The school remains accountable to a central authority for manner in which resources are allocated* (Caldwell & Spinks in Lumby, Middlewood & Kaabwe (2003:8). For the purpose of this study, the concept self-managing school refers to a school that manages its own affairs.

1.6.7   Rural schools

Although many of us have a common sense of the definition of the concept rural school, our common-sense understanding of this concept often confuses rather than clarifies. This has been compounded by the geographic and demographic factors. Literature states that different criteria are applied to the definition by various writers: some base them on the geographic and demographic factors, others on the economic and social factors, some associate them with education which is agriculturally oriented. Some use this concept synonymously with the concept farm school or small school.

Therefore, its definition depends on the research background and theoretical orientation of the authors. This assertion indicates clearly how difficult it is to come up with a single, universal definition of the concept rural school. Rural schools are the schools in the outskirts of the country. However, in this study, rural schools are those schools, which are located within the rural communities run by the local government.

1.6.8   Rural communities

Rural communities are difficult to define with greater precision and accuracy.   As Hartshorne [1992; 123] maintains that it is impossible to produce an adequate typology of rural communities. However, he further suggests that some combination of certain characteristics; geographical isolation, smallness of scale, low population density, a limited range of employment possibilities, traditionally administered communities which are resistant to changes, politically, socially and intellectually on the periphery, will be present in rural communities at the rural end of the urban-rural continuum. Rural communities in this study are the communities in the outskirts of the country.

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1.7 THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME

This study comprises the following chapters:

Chapter one

In this chapter the background to the study, the motivation for research, the formulation of the problem, aims of the investigation, research design and methods of this study, demarcation of the study, definition of concepts and the limitation of the study have been briefly described.

Chapter two

This chapter deals with the investigation of the learning culture of resilient schools from a managerial perspective and the South African perspective of resilient schooling.

Chapter three

This chapter consists of a literature study which deals with societal and schooling realities within rural communities in South Africa in general, and Mpumalanga in particular.

Chapter four

This chapter outlines a brief description of qualitative methodology which fits into the metatheory of an insider's perspective. It consists of the 'lived experiences' of key informants in the selected site. The data gathering techniques such as observation, semi-structured in depth interviews with principals and focus group interviews with a group of teachers, and parents were used. Field notes also featured in the research project.

Chapter five

This chapter consists of the display, discussion and analysis of actual data, and its corroboration with the literature study. In other words, a comparison was made between the categories/ patterns of the qualitative interviews with the findings of the literature study as regards the concepts of resiliency and learning culture are concerned.

Chapter six

This chapter comprises the summaries of chapters, conclusions, findings of the research and recommendations. The implications for teachers within schools, as well as for community members have been formulated as part of my recommendations.

1.8 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study was limited to observations of, and individual interviews and focus group interviews with teachers, parents who are currently serving on the school governing body, and principals of two secondary schools in the Mpuluzi circuit, which is in the rural community of Mpumalanga. As the study focuses on two rural secondary schools in the Mpuluzi circuit, the findings of the study may not be generalised to the whole of Mpumalanga rural communities. However, the findings are context bound and rich data were generated. The parent informants were unable to speak English so I conducted interviews in Zulu. Responses were translated into English which might have caused a loss of meaning.

1.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter dealt with a brief contextualisation of the study and the exposition of the research problems, aims of investigation, research design, demarcation of the study and key terminology. The contextualisation of the study serves as point of departure for the

presentation of the findings of the literature review. Because this study is designed to investigate the learning culture of resilient schools in the rural communities of Mpumalanga, the next chapter will present the findings of the literature study on the aspects of school-based management and the South African resilient schooling.