

Research Article

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Challenges Faced by School Management Teams in Managing Rural Schools in Three Selected Schools in South Africa

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Rural schools present unique challenges for School Management Teams, as most learners only attend school occasionally due to cultural obligations and household chores, resulting in low attendance rates. The study aimed to explore the challenges that school management teams faced while managing rural schools, which negatively impacted the quality of teaching and learning.

Materials/methods. This study adopted a case study design and used a qualitative approach. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten participants.

Results. The study findings revealed a number of challenges that school management teams face while managing rural schools, which negatively impact the quality of teaching and learning. These challenges included a lack of resources, the late coming of learners, the influence of substance abuse, bullying, teenage pregnancy, classroom management, contact workshops, the management of HR (teachers), the lack of parental involvement, the lack of effective communication, staff division and content gaps, and a negative attitude towards schoolwork.

Conclusion. To address the challenges that school management teams face, this study recommends that the Department of Education should ensure that rural schools receive equitable and adequate funding to meet their needs. To improve access to resources, the department can implement targeted funding programmes that address the specific challenges of these school settings. This could include financial support for upgrading the technological infrastructure, providing high-quality educational materials, and securing larger facilities.

1. Introduction

The members of the school management team consist of the principal, deputy principal, and heads of departments (HODs). In addition, the primary function of the school management team is to ensure the efficient daily operation of the school, uphold discipline, and foster good governance, thereby facilitating teachers' effectiveness and sustaining a positive school culture (Mogashoa, Malatji & Mphahlele, 2021). Molefe (2013) shows the importance of school management teams in all aspects of quality teaching and learning. They are responsible for executing their duties efficiently, which is essential for improving education standards. According to Msila's (2021) findings, school management teams in rural areas face various challenges, including a lack of parental and community involvement, inadequate resources, high teacher turnover, and high failure rates. One significant hurdle faced by school management teams is the scarcity of resources available to them. Despite their best efforts, rural schools often struggle to overcome the educational resource and infrastructural barriers that impede their ability to provide high-quality education (Ndofirepi & Masinire, 2021).

The poor performance of rural schools cannot be ignored any longer, as basic education serves as the basis for further education and success in tertiary institutions. According to Madondo (2017), school management teams (SMTs) face significant challenges, such as changes, confusion, lack of support, and high expectations, all of which reduce their enthusiasm for guiding schools toward achieving exceptional performance. Although the Department of Basic Education in South Africa may develop sound policies and plans, they are fruitless without their proper implementation. SMTs have become a critical component in implementing education policies and plans, and are essential in the education system. The demotivation and challenges SMTs face threaten the entire education system, and without education, the country cannot thrive (Madondo, 2017).

Rural schools present unique challenges for SMTs, as most learners only attend school occasionally due to cultural obligations and household chores, resulting in low attendance rates (Du Plessis, 2019). An array of challenges hampers the management of both teaching and learning activities, thereby obstructing the provision of quality education in these rural areas. Among significant setbacks is the poor state of the roads, which makes transport difficult for both learners and educators. The shortages of resources and infrastructure shortages are substantial challenges for the school management team (SMT) in managing teaching and learning. The availability of educational materials such as textbooks, syllabi, and charts is a crucial aspect that determines the effectiveness of teachers in the classroom (Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015). Without textbooks, teachers find teaching difficult, and learners struggle to succeed. Efforts have been made to address these challenges. However, there is still a significant gap in understanding the specific challenges SMTs face in managing complex environments and their strategies to overcome them in the rural context of the disadvantaged province of Limpopo Province in South Africa. As a result, there is an immediate need for thorough research to investigate the nature of these challenges to improve rural school management. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the challenges faced by SMTs while managing rural schools, which negatively impact the quality of teaching and learning, and proposes measures that could be put in place to address these challenges.

There are also insufficient studies in the area where the study was conducted, focusing on challenges that SMTs face while managing rural schools. This study can also guide the Department of Basic Education when developing school policies so that they can differentiate between rural and urban schools based on resources. Most of the time, the department expects the same results from both rural and urban schools, although they do not have the same resources and are in distinct environments. This research aims to encourage the government to assist schools based in rural areas with infrastructure and access to ICT so that the SMT can execute its managerial function. In addition, it encourages School management teams to take short learning programmes in leadership and

management for personal development. This qualitative study aims to explore and provide in-depth insight into the challenges faced by school management teams while managing rural schools. Through this exploration, the study seeks to raise awareness among education stakeholders about the challenges and the possible contributions that different stakeholders can make to address them. The study will also guide the government and other institutions regarding the problems that must be addressed to bring the country out of its current education crisis in the schools in rural areas. This study is guided by the following research objectives: to explore the challenges that school management teams face in managing rural schools that affect the quality of teaching and learning. To recommend strategies for mitigating the challenges that school management teams face in managing rural schools.

2. Literature Review

Managing rural schools in China poses several challenges for school management teams, which may be similar to those faced by their counterparts in the United States. These include managing large class sizes, addressing poor student attitudes, dealing with low salaries, and navigating concerns surrounding standardised testing (Romanowski, 2006). Additionally, the author notes that Chinese students are often indulged, rarely corrected, and accustomed to influencing their environment, making it challenging for the school management team to maintain control. Significantly, a study shows that the majority of school management teams in the Solomon Islands encounter numerous challenges in their work environments. These challenges include inexperienced educators, insufficient funding, a scarcity of educational resources, and land disputes. The latter issue, in particular, is beyond the control of school leaders and necessitates prompt attention from the primary stakeholder(s) involved (Lingam, Lingam, & Raghuwaiya, 2014).

Despite comprising nearly 20% of all schools in England, rural schools often need more support and attention for their unique challenges. Rowler (2018) notes that SMTs in these areas need help with financial constraints, low student enrolment, costly transportation due to long commutes, and families hovering just above the threshold for free school meals. In turn, schools in Finland and France have implemented community-led models that align with local interests and goals (Ferreira, 2011). However, this approach can be in conflict with the established school policies, making it challenging for school management teams to oversee these schools effectively.

Managing rural schools presents school management teams with the challenge of retaining competent teachers. Teacher retention has been a significant area of concern, with various factors influencing teacher turnover rates (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). Ingersoll (2001) notes that high teacher attrition disrupts instructional continuity and imposes an ongoing burden on school management teams to recruit and train new staff. This continual recruitment cycle strains resources and hampers the development of a cohesive school culture and consistent pedagogical practices. Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley (2006) further highlight that the loss of experienced teachers often results in increased workloads and stress for remaining staff, complicating the task of school management teams to maintain morale and productivity. As a result, these management teams must navigate the dual challenge of addressing the immediate staffing needs while also implementing strategies to enhance teacher satisfaction and retention.

Frahm and Cianca (2021) assert that organisational support, affirmation, and encouragement from schools have a vital influence on improving the retention of new teachers. This aligns with Ladd (2011), who identifies administrative support as pivotal in retaining effective educators. Similarly, Johnson (2022) and Ibrahim (2016) underscore the importance of school principals in creating supportive environments by managing schedules, providing resources, facilitating collaboration, and establishing community partnerships.

Research from Malaysia mirrors these findings, where poor working conditions in rural schools increased teacher turnover, as teachers moved to urban schools with better socio-economic conditions and support services (NCTAF, 2002; Ramesh, Rao & Jani, 2011). Financial incentives aimed at recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in rural areas have proven insufficient, as they do not outweigh the challenging working conditions (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2010; Glazerman, McKie & Carey, 2009; Milanowski et al., 2009; Vegas, 2005). Considering their significant challenges, rural teachers viewed these incentives as inadequate (Lavy, 2009). In addition, rural teachers' ability to develop their teaching skills and progress in their careers is hampered by heavy workloads and a lack of opportunities for professional development (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). The turnover rates in rural schools are influenced by this lack of support and opportunity. Muremela et al. (2020) point out that teachers in rural schools are demoralised by the absenteeism of learners caused by poverty. As a result of this demotivation, these teachers often strongly desire to move to urban schools, where they believe teaching conditions are more favourable.

Research indicates that parents from rural areas often have lower levels of education and economic status, limiting their ability to engage with schools effectively (Ngwenya, 2019). This presents a significant challenge for school management teams, as they must navigate these socioeconomic barriers while striving to increase parental involvement. Furthermore, creating and maintaining successful parental participation in school programmes in rural areas is challenging because of inadequate infrastructure and resources (Showalter et al., 2017). While Ngozwana et al. (2024) suggest otherwise, this study demonstrates that parents in rural schools are actively engaged in their children's education.

Overcrowded classrooms have long been recognised as detrimental to educational outcomes, particularly impacting literacy rates among adults and youth (Andries et al., 2022). Studies consistently demonstrate that high student-to-teacher ratios negatively affect academic performance and can lead to poorer academic results (Barde et al., 2021; Namale et al., 2021). One of the fundamental causes of overcrowding is the shortage of proper infrastructure, such as sufficient classrooms, which poses a significant challenge for school management teams (Amer & Amalia, 2021).

Research in regions like Nigeria, Tanzania, and Saudi Arabia has shown that overcrowded classrooms contribute to modest academic achievements and result in high CO₂ concentrations due to inadequate ventilation (Likuru & Mwila, 2022; Alama & Sabbagh, 2022). School management teams in such settings face numerous challenges that impact their management skills and the overall teaching-learning process. These challenges include difficulty assessing student performance, limited opportunities for meaningful interaction with students, and increased disciplinary issues arising from the crowded environment (Ahmad et al., 2018; Gulab & Khoka, 2024; Tahir et al., 2019). Additionally, overcrowded classrooms are linked to physiological problems, increasing susceptibility to respiratory and infectious diseases among students and staff (Ayub et al., 2018; Bakar & Mwila, 2022). Consequently, school management teams must navigate these issues while striving to maintain educational quality and ensure a favourable atmosphere for learning.

Overcrowded classrooms significantly impact learners by reducing opportunities for participation, individualised instruction, and access to learning resources (Fatima et al., 2019). Ahmad, Arshad & Qamar (2018) state that overcrowded classrooms can lead to lower academic performance, decreased motivation, and behavioural issues. In overcrowded classrooms, the heightened workload teachers face can significantly impair their ability to provide individualised attention, develop engaging lesson plans, and effectively manage the classroom environment. Marais (2016) stated that overcrowded classrooms contribute to teacher burnout and diminish job satisfaction. The repercussions of overcrowded classrooms extend beyond academic performance, affecting students' well-being and the general learning environment. Weatherholt et al. (2019)

reported that overcrowding leads to inefficient education systems and teacher challenges. Babalwa (2023) noted that students with disabilities particularly struggle in overcrowded classes because of a shortage of resources and inadequate inclusive education training. Studies further indicate that overcrowded classrooms impact academic outcomes and complicate classroom management and teacher-student interactions. Nyiwa and Gathumbi (2017) and Evarist (2018) highlighted that large class sizes lower teacher morale, diminish instructional quality, and result in ineffective teaching practices.

Overcrowded classrooms are a significant challenge for school management teams, impacting their ability to maintain educational quality and manage resources effectively (Andries et al., 2022; Barde et al., 2021). The challenges associated with poverty are particularly pronounced in low-income areas, where economic hardship intersects with educational obstacles. The correlation between poverty and educational achievement is extensively documented, revealing that children from low-income families frequently demonstrate lower academic performance and graduate with fewer competencies than their more affluent counterparts (Miller et al., 2014; Fortner et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). These socioeconomic disadvantages extend beyond the realm of education, influencing various dimensions of well-being and development, thereby perpetuating inequalities into adulthood (Clarke & Thevenon, 2022; Harris & Jones, 2020; World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2021) reported that even before the pandemic, students in G20 countries faced significant disparities in educational attainment based on income, location, and ethnicity, with many leaving schools before reaching the compulsory age. School management teams, grappling with overcrowded classrooms and these socio-economic challenges, face additional difficulties in addressing the needs of students impacted by both educational inequity and the digital divide (Donaghy, 2021; Ferris et al, 2022).

Burton et al. (2013) delve into the inequalities and health disparities prevalent in rural America, highlighting the sources of poverty and racial inequalities within families that ultimately affect health outcomes. Logan and Burdick-Will (2017) emphasise the complexity of poverty and segregation in rural areas, where high poverty rates coexist with predominantly white populations, creating unique challenges for educational equity.

Yang et al. (2022) investigate the effectiveness of targeted poverty-alleviation policies in decreasing the income differences between urban and rural areas, highlighting the influence of these interventions on poverty levels. Similarly, Irvin et al. (2011) emphasise the importance of school context in the educational achievements of rural youth, pointing out that poverty affects developmental challenges and academic performance significantly. The emotional well-being of children in poverty-stricken rural areas is a focal point in the study by Okoye and Mensah (2021), which evaluates the impact of poverty on elementary school students and government strategies to alleviate poverty-related challenges.

The human relations management theory is applied in this study and is based on the expectancy-value theory, process-based theory, employment relationship theory, and its fundamental principles to address the challenges faced by school management. The human relations management theory is one of the earliest management theories, and it has been adopted and used by many organisations as a guide for management to address challenges (Mayo, 1949). The human relations management theory principles can be applied effectively to the challenges faced by the management of rural schools, focusing on interpersonal relationships, employee well-being, and effective communication. By integrating these principles, schools can address issues such as the low retention of competent teachers, the lack of parental involvement, the lack of resources, poverty, and overcrowded classrooms. The school management can improve teacher retention by emphasising interpersonal relationships and employee well-being. When teachers feel appreciated, supported, and acknowledged for their efforts, their job satisfaction and morale rise, increasing their likelihood of remaining in their roles (Hitt, Black & Porter, 2012). The human relations management theory

underscores the need to address employees' social and emotional needs, which can be accomplished by fostering a supportive and collaborative workplace. Providing opportunities for professional development is consistent with the theory's emphasis on personal growth and motivation, making teachers feel valued and more likely to stay in rural areas (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

The lack of parental involvement can be mitigated by developing strong relationships between the school and the parents. According to the human relations management theory, fostering positive interpersonal relationships is critical. Schools can hold regular meetings and events to foster community and encourage parental involvement (Epstein, 2010). Creating clear and open communication channels fosters parental engagement and participation in the education of their children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Offering parental education programmes reinforces the theory's emphasis on the role of social factors in organisational success (Jeynes, 2011). Community involvement and collaboration can alleviate the scarcity of resources in rural schools. The human relations management theory emphasises the value of cooperation and group effort. Engaging the local community in fundraising and resource mobilisation can help to bridge the resource gap. Partnerships with non-governmental organisations, government agencies, and private organisations can help the school obtain additional resources (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Encouraging staff creativity and innovation can also help make the best use of the available resources, ensuring that educational goals are met despite financial constraints. This aligns with the theory's emphasis on leveraging individuals' collective strengths and talents within the organisation (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008).

Poverty, a significant issue in rural areas, can be addressed by creating support programmes that provide financial and material aid to students from low-income households (Jensen, 2009). The human relations management theory's emphasis on employee well-being can be applied to student well-being by providing counselling and support services that address the emotional and psychological needs of low-income students. Working with community organisations to address broader socio-economic issues can further support students' education, reflecting the theory's focus on the social context and external factors that impact the organisation. In order to manage overcrowded classrooms effectively, teachers must be trained in classroom management techniques that allow them to handle large classes efficiently. The theory's emphasis on effective communication and collaboration can be implemented through team teaching approaches, enabling teachers to manage large groups of students more effectively (Friend & Cook, 2013). Flexible scheduling and creative use of available spaces can help reduce the impact of overcrowding, consistent with the human relations management theory's emphasis on adaptability and innovative problem-solving (Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011). By implementing human relations management theory concepts, rural school management teams can improve teacher retention, promote parental involvement, mobilise resources to support impoverished students, and efficiently manage overcrowded classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach and Design

A qualitative approach was used in this study, which allows for a deeper exploration of real-world issues, as highlighted by Tenny, Brannan and Brannan (2017). This method gathers insights into individuals' perceptions, behaviours, and experiences, emphasising the "hows" and "whys" rather than numerical data. Using this approach, we, as the researchers, interacted directly with participants in their natural environments. This allowed us to capture their emotions and real-life experiences. Qualitative methods offer a deeper insight into why people interact socially and exhibit certain behaviors, as mentioned by Al-Ababneh (2020). This study utilised a case study design to investigate the challenges faced by the school management team (SMT) members in managing rural schools. In

a case study, a single person, group, community, or entity is thoroughly examined, enabling the researcher to look at a large amount of data from several different variables (f). This study is anchored through a case study because this approach would be more likely to produce fresh perspectives and shed new light on the issue at hand.

3.2. Study Group and Location of the Study

The researchers utilised purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling. Purposive sampling was used in this study to find and select participants who had relevant expertise and at least ten years of teaching experience. Purposive sampling was used to sample SMTs because they shared the same knowledge of running a rural-based school, providing helpful information for the study.

Table 1. Study Group

Participants	Study group
Deputy Principal	4
Head of Department	6
Total sample	10

The researchers selected four deputy principals and six heads of department from three schools. The selection criteria for participants focused on individuals currently serving in leadership positions within rural schools, with experience navigating the unique dynamics and challenges of rural education settings. The research was conducted in the Bahlaloga Circuit, a rural area in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The circuit is characterised by its predominantly rural setting, with schools facing significant challenges such as limited access to resources, infrastructural inadequacies, and socio-economic difficulties.

3.3. Research Paradigm

The present study is focused on exploring human experience, and to this end, interpretivist paradigms were employed. By investigating the world through the viewpoints and experiences of the participants, the interpretative paradigm enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of it. By leveraging these experiences, researchers can interpret and construct meaningful insights effectively from the data that they collect. This approach allows researchers to fully immerse themselves in the subject matter being studied, ultimately resulting in more accurate and comprehensive findings.

3.4. Data Collection

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. This data collection tool was ideal when the researchers aimed to gain insight into a participant's perspective rather than a general understanding of a phenomenon. The reason for selecting this tool was that it allowed interviewers to obtain responses to questions and understand the reasoning behind those responses. This research study required a method that encouraged participants to openly express their challenges when managing schools in rural areas. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for in-depth research and unrestricted responses from participants. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The language used to collect data was English. During the interview the participants were asked the following questions.

1. What are the most common challenges that you may have encountered while managing the school?
2. To what extent did those challenges affect the quality of teaching and learning?

3. How do you handle the shortage of resources (human, physical, technological, and financial) in a rural school setting?
4. Could you please share your views on how the lack of resources and infrastructure affects the quality of teaching and learning in your school?
5. How do teacher recruitment and retention difficulties in rural areas affect the continuity and quality of teaching school management teams provide?
6. Which strategies can be put in place to mitigate challenges that school management teams face in managing rural schools?

3.5. Ethics and Trustworthiness

The researchers paid close attention to ethics and trustworthiness in this study. They adhered to all ethical considerations, as outlined below: Before participating in this study, prospective participants were informed of its objectives and procedures. They signed a consent form confirming their voluntary participation in the research. We ensured the confidentiality of participants by utilising the information they provided solely for this study and refrained from sharing it with any third party. No individual was coerced or compelled to participate in this study against their will. Participation was voluntary, and those who chose to do so could stop at any moment without worrying about punishment or unfavourable outcomes. It is essential that each participant understands the goals, dangers, and advantages of the study and that their privacy and autonomy are respected at every stage of the investigation. Upon data collection completion, the researchers cannot establish a direct correlation between a specific survey and the individual who responded. This study did not disclose the participants' real names to maintain anonymity. To ensure trustworthiness in this study, credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable sources were taken into account. To ensure transferability in the case of a study conducted in schools within the Limpopo Province, the researchers likely aimed to ensure that the findings could be useful for other schools in the province. This would allow school management teams to utilise the insights gained from the study to improve their own schools. In this study, the researchers assured dependability by implementing a rigorous methodology and collecting data within a specific context. To ensure conformity in this research, the interview data were analysed to reflect the participants' viewpoints, and the audio recordings were reviewed during the data compilation. In the context of this study, credibility was maintained by requesting participants to validate the written transcripts of the recorded interviews. This process ensured that the study's findings remained accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

3.6. Data Analysis

The analysis comprises summarising data and finding its truth. This process helped answer questions by organising the acquired data. In simpler terms, the analysis helped researchers understand the fundamental truth behind the data. Ibrahim (2015) provided this definition.

In this study, qualitative content analysis was used, following Tesch's eight steps (Creswell, 2014):

- The researchers examined each transcription thoroughly, making notes of any ideas that stood out.
- The researchers chose one interview, read it through to derive meaning from the data, and jotted down any ideas that came to mind.
- After reviewing the transcripts, the researchers organised related topics into primary, unique, and remaining categories.

- The topics were then shortened into codes by the researchers, who wrote the codes next to the relevant passages in the text. After that, the researcher examined how the data were organised to see if any new codes or categories could be identified.
- Afterwards, the researchers identified and classified the issues' most descriptive words.
- After that, the final decision about each category's abbreviation was made, and the codes were organised alphabetically.

All the data about each category was gathered and curated systematically in a single location. Then, a preliminary analysis was conducted to offer a complete understanding of the data. By applying content analysis, the study ensured a structured approach to identifying themes and patterns within the data.

3.7. Limitations of the Study

The researchers encountered several limitations during the study. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2017), qualitative research inherently involves subjectivity and may be influenced by various biases related to sample selection, data collection, and analysis. Therefore, in this research, the sample size of ten participants from three rural schools may limit the breadth of perspectives represented in the findings. Using purposeful sampling could result in selection bias as the participants were chosen based on specific criteria, potentially excluding other relevant stakeholders. The researchers expected to interview three rural high school principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads from three sampled rural high schools. The goals and methods of this study were explained to the potential participants before they began. Their input would have added valuable insights. The researchers faced time constraints due to the type of study, which involved interviewing school management teams in the researcher's region. The interviews were scheduled around the lunch hour, which proved to be a logistical challenge, allowing insufficient time for the researchers to travel to the schools.

4. Results

This section presents the results of the data analysis from semi-structured interviews conducted with school management teams at three selected high schools in the Bahlaloga Circuit, Limpopo Province. Six department heads and four deputy principals participated in the interviews, which were conducted to learn more about the challenges they encountered when running rural schools.

4.1. Lack of Resources

One participant reported that one of the most critical challenges in managing rural schools is the lack of resources. The participant pointed out the lack of essential teaching materials, including textbooks, classroom supplies, and technology.

P1 stated, "One of the most disturbing challenges that we face is the lack of resources, and this hinders the effective operation of the school. We lack textbooks, technology, and classroom materials."

Based on the above response, the lack of resources such as textbooks, classroom supplies, and technology gadgets directly impacts the quality of education that can be provided, creating an environment where both teaching and learning suffer. This challenge forces school managers to seek alternative means of resource acquisition, such as local fundraising, donor partnerships, or improvised teaching methods. However, this situation is unsustainable and creates a heavy burden on the school leadership.

DP1 mentioned, “The challenge they face in the school gives rise to underperformance.” DP2 commented, “Due to a lack of resources, mostly technological ones, this renders learners unable to do practicals. DH 1 stated, “Our learners have a negative attitude towards schoolwork.”

According to the comments, learners' failure to complete practical activities reveals considerable obstacles in skills-based learning due to a lack of materials required to enhance teaching and learning in rural schools.

DP 2 indicated that the challenges in his school affected the quality of teaching to the extent that learners were disturbed in class. “Due to the challenges of technology and resources, learners get distracted in class.” DP3 noted, “Vandalism by the learners damages essential resources and creates an environment of disorder.”

According to these two deputy principals, the challenges mentioned above interrupt the teaching processes and undermine the focus and morale of both educators and learners, making it difficult to maintain a conducive learning atmosphere.

4.2. Late Coming of Learners

One of the ten participants mentioned that late arrivals were a common issue in their schools, particularly in areas where pupils had to travel long distances to reach the school which made it difficult for them to manage their schools effectively. Consequently, teaching and learning are negatively affected.

P1 The participant shared, “Many of our learners live far away from the school, and because the roads are poor and the long distances, they often arrive late, which disturbs the learning process.”

Reflecting on the above participant remarks, learners arrive late at school because of long distances and poor infrastructure. School managers are often forced to adjust schedules or accommodate latecomers, which can disrupt the teaching day and hinder the progress of the entire class. This challenge of late arrivals indicates a need for better infrastructure and transportation solutions for rural learners.

4.3. Influence of Substance Abuse

One participant identified substance abuse, particularly among older learners, as a serious concern. A few reported that drugs such as marijuana and alcohol were prevalent in their communities.

P1 commented, “Substance abuse is becoming more common among teenagers, and it negatively affects their performance and behaviour in school.”

P2 another participant mentioned, “When learners come to school under the influence, it becomes difficult to maintain discipline and focus on academic work.”

Based on the above participants, substance abuse is a growing issue in rural schools, affecting both learner behaviour and academic performance. This creates additional challenges for school managers who must implement disciplinary measures while also providing support to learners affected by substance use. The presence of substance abuse in the community often reflects broader socio-economic problems, including poverty and limited access to mental health support.

4.4. Teenage Pregnancy

Only one participant mentioned teenage pregnancy as one of the challenges that school managers are confronted with while managing rural schools, which affects teaching and learning. The participant indicated that many girls drop out of school after becoming pregnant and that the stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy often isolates these learners.

DP 1 stated, "We have a high dropout rate among female learners due to early pregnancies, and the community doesn't always offer support to these little girls."

This comment postulates that teenage pregnancy is a significant barrier to education in rural communities, particularly for girls. The social stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy further complicates the issue, making it hard for the affected pupils to continue their education.

4.5. Contact Workshops

Three DHs pointed out that the frequency of workshops and training sessions is a major challenge in managing rural schools.

DH 3 mentioned, "The workshops, often scheduled during the school term, leave us with little time to focus on our primary responsibilities."

DH 4 shared, "We are constantly being asked to attend workshops, and while they're useful, they pull teachers out of their classrooms. This leaves gaps in teaching time and results in learners falling behind."

DH 5 added, "Teachers are often absent for training, and when they return, they have a backlog of work that disrupts the school's progress."

These comments show that SMTs attend an overwhelming number of workshops. Although they are important for professional development, they also create serious disruptions concerning school operations. Teachers are frequently absent from school because of these workshops, leading to a loss of instructional time. Additionally, the workload that piles up in their absence becomes a source of stress when they return, as they struggle to catch up on missed work and assessments. This disrupts the continuity of learning, affects the teacher morale, and impacts the smooth running of day-to-day school activities.

4.6. Management of Human Resources (Teachers)

Two participants expressed concern about the lack of qualified teachers in rural areas, which makes it challenging for school managers to manage rural schools and affects the quality of teaching and learning.

One DP declared, "It is hard to get teachers to come to our school, and even when we do, they often leave within a year or two."

DH mentioned, "There is a high rate of teacher and learner absenteeism, and it's not easy to find substitute teachers in our area due to being remote."

Based on these comments, it is evident that rural schools lack human resource support. Most teachers do not stay in these schools long due the challenges that they encounter, and this serves to be a very serious issue to the SMTs.

4.7. Lack of Parental Involvement

Five participants highlighted the lack of parental involvement as a barrier to effective school management. The participants further pointed out that parents in rural areas are often busy with farming or other work and are unable to attend meetings or participate in school activities.

DP 1 commented, "Most parents are either illiterate or too busy to get involved in school affairs, which makes it hard to form a partnership with them."

Another DP stated, "Even when parents are invited to meetings, they don't show up, and this lack of communication hurts the learners."

According to these comments, parental involvement is extremely important for learner success, but rural SMTs face challenges in engaging parents. The socio-economic conditions in rural areas, where parents are often focused on survival, reduce their ability to participate in school-related activities.

4.8. Bullying

Bullying was highlighted as a disturbing issue in rural schools, with ten percent of participants mentioning it as a significant challenge.

P1 highlighted that “Bullying often takes the form of physical fights or verbal harassment.”

P2 described, “Bullying is too much in the school, and it often goes unnoticed because there are so few teachers to monitor the learners during breaks.”

From the comments above, it is evident that bullying is the dominant challenge in rural schools with which school managers are faced, and that affects teaching and learning. The lack of supervision due to the limited staff further also escalates the issue. This indicates that school leaders must address bullying through policies and education and create an environment where learners feel safe and supported. This issue can be difficult to manage in communities where such behaviours may be normalised or ignored.

5. Discussion

The outcomes of the study indicate that school management teams in rural schools face the considerable challenge of a lack of resources, which impacts the provision of high-quality education. Naidoo (2019) and Ajani (2022), who opine that rural schools have a shortage of the required materials for high-quality teaching and implementation in contrast with urban schools, confirm this assertion. The disparity in resource allocation between rural and urban schools is well-documented (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Bashir et al., 2018; Ajani & Govender, 2019; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). These studies consistently demonstrate that rural school districts are typically under-resourced compared to their suburban or urban counterparts. This disparity results in unequal educational opportunities, ultimately compromising the quality of education in rural schools.

The study also found that rural school management teams face challenges due to inadequate funding, which results in outdated or insufficient textbooks, limited access to devices, and a shortage of enrichment classes. These studies align with William’s (2017) findings, which assert that educators in schools cannot perform well because of a lack of essential resources, such as textbooks. In addition, William (2018) stated that the scarcity of resources results in teachers frequently having limited access to items, such as technological devices, textbooks, and stationery, which impedes their capacity to facilitate and provide quality education. The research further showed that school management teams in rural schools believe the inadequate provision of materials reflects significant neglect and failure by the Department of Education and the government regarding rural schools. Mupa and Chinooneka (2015), who asserted that rural school management teams have encountered difficulties when fulfilling managerial responsibilities effectively because of inadequate support from the Department of Basic Education, including the inadequate supply of essential school materials, support these findings.

This study found late coming to be one of the challenges that SMTs in rural schools’ face. It was found that learners frequently arrive late at school due to the necessity of walking long distances and the poor infrastructure, which limits the accessibility of transportation to these areas. This challenge of late arrivals indicates a need for better infrastructure and transportation solutions for rural learners. Du Plessis (2017) argues that the late arrival of learners at schools, which is a serious issue that affects teaching and learning in rural schools, is caused by cultural obligations. School managers

are often forced to adjust the schedules or accommodate latecomers, which can disrupt the teaching day and hinder the progress of the entire class. Late coming usually affects the first class or morning study classes, whereby learners miss most of what is shared in class, which affects their performance. Furthermore, this study discovered that inadequate parental involvement contributed significantly to some learners' tardiness, which takes us back to the issue of a lack of parental engagement. The shortage of resources and inadequate infrastructure in rural schools pose significant challenges to establishing and sustaining effective parental engagement programmes (Showalter et al., 2017). These issues exacerbate the lack of parental involvement in their children's education, which is often associated with student tardiness. In addition, the effect of households that are divided contributes to late coming in rural schools. In many divided households, students have taken on parental responsibilities at a very young age, when they should have been under parental supervision. Lastly, the study found that abolishing corporal punishment has contributed to late coming, as learners are aware that they cannot be physically disciplined. Instead, they may be assigned tasks such as picking up litter in the yard or cleaning toilets, which results in them missing lessons. Alternatively, teachers may delay starting lessons to accommodate latecomers, both of which impact the quality of education negatively.

This study revealed the influences of substances as a major challenge SMTs face in rural schools. Substance abuse is a growing issue in rural schools, affecting both learner behaviour and academic performance. Additionally, it has been found that this creates additional challenges for school managers who must implement disciplinary measures while also providing support to learners affected by substance use. This is corroborated by Berk (2007), who suggested that individuals using substances may exhibit withdrawal symptoms, mood swings, irritability, or aggression, along with a declining academic performance and increased absenteeism. Such individuals, under the influence of substances, often become disruptive and challenging to manage, causing classroom disturbances that impact the quality of education. The prevalence of substances in a community often signifies underlying socio-economic issues, such as poverty and inadequate access to mental health services. Zibi (2018) further emphasised that substance use not only affects the individual but also has far-reaching consequences for families, friends, teachers, and the broader community.

Rural schools do not have the necessary and/or sufficient equipment to assist anyone affected by substance abuse; it only results in expulsion, as they cannot help such an individual. This affects the psychological health of the learners. As a result, some female learners might engage in casual sex, which leads to teenage pregnancies. According to Mokoena (2002), the consequences include skipping classes, encountering academic challenges, facing disciplinary issues at school and home, and sometimes being expelled, dropping out of school, or withdrawing from sports activities. Due to the lack of resources, rural schools fail to help learners struggling with addiction.

This study found that teenage pregnancy constitutes the challenges SMTs face in rural schools. This is a major obstacle to education in rural communities as it results in a high rate of dropouts, particularly for girls. The social stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy further complicates the issue, creating hardship for affected pupils to continue their education. This study also highlighted that teenage pregnancy remains a significant educational challenge impacting learners' performance in rural schools. According to Soba (2020), cultural factors and insufficient resources hinder educational institutions in many developing economies from effectively addressing teenage pregnancy. Pregnant teenagers often experience psychological challenges, including depression and societal stigma, making it difficult for them to resume their studies and leading many to abandon their academic aspirations.

In this study, it was discovered that the issue of teachers having to attend contact workshops contributes to the challenges faced by SMTs in rural schools. Although these contact workshops are important for the professional development and equipment of the teachers, they also disrupt

schools' operations. Johar et al. (2021) identified several challenges related to online workshops and categorised them into four main areas: technical difficulties, inadequate facilities, limited cooperation among groups, and insufficient collaboration with facilitators. Teachers are frequently absent from school because of these workshops, leading to a loss of instructional time. Additionally, the workload that piles up in their absence becomes a source of stress when they return, as they struggle to catch up on missed work and assessments. This disrupts the continuity of learning, affects teacher morale, and impacts the smooth running of day-to-day school activities. Workshops can be adapted from traditional face-to-face formats to online training, allowing teachers to participate without missing classes and ensuring that the quality of teaching and learning remains unaffected. However, Mailizar and Fan (2020) emphasised that internet accessibility is a critical factor for teachers in adopting online workshops. This presents a significant challenge for rural schools, where resources are often limited.

This study revealed that rural schools lack human resource support. Most teachers do not stay long in these schools due to the challenges that they encounter, and this appears to be a very serious issue for the SMTs. Additionally, it was found that having to teach more classes and handling more responsibilities in the school because there is a shortage of teachers is one of the challenges that leads to teachers leaving the school as they feel they are being overworked. Muremela et al. (2020) stressed that poor working conditions are a major factor that makes teachers leave rural schools, which creates a burden on school leaders. A lack of resources and facilities also make teachers leave for better schools. This low retention of teachers leads to teacher shortages, resulting in big class sizes, more burned-out educators, and poorer student performances. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) and Chika and Ombajo (2017), who argued that educators in rural schools leave in large numbers to go and work in urban schools due to the poor resources in their schools.

The study emphasises that the low level of parental involvement in their children's education is a major issue for school management teams in rural areas. Previous studies suggest that parents in these regions often have lower levels of education and economic resources, which limits their capacity to engage actively with the schools (Ikechukwu, 2017). As a result, many parents view schools more as a form of daycare rather than as educational institutions. The resultant issues involve a lack of parental guidance and insufficient support from parents concerning their children's homework or assignments. School management teams and teachers often feel more like caregivers than educators because parents ignore their children's academic progress. Parental involvement should not be seen solely in terms of financial support (though monetary contributions are important); parents should also play an active role in addressing their children's academic, social, and emotional needs.

This could be due to the belief that teaching is the teacher's responsibility. (Mavuso et al., 2022) identified work commitments, unemployment, and school factors that contribute to uninvolved parenting. It is worth noting that the lack of parental involvement can be due to misguided priorities, where parents lack vision and commitment. Parents' involvement in their children's education starts at home, where they create a loving atmosphere, provide appropriate learning opportunities, offer assistance, and have a positive outlook on education. This viewpoint is supported by Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017), who contend that parental involvement in the educational process offers schools a significant opportunity to improve their current programmes.

This study discovered that bullying is one of the dominant challenges in rural schools that SMTs face. The lack of supervision due to limited staff further escalates the issue. This indicates a situation in which school leaders must address bullying through policies and education and create an environment where learners feel safe and supported. This issue can be challenging to manage in communities where such behaviours may be normalised or ignored. Therefore, educators have an

important role to play in combating bullying by introducing anti-bullying programmes as a foundational approach for learners (Ybarra et al., 2019). Nevertheless, a study of Canadian teachers revealed several barriers and challenges affecting the effectiveness of such programmes. These include insufficient teaching, inability to detect occurrences of bullying, insufficient implementation time, and sustainability challenges (Cunningham et al., 2015).

This is the same reality in rural schools; anti-bullying programmes require resources to implement them. However, this is a challenge that rural schools are also facing, namely, a lack of resources, which makes it difficult to implement these programmes. Classroom management is important for the effectiveness of bullying interventions and in reducing bullying behaviour (Yoon et al., 2016). Accordingly, the SMTs and fellow teachers require adequate training to prevent and reduce bullying, and training calls for resources that they do not have in rural schools. The bullying of learners disturbs others in classes, which causes disruptions. Mostly, they may be under the influence of alcohol or other substances, and this results in a low quality of teaching and learning as other learners cannot focus properly.

In this study, the sample size of ten participants from three rural schools may limit the breadth of perspectives represented in our findings. Using purposeful sampling could result in selection bias as the participants were chosen based on specific criteria, potentially excluding other relevant stakeholders. The researchers expected to interview three rural high school principals, deputy principals, and departmental heads from three sampled rural high schools. The goals and methods of this study were explained to the potential participants before they began. Their input would have added valuable insights. The researchers faced time constraints due to the type of study, which involved interviewing school management teams in the researcher's region.

6. Conclusion

The current study explored the challenges that school management teams faced while managing rural schools, which impacted the quality of teaching and learning negatively. As discussed, the study revealed various challenges that school management faces while managing rural schools. These challenges negatively affect the teaching and learning process in rural schools and have an adverse impact on learners' academic performance. Human relations management theory was important in this study as it assisted in proposing measures to address some of the challenges faced by school management teams in managing rural schools. These measures included training school management teams in effective resource management. Therefore, given the limited resources in rural schools, SMTs can be trained on how to manage them efficiently. These findings can be compared with other studies to highlight similarities and differences, and they may help inform future change initiatives. Rural schools and the Department of Education can use the data from this study to strengthen the implementation of programmes aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning. Other schools may gain insights into addressing some of the challenges faced by the schools in this study. The Department of Education will find this research valuable for understanding the specific needs and challenges of School management teams (SMTs) in rural schools. This will make it easier and fairer for rural schools to compete with their urban counterparts.

7. Suggestion

The authors suggest that the Department of Education can tackle the issue of overcrowded classrooms by expanding the existing classrooms or constructing additional schools in rural areas. Furthermore, collaborating with healthcare providers to offer on-site health services, including mental health support, can help meet the diverse needs of learners. Additionally, by investing in teachers' professional development, they will be able to make effective use of the accessible resources and modify curricula to better meet their learners' needs. The Department of Education can ensure that rural schools are provided with the essential resources and support needed to

promote quality teaching and learning. Additionally, the Department of Education should empower teachers by offering more workshops to raise awareness about the importance of parental involvement. Finally, the study suggests that the Department of Basic Education and relevant stakeholders should give greater attention to reviewing the provision of resources as a key factor in enhancing student performance in public schools. Enhancing parental involvement in rural schools is essential for fostering a supportive and effective educational environment, and this can be achieved through various strategies. Schools could organise regular community events, such as workshops, to encourage parents to engage with teachers and staff while providing them with the necessary resources to support their children's education at home. It is important for schools to consider parents' schedules, as many work during the week; therefore, meetings should be arranged to accommodate everyone. By actively involving parents in decision-making processes and seeking their feedback, schools can strengthen their partnerships with families, ultimately boosting student performance and increasing community participation. Additionally, it is recommended to encourage parents to engage in forums that could assist rural schools in securing funding for educational purposes. To address teenage pregnancy, school management teams need to establish partnerships with non-governmental organizations that implement youth work activities focused on promoting youth health education. These NGOs can deploy youth workers in rural schools to raise awareness on issues related to youth health and sexual behavior.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Mphosi D.N: Literature review, conceptualization. Chauke T.A: methodology, Mphosi D.N data analysis. Mphosi D.N.: review-editing and writing Chauke T.A, original manuscript preparation, Chauke T.A. All authors have read and approved the published on the final version of the article

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