

# Revisiting Rurality and Schooling: A Teacher's Story

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*This paper presents an understanding of what it means to be a teacher in a school defined as 'rural'. From a sociological perspective, we consider the mechanisms and ways of knowing that are adopted by a teacher for understanding not only the external world but for being a certain kind of teacher for a school in a rural setting. Employing data techniques from life history and collage compositions, data was produced with a teacher we have named Hilton. The data focused on his daily lived experiences and the social realities of working in the context of rural education to offer an expanded social and collective approach to teacher identity. Through his story, as told and experienced by him, we foreground dominant discourses at work in a rural context, and show how specific discourses define Hilton's life and work as a teacher in specific ways. Despite the challenges and adversities he faces, we show how as a teacher he chooses to negotiate - through resistance and complicity - the discourses that dominate rural schooling and its culture, learners, teachers and communities. The article concludes that a teacher's capacity to disrupt and challenge stereotypical meanings of rural schooling involves ongoing dialogue with the self, with teachers, with learners and the wider community.*

**Keywords:** teacher identity, rural, dialogue, schooling, community, disrupt, resist, discourse.

## Introducing the enquiry

*My dreams of going to college and becoming a teacher had to fade away and the embarrassment of sitting at home for a year began to seep in. I must admit that the combination of not being at school and not even being allowed to play outside or push a wheelbarrow in the sun depressed me. Then one day I could not take it any longer. I tied a rope around a piece of wood, placed my head through the rope and began to swing. Just then my mother walked in... (Interview with Hilton, May 2008, Marianhill Monastery)*

This excerpt offers us a glimpse of the abyss that Hilton found himself in. It sums up his pain and hopelessness as a young man growing up in a rural community. It also reminds us of his dream of wanting to study to become a teacher and live a life with some sense of normality and purpose. As a boy growing up in a rural environment, and having to live with the condition called Albinism<sup>1</sup>, life was never easy: Hilton found life trying. Moreover, realising his dream of becoming a qualified teacher from this marginalised space was a process requiring marked redefinition. He had to rethink his identity as an Albino and make the transition from "silent outsider to an authoritative insider" (Richie & Wilson, 2003: 76).

Hilton's story<sup>2</sup> is one of eight teachers who participated in the larger research project funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF), and conducted in schools in the Vulindlela District in KwaZulu-Natal. All ethical clearance issues were followed through with great care to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the teacher participants and the schools in which they worked. Consent and permission to report the findings was obtained within the ambit of the larger Every Voice Counts Project (EVC).

The reconstructed story of Hilton (who resided in the district), is represented here in the first person. The EVC project identified *five possible entry points* using participatory methodologies as a cross-cutting theme for testing out the ways in which each group (community members, teachers, and learners) could regard another as a resource in the community when working with young people. Reflexive methodologies in studying teachers' lives, was chosen as one entry point by the authors, Daisy Pillay and Sheeren

Saloojee.<sup>3</sup> Within this research node, the researcher-authors used visual participatory and reflexive methodologies, showing how this could contribute to teachers acquiring a greater awareness of their own lived experiences, their strengths and of themselves as assets.

## Context of the study

Critchley (2001) states that teachers define themselves according to the contexts in which they work: they see themselves as people who are willing to negotiate skills; front institutional barriers in socially appropriate ways; turn constraints into opportunity for change; reflect on the teaching process and environment, and engage in lifelong learning to the best of the individual's capacity. According to Critchley, teachers define themselves in relation to the context in which they teach. How the teacher negotiates the personal-professional self within the context of rurality and schooling is what we wish to explore, describe and explain through the lived experiences of an exemplary teacher, Hilton.

We start from the premise that a rural school is contextually different from the urban school in its geographical features, its practices, ethos, and economic status. While we argue that these issues and challenges are not unique to rural schooling and teachers who teach in rural schools, we hope to disrupt and challenge the stereotypical understandings adopted about it, by listening to real stories of real teachers working in rural schools. The first section examines some of the critical research that currently frames rural education and development in South Africa. The second section maps out the theoretical stance that the authors adopted to frame the argument. We then consider the participatory methodologies that could contribute to teachers acquiring a greater awareness of their own lived experiences, their strengths and possibilities in the community working with young people. Finally, we consider how a thorough and contextualized investigation of one teacher's lived experience can inform teachers generally who work in schools in rural environments.

## Rural Education and schooling in South Africa

In the pre-Apartheid era, rural settings were "reservoirs of unskilled labour and the dumping ground of the unemployed" (HSRC-EPC, 2005: 136) and this remains unchanged, as schools in rural settings produce students who have limited chances of obtaining a meaningful education and life after matriculation, because of a combination of poverty and poor quality education that includes lack of encouragement from teachers (HSRC-EPC, 2005). The policy of unequal education resulted in serious neglect of rural schools (HSRC-EPC, 2005), the evident effects on learners, teachers and the community.

Many rural schooling communities are characterised by a deep rift between teachers and the guardians of the children in their care (HSRC-EPC, 2005). According to the *Emerging Voices* Report (HSRC-EPC, 2005), some communities are proud of their school and teachers who work there, while others have serious concerns. Criticisms of teachers encompass a complex set of issues related to teacher absenteeism, their lack of qualifications, their level of subject knowledge, commitment and sense of vocation.

According to national studies, many teachers in rural schools have their roots amongst the rural poor; with a matriculation certificate as their highest qualification (HSRC-EPC, 2005), resulting in most teachers being under-qualified to work in schools. This contributes to the poor teaching and learning opportunities available to promote quality education there. One parent in *Emerging Voices* Report (HSRC-EPC, 2005: 119) pointed out: "There is a pressing need for a sound relationship between the teachers, learners, and parents. However, the reality is that many parents do not set foot on the school premises and many teachers who travel to work in schools there do not set foot in the rural communities". Further, instances of 'teacher bashing' permeate a negative image of the profession in rural schools (HSRC-EPC, 2005).

While the view that the teacher is the most important factor in the learning and teaching encounters with learners is echoed internationally (Cochran-Smith, 2004), the need for teachers to be seen as key agents of change in improving the quality of the education in schools in rural settings, as opposed to service 'workers', is compelling (Department of Education, 2005). In this paper, we recount the story of Hilton and his desire and commitment to go beyond just providing a service. This story reveals the complicated

procedures he has to endure to make sense of his life, offering hope for transforming definitions of schooling in rural contexts and for transforming the negative perceptions of teachers who work there.

## Theoretical Framework

*There are alternate choices to understanding the dominant, totalising discourse for what it means to be a teacher in a rural environment. The alternate choices we argue for, offer a less fixed positioning of teacher identity and rurality. Existing research and anecdotal evidence suggest that there are significant challenges faced by teachers in rural areas, and that teachers respond in very different ways to these challenges (De Lange, Mitchell, Moletsane, Balfour, Wedekind, Pillay & Buthelezi, 2010: 10).*

The theoretical lens, through which teacher identity is sociologically explored and interpreted, is offered here. We draw on two theorists, Foucault (1980) and his perspective on how the self works on itself - and what he calls ‘technologies of the self’, and Judith Butler (2004) and her theory of identity as performative. These perspectives assist us to understand the identities of teachers who work in schools in rural settings – specifically to explain what kind of teacher identity is achieved as part of the social and collective endeavour (Butler, 2004). From this theoretical stance we want to speak to the idea of rurality conceptualized as dynamic (Balfour, Mitchell & Moletsane, 2008), or as a set of preferences that have value independent of urban influences. It makes available an understanding that does not homogenize ‘rural’ space but rather, opens up a multiplicity of variations (Odora-Hoppers, 2004) in and through which new categories of knowledge are produced that make new meanings and change possible for schooling in rural settings. This can be seen through the investments teachers may make in various subject positions they adopt in their roles as teachers in a rural school.

Foucault in his work links the three concepts of power, knowledge and selfhood, and argues that one of the ways in which power works is through producing ‘truths’ about the world not as a prohibitive and denying force but through productive ways of being, forms of pleasure and so on (1980). According to Foucault (1980: 119), “...power traverses and produces things, forms knowledge, produces discourses.” Foucault argues that power is not a possession nor is it reducible to physiological capacities or labour. For Foucault (1980: 98), power is not the property of an individual, nor can it be seized or acquired. Power is dynamic and unstable. A state of domination exists, for example, when a teacher is subject to the unnecessary authority of the school manager. Thus, what is important is to analyse these relations of power through the range of discourses and practices teachers embody, constraining and enabling, in order to learn what is possible.

The idea that power is not possessed but exercised in ways that open up spaces for resistance and agency in the interplay of shifting and mobile relations, points to fresh possibilities through which teachers like Hilton can denaturalise themselves and embrace change as teachers working in a rural school. “Power makes visible teachers’ identities as multiple and fluid” (Foucault, 1978: 93) and produces knowledges by which people can be known and understood (Lawler, 2008: 57).

Strathern (1996) emphasises this perspective by arguing that identity is produced through knowledge, and ‘what we are’ is ‘what we want ourselves to be’, which is aligned to Foucault’s description that ‘we are addressed’, and ‘address ourselves as certain kinds of person’ and through this process, we become that person. Knowledge in this instance might be termed ways of knowing or in Foucauldian terms, discourses. The kinds of knowledge produced within discourse are about what kinds of persons we are, and are bound up with our sense of self. There is always struggle for new meaning, and the fact that discourses change across time and place, makes change possible in what kind of teacher-self one wants to be. In this paper, this theoretical stance is necessary to explore the range of discourses Hilton adopts in his struggles for new ways of knowing what/who he is and the world in which he lives and works.

In addition, we find the perspectives of feminist philosopher, Judith Butler, relevant here as well. Her perspectives seek to destabilise the notion of a coherent, unified, stable identity (Butler, 1992). Like Foucault, Butler emphasises the relation between the individual and the social as a primary concern in the struggle for new meanings of being a teacher, and what she calls “improvisation within the scene of

constraint". Lawler (citing Butler and Goffman, 2008: 104) explains that in resisting a normative claim of a core authentic identity, he (Lawler, 2008) highlights "identity as always something that is done: it is achieved, rather than innate...identity is not achieved in isolation; it is part of a social and collective endeavour, not an individual odyssey". Teacher identity as performative can be understood through the enacted daily practices (Butler, 1993), by the individual teacher in relation to the social and collective endeavour (Lawler, 2008) of the wider community of teachers and within a specific normative framing of rural schooling.

These fleeting multiplicities of performances (Sparkes, 1994) we map out in Hilton's story to make available the complex ways in which the past and its remembrance invade and pervade the present, to produce different ways of knowing in the performance of being a teacher in a rural school.

## Methodology

Of the eight teachers who participated in the larger research project (NRF) conducted in the Vulindlela District, the reconstructed story of Hilton (who resided in this district), is represented in this paper in the first person genre. The reason for selecting Hilton's story as a residing teacher is important for understanding the differential impact this had on his life, behaviours and dispositions, and what was possible for him in a school located in a rural setting. The school is located in the Vulindlela district, about 150 kilometres west of Durban. Close to 66% of pregnant women in this district are HIV-positive, with 25% of them being between the ages of 15 and 24 (De Lange, Bhana, Mitchell, Moletsane, Balfour, Wedekind & Pillay, 2006).

The school management teams collectively, or in some instances the principal or teacher as an individual, draw on the assets available in the community, for example, the existing well-resourced Mafakatini Clinic and the Learning Together Project, in which the school participated. In this study, the life history approach offers a greater sense of process, gives a more ambiguous, complex and chaotic view of reality and a deeper understanding of the complex relations between ideology and culture, self and society (Munro, 1993). Through life history interviews, complemented by visual collages and critical conversations, memory work yielded rich and interesting data. Inquiry through the collage increased access to the teacher's voice and reflexivity in the research process and expanded the possibilities of multiple and diverse realities and understandings (Butler-Kisber, 2008: 268). As part of the process of self-narration, this method enabled the teachers to express, enhance, share and analyse their knowledge of life and their circumstances (Mayoux, 2008), and to remember beyond words the issues that they confront daily, and those that need to be addressed in working with vulnerable children and young people (Chambers, 1994; De Lange, Mitchell, Moletsane, Stuart, Taylor, Buthelezi & Mazibuko, 2003).

In the act of constructing and reconstructing 'a life' through story, the focus is on central moments, critical incidents and practices that revolve around the confusions and contradictions individuals face at different times in their lives and how they relive, reclaim and construct chosen identities through the telling. We use Hilton's story firstly to listen and look out for the disruptions or resistance to the norms of rural life in Hilton's daily practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These practices enacted at different times in a teacher's lived life assist in understanding the nature of Hilton's days in the 'world' and as a teacher. Secondly, we try to understand how the individual self is constituted in relation to the social world, and as Butler (1993) argues that there is no identity that precedes the social. In the description of the formation of teachers' identities, we try to critically account for the matrix of social relations that authorises how one wants to be known and understood, for example, Hilton's version of being African and albino. Thirdly, we elaborate on the story's pragmatic dimension by offering insight into Hilton's self-constituted teacher persona through practice in/out of the school, bringing into effect his teacher position and naming of himself as African and albino. In this layer of meaning, we offer an understanding of a teacher's 'freedom', his enacted practices and the resultant effects.

## Analysis of Hilton's story

### Being an albino – from invisible outsider to visible insider

Hilton is in his mid-forties, married and a father of six children. He was born and raised in a rural area. At birth, he was diagnosed with Albinism, a pigmentation disease causing whiteness of the skin and affecting his life as a black child growing up in a black rural community, in powerful and significant ways. While particular narrative codes defined him, he narrated them in unique ways to set himself 'free'. Ironically, the choice to die was one such moment.

#### *The challenges of being albino and male*

Particular practices within the rural community in which he grew up and lived, coupled with his experiences as a learner attending school in the same community, created certain meanings for Hilton. They highlighted how he made sense of his life and the world as a male child. Feeling like an outsider and a 'stranger' in this rural community became a struggle for him. He was open to different kinds of abuse and injury, physical and emotional:

*The community believed that I was 'cursed' or 'bewitched', and the children thought that if they ever touched me they would get these 'white things' on their hands. I can still remember those lonely nights when my family would get invited for meals and the neighbours' children would not dare to sit next to me. "Let this creature eat alone", they whispered. At primary school, my classmates would sometimes beat me up and lock me up in the cupboard until my siblings and teachers would come to my rescue.*

#### *Being someone and feeling human*

But Hilton is able to rework his meanings about some individuals that he met daily: his teachers. His relationship with teachers was one of care, support, love and understanding (Witherell & Noddings, 1991; Nieto, 2003; Gilligan, 1982). The practices enacted by his teachers gave form to particular meanings and practices:

*My teachers were my guardian angels. They would make me sit in the front of the class so I would be able to see the writing on the chalkboard more clearly. I remembered so clearly that my teachers showed a deep sense of care and commitment towards the disadvantaged learners in our community. This made a deep impression on me very early in my life. In those days, teaching earned you a lot of respect from the parents and the learners. I wanted to serve my community and, hopefully, become a teacher like them, one day.*

In the above excerpt, Hilton shares with us examples of where his reserve of hope originates. It was at school that he recognises himself as being treated like a human being, with respect. The teachers' sense of care and respect offered Hilton hope to look beyond the situation as it seemed to be, and the possibility of gaining entry into a community of teachers. The teachers' commitment to learners is a significant and critical moment in Hilton's life. Being a teacher and teaching makes power hold good, it induces pleasure and inclusion, forms new knowledge and produces a different discourse and life for learners in rural schools (Foucault, 1980: 119). In the school, being an Albino learner was not something to be afraid of, but rather a 'self' to be worked on. Through particular relationships, Hilton's power as an Albino is extended not in a forbidding and denying force, but in a productive way involving new ways for him to be known and understood (Lawler, 2008).

The contextual realities of rurality combined with the institutional culture of rural schooling experienced as a boy, a learner and a son, are narrated by Hilton in particular ways. Interestingly, we recognise Hilton's turning point in his story and in his life when he chooses to become a teacher. Within the broader cultural community that perpetuates particular preferences for what it means to be human, male and community member, Hilton is able to 'slip through' the fractures of identity to a space outside of these oppressive and traditional relationships. Through particular social formations within the school, he

is able to redefine himself as one with power and knowledge to sustain himself and cultivate new meanings of the world and the kind of person he wants to be. Becoming a qualified teacher, Hilton acknowledges, will create a different category and meaning for him as an African albino working in a rural community that “discarded” him.

## On being a teacher

In this section we make sense of Foucault and his perspective on how the self works on itself, and what he calls ‘technologies of the self’. We explore the range of discourses Hilton takes up in his struggles for new meanings and understandings by which he can be known and understood as an African, male, albino teacher.

Against great odds, Hilton persevered to lead a ‘normal’ life as an African male and as a student wanting to become a teacher. In reflecting on his university education at the University of Durban-Westville, he draws on memories of the experiences of ‘city’ life that came with it and the challenges and opportunities that he faced as a man from a rural community. Through these multiple positions and places we learn about him, and his understanding of rurality and the complexities of rural schooling:

*The area that I once lived in, had now fallen into the grips of despair. The sight of poor children suffering without food; of girls and women being raped by their own family members; of children hanging around corners and not attending school during school times; and of parents not being interested in their children and in themselves - all this was too unbearable.*

The collage composition below offers a visual representation of Hilton’s version of rurality and schooling:



Figure 1: Hilton’s collage of hope and despair for teachers in Black Rural communities (Hilton, 4 September, 2007, Langelihle High School)

Hilton's collage is a combination of image fragments of words and images that are chosen and placed strategically to communicate a sense of anguish, satisfaction, frustration and pride of life in a rural community. Through these contradictory images of teachers, happy and sad; learners young and old, and the people of the community, dejected and waiting, we gain access to his experienced life and work there. Hilton's expression of his life as a teacher transcends the boundaries of the formal school. The challenges that he faces daily as a teacher touch on death, financial difficulties, and social ills like alcoholism and drugs. Divided into four dimensions, each dimension offers a metaphor of good/bad. Worth noting is the bottom half of the format that is dominated by more positive imaging of good health, happiness and success. Though small in scale, this stark fragment of symbol and word offers a powerful contradiction to the happy scene that jars the readers' senses.

As a metaphorical product of his conscious and unconscious (Burns, 2003), Hilton makes available the contradictions and challenges of rurality and schooling and the position he inhabits as teacher through these constraints. Whether it is about cultivating good eating habits and getting rid of the bad habits like smoking and drinking, the words, "*Yes, Help now*", is his cry for help out of a dislocating, depressing situation. The reader/viewer is left disturbed and uneasy by the words, "*Are you an attention seeker?*" Whatever the implication, we draw on these provocative signs and symbols to get glimpses of Hilton's understanding of the 'rural' external world and his personal feelings and thoughts about this life.

## Doing Teacher: Moving into teaching as a qualified and committed teacher

Unlike many teachers in rural schools who have their roots amongst the rural poor and are often unqualified (HSRC-EPC, 2005), Hilton is in a somewhat different position. He makes particular investments in/through a range of discourses and practices as a qualified teacher. The range of knowledges that he accumulates and negotiates from his life in the city and the rural community authorises him with power to inhabit the teacher position in unique and personally meaningful ways. We show in the next section the dominant discourses constituting schooling in the rural community and how Hilton organises and makes sense of this world through particular social relations available to him. This is aligned to the Foucauldian precept that we are addressed, and address ourselves as a certain kind of teacher (Lawler, 2008).

### *Enacted relations within the school*

Hilton's beliefs about being a teacher emerge within the context of new and caring relationships with the teachers with whom he was working. In speaking about his relationships with the teachers, Hilton says:

*Whilst some teachers are genuinely helpful and supportive, others just discourage you and made you feel that as a young teacher you are inexperienced especially when working under the mentorship of an older teacher. I was fortunate to be living in the same area as the school. For some reason, both parents and learners trusted and respected the local teachers far more than the teachers who travelled from other areas to the school.*

Drawing on his membership in the rural community as a critical resource is important for Hilton as it enables him to re-visit his story of being a novice teacher in this community. It means that he can engage with his responsibility differently from teachers who are not residents there and who often have to leave because poor relationships make being a teacher 'unbearable'.

*My colleagues who travelled distances to school were excellent teachers. They just didn't get the acknowledgment from management and many of them left when parents and learners made it unbearable for them to stay.*

We understand from the above excerpt some of the challenges teachers face when they commute to schools and how teachers and managers respond in very different ways to these challenges (DeLange *et al.*, 2010: 10), sometimes to the detriment of education. While Hilton's work is challenging, he benefits from the support of the school management and the learners in personally meaningful ways. As a committed teacher, he cultivates new ideas to better educational opportunities for young learners in rural settings. However, the situation in rural schools (including the working conditions) is not encouraging:

*We don't have the many resources that other schools have, our student numbers are very high and our classes are overcrowded. But, despite these challenges, I come to school daily to teach, to make a difference in the learners' lives, and not to compare ourselves to township and city schools. This school is doing an exceptional job.*

The role that Hilton as a teacher is expected to assume, is extremely burdensome (HSRC-EPC, 2005). He acknowledges that little of his own educational experience and teacher training in the city have prepared him for these roles and expectations and that the two experiences speak to each other very little. But his knowledge of both capacitates him with the experience to know the difference and to acknowledge the rural community for its own complexities, uniqueness and preferences.

### *Enacted relations within the self*

We explore in this section how Hilton is able to compose his own personal narrative of care and commitment constituted through social and collective endeavours within the teacher community. Within the contextual constraints and adversities of rural life, Hilton's construction of himself as a desirable and committed teacher creates moments of hope or what Butler (2004: 2) calls the "improvisation within the scene of constraint":

### *The call to serve*

*My school is in the same area where I live and the children come from homes where many parents are unemployed. So, they often come without having breakfast or bringing lunch. Many of their parents are also sick. There is a lot of HIV/AIDS in my area. I still want to teach in these schools to improve them and not just hide in them...Yah! I'm happy. I enjoy being at a rural school.*

Full of confidence and commitment, Hilton is ready to put into practice his plans, desires and intentions that were important in his own development as a learner - to love, care, and respect the learners. Hilton is able to theorise from his experiences of being on the periphery of society as an albino, and to use the pain of his exclusion as a starting place for action and change (Richie and Wilson, 2000).

Opposed to the notion of being a service 'worker' (Department of Education, 2005: 18), in such adversarial conditions, Hilton is committed to maintain a sense of purpose and enjoyment, while understanding and acknowledging with sobering awareness (Nieto, 2003), the limits that prevail in such rural environments. In opposition to a culture of defeatism, the assertion that "[he] still wants to teach in these schools and not just hide in them" shows his commitment to this environment (HSRC-EPC, 2005).

### *The call to lead*

His sense of purpose and a belief in the promise of education in rural environments, his enthusiasm for teaching and the passion for social justice (Nieto, 2003), opens up better opportunities for Hilton to exercise his vision:

*So, after eight long years, I am proud of the fact that I have just been promoted to the position of Head of Department. I see this achievement as something great for myself and for others. We are all propelled towards a bigger dream.*

The positive climate that he instils spills over to other teachers as well. His activism and passion infiltrates the wider institutional space, inspiring and propelling others to imagine a different life for themselves and their school. Working collectively, with parents and the larger business community, they find creative ways to work together, reason together and focus on what really matters (Witherell & Noddings, 1991; Richie & Wilson, 2000).

### *The call to connect*

Jessop (1997) argues that rural education in South Africa is considered the 'Cinderella of the system', but Hilton was determined to exercise his power as a leader to "tell the people that there are schools out here



*in the rural areas that are doing well.*” Generating funds from the businesses in rural communities offers another version of hope for enhancing conditions in Hilton’s school:

*I began writing letters to our businesses in the area and to some ‘high’ people I know in the department. It was amazing and encouraging to see them responding so favourably.*

While demotivation and frustration have a place in the lives of committed and passionate teachers, we see how hope and anger are really two sides of the same coin (Nieto, 2003: 63):

*Many learners smoke drugs, drink liquor on the school premises and disrupt my lessons. Many female students fall pregnant and are forced to drop out ... Then there are those learners who steal the school’s electricity cables. Do they not realise how this impacts negatively on their education?*

Hilton expresses feelings of despair, contributing to what Nieto describes as the school imbued with despair (Nieto, 2003). But he soon works out what he needs to do to repress that which constrains his utopian vision for rural schooling and his commitment to ethical work and the ideals of democracy:

*In my view, if we can talk to the learners properly and make them understand that the school is theirs, and that they should own the school as a community, this will make a huge difference.*

Hilton’s performance is a glimpse of how effective agency or social change lies in those times when fortunate conditions do not work (Butler, 2004). His attempt to assist students to believe in themselves and take ownership of their lives and their education (Christie, 2001) means visiting learners’ homes to meet and talk to the parents, even to the disapproval of the learners:

*Man! You should see the look on the learners’ faces when I surprise them at their homes ... They stare at me with such ‘nasty eyes’, as if they were casting an evil spell on me.*

Given how difficult it is to be a teacher, it was interesting to explore what and why Hilton continues to commit himself with care and commitment to his life as a teacher. A combination of the transforming sense of self (personal) and the community of teachers working within the dynamic context of rurality, changing and challenging what it means to serve, to lead and to connect as a teacher, becomes a life enhancing experience for all who inhabit what is sometimes construed as an inhabitable and intolerable position.

## Conclusion

In this paper we show through Hilton’s narrative, that teachers’ lives and rural communities cannot be explained in singular, simplistic and deterministic ways. For Hilton, his conviction with regard to education had been honed from long years of struggle and hardship as a learner attending a rural school and provides the site for altering and disrupting the culture of how rural schools work. Personal history becomes the root of his endurance (Nieto, 2003). While the prevailing social order is built on particular rules of behaviour and performance, it is in the improvisations that Hilton continues to exercise moral choice by which he can be known and understood as an African, male, albino teacher.

*It’s a wonder I’m still alive today. But, I do this because I care for them [learners] and treat them as if they were my own.*

In valuing care and respect for himself and his life as a teacher, Hilton’s embodied knowing and knowledge can be seen as constituted through the daily lived performances enacted in and through different relations inside and outside the school. This understanding opens up opportunities for us to change how educational research (HSRC-EPC 2005: 119) has come to position rural schooling, as well as teachers, learners, parents and rural communities in rural environments.

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