

A confluence of liminality in a rural learner transitioning to boarding school in South Africa

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Many rural children in South Africa are subjected to social isolation, poor quality schooling and other related challenges, which impacts their growth and development and access to post-school educational opportunities. Well-functioning boarding schools offer a solution but research in South Africa is still in its infancy. Using the theoretical frame of liminality, in a qualitative case study, the authors explore the influence of a well-functioning boarding school on the social and academic development of a socio-economically disadvantaged rural male learner. Data from interviews, observations, progress reports and open-ended questionnaires were analysed using content analysis procedures and interpreted for evidence of possible shifts, tensions, and challenges. The findings confirm that while the young man benefitted both academically and socially, the confluence of liminal spaces in his transition from a rural background to boarding school, resulted in ongoing tensions that prolonged his state of liminality. We discuss the consequences for the learner and our roles as researchers and engage with the implications for this type of research for development agents both in South Africa and internationally.

Introduction and background

Education in South Africa's rural areas is generally of a very poor quality (Gardiner, 2008; Gordon, 2007; Spaul, 2013). Issues such as overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of teachers, and a lack of basic resources such as running water, libraries, electricity, computers, and laboratories (Department of Education, 2007; Gordon, 2007) impact negatively on children's educational outcomes and their access to and success with academic achievement in tertiary education (Modisaotsile, 2012; Spaul, 2013). Rural schools often also struggle to attract qualified teachers and are often unable to access social services (Gordon, 2007; Masinire, 2015). Learners' rural home environments are also challenging. First is the negative impact of a disproportionate number of farm duties such as tending to livestock (Gardiner, 2008, p.10) and withdrawal from school during harvest times (Hall & Sambu, 2017). In addition, unaffordable transport costs (Kellard, Costello & Godfrey, 2010), mean that children often walk long distances to and from school (IBRD, 2018). With no adult supervision, children's safety is at risk, especially in a country like South Africa (Crime Statistics, 2019). Other factors are parent illiteracy (Gordon, 2007) and the lack of a peer group and leisure activities leading to social isolation. Many of these factors also impact rural populations internationally.

One option for rural learners to access good education is through boarding schools with learners returning to their families on weekends or during school vacations (Behaghel, de Chaise, Martin & Gurgand, 2017). Well-functioning boarding schools tend to provide better quality education. Boarding schools are also credited with helping learners develop a sense of discipline and the routines necessary for consistent academic progress (Martin,

Papworth, Ginn & Liem, 2014; Vigar-Ellis, 2013). They also have a positive impact on social development as pupils learn about school traditions, rules, and responsibilities under the mentorship of teachers and sports coaches (Martin, Papworth, Ginns & Liem, 2014).

This research is supported by a USA-based grant from a not-for-profit organisation, for the project *Transforming Education in Rural South Africa*, in cooperation with University of Johannesburg. The project explores the limitations of schooling in rural South Africa and supports schooling for selected learners. The learner, whom we refer to by the pseudonym Bayete, moved from being a day scholar to being a boarder at the same school at a time when he was moving from the pre-adolescence to adolescence stage of development. The school is a private school, also referred to as an independent school in South Africa, which while operating within the confines of the national and provincial legislation and the constitution, have the freedom to follow their own missions, determine their admission policies, as well as determine how they are governed (Department of Education, 1996).

As so little research exists on what the advantages and disadvantages of such transitions are for young South African males (Isaacs, 2019), we were interested in how an in-depth study of one young male rural learner could inform support for other such learners. We also reasoned that the findings of this case could be of value for rural education and boarding schools in international contexts.

Theoretical framework: Liminality

In this study, we drew on the notion of liminality or transition between two ‘spaces’ from the work of van Gennep (1909) and the expanded ideas of Turner (1967). Van Gennep (1960) in his explanation of the rites of passage of young men, moving from one stage of development to another, theorised that all rites of transition have three stages. These are firstly the rites of “separation or pre-liminal rites”, followed by the “rites of transition or liminal rites” and then finally the “rites of incorporation or post-liminal rites”. Van Gennep (1909; cited by Turner, 1969, p. 80) described the separation stage as a compromise of “symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group ... from an earlier fixed point in the social structure”. From this, we understand that the detachment can be symbolic or physical or both.

The second stage represents the core of liminality (van Gennep, 1909) and is described as a period between the separation and transition stages, meaning that individuals have left the first stage but not yet entered the new stage. It is in this in-between stage that one’s status is suspended between the old and the new. The third stage, the rites of incorporation, occurs when individuals have adjusted to the new situation to enable them to reintegrate with everyday life (Teodorescu & Călin, 2015; van Gennep, 1960). Turner (1967), although influenced by van Gennep (1907), differed from him on views of the individual versus the community in the liminal phase. Turner (1967) believed that liminality is “limbo” in the sense of a community experiencing the transition of social

change together, whereas van Genneep (1907) believed liminality is experienced individually. We incorporate Turner's (1967) view of liminality in this study, as adolescence is not only experienced individually, but also as part of a community of a certain age. In the context of this study, the learner is in several liminal spaces - in terms of place as he moves between boarding-school and home; in terms of age and development as he moves from pre-adolescence to adolescence; and in terms of material space as he transitions from a home life characterised by poor working-class parents to an environment populated by middle-class peers.

Challenges and affordances of boarding-school living

Children who move to boarding schools find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings and have trouble in adjusting (Behaghel et al., 2017). The first year particularly is fraught with a sense of isolation (Fischer, Murray & Frazer, 1985) and a loss of friends, family, and security (Behagel et al. 2017; Fischer et al., 1985). It takes time, sometimes up to a year, for learners to adjust to a new environment (Behagel et al., 2017). This time lag results in learners often progressing very slowly with respect to academic work (Behagel et al., 2017). In addition, during this period, learners can feel secluded from their family and withdraw in class, or struggle to adapt and make new friends (Behagel et al., 2017). For children from a rural farming environment, the adjustment to a new boarding school environment may be even more difficult. With homesteads in rural areas located generally quite far from neighbours, children have very little exposure to social interactions (Gordon et al., 2000) with other children from similar or different languages, cultures, and religious backgrounds. Such social isolation often results in children being withdrawn, afraid of strangers (Gordon et al., 2000) and not possessing suitable communication skills (Ostrove & Long, 2007) to adapt.

Even when children do settle, the ongoing movement between schools and home results in these children being in a continuous state of flux between the two environments. This could exacerbate feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. There are often issues of conflicting expectations, authority and rules of engagement. At boarding school, learners usually have a house master/mistress taking charge, monitoring the children's routines and interests, and possibly influencing their habits and beliefs, while parents/ extended families take over during weekends/ holidays. The disparity between the expected conduct in the two environments is seldom the same with one study indicating that rural parents lack time to engage optimally with their children, due to farming responsibilities (Gardiner, 2008). Alternatively, children could find their free time filled with farm chores only (Hade, 2004).

Moving to boarding-school at a time when children are transitioning from childhood adds another layer of pressure to navigate, physically, socially and psychologically. Many of these changes create a sense of uncertainty (Wendling, 2008). Firstly, when entering adolescence, the young child is negotiating the physical bodily changes of puberty, which generally occurs at around 12 years old (Brown, 2017). They are also learning to negotiate who they are; learning to acquire new skills to be productive (Eccles, 1999) and seeking stronger peer identification and friendships (Davison & McCabe, 2006). However, acceptance or rejection from peers is based on the rules that operate within specific

groups at the time, which Jaskulska (2015) argued is a form of initiation for children who transition into adolescence. Although all children transitioning into adolescence share these experiences, a child moving into boarding school may feel further alienated as the social structures which operate - from clustering of friends, segregation and hierarchies (McFarland, Moody, Diehl, Smith & Thomas, 2014) - become more complex.

For children from low socio-economic rural circumstances, there is an added stigma. They are frequently bullied or laughed at for being poor (Horgan, 2007) and rejected by children who come from middle-class backgrounds (Weinger, 2000, p. 139) leading to feelings of shame, embarrassment and humiliation (Horgan, 2007; Main, 2014). Moreover, poor children may be excluded from social gatherings (Main, 2014; Weinger, 2000). These aspects impact negatively on their psychological well-being. Parents too feel helpless, because they are not able to prevent the teasing and bullying (Main, 2014, p 27). Not all children and adults understand material poverty due to financial hardship. As a result, children from poor families tend to connect with individual/s from the same backgrounds (Weinger, 2000).

Despite the challenges in adjusting to boarding school, there are many advantages. For example, Behagel et al. (2017, p.158) argued that “boarding-schools provide students with smaller classes, more engaged teachers, better peers, less classroom disruption, and more mandatory time spent each day in a study room”. Additionally, a well-functioning boarding school lays the foundation for a structured lifestyle (Martin, Papworth, Ginn & Liem, 2014), which includes having a tight scheduling system that assists learners in time management and discipline. Martin et al.’s (2014) research argued that structure and routine from boarding schools help learners, particularly males, develop qualities to enable them to succeed in furthering education or in the workplace (Vigar-Ellis, 2013). Another advantage is that boarding-schools generally cater for the personal needs of the children such as security, love, freedom, independence, self-expression, and achievement (Curto & Fryer Jr., 2014).

Many good boarding schools also have academic support and development policies set in place for learners from poor rural schools (McRae, 2007). Children are also more likely to receive a balanced diet (Vigar-Ellis, 2013). This is important for children from poor rural households, to counteract the effects of poor nutrition on brain development, speech and language development, and other growth milestones (Loomis, 2010; Mqadi, 2017).

Research methods

In this qualitative case study, we were seeking to understand how an individual, whom we refer to by the pseudonym of Bayete, makes sense of and understands his world within a bounded system (Henning, et al., 2004; Merriam, 2009), guided by the following research question:

What is the influence of a well-functioning boarding school on the social and academic achievement of a socio-economically disadvantaged rural male learner?

The unit of analysis within the case study is described as “statistically as the ‘who’ or ‘what’ for which information is analysed and conclusions are made” (Sedgwick, 2014, p. 1). The unit of analysis was the adolescent Bayete’s social and academic experiences within a specific context over a two-year period (2018-2019). Data was generated from Bayete, as well as from his father, teachers, and the boarding-school master to provide multiple perspectives (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Data sources include interviews, questionnaires, observations, and school documents. The most important elements of Bayete’s case we took cognisance of are his age (12-13 during the time of the research), his interests (soccer mainly), his family composition (mother, father, an older brother and a younger sister), the relationship he has with his dad (very traditional African values characterised by respect for his parents, recognition that the father is the head of the household, with a close bond between Bayete and his parents) and the differences between his family’s socio-economic status (poor, working class parents who have little formal education) compared to that of families at the boarding-school (largely middle class, educated parents) and issues of safety and security as a farm dweller.

Bayete speaks three languages, his home languages (IsiXhosa and Setswana) and English which is the language of school instruction, which he has been using since the age of 7 (Grade 1). Interviews were conducted in English, audio recorded and transcribed to capture the detailed conversation and to isolate any discourse in the conversation (Roberts, Smith & Pollock, 2004). Ethical protocols were specific to research with an under-age adolescent, with assent from the participant himself and consent from his parents (Kaiser, 2009). Data was analysed inductively using procedures associated with grounded-theory content analysis to form categories, and then themes to create patterns of meaning (Henning et al., 2004).

Findings

Three main findings were distilled.

Boarding school had a positive impact on Bayete’s academic achievement

Before Bayete entered the boarding school in 2018, he was a day scholar at the same school for four years. His Grade 4 school reports from 2017 provide evidence of his academic struggles, particularly in mathematics (29%), and natural science and technology (38%), with an overall grade average of 44%. We concluded that one main reason for Bayete’s poor academic performance was that Bayete spent up to six hours travelling to and from school. Each morning and afternoon he walked up to 4 km on a dirt road to his transport point. His dad recalls: “They [Bayete and his younger sister] get up at 4 o’clock. 5 o’clock they must be done then they need to walk”. The time wasted coupled with his exhaustion, meant he had insufficient time for homework, as recalled by his father:

If they get off there so 2 o’clock, they will get home about half-past 5 ... if he puts his bag down and ate finish, he’s fast asleep. Now you must struggle with him to do homework, he eats and goes shower ... he is tired.

It is therefore not surprising that Bayete was too tired to complete his homework. It also became a daily struggle for his parents to motivate him. For instance his father said: “I ask him if he done the homework he says no ... I ask three times and ... then he says no, he has homework”. The comment from his Grade 4 teacher supports this: “his homework [was] never completed”.

From 2018 however there is ample evidence of improvement. His overall average improved from 44% (Grade 4 in 2017), to 63% (Grade 4 in 2018) to 60% (Grade 5 in 2019). There were also major improvements in his mathematics marks from 2017 to 2018 (28% to 65%). However, in 2019, this had dropped to 45%. His natural science and technology marks increased consistently over the years from 38% to 76%. Some elements of the boarding school are likely to have influenced this improvement. The first was the structured time to complete homework, as evidenced by the house master’s comment:

We especially make sure that they definitely do their homework, it is important that all hostel learners make sure that they do their homework [and] teachers make sure that they do their homework.

Bayete’s dad’s remarks about the advantages of the boarding school seems to support this:

... before boarding-school he wasn’t by the books, he wasn’t like he is now like at the hostel. Now, ... I see him. He does his work more than when he was at home.

A second advantage of the boarding school is time set aside for study, library visits and quiet reading. This is part of an established routine as per the housemaster’s observations: “... after supper they go straight to the hostel for a shower and then ... study time starts at quarter past 6 till about quarter to 8”. A third reason is the provision of extra-classes after school for learners who are not performing well in specific subjects, an area which was needed by Bayete as a day scholar, but which he was unable to access. The extra-classes did contribute towards his academic achievement in 2018, as highlighted by his dad:

Now you see they have extra classes at school, so it’s better to sleep at the school ... Right, they started helping him with maths last year. Therefore he got 84% ...

As a day scholar, Bayete was not able to receive such help at home. His grade 5 teacher explained that “... his father cannot write. There wasn't support at home. Now he is in the boarding-school and the teachers can easily assist with extra help”. Additional classes are also arranged during the exam period as evidenced by the comments from the housemaster: “... there have been arrangements to have extra classes in the afternoon, on a Wednesday ... what we do is we have two study sessions [during exam time] ...”.

Although such support was provided by the school, 2019 data showed that Bayete had still not completely made the transition to the new habits required of him; he still seemed to be stuck “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967, p. 97) the habits of a struggling learner and one who is improving. For instance, the housemaster reported that Bayete did/does not always make use of opportunities for additional support:

I know that [Bayete was] supposed to have extra classes and a lot of times [he] didn't pitch up for that classes.... even though we sent boys and girls to go look for [him] and go find [him]". But [he] love playing I think a little bit more than to do homework or extra-classes.

A similar observation was made by his grade 5 teacher, that, "a lot of times, he [Bayete] does not show up". While his improved performance in 2018 was probably due to regular attendance of the extra classes, his scanty attendance in 2019, resulted in some learning losses. Bayete too confirmed that he does not always attend extra-classes. In exploring the possible reasons for his absence from the support classes, it seemed that the expansion of Bayete's social group activities was conflicting with his academic tasks. Bayete is a passionate soccer player, and at the boarding school the facilities for soccer and a readily available group of peers clearly overrode attendance at academic support classes. He thus made a deliberate choice not to attend the extra-classes, in favour of social interaction.

Bayete has developed a select social group

When Bayete first moved into the boarding school he struggled to make friends. This could in part be attributed to a historical lack of interaction with peers of his own age in an isolated rural environment. As Bayete described it: "... we live in a mountain, and there's no one to play with Most of the time the place is boring at home". Time spent travelling to and from school as a day scholar also seems to have impacted negatively on interactions with a peer group. However, his Grade 5 teacher indicated that Bayete's move to the boarding school in 2018 had improved his academic performance which gave "him more confidence and then in time his social development also improved". Bayete also stated that he preferred "going to boarding school" because "I [saw] my friends everyday". His Grade 4 teacher too also noticed this change: "... In 2017, Bayete was very withdrawn in class He started to communicate more with friends and made friends easily [after 2017 when he moved into the boarding school]". The boarding-school housemaster concurred: "his social interaction and behaviour changed over time. He made a lot of friends".

Although there is increased social interaction and the presence of many new peers to engage with, the data reveals more nuances. Bayete's choice of friends seems to have been careful. For instance, in January 2019 Bayete indicated that he had four special friends, selected because they are respectful and have a good moral grounding. He described these criteria in the following way: "*Not rude; that make good decisions*". Bayete's criteria for choosing friends echoes his dad's views who recounted the following:

... many times I tell him that when you choose friends, that you mustn't find friends that teach you what I don't teach you. So that tomorrow when you get home, I don't know what you learnt. Please choose the right things at school.

By April 2019, in a follow up interview with Bayete when asked again about his friendships, Bayete responded that he only has two close friends. This was confirmed by the first author's observation notes: "He would only talk and play with the two boys ...". The first author also noticed that when another learner joined the small group, "Bayete

would sit on his own, then remains quiet and shy". This suggests to us that Bayete feels some discomfort when interacting with children out of his immediate social group (Gordon, et al., 2000).

Another factor that influences peer socialisation appears to be material deprivation. In South Africa, farming/ rural areas are generally inhabited by disadvantaged and unemployed populations, particularly African farm workers (Atkinson, 2014). While it is common during adolescence for children to seek social acceptance within their peers (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992), Bayete's poor background, in a boarding school where most learners come from middle class backgrounds in some way dictates his social sphere. As an adolescent, it is not unusual for him to compare himself to his peers as well as worry about how he is perceived (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992), with Bayete reporting in April 2019 that "they [peers] always laugh at me" and when asked for a reason, said "They always make fun of my shoes" because they are not "name brand shoes" ¹.

It is likely that these types of comments would result in him feeling insecure, humiliated, and embarrassed. His only way to address this was to ask his father for a branded pair of Nike shoes, as this becomes a proxy for social acceptance; he sees his acceptance into the group through its acquisition. To the father, these demands are not new, but he manages this request in a very supportive manner, as highlighted by the following response: "He always does that, but then I asked where he saw that tekkie [colloquial South African name for sneakers] and he says by his friend. And I said it's very expensive I can't afford it but I will try". In yet another example, Bayete compares his mobile telephone to what others have: "I only have a Mobicell [disregarding his type of phone by looking down]". Bayete's choice of words indicates its lower worth, because it is not a popular brand of mobile phone. His family's inability to provide material goods that may enable him to fit in contributes to Bayete's social isolation from others.

Despite Bayete's lack of understanding about the financial circumstances of his family, his dad remains steadfast in his belief that education is a way out of a farm life. His dad's remarks about what he tells Bayete in this respect are pertinent:

Leave to look at other children please. If you look at other friends, it is going to be difficult because you looking at clothes now and so on and so on. Focus on your things at school. If I see something at the shops I will always surprise you, but if I have money.

As a result of this impasse, Bayete has purposefully chosen a small group of friends whose circumstances are similar to his own (Weinger, 2000) and with whom he can create a sense of belonging (Howard & Johnson, 2004).

Disorientation caused by the ongoing movement between two different spaces

Bayete's move to boarding school in 2018 meant that he saw his family over weekends and during longer school holiday periods. The movement between his home and the

¹ Name brand is an all-encompassing term for top clothing/ shoe labels like *Nike*.

boarding house, resulted in him being “betwixt and between’ two fixed points in space-time of structural classification” (Turner, 1967, p. 97) and seems to have led to “in between-ness” or “liminality” (Turner, 1967, p. 97), accompanied by disorientation and often, distress. We surmise that Bayete’s uncertainty and anxiety is the constant adjustment required to operate in the two very different environments. The boarding school is a highly structured environment with its own routines and processes as explained by the housemaster:

The first bell will ring at quarter to 6 in the morning, where the boarders will be (pause) we will wake them up. Where they will need to get dress[ed], and wash their faces and brush their teeth. And obviously be prep be ready and prepared for inspection ... Our school starts at 25 past 7, and, first break is round about half past 9 twenty to 10, where they also then receive sandwiches that’s been made for them. After that, there’s a second break and the school ends roundabout quarter to 2 where the kids go line up to go have lunch ... Study time starts at quarter past 6 till about quarter to 8, in the evenings ... they move back to the hostel and prepare themselves for quiet time. Quiet time is time they can sit on their beds and read the bible, say prayers and then lights out is half past 8.

The tight structure for meals, homework, watching television and going to bed in the boarding school was meant to regulate myriad activities, but can be a challenge for children who are not accustomed to this type of structure. It is in stark contrast to Bayete and his dad’s description of their home environment where there seems to be very little evidence of set routines and tasks for Bayete as explained by Bayete’s dad: “... he is handy to wet the garden at home, but we don’t really have anything for him to do. We will just tell him to make up your bed and brush your teeth”. Bayete’s dad complains about other struggles too:

I ask him if he done the homework he says: ‘no’. After he drinks tea I ask: ‘did you do the homework?’ He says ‘no father I don’t have homework’. I ask three times and I want to go look ... then he says no he has homework.

Similarly, when home for the school holiday, Bayete describes his typical day as “I wake up and watch TV all day”. Bayete’s dad however would like him to use the time on academic work. He says: “... [he] must always ... read his books when school is closed. He can just take one book to read, or Huisgenoot² ... So that when the school opens he doesn’t struggle again”. Bayete seemingly ignores his dad’s requests. This data contrasts with the general lack of support for their children’s social and academic activities from some parents in rural households (Mudau & Obadire, 2017). The differences in rules, routines and experiences between home and boarding school environments are captured in Bayete’s comment: “... you sleep too early”. He struggles with adjusting to a 20.30 bedtime Monday to Friday in comparison to unmonitored late nights over the weekends. Bayete states that he sometimes stays awake for a long time after the lights are out, which affects his ability to concentrate on lessons. The observations of the first author confirm this.

² A popular Afrikaans magazine with articles of general interest.

Bayete also understandably misses his family and struggles to adjust to life away from them. For example, in 2018, when asked about his family, he broke down in tears. This continued throughout the interviews with him in 2019. Bayete took a liking to a teacher who reminded him of his mother, “[b]ecause she treats me like my mother ... She always helps me with my stuff ... She is young, she is nice ... She's not strict”. He therefore was drawn to the nurturing personality of this teacher, which also impacted positively on his academic performance in the subject she taught, namely English. Bayete expressed a wish to return home but his dad reminded him of the struggles he encountered as a day scholar. Although the data showed that Bayete still missed his family in the second year of boarding school, the constant support from his family did to some extent change his perspective.

Much of the data also points to Bayete’s poor eating habits both at boarding school and at home, which could be linked to the difficulties experienced with the transitional tensions between the two environments. The excerpt below is an incident that occurred during a phone call between Bayete and his dad:

If you ask him don't just say ya I didn't get food, then you run after [to complain to the housemaster] and say that 'you didn't feed my child' ... Then he [Bayete] says sometime the food that we eat is not the food that we like.

Bayete prefers the simpler rural diet of “milk and soup pap³” and vegetables. Bayete clearly misses his mom’s cooking and familiar foods (even though it may not have sufficient nutritional value). When Bayete does eat meat dishes, he stated that “I vomit.” He also stated that he also does not eat when he is home “Because I don't know if the food is going to make me sick”.

The overriding inconsistencies in his eating habits caused concern at the boarding school. The housemaster indicated that each learner receives “...3 meals, breakfast, lunch and supper. But there’s also sandwiches available for them after or during first break”. However, from the observation notes of Bayete during mealtimes, it seems that food although available is not consumed. Not eating regularly could lead to negative effects physically, and cognitively. Bayete indicates that he does not enjoy moving between classes at school as he gets tired quickly. This is in direct contrast to his enjoyment of soccer as an intensively physical game. Bayete’s signs of fatigue and lack of concentration in class during the day may be directly related to his lack of consistent and regular nutrition. This assertion is backed up by numerous observations of Bayete in the school environment: “He does not complete his activities on time in the classroom, and is distracted easily ... Does not participate in any classroom interaction ... Signs of fatigue”.

Lastly, it seems as if the contrast between the boarding school environment that provided safety versus living in a rural farming area with little security was another disorienting factor. Bayete describes his fear of going to sleep due to “nightmares ... being chased by

³ Pap is a colloquial term for soft-cooked maize porridge, commonly eaten by many rural families every day both as a breakfast meal and in place of rice at an evening meal.

monsters”. Bayete’s nightmares could stem from a constant concern about the safety of his family. In his very first interview conducted in 2018, he explained “wanting to be a policeman and catch criminals” so that he could “protect [his] mother... [because his] dad is always away”. He has obviously also listened to his dad’s concerns for the long distances his children had to walk while they were day scholars: “Two years back was it a bit too bad in South Africa to kidnap children. But now it’s a bit lower, I don’t see that they talking so much about it on the news”. Bayete, as the older of two young children took responsibility for his younger sister. In contrast, at boarding school, Bayete felt safe, “Because there’s a security guard”. This was confirmed by his dad: “... there is security, no one can just come in to talk to the children. That is important for us parents”.

Discussion

One key focus of the TERuSA project is improving the educational opportunities for young rural learners like Bayete. To this end, the project provides access to well-functioning boarding schools, as well as other related costs, such as transport, school uniforms, textbooks and electronic devices. The data over the period of study confirms an upwards shift in the academic achievement of the participant. This is due to several factors. First, access to a well-organised and resourced school environment coupled with sufficient support from teachers who are knowledgeable and who care for their charges, has enabled Bayete to improve in areas where he has struggled. In addition, the cultivation of a social group, albeit small, has enabled Bayete to make friends and socialise in a way that was not possible before.

While these are positive elements, we realised that the process of transplanting a young pre-adolescent from a rural environment into a boarding school is fraught with challenges. We anticipated that there would be some adjustment period as Bayete moved into a new and unfamiliar environment (Behaghel et al., 2017) and that he would experience a sense of isolation or seclusion (Fischer et al., 1986). Studies illustrate how adapting to the rules and norms of a new (and often unfamiliar) environment can be accompanied by much uncertainty and anxiety (Petersen, 2017; Teodorescu & Calin, 2015; van Deventer, 2017). We assumed that his transition would be eased somewhat as Bayete was already familiar with the school from his time as a day scholar. However, the data shows that two years after his shift to the boarding school, Bayete was still experiencing social and familial isolation. The team clearly underestimated the length of adjustment period required, the kinds of issues Bayete would struggle with and the kind of support he would require. As a result, Bayete’s state of liminality in three specific areas was considerably prolonged, impacting on his adjustment in ways we did not anticipate.

First were the challenges of moving between two environments that were very different in expectations, rules and routines. The lack of synergy between the two environments resulted in Bayete inhabiting a “boundary space” (Engeström, Engeström & Kärkkäinen, 1995). A boundary, according to Akkerman and Bakker (2011), can be regarded as a sociocultural difference which leads to discontinuity in action or interaction. While there is sameness and continuity of purpose in both sites, there is also discontinuity between them

in their interaction with each other. Both sites were concerned with Bayete's development and progress, albeit with different perceptions and views of how it would be realised. This naturally led to a situation characterised by conflict, tension and uncertainty. Although Bayete's dad was adept at keeping him from the pressures of arduous farm work, he could not effectively monitor Bayete's schoolwork and create routines for him at home. This is not unusual as rural parents, particularly those with little formal education, do not observe the same routines as those associated with suburban living (Hade, 2004).

Other areas of liminality for Bayete were in terms of age and development as he transitioned from pre-adolescence to adolescence, which is accompanied by myriad physical, emotional and behavioural changes, educational challenges, uncertainties and crisis of identity. Navigating these successfully usually comes with the support of parents and loved ones. In retrospect, we have realised that the differences in the rules, routines and experiences between home and the boarding-school environment and being away from his parents and older brother may have exacerbated his feelings of isolation, uncertainty and anxiety in this liminal space (Turner, 1967; Wendling, 2008). Our results are in line with previous studies showing that adolescents living in boarding-school experience emotional surges such as loneliness, and homesickness (Hadwen, 2015, p. 39) which can lead to long-term mental health issues for children (Foucar & Duffel, 2001).

Then there was the liminality of transitioning between the material spaces of home versus the school environment. In terms of the latter, Bayete transitioned from a home life characterised by working-class poor rural parents, to an environment populated by peers from middle-class backgrounds, who in material terms had more expensive clothes and goods. The repercussions of prolonged liminality impacting these intertwined transitions and Bayete's sense of self and feelings of self-worth may have disadvantaged him in ways we did not anticipate. His growing anxiety, loss of interest in school and peer socialising, and lack of appetite are all signs that Bayete may have benefited from support via a school psychologist or counsellor.

Reflecting on the significance of the data, we questioned the success of our role/s as mediating partner. Participation and collaboration across the different sites of Bayete's home and the school were therefore key in combining "ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid situations" (Engeström et al., 1995, p. 319). It meant crossing boundaries to "enter onto territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore unqualified" (Suchman, 1993, p. 25). This can be quite challenging for the school and the parents to resolve on their own, as it means suspending assumptions about each environment and communicating as equals. In addition, given the Apartheid history of South Africa, the difficulties of navigating power differentials between African rural, semi-literate parents and White, educated school staff and management, requires careful intervention. Here, the project team could have served as boundary spanners (Price-Mitchell, 2009) or brokers (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) to establish greater continuity between the two environments. The outcomes of such a collaboration would have meant that children like Bayete would have been better supported in overcoming the differences between home and the boarding-school environment. If successful, it could have meant that continuity between the home and school for instance with regards to routines and

structure was established “facilitating future and effortless movement between different sites” (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p.144).

At the conclusion of this phase of the research, we are clear that our role was not only about liaising superficially between school and parents, and supporting the adolescent, but working much more closely with the parents, which we did not initially consider as part of our research. We were keen to uphold the agency of rural parents, but in the process neglected key aspects of the development component of our work. Development agents and researchers, both in South Africa and in international contexts, should pay more attention to these aspects.

Conclusion

Parents in rural areas often find that their children’s access to good quality education and opportunities for social integration are impacted by both geography and finances. Boarding schools offer a viable alternative to long travel times and unavailability of well-equipped schools, and provide ready access to a peer group for socialisation. Informed by the body of research internationally, the authors set out to investigate the impact of a well-functioning boarding school on the social and academic development of a socio-economically disadvantaged, adolescent male in South Africa over a two-year period. We wanted to understand from the young adolescent learner’s experiences what he struggled with most in the transition, why this was so, and how support could be provided. We were also interested in how these learnings could inform the area of study of rural education and boarding schools in South Africa and internationally, and for not-for-profits interested in funding such endeavours.

The findings show that a confluence of factors conspired to prolong the young man’s liminality. This led to protracted tension and unhappiness for the adolescent and his parents and may have caused additional difficulty with routine setting and adjustment. The authors conclude that in their quest to not usurp the rights of the adolescent’s parents they failed to offer appropriate advice. In the process they may inadvertently have contributed to prolonging the young man’s liminality and inability to settle. The tensions between their primary roles as researchers and lesser role as intervention agents remains unclear and is an area of research that is vital to clarify. This has implications for how these kinds of interventions operate in South Africa and other developing countries.

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