



Investigating the Role of Consumer Science Education to Enhance Social Cohesion: Opportunities for Underprivileged Students from Rural Communities in Eswatini

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Abstract

This research looks at the groundbreaking role of Consumer Science Education in nurturing social cohesion among marginalised learners in rural Eswatini. It tackles socio-economic obstacles such as scarcity, insufficient learning resources, and structural disparities that infringe development and equality. Consumer science education promotes resourcefulness and fosters financial inclusion, furthermore it equips students with practical skills, financial literacy and decision making. The research showed a clear connection between education and community development. It continues to provide hands-on solutions to reduce disparities and promote community resilience. A descriptive and survey design were applied while adopting a qualitative approach to administer semi-structured interviews during data collection. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. Using Braun and Clarke's outline, the researcher conducted thematic analysis for collected data, while upholding informed consent and confidentiality to ensure ethical consideration. The study revealed that consumer science education empowers students with vital skills on financial management and malnutrition, addressing financial challenges and structural poverty, while fostering all-encompassing education to minimise any gaps. The importance of integrating consumer science education into broader educational programs is highlighted by barriers like restricted access and this can be achieved through emphasizing community engagement. Creating focused financial aid initiatives and establishing community outreach to showcase the value of consumer science, emphasizing its potential to equip underprivileged learners to foster equity and enhance social cohesion for continuous growth is recommended.

Keywords: Consumer Science Education, Social Cohesion, Underprivileged Students, Rural Communities

Introduction

The nation of Eswatini battles with a cycle of socio-economic problems that negatively affects equitable growth, and quality life. Rural areas in Eswatini have half of its population living below the poverty line, furthermore they are faced with challenges ranging

from inadequate infrastructure, malfunctioning healthcare and improperly funded education programs (World Bank, 2023). According to Baloyi (2020), the rural individuals deal with insufficient access to quality education and financial support, and these perpetuate poverty and increases social inequities. As a mechanism to empower underprivileged learners from rural communities, the study underlines examining the innovative potential of consumer science education. Consumer science education offers communities with practical skills like finance management, malnutrition and sustainable development. These factors can immensely improve the quality of life and social harmony. By tackling the connection among learning and collective harmony, this research intends to recommend approaches that empower marginalised learners to maneuver challenges, promoting upliftment and participation. Furthermore, it seeks to provide a wide intellectual and pragmatic communication on equitable growth in Eswatini, championing alternatives that focuses on eco-friendly learning and its function in eliminating structural inequalities.

Eswatini's economy and agriculture are intricately linked, micro- enterprises, and commerce notable with its leading regional ally, South Africa. Even as these fields are of great significance, they struggle to deliver lasting job prospects for a considerable share of the population. At 33% (World Bank, 2023) the jobless rate is staggering high, rural communities are the hardest hit by unemployment. Across these zones, limited infrastructural support, healthcare and vital services enhances the socio-economic barriers that limit continuity and individual growth (Mallepu, 2020). The scarcity of financial commitment, the lack of investment in rural areas, poor development of infrastructure entails that locals deal with insufficient unreliable transportation system and limited access to portable water, thereby impacting the quality of education. In these communities' schools regularly suffer from insufficient funding, under prepared, and staffed with underqualified teachers. These elements foster a substantial divide in academic success especial among underprivileged students, whose talent remains underutilized.

In this research, boys and girls originating from poor households in rural Eswatini are referred to as underprivileged students. Underprivileged students face several systematic educational problems. The barriers faced by underprivileged students are complex, they include lack of adequate teaching material, demotivated teachers, shortage of textbooks and digital tools. To make matters worse, these learners also deal with scarcity of proper infrastructure, which makes the journey to school more cumbersome because students travel long distances every day. By the time these learners reach education centres they are exhausted and with very low concentration levels. Not limited to the already mentioned challenges, these students deal with social isolation and discrimination associated with their poverty situation. Their exclusion from learning and engagement in extracurricular activities is inevitable because of the highlighted barriers. The amount of damage done to their self-esteem and ambition is huge, and their capacity to engage with others and develop social relationships is affected. The shortage of an enabling

environment at household and community level adds another layer of complexity to the already existing challenges. Families for underprivileged students are faced with structural poverty and lack of value for education, these factors are closely linked to the struggles faced by these learners academical. Aligning with views shared by Baloyi (2020), the intention of the study is to highlight the demand for tailor-made education programs that address systematic inequalities and promotes teaching and learning focused on the specific needs and abilities of underprivileged learners.

One of the key factors with a direct bearing on educational outcomes is economic and social position, because of this factor, students from poor households are facing difficulties in achieving academic achievement. Gupta (2019) highlighted that the challenges connected to low economic and financial position are exacerbated by structural barriers such as poor inconsistent education funding, inadequate facilities and continuous financial hardships, especial in a country like Eswatini's rural communities. The struggle of underprivileged students is complicated by the interconnection of the challenges they deal with, such as lack of infrastructure, poor teaching conditions and inadequate infrastructure. An uneven educational environment manifests because of factors like hunger, lack of medical support and unreliable transport to school, and these elements intensify the challenges faced by these learners. A context specific multi-sectoral approach is required holistically to address these barriers, focusing on both strategic-level initiatives and community centred interventions. A united community serves as a pillar in advancing equitable and long last community programs. Social harmony is explained as the community's ability to uplift the welfare and unity of all individuals within the community. According to Khan (2016), within an education framework, a united community is important particularly in reducing the gaps existing because of socio-economic divisions, promoting mutual respect, recognition and teamwork across people with diverse backgrounds.

For marginalized learners in Eswatini, promoting social harmony in educational settings unlocks a pathway to equality and inclusiveness. Social harmony encourages the formation of an enabling setting where all learners feel significant, supporting them to participate more actively in their education process. It also enables engagement and partnership between interested parties, bringing together teachers, decision makers and guardians to deal with systematic challenges encountered by underprivileged learners (Ghosh, 2021). Programs like collaborative learning cohorts, equitable classroom strategies and engagements with local organisations are important for promoting growth. Volunteering initiatives can help bridge gaps between learners of diverse financial backgrounds, creating opportunities for solidarity and shared purpose. By prioritising social unity through education, Eswatini can build a future where learners excel, leaving no-one overlooked and the advantages of learning uplifts the most even disadvantage populations.

The ability of consumer science education to provide practical skills to learners in unequivocal supported on many fronts. Kantzara (2011) highlighted that by dealing with important aspects such as finance management, nutrition, dietary health and sustainable development as well as continuous active community involvement, consumer science education addresses the unique challenges faced by rural underprivileged communities in Eswatini. For an example, implementing sustainable agriculture has the potential to enhance family food supplies while promoting partnerships opportunities that draw communities together for common goals. This teaching method assists learners to play an active role in building strong united communities, by fostering a sense of capability and purpose. By highlighting common struggles and mutual experiences, this approach further encourages unity and teamwork across various segments of the community. Green and Peston (2001) noted that with challenges like economic disparity and social fragmentation in Eswatini, contextualising programs can create community led innovation and collective efforts to address pressing socio-economic challenges.

The study is guided by four primary objectives, each is focusing on key aspects of socio-economic and educational barriers in rural communities in Eswatini. The study seeks to investigate the socio-economic barriers of underprivileged students, revealing barriers that limit their educational success. Also, the study endeavours to examine the potential of consumer science education to overcome these barriers, underlining its practical rewards and continuous value for underprivileged individuals. Thirdly, the research explores the delicate connection between consumer science education and social cohesion, with an objective to reveal how inclusive education approaches can promote shared understanding and collaboration among various socio-economic segments. Lastly, the study seeks to provide implementable strategies for decision makers, teachers and community stakeholders. The ultimate aspiration is to have an education system centred on fairness and equity. This research is centred around essential themes such as “social cohesion,” aimed at fostering unit within diverse communities; “consumer science education,” on practical and local relevant teaching methods; “marginalized learners,” defined as those from economically disadvantaged rural areas dealing with structural obstacles to education. These key terms will be meticulously examined and supported with reliable scholarly references to provide detailed understanding of their significance and impact in the rural context of Eswatini (NASAFACS, 2018).

Problem Statement

Underprivileged students from rural communities in Eswatini are faced with many problems associated with major limitation within the education system. A considerable number of underprivileged students are short of the much-needed skills and resources to contribute meaningful to economic and social development, even though these learners

have an experience with consumer science education. This is despite consumer science education showing a great potential to offer much needed practical essential skills. The inability of students to transfer an encounter with consumer science education to a life change experience leaves a lot to be desired. The quality of consumer science education has been on the spotlight lately, with critics highlighting its failure to account for the different socio-economic and cultural contexts of rural communities and reducing their overall impact. Research has shown that cycles of poverty and inequalities, as well as social exclusion, are intensified by the lack of educational facilities, support systems and proper implementation of consumer science education. The effectiveness and expansion of life changing educational initiatives is undermined by inconstant funding support and lack of stakeholder engagement. There is no argument about clearly visible challenges within consumer science education, nonetheless the program has managed to showcase its ability to equip individuals with vital skills in financial literacy, well-being and nutrition, which have contributed positively to resilience and community development. The study took a deliberate approach to review the role of consumer science education in dealing with clearly visible issues connected with barriers faced by underprivileged students from rural communities in Eswatini, seeking to create meaningful opportunities for empowerment. The study seeks to contribute to inclusive development and sustainable community development, through an analysis of context-specific approaches.

Literature Review

Consumer science education offers an important instrument for promoting social cohesion, especial in the context of underprivileged students from rural communities. Underprivileged students are offered essential practical skills to deal with daily challenges and positively impact their immediate communities. The inclusion of consumer science concepts and theories into the overall education framework will make students more independent and knowledgeable to address social and financial barriers perfectly. Problem-solving and practical skills are fostered through consumer science education (Ghosh, 2021). These skills are essential in promoting autonomy and collective action. The capacity of consumer science education to address inequalities, especial among poor rural communities in Eswatini where there is scarcity of resources and opportunities, is clearly highlighted in the idea of establishing a relationship between consumer science education and social cohesion. Poor communities may be offered with opportunities for social inclusion and continuous economic development through consumer science education. To achieve such a milestone, consumer science must act as a connection between theoretical learning and practical application.

As wide as the concept of social cohesion is, it emphasizes the value of promoting unity, fairness and mutual economic benefits with all people within a community. A

community's strength in fostering mutual respect, fairness and minimising social divides within its residents is referred to as social cohesion. Social cohesion has its origin in sociology, is closely linked with Emile Durkheim ideology, which highlights the crucial role of education in creating social unity and shared identity. Kantzara (2011) expanded on Durkheim's ideas by underlining the function of education in creating unity by developing a framework of common values and practices. Consumer science education creates a practical pathway towards enhancing social cohesion by addressing disparities and promoting resilience.

Struggles faced by underprivileged students from rural communities in Eswatini limit their access to quality education as well as their ability to reach their full potential. Structural disparities which include lack of adequate facilities, poor working conditions and limited learning material perpetuate the highlighted challenges (Zulu, 2020). The effects of educational disparities are very severe for students from poor rural households, as it deprives them the opportunity to attain a quality education. The absence of constant, timely government support worsens the situation faced by students from poverty-stricken households in rural communities. With consumer science education prospects of providing students with critical life skills, there is hope for a viable solution. There is a noted educational gap connected to these barriers. However, by promoting inclusivity and providing learners with instruments for resilience and empowerment through consumer science education, this gap can be closed.

In areas where the trend of marginalization is well documented, consumer science education offers a wonderful chance to promote social cohesion. Consumer science education is known for its all encompassing approaches to combine academic excellence with hands on skills, which is a recipe for decisively dealing with challenges and enhancing community development. In Eswatini, initiatives that combine consumer science education with community engagement initiatives have achieved high levels of success in promoting meaningful community development (Moya Trust, 2020). The effectiveness of consumer science education is in its ability to advance a resilience, interconnected community. A community where individuals are prepared to help each other and work together towards mutual benefits of progress and health. Valuable insights for promoting social cohesion and addressing economic inequalities are outlined in reviews of international and local framework of consumer science education. Inclusivity, tolerance and intercultural understanding are always promoted in comprehensive, well-organized International best practices. In global torchbearers like Finland and Canada, a combination of integrated education models and consumer science education along practical skill development, help people navigate complex community relations properly. The broader relevance of these approaches is highlighted by (Khan, 2016), drawing attention to their ability to enhance social equality and unity. In a country like Eswatini, considering challenges like inadequate resources, cultural interplay and isolation, calls for a contextualised approach to deal with

distinct needs. The power of consumer science education lies in its ability to remodel international models to suite local demands to address real life challenges while warranting continuous community rewards.

There are visible social gaps that impede community development; however, consumer science education promises to narrow down these gaps, although certainty may not be guaranteed on outcome consistence. This may be attributed to plenty of circumstantial issues as well as the technical acumen of program designers. According to research, the noted differences in previous studies are sometimes overrated or associated with short-term transition periods rather than core defects (Mwale and Banda, 2019). Results have always been visible, and they exceeded initial target especial in rural areas for programs aimed at enhancing social cohesion and economic empowerment. Numerous rural communities have the potential to design context-specific consumer science programs to direct deal with their immediate needs. This can be done against all odds, where insufficient infrastructure and cultural limitations have been highlighted as impediments. The ability to turn obstacles into opportunities is always worth pursuing as it favours adaptability and creative thinking. According to Hassan and Naidoo (2021), there is no denying of the clearly visible challenges like limited funding, however identified funding gaps can be dealt with through multilateral engagements as well community-driven fund-raising approach. Beneficiaries have been equipped with practical skills to deal with ongoing inequalities. Such an action demands prioritization of community-based entrepreneurship to maximize utilization of local resources. Okoro and Ibezim (2020), noted that a detailed analysis of consumer science education potential must focus on the ability to bring change through contextualization of programs. The importance of focusing on the positive other than the negative is clearly highlighted by Okoro and Ibezim views. Such an optimistic approach enables the creation of opportunities aimed at refining global approaches to be context specific through collaborations.

The ability of consumer science education to promote social cohesion in rural communities of Eswatini, it is perceived as a hype. Those who hold such views argue that practical execution of the program fails decisively to eradicate structural barriers. Ncube and Dlamini (2017), noted that standardization of educational programs limits their effectiveness as standardization often fails to account for context-specific issues faced by communities. Sibanda and Mkhabela (2019), emphasized that standardized programs often tend to be effective in well-resourced communities compared to underprivileged communities. They indirectly widen the gap between those that are doing well and those that are struggling. Systematic poverty is a product of multiple intertwined issues on the population such are societal disparities, and thus economic growth alone cannot solve systematic poverty. Systematic poverty continues to multiply when inclusive community participation is absent because the possibility of overlooking context-specific issues in the program is inevitable due to policy failures. The value of reevaluating the role of consumer

science education in pursuing social development is clearly highlighted by these challenges. Moreover, these challenges underline the demand for upholding a more profound understanding of grassroots issues.

Methodology

The study was conducted in rural communities of Eswatini under a descriptive study design, and it adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the role of consumer science education in promoting social cohesion among underprivileged students. Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlighted that descriptive designs are best for understanding events as they unconsciously take place. This method offers an all-encompassing perspective which allows for a profound understanding of participants' insights. A clear narrative was derived through this approach, aligning with Bogdan and Biklen (2021). Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience, who can offer insightful information. The recruitment of participants was done in collaboration with local authorities and school administrators to ensure inclusive engagement (Palinkas et al., 2015). Semi-structured interviews were executed for data collection, the questionnaire was crafted to collect detailed and insightful responses from the respondents. The data collection tool met all the necessary requisites of qualitative approaches, based on the respondents' answers, the tool allowed the researcher to make follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016). The areas of focus for the interviews include themes such as the socio-economic challenges faced by marginalised students, the role of consumer science education in mitigating challenges, consumer science education and social cohesion and recommendations for policymakers, educators and stakeholders. The tool was piloted in a geographic area that is not targeted for final data collection; however, it was having similar demographic features to ensure clarity and effectiveness. This method was applied to ensure that the collected data was both relevant and of high quality, as suggested by Turner (2019). This study established credibility, reliability, and validity by applying various strategies aligned with established research standards. Reliability was achieved by consistently structured interview protocols and using audio recordings to guarantee accurate data collection, as highlighted by Noble and Smith (2015). Member checking was employed to enhance validity, participants reviewed their responses for completeness and accuracy to enhance transparency. Triangulation was applied to enhance the findings by cross-referencing information from interviews with educational records and community feedback. Also, preliminary validation of the interview guide was done with the University lecturers to achieve credibility. Trustworthiness was fostered by detailed documentation of approaches, ensuring transparency for future researchers. Confirmability was achieved through the establishment of an audit trail, keeping records of decision-making processes and setting results in respondents' answers. The purpose of the research was explained to

participate, ensuring they full comprehend the procedure and potential risk, furthermore an informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Ethical approval was sought from the University Research Council to ensure compliance with the research ethics. The researcher explained to the participants that participation was voluntary, respondents can withdraw at any stage. Data collection was done through face-to-face semi -structured interviews, each interview lasted for 60 minutes in a neutral and comfortable environment. The utilisation of an interview guide was to maintain concentration while allowing relaxation for detailed engagement, as highlighted by Rubin and Rubin (2012).A thematic approach was applied for qualitative data analysis, adhering to Braun and Clark’s (2006) six steps method which includes, immersing in the data, creating initial codes, identifying themes, refining themes, naming themes and composing the final narrative. Using this approach, qualitative data were systematically arranged to reveal key patterns on how consumer science education contributes to social cohesion and collaboration.

Results and Findings

Socio-economic Challenges Faced by Marginalised Students

The opinions expressed by marginalised students from rural communities depict a painful image of the socio-economic struggles they encounter, magnified is their deep impact on learning and community engagement. The research uncovered that a shortage of learning material significantly affects learning. One student said, *“Late delivery of textbooks significantly stalls learning, learning becomes a futile endeavour. I wish decision makers in the ministry would understand that our future hinges on this.”* This finding has been a thorn in the flesh for many learning institutions over the years, especial for schools located in rural communities. In some instances, delivery of learning material is noted to be two months late after schools had opened. Participant 2 said, *“We have seen government adopting divide a rule approach, schools in urban areas would be supplied with adequate learning material as their counterparts in rural communities receive almost half of what is ordered.”* This study highlights the urgent need for proper planning and coordination by officials in the ministry of education and training to address the highlighted problem. Previous studies have also highlighted the effects of inadequate resources on classroom activities and academic growth. The research uncovered that scarcity has a significant bearing on the pursuit of a successful educational journey, many households from poor rural communities sacrifice their last meals to have their children attend school. One student said, *“My parents would skip meals so that they can make provision for me to go to school, my heart is always in pain when weeks pass by without me receiving textbooks.”* This revelation was difficult and painful to assimilate, nonetheless is the reality of underprivilege students from rural communities. These are sacrifices made by parents to try and create a better future for their children, affect not only the students but the whole

family. With parents skipping meals, malnutrition is likely to strike within families considering their financial struggles. With all the effort made by families to provide better opportunities for their students, long distances to school counter these efforts. Long and challenging journeys cause students to be tired and have it difficult to concentrate in class. Mabena and Gumede's (2020) study highlighted school transport as a key determinant to creating an enabling learning environment. The absence of a parental figure, coupled with difficult family relationships, create a very difficult environment for underprivileged students to thrive at home. Students always need that extra support at home to boost their confidence and sense of belonging. There is no denying that our society is driven by technology, underprivileged students do not have access to technology due to inadequate access to technology and their household's economic position. The respondents furthermore highlighted that crowded home environments and too many home duties assigned to students consumes on their study time and lead to continuous disturbance. The respondent said, *"After having travelled a long distance to and from school, you reach home already exhausted, there is a pile of household chores waiting for you. By the time you are done, you only want to sleep."* These findings highlight the importance of creating a forum for parents and offer guidance on how parents can contribute to create a meaningful support environment for students, such will encourage social cohesion and promote collaborations. Nkosi (2018), noted structural challenges like classroom overcrowding and demotivated teaching staff as other elements that strengthen the trend of exclusion for students. In crowded classrooms, teachers are unable to give attention to all students equal because teacher to students' ratio is above average. Addressing these issues demands for collective action from all stakeholders and a clear profiling of issues that impede on inclusive consumer science education within the contexts. It's worth noting that the solution to these challenges is centred on engaging the affected population to craft a lasting solution to their challenges. In the absence of tangible programs, these students face the possibility of being denied opportunities to reach their potential, extending of generational disparities.

Role of Consumer Science Education in Mitigating Challenges

During the interviews it transpired that respondents have limited understanding of Consumer Science Education, their understanding is only limited to cooking and sewing. With such an uninformed perspective, the role of consumer science education in mitigating challenges remains skewed. A learner said, *"I don't know that consumer science education can teach anything else other than sewing and cooking. Any other opinion that it can teach us more than cooking and sewing is yet to be tested."* It is crystal clear that there is a misconception about this valuable subject, and this calls for relaunching and branding of consumer science education to deal with misconceptions. Previous studies have

demonstrated a promising untapped potential of consumer science education to address structural inequalities and unlock opportunities for mutual economic benefits. Mixed views were shared by respondents, one respondent said, *“My enrolment in the consumer science education class has transformed my life positively. I have managed to apply skills learned from this subject to start a decoration and catering company through the support of my teacher. I was lucky to have one of my teachers adopt me after the death of my parents.”* The sentiments shared by the student highlight clearly the transformative potential of consumer science education, however to full exploit this potential it is imperative to strengthen financial support in the micro and macro environment the students reside in. The mitigation role of consumer science education in the challenges faced by marginalised students cannot be achieved through application of a narrow, vertical approach. The narrative highlighted by many authors in this regard is that of an untapped potential, tapping into this potential is a linear approach, it demands the ability to analyse multiple interconnected factors to achieve equity and economic emancipation. Participants highlighted the potential of consumer science education to offer critical skills like finance management, diet diversity and health, which are perceived as essential knowledge in tackling socio-economic and health barriers. One participant outlined a success story, and he said, *“Our family is an underprivileged family, the insight acquired from community training facilitated by government home economics extension officer changes our family lifestyle in many facets. My mom is now always emphasizing budgeting and setting financial goals also she talks about using local available food resources to create a balance meal.”* The findings correspond with Dlamini (2021) who noted consumer science education programs provide households with family finance planning and food security insights in rural communities. The lack of coordinated approach and context-specific content affects the effectiveness of these programs in rural communities. This view supports Sibanda et al. (2017) who highlighted that context specific, and community centred consumer science education programs tend to be more effective than the standard programs.

Consumer Science Education and Social Cohesion

The function of consumer science education to foster relationships, skills development and trigger economic growth in rural communities was highlighted by many respondents. Attainment and fulfilment of this functionality hinges on the ability of consumer science program designers to deliberately seek to unlock the identified potential in this subject. The respondents noted that for consumer science education to foster social cohesion, both program implementers and beneficiaries must engage in the process of finding and removing barriers to the full use of resources and capabilities. The efficacy of consumer science education programs is a key variable that may influence the stability and

resilience of underprivileged communities. Economic growth is a dual contributor to and an outcome of sustainable consumer science education initiatives, influenced by the depth and reach of social cohesion measures. The socio-economic posture of individuals can hinder their access to tailor made programs aimed at enhancing social unity. This in turn can hinder their potential to contribute and benefit from community focused interventions. The respondents further highlighted that group work is highly appreciated for promoting unity and mutual support among group members. One respondent said, *“Working in silos is not ideal within the consumer science education space. Home economics education is a practical subject where the exchange of ideas creates an opportunity for us to achieve mutual growth. By supporting one other, social bond occurs, and learning becomes easier.”* The study suggests that achieving social cohesion through consumer science education is not an afterthought event, it is a milestone that requires open mindedness to unlock all structural and financial challenges through collaborations. This aligns with Mpofu and Ngwenya (2020), who noted how inclusive education approaches pushes for academic growth and common understanding while minimizing social challenges among learners. The dividers and hindrances in inclusive education are glaring for all to see, and their effects are even heavier. Students noted that unintended and intended discrimination is common in rural schools. A learner said, *“Some teachers give attention to rich students whose family economic posture ranks high.”* The power of education to create social unity is stifled by the failure of educators to be impartial and fair in their dealing with students. Consumer science education is indeed a roadmap to a shared learning experience with power to break all dividers and enablers of social exclusion and marginalisation in communities. Participants acknowledged the impact this subject is having on community empowerment, reflecting on Thwalas (2020) opinion that consumer science education creates inclusion through mutual engagement and teamwork practical sessions. The study shows that consumer science education needs to go beyond school boundaries, because the inability to go outside school boundaries constrains its impact. Institutions need to deliberately include consumer science education as part of community service to assist social divided marginalised communities. This kind of assistance to communities in periods of distress, whether because of economic difficulties, health challenges and generational poverty, is vital for social cohesion and sense of belonging.

Recommendations for Policymakers, Educators and Stakeholders

Through the study, a possibility of multiple approaches has been revealed, that can be applied to deal with academic inequalities and its effects, particularly on marginalised students from rural. The planning of consumer science education programs should be done with a clear end of uplifting underprivileged communities and closing social dividers. Respondents on numerous occasions highlighted that if nothing is done, education will

continue to be a routine exercise with no impact on social harmony and economic upliftment. A respondent said, *“Policymakers, educators and stakeholders must sit down to harmonize policies, each policy implemented in isolation leaves multiple students disadvantaged.”* This opinion justifies the international demand for equity focused education programs, especially in instances where the burden of financial support is dominant. Educational programs that come with their own funding create equal accessibility opportunities for beneficiaries, the programs themselves are transformative and tend to create an enabling sphere for all target beneficiaries to thrive. Successful program implementation demands inclusion of all key partners. Ncube and Hlophe, (2022), highlighted that having a stable continuous funding is a key enabler for sustainable effective education program. The study reveals that on top of adequate funding there must be an engagement of all stakeholders, priority areas must be agreed upon, and an effort must be made to align programs with community needs. The programs must be responsive to the needs of the target population with a window of opportunity, readjusting where necessary. Dube et al. (2019), noted that community focused education initiatives show power to foster community resilience and fill any void which might be caused by standard programs. Through this study, the value of grassroots efforts in spearheading an education sphere that promotes inclusion and collaboration is emphasized. Such efforts have a notable footprint in uniting communities and creating an environment for academic excellence. One participant said, *“If education initiatives can be decentralised a lot of highlighted barriers which are at grassroot level can be addressed. Some of these challenges are intertwined, hence sensitization of communities can position them for positive contribution.”* In communities where resources are scarce, community service initiatives need to be prioritised, where essential skills like financial planning and nutrition can be taught. The findings highlight that the program should have broad-based benefits for society. Achieving this involves dealing with the root causes of social and economic exclusion. Regardless of consumer science education potential, the execution of these initiatives faces multiples challenges, issues like delivery and continuity. The success of consumer science education in addressing issues affecting underprivileged students is solely depended on political commitment and institutional capacity.

Conclusion

The study set out to investigate the function of consumer science education in promoting social cohesion, focusing on underprivileged students from rural communities in Eswatini. Multiple challenges were identified as key factors that need to be considered when seeking to have consumer science education attain social cohesion and create a conducive socio-economic context for underprivileged students to thrive. The research findings show that long term inherent poverty is a major hindrance in ensuring that social

cohesion is achieved through consumer science education. Lack of political commitment and institutional capacity stifled any effort to design a context-specific program that will address the unique socio-economic and community needs to promote cohesion and mutual growth. The research brings to light the unique opportunity to develop a robust consumer science education program that can adopt a community focused approach that yields long-term development and social harmony. Poor academic performance, voicelessness, social exclusion and difficulties in establishing and keeping relationships were highlighted by participants as key barriers which needed to be addressed immediately as they collectively form major social barriers. Any program designed without considering the highlighted issues is bound to struggle to enhance social cohesion and inclusive development. Consumer science education is underlined as a viable platform for equipping underprivileged students with essential skills that can foster financial independence, teamwork and mutual growth.

Recommendations

The study recommended exploring of continuous and cost efficiency funding concepts in remodelling consumer science education to be community focused. There is clear evidence on the impact of sustainable funding models on education initiatives, especial if that model emphasizes stakeholder engagement in all stages. For consumer science education to achieve its major goal of equipping students with essential life skills, the standard syllabus currently used must be redesigned to focus on identified community needs. There is a need to strengthen academic support for both teachers and students, particularly because teachers in rural areas work under challenging conditions compared to those in urban areas. The support may include provision of adequate housing, teaching materials and hardship allowance specific for teachers in rural areas who engage in community service. The study recommends addressing challenges as a collective unit as it leads to long-term benefits thus paving the way for social harmony and long-term sustainability.

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