SDG4 and the Ambiguity of Sustainable Development: The Case of Poor Schools in South Africa

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Abstract: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was conceived as a blueprint for development and an acknowledgment that poverty and multiple deprivations continue to plague large sections of the world’s population. Target 4.7 of SDG4, in particular, reads as follows: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development”. This article considers the question of how schools in contexts of extreme poverty and deprivation can sustain their continued existence. It aims to establish the specific nature of such contexts and engages in a discussion of the ethicality and complexity of imposing sustainable development content knowledge on children living at the edge of survival. Data from eight school principals were generated using a qualitative research approach that employed a series of in-depth interviews and onsite observations. The findings reveal the extent of community poverty and its effects on schools, the extent of neglect regarding poor schools and their struggles with sustainability, the extent of food insecurity and in-school feeding schemes, as well as the levels of desperation felt by school principals as they respond to the conditions they encounter. Teaching (and learning) the content of this Target 4.7 is likely to present a particularly complex challenge in those school contexts characterized by severe destitution and deprivation, given the content’s middle-classness in contradistinction to the immediate lived experience of the destitute.

Keywords: poverty; sustainable development; sustainability; schools

1. Introduction

The comment below, made by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in his delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022 [1], is particularly telling as it suggests that the SDGs are under threat and have been compromised. Progress on SDG 1 (to end poverty), according to the report, has been severely compromised by COVID-19 and the current conflict in Ukraine.

“We must rise higher to rescue the Sustainable Development Goals—and stay true to our promise of a world of peace, dignity, and prosperity on a healthy planet” António Guterres [1] (p. 66).

SDG2, which focuses on addressing hunger and food security, as well as SDG4 (ensuring quality education) have also suffered serious setbacks as a result of COVID-19. The SDGs have been subject to widespread criticism by established development scholars, including W. Easterly, who questions the fundamental premise from which the SDGs have been conceived, arguing that “the SDGs are about as likely to result in progress as beauty pageant contestants’ calls for world peace” [2]. Bali Swain asserts that:

“Developed countries need to remain focused on their social and environmental policies. The developing countries, on the other hand, are better off being focused on their economics and social policies in the short run, even though environmental policies remain significant for Sustainable Development” [3] (p. 96).

While Bali Swain did not allude specifically to SDG4 and its sub-targets, she does implicitly suggest that sustainable development as a concept and education for sustainable
development is likely to be received, interpreted, and practiced very differently in different socio-economic contexts. How people living in serious life-threatening destitution might understand the need for education for sustainable development and sustainability remains a moot question.

In countries such as South Africa, with entrenched inequities, the plight of the poor has worsened. That South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world, with high levels of unemployment and poverty, is a well-documented fact, a condition that existed well before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic [4]. Affluence manifests alongside chronic poverty, a scenario that is particularly overt in the school education system [5]. The pandemic, with its accompanying misery and suffering, did, ironically, serve the purpose of drawing attention to the many schools that could not meet minimum sanitation and social distancing requirements [4]. Yet despite this unprecedented attention, the plight and sustainability of such schools continue to be particularly precarious. South Africa, as a signatory to the SDG goals, has declared its commitment to the achievement of the UN’s SDGs. Its ability to actually achieve them, however, remains a moot question, especially as it relates to the attainment of SDG4.

In 2005, the South African Schools Act [6] was amended to make provision for a tiered funding policy for public schools, in the hope that the application of the principles of redress, equity, quality, access, and efficiency might create conditions favorable for the attainment of the SDG targets for education. Given the extent of poverty and unemployment in the country and the diminished capacity of citizens to afford the costs of public schooling, the state created the quintile ranking system, a system that differentiates school funding allocations on the basis of the unemployment and literacy levels of the communities in which each school is physically located. Quintile 1, 2, and 3 schools are classified as “no-fee schools” and are granted an annual allocation per child that is higher than the funding allocated (per child) to more affluent schools (in quintiles 4 and 5). The latter have the leeway to set and charge school fees in consultation with school governing bodies, while the former are prohibited from generating revenue through school fees.

Schools in quintiles 1–3 receive an annual allocation per child of between USD 75 and USD 80 per annum, while quintile 4 schools receive half this amount, and quintile 5 schools receive a quarter of this amount. Quintile 3 and 4 schools, however, have fee charges that could range up to USD 3500 per annum and more, depending on the ability of its middle-class clientele to afford it. While, at face value, the quintile ranking system and its associated funding protocol appear to be a laudable policy initiative, research evidence indicates that poor schools, handicapped by the prohibitive “no-fee” imposition, struggle to meet their expenses and are often left with very limited financial resources for capital expenditure on infrastructure maintenance and improvements [7]. As such, their sustainability remains precarious. Many thousands of schoolchildren in South Africa commute to schools outside of their neighborhoods in search of better learning environments. The migration of schoolchildren away from poor schools and from rural areas [8] represents a drain on the resources of already stricken schools. The sustainability (of poor schools), education quality, and education for sustainable development are likely to become somewhat nebulous aspirations in such contexts.

Three key issues arise relating to the notion of sustainability; while they are complex and intricately connected, they warrant separate analysis/interrogation. The first is the extent to which the official school curriculum policy carries the requisite content and pedagogical guidance for the teaching and learning of competencies that might promote learning about sustainable development. South Africa’s latest national school curriculum, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS), came into effect in 2012, three years prior to the release of the SDGs by the UN. While some scholarship on the relationship between SDGs and the South African school curriculum does exist [9], as well as research and practice in the broader field of education for sustainable development [10], there is yet to be any systematic mapping of SDGs in the context of subject content in the South African school curriculum. The jury is out on the extent to which sustainability is integrated...
into school subjects such as mathematics, history, or business subjects. That a superficial approach to sustainability might prevail is evidenced by the study published by Carina America [9].

The second issue is the school’s basic resource context in which such sustainability knowledge is to be taught. This ought to support favorable contexts that might enable the generational transfer of powerful knowledge as it relates to sustainability. There is little contention that the resource landscape is wholly uneven, characterized by a very small percentage of resource-rich, affluent schools alongside under-resourced schools and resource-starved, poor schools [5]. It follows, then, that the potential to offer quality education is very different across the schooling sector and that the poor are likely to be on the receiving end of education of sub-standard quality. At the time of scripting this article (26 August 2022), television stations in South Africa led with the story of parent protests over dilapidated school infrastructure at a school in Soweto. Forty-six years ago, school students in this African township led an active revolt against inferior education and atrocious learning conditions. Glaser [11] reminds us that while marginal improvements have been made to schools in Soweto since 1976, material deprivation in the school’s neighborhood sustains a form of paralysis as it relates to sustainable intergenerational knowledge transfer, a condition that manifests across the country. That teacher motivation and commitment is likely to be compromised under such conditions is of real concern [12]. Nakidien, Singh, and Sayed [13] remind us that “to attain SDG 4 requires conducive teaching and learning environments, characterized by, among other things, safe school spaces, running water and sanitation, and teaching and learning support material”. They also note the importance of the continuing professional development of teachers as a key factor in realizing SDG4.

The third issue is the actual sustainability of poor schools within the context of a funding policy that exacerbates pre-existing destitution. This remains an enigma in South African schools; namely, how schools in contexts of extreme poverty and deprivation continue to remain open for business—an issue that this article explores. What has become abundantly clear is that school funding policies in South Africa, while conceived with the intent of addressing the issue of equitable schooling in the post-apartheid era [14], have proven to have had a confounding effect, rendering already poor schools even more destitute [7] and depriving them of basic necessities, such as running water, electricity, and safe ablutions. In fact, the pandemic might well be regarded as a watershed moment in the SA education context, since it forced education authorities to develop an accurate database of the extent of this deprivation. The inaugural release of the National Education Infrastructure Management Report of April 2021 [15] revealed some quite startling data. Of the total number of 23,726 public schools, 90 schools had no electricity supply, while 3343 had an unreliable electricity supply. Just over 5800 schools had an unreliable water supply—a serious health hazard in the context of a pandemic. More than 5000 schools did not have flushing toilets but instead used precarious pit latrines to manage sewerage. In total, 70% of all schools had no library, while 80% did not have a science laboratory. In terms of technology, 58% of schools did not have computers and only 20% of all schools had access to the internet for teaching. In total, 10,000 schools did not have flushing toilets but instead used precarious pit latrines to manage sewerage. In total, 10,000 schools did not have flushing toilets but instead used precarious pit latrines to manage sewerage. In total, 10,000 schools did not have flushing toilets but instead used precarious pit latrines to manage sewerage.
theory, assert that there is much uncertainty and unpredictability with school financing, especially in poor schools in South Africa. The implications for the sustainability of such schools are, indeed, dire and a call for a more differentiated funding approach in favor of poor schools is required [18].

The aim of this study was to investigate how a selection of schools in low socioeconomic contexts was surviving in the context of South Africa’s “no-fee” school policy and to establish the specific nature of the contexts within which SDG4 is expected to be achieved. Due cognizance was given to Eve Tuck’s caution that researchers should avoid approaches to research that romanticize the plight of the marginalized [18]; in this instance, it is rather the plight of the indigent, who are the recipients of ideology conceived far from the place of their imposition.

2. Research Question

The research question is this: How do schools in the contexts of extreme poverty and deprivation sustain their continued existence?

3. Methodology

This research was conducted from the fundamental premise (research position) that the South African school landscape is distinctly unequal and that poor schools are likely to be affected by a policy that disempowers them even further. Data were extracted from a qualitative multiple case study of eight poor schools in the greater urban area of a major city (Durban), in one of South Africa’s poorest provinces (KwaZulu-Natal). It is the second most densely populated city in the country, densification that has significantly increased in the post-apartheid era [19], and that has presented sustainability challenges, especially for poor schools that have enrolled large numbers of children from indigent communities. A qualitative approach was considered to be most appropriate as it offered techniques for data collection that allowed for the in-depth probing of key issues with participants and an understanding of the context within which the research participants operated. Principals (headmasters) from eight schools were selected. They were sampled purposively [20] because their schools had experienced an influx of poor children whose parents were unable to pay school fees. These schools were selected primarily because they were experiencing difficulties in sustaining themselves financially. Yin describes a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context” [21] (p. 16). As such, it presented an appropriate resource for the type of data that we wished to generate; namely, rich, thick, qualitative data. Because the sample was not representative, as it would be in a quantitative study, the findings are not generalizable [20], but they may well be transferable to similar contexts. Rule and John note that “reader-determined transferability” might be achieved through the presentation of thick and pertinent qualitative data [22] (p. 105).

The tenets of critical social theory [23] were applied to investigate how schools in low socioeconomic contexts were surviving in the context of a “no-fee” school policy. CST is an intellectual form that puts criticism at the center. The positionality or point of departure that his article adopts is that the socioeconomic status quo is inherently discriminatory and enduring and that it constantly reproduces those systems that perpetuate extreme inequality and human suffering. The article attempts to reveal the real struggles that principals, school governing bodies, and poor communities face in the management of school finances. We draw attention to the precarity of such schools and their ability to sustain dignified learning experiences for poor children. Importantly, attention is drawn to Cartesian dualism, namely, discourses that construct the body as being separate from the mind (the impoverished, under-nourished learner body, and the learner mind, which must engage in the discourse of the SDGs).

A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight school principals who, by virtue of Clause 16A of the South African Schools Act, are permanent members of the Schools Governing Bodies (SGBs) and are responsible for the daily running
and financial management of schools. These interviews were conducted with due attention to the issues of respect, justice, and autonomy. Interviews were conducted on-site as this afforded the opportunity to generate comprehensive field notes on the schools’ contexts, as well as the socio-economic contexts in which the pupils lived. In an attempt to strengthen the dependability of the study, transcribed interview data were returned to the participants for verification. Follow-up interviews were subsequently conducted to probe issues that needed further clarification. All interview data were subjected to an open coding process [24] through which the various themes were inductively developed. In this qualitative, naturalistic inquiry, a concerted effort has been made to demonstrate the study’s credibility by spending extended periods in the research contexts and by developing a rapport with the research participants, thereby generating data and presenting analyses that might be deemed plausible.

This study complied with the strict ethical protocols prescribed by the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Gatekeeper permission was sought from the local Department of Education. All participants were informed about the nature of their involvement in the study. They were assured of anonymity and of the option to withdraw from the study without consequences should they wish to do so.

In the next section, key data excerpts are selected and analyzed to establish our findings as they relate to the context in which SDG4 is expected to be achieved.

4. Results/Findings

The data analysis revealed several telling factors that compromise the ability of poor schools to deliver quality education; as such, they contribute to undermining the achievement of SDG4.

4.1. Enduring Poverty and Unemployed Parents Impact Schooling

All principals participating in the study alluded to the fact that many of the children who attend their schools hail from conditions of extreme poverty and destitution. Informal settlements have always been a feature of South African society and have increased in occurrence and size. Informal settlements comprise rudimentary dwellings that are generally constructed illegally, are usually built on land not suitable for formal housing (very close to riverbanks), and are without electricity, tap water, and sewage systems. While there have been attempts by local municipalities to upgrade these settlements (the provision of communal taps and portable toilets), budgetary constraints and the prioritization of the formal sector mean that progress has been minimal.

Unemployment presents a huge challenge in these poor communities. Unemployed parents are simply not able to make any kind of monetary contribution to schools. They are likely to raise their children with very limited or no financial resources. Hunger and starvation are very real issues that poor communities endure. Of significance is that the condition is widespread and points to the precarious living conditions that people have perennially been living under. The following comments by school principals, extracted from the data set, attest to the extent and intensity of systemic issues, such as poverty and unemployment, and their likely impact on children’s lived experiences of schooling:

“So, when one has been here for a long time, you see all these things.”

“I think 98% of the community live in informal settlements . . . They are largely disadvantaged.”

“It’s a very poor community with many, many, in fact, a large percentage of the parents are unemployed. I would put it as high as 70% unemployment, and this certainly impacts on the school.”

“. . . 90% of our learners come from the informal settlements. These low socioeconomic communities are really battling to make ends meet, with the result that some of them are not even able to feed themselves, let alone pay school fees, and that has definitely impacted on the finances of the school.”.
Of significance is that destitution and suffering have been an enduring phenomenon that communities and, by extension, schools have had to deal with, as reflected in the observations below:

“If you are in my environment, and you’ve been here for a very long time, you would realize the word “disadvantaged” comes alive . . . So with “disadvantaged”, you will see a lot of problems, not only financial.”

“The majority are very poor, relying on state grants.”

4.2. Child-Headed Households, Orphans, and Poor Single Parents

Child-headed households continue to be a feature of South African society, as indicated by school principals in this sample. They also report that a disturbingly high proportion of their students hail from this type of context. Single-parent households (usually female) are also a common feature and, in many cases, poor, aging grandparents act as parents. Children who come to school from this type of context are likely to present with peculiar challenges:

“This area consists mainly of low-cost housing and most of the people here are not employed, and more than half of my learners are orphans.”

“We have an enrolment of 773, and half of them come from child-headed households. So, when we are talking about money, we are talking about something that is absolutely not there.”

“Poverty is the common denominator . . . you get a lot of parents who are single. They come from single-parent homes. Mainly, it is the mother. The father is nowhere to be seen and we cannot track the father, or the father is [dead]. Many children live with their grandmothers also.”

“These young ones don’t have [any family]. They are virtually on their own. Many of them are living with their ‘parents’ or grannies and not their biological parents . . . Basically, the adults in that household are doing them a favor by bringing up the children, caring for them . . . ”

“If you look around, you can see the children with worn-out uniforms . . . a child that should be wearing a size 5 shoe is wearing a size 3.”

The above observation by principals that having a basic need unmet, namely, appropriate clothing, is something that poor school children endure daily, a condition that is likely to be exacerbated when weather conditions become adverse.

4.3. Responding to Child Hunger

All principals in the sample indicated that many children turn up at school every day without having had any kind of meal at home. Given the level of poverty described above, it is very likely that this very basic need, namely, the sustenance required for the human body to function, was likely to be compromised. Again, the extent of this condition is alarming, as indicated below, especially the fact that the children’s physical appearance reveals in no uncertain terms that they are malnourished, a blight on South Africa as a country that produces enough food, even for export. That access to these food resources is denied to poor children is indeed an indictment. To their credit, the school principals and their staff have been resourceful and have attempted to address the issue of child hunger at their schools:

“If you just look at them, their physical well-being. They look undernourished and many of them are vulnerable to the flu and other forms of illness.”

“ . . . other social problems—poverty, no breakfast, no care, no parents, pregnancies, nobody cares for children, etc.”.

“ . . . you know you can see the signs of malnutrition.”
“Children come to school without lunch, and we know that for sure because their attention span in the classroom and concentration levels are very low. That’s because they haven’t had anything to eat in the morning. So, I’ve secured 5 cultural and community groups that supply our children with food on each of the 5 school days. They are allocated a day where they bring sandwiches for the children. So, every day is catered for.”

“If there is a shortage of lunch, or we have more children to feed on a particular day, then we make it up. We’ve got two teachers that are in charge that make up the lunches for the children.”

“We run the state nutrition program. They receive a meal every day. The other issue is that on Thursdays they are given sandwiches from an organization to take home because there is not much in these homes after school . . . So, on that one day, at least they are able to take something home. But even on other days too, like if there’s extra, they are given that choice to take it home, the very poor ones, where we know for sure now that they are not going to get anything at home. So, they take it from school. They have their meals and then they come with their lunch tins, and then they take it in that tin.”

“Sometimes they are really desperate out there, destitute, because you hear from the children, what they are saying about their own parents, and you see them taking food home, and a little more than enough for one person because there are others who don’t have”.

In the above comment, principals reflect on the fact that school children take food home to be shared and consumed by family members who might be relying on their children to return from school with food. The empathetic disposition of the sampled principals is clear—their deep concern for the children under their care is evident by the way they speak and act on behalf of such children, as reflected in the comments below:

“Yes, we have poor children; we have made provision for them . . . We also have a feeding scheme for our indigent learners . . . we are dealing with a poor society, and must be sensitive to the fact that poverty is a very serious problem . . . you have to be humanitarian in approach in dealing with people who are truly destitute . . . ”

“We have a feeding program. However, that means that these kids eat only once a day—when they come to school—at quarter to ten—then that would be their first and last meal. We then approached several people—churches and NGOs to come and assist. Bridge Ministries have come on board. They provide an after-school feeding scheme. Then there is Rivers Church, they give the kids morning porridge before they come to school. Even though that poses a challenge because they come in late to school because they have to start by getting that porridge, and then come to school. Sometimes the lines are too long and then they come late to school.”

4.4. Feelings of Inadequacy and Hopelessness

In the excerpts below, principals share their frustrations with the contextual issues that they must contend with. They reflect on the sub-optimal conditions under which teaching and learning occur and the fact that children are denied the opportunity of enjoying a dignified school experience:

“You’ll find that infrastructure is appalling. It’s appalling! Children are working under the most severe constraints.”

“We explain and make people understand that we cannot afford A, B or C . . . we get staff and all the stakeholders to be aware that we have to spend as little as possible for whatever, so we stretch the allocation.”

In the excerpt below, a principal describes how he has managed to secure electricity illegally from a dwelling close to his school. This is a potentially hazardous arrangement that could be fatal, yet principals appear to be forced into this kind of dangerous and desperate practice in order to keep the lights on in their schools. Of concern is that this particular school is located in an urban area. The neglect on the part of the education
authorities is overt. This also speaks to the paralysis of the poor to exercise any kind of effective leverage over the state to deliver equitable education provision:

“For electricity, we have connected to one of the houses across the road where we pay R1000 [about USD 60] a month . . . . we have an electric cord that runs across to one of the houses. We pay them so that we are able to run the computers and stuff because there is no electricity as such. There is no electricity here, and that is how it has been from the beginning.”

“We are not having a proper school. By a proper school, I mean a school with computer labs, fans to run in the summer, and proper classrooms . . . We are surviving because we are in a temporary structure that has prefabricated classrooms, one standpipe [tap] for water, and toilets that are not flushing.”

“At times we had two classes in one room. The numbers went up to 70.”

The existence of a single tap for an entire school, toilets that do not flush, and overcrowded classrooms are indeed telling indications of neglect. In the excerpt below, a principal reflects on the sense of helplessness he feels and his awareness that his school is delivering an education with which he is clearly dissatisfied. He explains that as the leader, he has to put on a brave face and persevere. He also draws attention to the perils of confronting the education authorities and the risk of censure:

“Let me start with myself as a principal—as I am here as the principal—knowing that I, as the Department, [am] not doing justice to this child—we are providing the child with a lesser education than the other children from the surrounding schools—it kills me, it pains me. However, I have to put a smile on my face, lead the team under these circumstances, fight quietly, you know, not exposing anybody, because I’m employed. You know, I don’t want to bring disrepute and stuff, but it is not fair, it is not fair.”

Principals also reflect on the fact that a sub-standard work environment for schoolteachers affects teacher morale. The absence of physical space for teachers to sit in relative comfort does not augur well for staff morale:

“It would definitely affect the morale of teachers. If, for example, they have like an air-conditioned staff room, where they feel they are being treated properly, I think it would impact on them because they are the engine of the whole thing. If they feel they are being neglected, like in our school. You know we don’t even have a staff room, and it’s impacted on them, like, you know, when I went in there, it’s a very tiny room, with CD copiers, and you can barely sit. The whole staff can barely fit in there around a table. It does impact on them where they don’t have what they need, they don’t have adequate space. It’s a tiny, pokey little room.”

In response to the question as to whether he had a toilet, one principal remarked on how attending to an involuntary biological need (urination), was a challenge. He also commented on the fact that the school only had one janitor who was expected to service the entire school. The implications for hygiene and the general health and safety of both staff and children are a serious cause for concern:

“No, it can get a bit difficult sometimes, with one toilet and you need to go, and it’s occupied. It can impact on you, but there’s nothing you can say or do, but it impacts on you.”

“We only have one state-paid cleaner . . . one person cannot manage to clean a school as big as ours.”

5. Discussion

The findings documented above reveal that the principals in this sample appear to have a high level of awareness or consciousness of the plight of the communities from which their school children come. Their descriptions of the plight of such (poor) communities are empathetic and telling, as they point to the extent of the socio-economic travesty that
besets citizens who are forced to live in destitution. Material deprivation is accompanied by biological deprivation, with young children and their families living on the brink of starvation and having to rely on nutritional programs and feeding schemes organized by the school during the school week. It begs the question as to how these dependent school children and their families survive over the weekends and school holidays when schools are shut down. The extent of the deprivation is profound; its manifestation in arguably the richest country on the African continent is a testimony to the looseness of the SDGs, given that “goals are non-binding, with each country being expected to create their own national or regional” goals [3]. The South African state, although a signatory to the “agreement”, appears to pay lip service to accountability and responsibility for effecting substantive improvements to the lives of the poor. Foucault reminds us that the “materiality of power operates on the very bodies of individuals”, and that less powerful subjects are produced through technologies of power [25] (p. 55). The UN, in leading the development of the SDGs appears somewhat disconnected from the citizens of the countries over which they wield power. As such, this disconnect renders the organization not directly accountable to citizens, especially in developing contexts where local governments treat SDG targets as a performative, check-box exercise, while they narrowly focus on attempts to meet minimum targets. The recipients of such interventions have little or no say in the what, why, or how of such interpositions.

What is indeed admirable is the resilience of school principals, their teachers, and the children who attend their schools. One does, however, run the risk of romanticizing this resilience (especially the functioning of cognition) in impoverished children whose most basic biological needs are not met on a daily basis. That malnutrition is likely to affect cognitive functioning is well documented in the extant literature [26]. Body/mind dualism, akin to Cartesian binarism, appears overt and inherent, yet it is not consciously discernible by the constructors of the school curriculum, especially as it relates to the teaching of sustainable development to subjects living on the brink of starvation. There is an assumed disconnect between the depleted body and the mind (cognitive domain) that it houses. This begs the question of how the mind in the depleted body interacts with the knowledge that speaks to its very depletion. What kinds of sensitivities might pedagogues invoke as they contemplate instruction, as it relates to SDGs and to young children living in precarity? What becomes apparent is the middle-classness of sustainability knowledge that is paraded in the South African school curriculum and its suitability for its target middle-class audience.

Child-headed households remain a shameful phenomenon. Such children have literally been failed by the state, a phenomenon that is less likely in first-world countries where children in jeopardy have recourse to child protection and policies. Orphaned children and child-headed households represent a social issue that plagues contemporary South African society. It is estimated that there are a staggering 33,000 child-only households and 55,000 orphaned children in South Africa [27]. It follows, then, that managing school populations that comprise more than fifty percent of orphaned children is likely to present particular challenges for school principals. Such children suffer from particular health, hygiene, and malnutrition challenges that threaten their own existence and sustainability. The food environments of poor children and the effects of the double burden of malnutrition is an area of research that might well help in better understanding the nutritional challenges encountered by poor children [28].

Schools in this sample appear to be trapped in their states of poverty and disadvantage, with very little hope of emancipation. Despite these constraints, there is also an intense determination on the part of principals to afford some degree of dignity to the pupils they serve by exercising agency, self-reliance, and defiance in the face of adversity. In such schools, the struggle for sustainability is real. How content knowledge (education for sustainable development) is understood and interpreted by those at the margins remains a perplexing question.
6. Conclusions

This article reported on a study that investigated how schools in contexts of extreme poverty and deprivation sustain their continued existence. The study drew attention to the specific nature of such contexts and the precariousness of the schools as sustainable sites of learning. Arguably the most telling revelation was the extent of deprivation of the children that attend such schools, children whose daily attendance appears to be driven more by hunger than by the thirst for knowledge. Attention was also drawn to the ambiguity of imposing sustainable development content knowledge on children living at the edge of survival.

The limitations of this study stem from its methodological orientation; namely, it is a qualitative study that drew on a small sample of schools in a single city. Given that the sample is not representative of the population of schools in South Africa, the issue of generalizability of the key findings is not possible.

There is a dearth of research into how salaried, middle-class teachers and principals respond to the under- and malnourished children that they encounter on a daily basis. Further research is needed into how issues of sustainability are prioritized in the curriculum and how teachers might broach the notion of sustainability and teach such content knowledge to children who live under conditions of unsustainability, every day. While “quality education”, including the knowledge of sustainability, might well be on offer by qualified teachers, the manner and extent to which it might be received by the destitute are also worthy of further investigation.

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