

Research Article

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Author for correspondence:

Thulani Andrew Chauke

✉ Chaukt2@unisa.ac.za

✉ University of South Africa, South Africa



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Addressing Institutional Challenges: Teachers' Perspectives on Effective Teaching in Rural Schools in South Africa

Vhurande Dadirai, Thulani Andrew Chauke

Abstract

Background/purpose. Teacher effectiveness in delivering quality education in rural schools has been severely affected by a shortage of resources and many other challenges that affect rural schools. This qualitative study aims to explore rural teachers' perspectives on effective strategies to mitigate institutional challenges, thereby improving their pedagogical effectiveness in rural schools.

Materials/methods. The methodological choice of the current study is qualitative in nature. This qualitative study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which placed rural teachers' understanding and experiences of the subject under investigation at the center of data collection.

Results. The findings revealed that several strategies are necessary to enhance teachers' pedagogical effectiveness in rural primary schools. These include the provision of adequate educational resources, such as textbooks and technological tools, as well as increased financial investment by the government in rural education. Furthermore, to address institutional challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, the government should prioritise the construction of additional school infrastructure in rural areas.

Conclusion. To improve pedagogical effectiveness in these contexts, the study recommends that teacher training programmes at colleges and universities should equip primary school teachers with the skills and knowledge required to adapt to the unique conditions of rural school environments.

1. Introduction

In the South African context, teacher effectiveness in rural classrooms continues to be significantly undermined by structural and systemic challenges that are deeply rooted in the legacy of the apartheid-era education system (Mabula et al., 2023; Roper, 2024; Saka, 2024). Despite ongoing policy reforms, many rural schools remain poorly resourced, with overcrowded classrooms persisting as a norm rather than an exception. The physical infrastructure in these schools is often inadequate. Some learners still attend classes in makeshift structures such as shacks while access to basic utilities like electricity and telecommunications remains limited (Dube, 2020; Netshidzivhani & Molaudzi, 2024; Smit, 2017). These material deficiencies are compounded by the presence of underqualified and poorly trained teachers, who are expected to deliver quality teaching in environments lacking essential teaching and learning materials (Masinire, 2015). The cumulative impact of these conditions is a marked decline in both teacher effectiveness and learner academic performance. Shikalepo (2020) highlights the direct correlation between the availability of educational resources and teacher efficacy in rural contexts. Similarly, empirical studies have demonstrated that when learners are taught in resource-deprived settings, their academic outcomes are adversely affected (Biriescu & Babaita, 2014; Kayange & Msiska, 2016; Tarhan et al., 2019). Kapur (2018) and Shikalepo (2020) affirm that access to adequate teaching tools and resources is fundamental to the delivery of quality education and learner success.

The curriculum has repeatedly been changed in South Africa since 1994 (Govender, 2018; Lemmer & van Wyk, 2014). In many instances, most teachers have been made to implement a curriculum while they were not involved in its design (Govender, 2018; Tapala, Van Niekerk & Mentz, 2020). The total result has been that each time a new curriculum is introduced, it is poorly implemented by teachers, and this, in turn, affects learner performance (Govender, 2018; Ohadiugha, 2024; Tapala, Van Niekerk & Mentz, 2020). Failure to involve most teachers in curriculum design, as well as inadequate workshops on the new curriculum, has meant that teachers cannot effectively teach the curriculum content. This clearly has a detrimental effect on learner performance.

The issue of overcrowded classrooms not only hinders individualized attention but also compromises learners' health due to poor ventilation. The challenge is further intensified by multi-grade teaching arrangements, a lack of parental involvement, and high levels of poverty, all of which disproportionately affect teachers' effectiveness in the rural classroom (Zuze & Juan, 2018; Smit, 2017). The socio-economic realities of rural families mean that many learners arrive at school hungry and fatigued after traveling long distances, which negatively influences their capacity to engage meaningfully in learning (Smit, 2017). Collectively, these interrelated challenges highlight the urgent need for targeted strategies aimed at improving both teacher effectiveness and learner performance in rural South African schools.

Previous studies in the South African context have predominantly focused on identifying and describing the myriad challenges that teachers face in rural classrooms, challenges which have been shown to negatively affect teacher effectiveness, as well as the overall quality of teaching and learning (Dube, 2020; Smit, 2017; Mabila & Msana, 2023; Mphosi & Chauke, 2025; Dadirai & Chauke, 2025). While these studies have made valuable contributions by highlighting structural and pedagogical barriers, they offer limited insights into the strategies that can be adopted to improve pedagogical effectiveness in rural school settings. The emphasis has largely remained on problem identification rather than solution-focused interventions in the rural teaching context. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of rural teachers regarding effective strategies that can mitigate institutional challenges and enhance their pedagogical effectiveness.

The central research objective is to identify, through the lived experiences of rural teachers, effective strategies that can address institutional challenges that teachers face in rural schools and improve pedagogical effectiveness. To achieve this, the objective will be guided by the following main research question: What do rural teachers consider to be effective strategies for mitigating institutional challenges and improving pedagogical effectiveness in rural schools? The contribution of this study extends beyond the specific context of rural schools in South Africa, offering broader applicability to both Global South and Global North settings. By foregrounding rural teachers' perspectives on effective strategies to address institutional challenges in the rural schools, the study has the potential to inform global debates on teacher effectiveness in under-resourced and marginalised educational environments. In particular, the study shows the critical importance of context-responsive, practical interventions such as continuous professional development, targeted support mechanisms, and resource provisioning that can enhance pedagogical practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Adequate resources, teacher development and parental support

Rural primary school teachers have long been complaining about a shortage of physical resources at their workplaces. They have a serious shortage of classrooms, offices, staff rooms, photocopying machines, computers and sports grounds (Biriescu & Babaita, 2014; Du Plessis, 2014). Rural primary school teachers need enough funds in schools to pay for teacher development programmes. The issue of shortage of funds in rural primary schools extends to developed countries such as China (Hui et al., 2023). In South Africa, most rural schools have a serious shortage of technological resources (Taole et al., 2024). These technological resources include assessment tools, software, Microsoft PowerPoint, and video resources. Effective use of technological resources improves learners' performance (Taole et al., 2024; Yizengaw & Nigussie, 2023). Discovering that rural primary school teachers lack even the simplest resources, such as worksheets and display materials, is disheartening. It is crucial, therefore, that the problem of resource shortages in rural primary schools be resolved as a matter of urgency.

Teachers working in rural primary schools need effective continuing professional teacher development programmes (CPTD). Research has proven that teacher effectiveness can be improved by effective teacher development programmes (Akalu, 2016; Bass & Olson, 2023; Tep, 2024). The problem with the majority of teacher development programmes that are conducted is that most of them are not beneficial to teachers. Most of the CPTD programmes have been criticised for their lack of connection between theory and practice (Steiner & Lemke, 2023). Some CPTD programmes are conducted by people with inadequate knowledge about the subject under discussion. Kayange and Msiska (2016) emphasise the importance of well-trained experts in conducting CPTD programmes. Kennedy (2016) warned against CPTD programmes that are held without follow-up sessions to verify their success. In a study conducted in the United States of America, Wawro (2024) stressed the importance of regularly exposing new information covered in CPTD programmes to teachers.

Rural primary school teachers need effective support from parents of learners and the community at large. Several scholars have confirmed the importance of parental involvement in their children's education (Ahmed, 2023; Ngozwana et al., 2023; Pena, Anderson & White, 2023). Rural primary school teachers have complained about a serious lack of parental involvement in their children's education (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Tan, Lyu & Peng, 2020). Most parents do not respond positively to letters requesting them to attend different meetings at school. Some meetings are intended to address issues related to their children's academic performance, behaviour or health. When parents fail to attend such school meetings, teachers do not know what to do next. Parents will also be able to transport themselves when they attend school meetings. The relationship between the school and the parent is crucial (Ahmed, 2023; Nkosi, 2024).

2.2. Teachers' training institutions

Rural primary school teachers need effective teacher training institutions. They need these institutions to train and prepare them effectively to work in adverse rural area conditions. Teacher attrition and teacher turnover are common in rural primary schools (Bragg et al., 2021; Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2019). On top of working under adverse rural area conditions, rural primary school teachers have had to cope with being paid low salaries (Biriescu & Babaita, 2014; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). It is important to pay rural school educators high salaries to motivate them and minimise teacher attrition and teacher turnover.

Rural primary schools should be equipped with highly qualified teachers to enable effective teaching and learning. Effective teacher training institutions should, therefore, be in place. Using unqualified and underqualified teachers in rural primary schools should not be allowed to continue. Using unqualified and underqualified teachers in rural primary schools has a detrimental impact on learner achievement (Gichuru, 2016; Shikalepo, 2020). These teachers feed learners with invalid subject content due to inadequate knowledge. Sayed et al. (2016) assert that several unqualified and underqualified teachers still work in rural South African primary schools. Many qualified teachers have no interest in working in rural primary schools (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Efforts should therefore be made to deploy qualified teachers in rural primary schools.

3. Theoretical framework

This study adopts Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as the theoretical framework. This theory offers a comprehensive lens for understanding how individuals interact with their broader environment, shaping their development through dynamic and reciprocal relationships within their ecological contexts. Importantly, the theory extends beyond immediate surroundings to include the influence of more distal factors that may indirectly shape an individual's experiences and outcomes. Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Guy-Evans (2020) outline five interrelated systems that constitute this framework: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each of these systems interacts to influence human development and behavior in complex ways.

Bowers and Bowers (2017) emphasise that to fully comprehend individual or group functioning, one must understand the entire ecological system in which they operate. Applied to the context of rural education, this suggests that mitigating institutional challenges and enhancing teachers' pedagogical effectiveness requires an appreciation of the broader systemic factors influencing rural schools. These may include the immediate classroom environment, schooling funding system, and parental involvement (Biriescu & Babaita, 2014; Kayange & Msiska, 2016). Thus, Bronfenbrenner's theory is particularly well-suited to this study as it provides a multidimensional framework for examining how institutional challenges are situated within and across various levels of influence. It enables a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of rural teachers and offers a basis for identifying contextually appropriate strategies to address these institutional challenges. In doing so, the theory supports the development of holistic strategies aimed at improving teachers' pedagogical effectiveness in rural schooling contexts.

Guy-Evans's (2020) five interrelated systems that constitute this theory in the context of rural education are outlined as follows: At the most immediate level of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the microsystem refers to the direct environments in which individuals actively engage (Dhludhlu, 2021). In the context of this study, it encompasses the everyday interactions and conditions that rural teachers experience such as working in under-resourced schools and teaching learners who come from impoverished backgrounds (Du Toit, 2019). These socio-economic factors directly impact the ability of teachers to deliver effective pedagogy. Therefore, to enhance pedagogical effectiveness in rural schools, it is imperative for government to urgently address these

poverty-related issues that shape the immediate context of teaching and learning (Damian et al., 2023).

The mesosystem refers to the interactions between different components of the microsystem essentially, how various elements of a person's immediate environment interrelate (Mokgoko, 2021). Within the rural education context, this includes relationships between teachers, learners, parents, and school management. One significant mesosystem interaction is the teacher-parent relationship. A strong, collaborative partnership between teachers and parents has been shown to enhance learner performance, which in turn contributes to teachers' pedagogical effectiveness (Ahmed, 2023). Thus, encouraging effective communication and cooperation between schools and families is a vital strategy for improving teaching outcomes in rural areas.

The exosystem includes external environmental factors that indirectly influence individuals, even if they are not directly involved. In rural education settings, this may refer to infrastructural issues such as lack of electricity, water, and transport, which are largely shaped by decisions made at the national or provincial level (Ajani, 2023). Although teachers do not control these conditions, they significantly affect their work environment and efficacy. Addressing these exosystemic factors through infrastructure development and improved service delivery can substantially improve teachers' working conditions and, consequently, their pedagogical effectiveness in rural schools.

The macrosystem represents the broader cultural, societal, and policy-level values, norms, and ideologies that influence individuals' behavior and expectations. In rural schools, societal issues such as the normalisation of violence and lack of respect for authority figures in some communities affect learner behavior and discipline, which in turn hampers teaching and learning (Joas & Bulayi, 2022). Teachers' ability to manage classrooms effectively is compromised in environments where social norms undermine school discipline. Addressing these cultural and normative influences through community engagement and value-based education can play a critical role in fostering environments that are conducive to effective teaching. The chronosystem concerns the dimension of time and the transitions or shifts that occur over an individual's lifespan, including changes in policies, life circumstances, or social trends. In the context of rural schools, curriculum reforms represent a key chronosystemic influence. Frequent changes to the curriculum, often implemented without adequate consultation or training, can undermine teachers' confidence and capacity to teach effectively (Tapala, Van Niekerk & Mentz, 2020). To mitigate this, rural teachers should be actively involved in curriculum development processes and receive ongoing professional development to adapt to curricular transitions. Doing so would not only empower teachers but also enhance their pedagogical responsiveness and effectiveness over time.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The methodological choice of the current study is qualitative in nature. Unlike quantitative research design, data collected using qualitative research design techniques, such as interviews, cannot be analysed and understood successfully in terms of numbers or statistics (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). One of the main reasons why the qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study is that it enabled data collection through interviews. Individual opinions and experiences regarding strategies to improve teachers' effectiveness in rural primary schools were gathered through teachers' perspectives within their social contexts. This qualitative study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which placed rural teachers' understanding and experiences of the subject under investigation at the center of data collection. Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm enabled the researchers to explore the reality of the social phenomenon through the insights shared by rural teachers during the interviews.

Case study was used in this study. The case study approach provides an allowance for a deep understanding of participants' experiences, paving the way for a comprehensive and impactful assessment of a given situation. In a case study, a single entity is thoroughly analysed, and the case can be an activity, group, individual, process or event (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). A case study was appropriate in this study since data were drawn from multiple perspectives (teachers and school management) from different rural schools. This was important in validating the findings of this study. This qualitative research took place at two rural-based primary schools in Northern Pretoria in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Both schools are quintile one schools. Quintile one schools are among the poorest 20% in each South African province. Economic and social factors, such as poverty and unemployment usually affect people's lives in rural areas. This, in turn, affects schools based in these areas. In this research, data were collected from the list of schools based on the district's general performance rankings for the past three years. Using these result analysis lists, two underperforming rural area-based primary schools were purposefully selected. This selection technique is considered relevant as it is based on facts rather than assumptions. The selection of the two underperforming schools helped determine the extent to which the shortage of educational resources in rural schools also affects learner performance.

4.2. Participants of the Study

This study was conducted in the Tshwane North district, Gauteng Province, South Africa, and the population in this study was drawn from rural primary school teachers and the school management team in this region. This study comprised a sample size of 25 participants, selected through purposive sampling from two primary schools. This non-probability sampling method was used to deliberately recruit individuals who possessed specific characteristics of interest to the researchers namely, an informed awareness of the institutional challenges faced by rural teachers. The aim was to collect in-depth information on strategies that could be employed to address these challenges and enhance teacher effectiveness in rural primary schools. The inclusion criteria required participants to be either teachers or members of the School Management Team (SMT) with more than three years of teaching experience in rural primary schools. The exclusion criteria eliminated all teachers and SMT members from secondary schools, as well as those teaching in urban primary schools, to ensure that the data remained focused on the rural primary school context. Table 1 below shows the study group:

Table 1. Study group

Participants	Study Group
Teachers	20
School Management Team	5
Total Sample	25

4.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

The semi-structured interview schedule was developed to guide the interview sessions. Face-to-face and focus group interviews were conducted with teachers and members of the School Management Team (SMT). The same interview guide questions were used for both face-to-face and focus group interviews. To establish trustworthiness of the study, the four stringent criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability created by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed. In this regard, field notes were taken during data collection and were later used as references during data analysis and interpretation. Data analysis was thoroughly audited. Ethical considerations were adhered to, as emphasised by Bhandari (2023) and Israel (2015). As such, the researchers abided by various ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and professional integrity. Two focus group interviews were held with teachers: the first group

comprised 10 teachers, and the second also included 10 teachers. These sessions were conducted after school hours and each lasted approximately 45 to 50 minutes. Additionally, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with five SMT members during lunch breaks and free periods. Each of these interviews lasted approximately 25 to 30 minutes. The participants were asked the following questions show in table 2:

Table 2. Interview guide questions

Interview guide questions
• What do you think should be done to improve teacher pedagogical effectiveness in rural primary schools? • What do you think the government should do to improve teacher pedagogical effectiveness in rural primary schools?

4.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed through Tesch's method of open coding (Creswell, 2014). The researchers initiated the analytical process by organizing the data, wherein interview transcripts were converted into a textual format. In the subsequent phase, thematic elements were established as the principal units for analysis. The third phase entailed the formulation of conceptual categories and the design of a coding framework. In the fourth phase, specific codes were systematically applied to segments of the data, followed by a pilot assessment of the coding scheme. The fifth phase involved refining the coding structure by clustering interrelated concepts. The sixth phase emphasised the verification of coding reliability and uniformity. In the seventh phase, interpretive insights were generated from the systematically coded data. Lastly, in the eighth phase, the researchers provided a comprehensive account of the analytical procedures, empirical outcomes, and coding rationale to ensure the credibility and rigor of the study.

4.5. Research Ethics

Researchers conducting qualitative studies establish trustworthiness in their research by using the four stringent criteria, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, which were developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). To ensure credibility the participants' language was taken into account during interviews. Participant checks were done. In this case, the researcher verified all the interview transcriptions with the interviewees. To achieve dependability, the study methods used were described thoroughly, and data were transcribed effectively. To achieve confirmability in this study, field notes were used along with verbal formats, and the data analysis was audited thoroughly. Lastly to ensure transferability, data and context were thoroughly audited. Ethics was also taken into consideration in this study. The researchers received ethical clearance from the University of South Africa, certificate no: 2024/04/10/45126267/02/AM. After receiving ethical clearance, the first author approached the Department of Basic Education in Gauteng Province, South Africa for approval to conduct the study in rural primary schools. During the interview process, the researchers ensured that all participants signed informed consent forms after being fully briefed on the aims and objectives of the study. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that any information they provided would be used solely for research purposes. The participants' real identities were protected throughout the study, and no individual was coerced into participating. Furthermore, the researchers emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

5. Findings

This qualitative study aims to explore rural teachers' perspectives on effective strategies to mitigate institutional challenges, thereby improving their pedagogical effectiveness in rural schools. One superordinate theme was developed during data analysis: a holistic approach, which consisted of four sub-themes, namely sufficient educational resources, teacher professional development, classroom management, and improved infrastructure. During the interviews, participants indicated that addressing institutional challenges to enhance their pedagogical effectiveness in rural schools requires a holistic approach, where multiple factors need to be implemented simultaneously.

5.1. Sufficient educational resources

All the rural primary school teachers (n=25) who were interviewed said they need educational resources in their schools to improve their effectiveness and, ultimately, learners' academic achievement. According to Hui, Wang, Huang and Zhang (2023), the existence of enough teaching and learning resources enables teachers to effectively perform their duties. The participants (n=5) voiced significant concern regarding the limited funding that rural schools receive from the Provincial Government. The participants believed that increased financial support would greatly enhance effectiveness in teaching learners in the rural schools and enable them to deliver improved and more equitable education to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. These are some of the participants' responses in this regard:

ADH18 alluded: *"If learners don't have tables and chairs, they sit on the floor. Effective teaching and learning cannot take place. Funding is needed to improve rural schools. Sometimes, we have a serious shortage of teachers. There is usually a delay in replacing teachers who are on leave."*

T19 posited: *"Teaching without resources results in objectives not being fully achieved."*

T11 noted: *"Lack of technological resources is a problem, especially because this is an inclusive school. We don't have a library at our school. Learners share some of the textbooks."*

Reflecting on the above statements made by teachers, it is clear that addressing factors affecting their effectiveness in rural primary schools, such as the shortage of educational resources, requires additional funding. The significance of enough financial resources cannot be overemphasised. With adequate financial support, rural schools are able to buy supplementary teaching and learning materials and hire educators to alleviate the problem of high teacher-learner ratios. Furthermore, to tackle technological issues, rural primary schools should be equipped with libraries that contain adequate resources, including textbooks and technological tools.

T3 remarked: *"Shortage of teaching and learning materials is a problem. Shortage of classes is a big challenge. Nowadays, learners can't be expected to be taught under the tree."*

T16 shared: *"The furniture, classes, and equipment are not well-maintained at this school. Classroom doors don't lock. Grounds are needed for exercise, especially during Life Skills."*

DP22 commented: *"Subjects like Natural Sciences and Technology are practical subjects requiring experiments when teaching, and it becomes difficult if there are no resources."*

During the interviews, participants expressed the view that the government must ensure the provision of adequate classroom space to address the persistent challenge of overcrowded classrooms. They further emphasised that their ability to teach effectively in rural schools, particularly in subjects that require practical application, is significantly compromised by the lack of essential resources such as experimental materials. The availability of such materials, they argued, is critical for enhancing the quality of education in rural contexts.

T1 stated: *"Lack of resources is a problem. Learners learn differently and without enough resources, they cannot effectively learn."*

T25 mentioned: *"Shortage of textbooks is the most challenge that I face. Poor learner results are usually the consequence. Learners cannot perform at their best without enough textbooks."*

The responses of rural primary school teachers above clearly show that they are in dire need of educational resources such as textbooks. They say they need physical, technological and human resources. According to the teachers, teaching learners is only possible if educational resources are available.

5.2. Teacher professional development

Most teachers (n=23) who were interviewed said they need regular teacher training workshops to develop them. Five participants indicated during the interviews that their effectiveness in rural primary schools is hindered by the lack of sufficient workshops aimed at equipping them with the necessary skills to navigate the unique challenges associated with rural schooling contexts. They emphasised that to enhance their teaching effectiveness in these environments, the Department of Basic Education should organise a series of targeted professional development workshops. Such workshops should focus on providing the relevant knowledge and competencies required to teach effectively in rural settings. Here is what some of them said:

T3 shared: *"Teacher development workshops are needed to increase the knowledge of teachers."*

T12 responded: *"The Department of Education should organise enough professional development programmes for teachers. We need workshops on learner discipline."*

DH5 remarked, *"The Department of Education needs to be hands-on and organise high-quality workshops for teachers. Workshops give us the opportunity to share ideas with other teachers."*

The participants' remarks state that rural primary school teachers need high-quality and continuous teacher professional development programmes to improve their effectiveness. Training and workshops can achieve this, which in turn will improve learner achievement. Continuous teacher professional development is part of lifelong learning that keeps teachers up-to-date with recent teaching methods. Among other things, it has the potential to intensify teachers' practical experience, knowledge and skills. Mestry (2017) maintains that continuous teacher professional development helps to increase problem-solving skills or professional performance standards, which leads to quality education. Regarding the quality of continuous teacher development programmes offered to rural school teachers, it would appear that most of the workshops organised by the Department of Education were both inadequate and below par. The workshop professional development model applied by the Department of Education has more often than not been labelled as ineffective (Mestry, 2017; Siyaya et al., 2022).

5.3. Classroom management

All the participants (n=25) who were interviewed in this study cited overcrowding as one of the major factors that affect their effectiveness. According to the participants, overcrowding contributed to poor learner achievement because teaching overcrowded classes was a massive task for them. They said they need the teacher-learner ratio to be brought down. Teachers also raised the issue of ill-disciplined learners. Bringing the teacher-learner ratio down will assist teachers in teaching in classrooms with a reasonable number of learners and in maintaining discipline. This, in turn, will improve learners' academic performance in rural primary schools. Some of the participants' responses were:

T3 shared: *"Overcrowding is a contextual factor affecting both teachers and learners. The teacher-learner ratio is a challenge. A teacher-learner ratio of 1:45 is better."*

T12 stated: *“Overcrowding is a problem because there is no space to move around during teaching and learning activities. Sometimes, learners sleep because of the heat in the class. Learner discipline is a big problem. There are a number of learners who disrupt the class on a daily basis. Teachers spend too much time trying to maintain discipline, and this robs learners of their contact time.”*

These comments by teachers were proof enough to show that rural primary school teachers need a lower teacher-learner ratio and that something needs to be done to resolve the issue of negative learner discipline. According to rural primary school teachers, overcrowding and a lack of learner discipline negatively impact teacher effectiveness and learner achievement.

5.4. Improvement in infrastructure

Most rural primary school teachers (n=21) interviewed in this study cited a lack of clean running water and electricity as factors affecting their effectiveness and learner achievement. Participants believed that the government should, at the very least, ensure that rural schools have access to clean water. They argued that addressing such basic needs would allow teachers to concentrate on their core instructional responsibilities without being burdened by concerns related to inadequate school infrastructure. Teachers' comments included the following:

T2 responded: *“We have a serious shortage of clean water. Electricity is sabotaged. Sometimes they bring water trucks, but not always. If schools can have all these basic needs, we will be able to provide quality education because teaching with these basic needs is difficult.”*

T21 stated, *“We have a problem with water. We don't have electricity in our classes. Sometimes, we knock off early because of the water. This issue needs to be addressed to improve quality teaching.”*

The participants' views expressed above clearly show that rural primary school teachers need clean water and electricity. Teachers said they need clean water and electricity to improve their effectiveness and learner achievement.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that rural primary school teachers face significant institutional challenges, particularly the lack of adequate resources essential for effective teaching and learning. To enhance teacher effectiveness in rural schools, there is a pressing need to ensure the provision of sufficient physical, financial, and technological resources. This aligns with the findings of Hui, Wang, Huang, and Zhang (2023), who assert that the availability of adequate resources is a critical determinant of teacher performance in rural contexts. Specifically, the study found that rural primary schools are deficient in both categories of physical resources: infrastructure (school buildings and grounds) and educational materials (stock and equipment). For instance, sports grounds were reported to be unsuitable for diverse physical activities, thereby limiting holistic learner development. Moreover, many teachers highlighted the dilapidated state of school buildings, emphasizing the need for renovations and repainting to create a conducive teaching and learning environment. These findings resonate with those of Roper (2024) and Umeji (2024), who argue that the quality and quantity of classroom infrastructure are pivotal for fostering effective educational practices in rural settings. The lack of investment in physical infrastructure not only undermines the morale and efficacy of teachers but also reflects broader systemic neglect that perpetuates rural educational disparities. Addressing these structural shortcomings is thus not merely a logistical necessity but a matter of educational equity and justice.

In addition, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting a critical yet underexplored dimension of physical resource scarcity in rural primary schools, namely, its impact on learners' holistic development and teacher effectiveness in delivering extra-curricular activities.

Unlike many previous studies (Hui et al., 2023; Biriescu & Babaita, 2014), our findings emphasise the significance of functional sports grounds, as rural primary school teachers reported being unable to conduct certain Life Skills activities effectively due to the lack of adequate outdoor space. This not only hampers physical development but also undermines the broader educational goals associated with extra-curricular engagement.

Moreover, the study revealed an urgent need for school libraries and sufficient textbooks, which are essential for fostering a quality learning environment. A study by Motseke et al. (2024) found that libraries in South African rural schools were extraordinarily scarce, and this deprived learners of their right to quality education. Teachers noted that shared textbooks posed a serious barrier to effective teaching, particularly when learners were expected to complete homework independently at home. The absence of individual learning materials not only limits learner autonomy but also places undue strain on teachers striving to deliver equitable education. A further critical issue identified was the severe shortage of technological resources. Teachers expressed a strong desire to integrate digital tools into their pedagogical practices but were constrained by the unavailability of essential technologies such as computers, tablets, or internet access. The call for technological integration is consistent with recent studies (Taole et al., 2024; Yizengaw & Nigussie, 2023), which emphasise the need for digital infrastructure in rural education settings to support innovative and inclusive teaching strategies. These findings support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans, 2020), particularly at the exosystem level, which highlights the influence of external environments on the microsystem of teaching and learning. The lack of institutional and systemic support, manifested in inadequate resource provision, significantly constrains teachers' pedagogical efficacy. To improve teachers' pedagogical effectiveness in rural primary schools, it is imperative that stakeholders provide the necessary external support in the form of physical, technological, and instructional resources. This systemic intervention is essential for fostering an equitable and enabling educational environment.

The study revealed that while rural primary school teachers do receive professional development workshops, these are often insufficient in both frequency and content, failing to adequately address their specific needs. As such, to enhance pedagogical effectiveness in rural contexts, there is a clear need for more frequent, high-quality professional development initiatives designed for the realities of rural schooling. These findings are consistent with the work of Akalu (2016), Bass and Olson (2023), and Tep (2024), who emphasise that rural teachers require targeted professional development programmes that adopt a holistic approach to address the complex challenges associated with teaching in under-resourced environments.

Furthermore, the study found that rural teachers expressed a strong need for regular content-focused professional development aimed at deepening their subject knowledge. This is critical, as improved teacher content knowledge is directly linked to enhanced learner performance. In addition, teachers highlighted that effective professional development plays a pivotal role in improving their teaching strategies, which in turn positively influence learner achievement. These findings align with Siyaya et al. (2022), whose research on South African rural schools revealed that teacher development workshops are often inadequate and fail to equip teachers with essential digital competencies. Many rural teachers struggle to integrate digital tools into their teaching due to a lack of training and support. Empowering teachers through ongoing professional development would not only improve their confidence and competence but also contribute significantly to learners' academic success. This perspective is supported by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, particularly at the microsystem level, which shows the significance of direct interactions between individuals and their immediate environments (Dhludhlu, 2021). In the context of this study, the interaction between teachers and learners within the classroom is critical. When rural schools are adequately resourced and when teachers are professionally developed, the quality of these interactions improves, thereby

enhancing pedagogical practices and learning outcomes. Therefore, investing in sustained and contextually relevant teacher development is a crucial step toward bridging the educational equity gap in rural South African schools.

The findings of this study revealed that rural primary school teachers are often required to teach in severely overcrowded classrooms, with more than fifty learners per class. Teachers expressed the need for the learner-teacher ratio to be reduced to at least 1:45, stating that managing classes of nearly sixty learners significantly compromised instructional quality. They reported that overcrowding not only made effective teaching difficult but also negatively impacted learner achievement. A key concern raised was the challenge of maintaining learner discipline in such large classes. Controlling ill-disciplined learners in class has been cited by several scholars as one of the biggest challenges that teachers face on a daily basis at work (Hlatshwayo, 2024). Wolhuter (2023) maintains that poor learner discipline in South African schools is an issue that requires urgent attention. Rural primary teachers in this study noted that excessive time was spent trying to control disruptive behaviour, time that should have been allocated to teaching. This resulted in considerable instructional loss and hindered academic progress. These findings are consistent with those of Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), whose study also identified overcrowded classrooms and learner misbehavior as persistent challenges in rural primary schools. This study, therefore, reaffirms the urgent need for structural and policy interventions aimed at addressing classroom overcrowding and supporting rural educators with adequate human and material resources. Furthermore, the findings contribute to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, particularly at the exosystem level, by highlighting the influence of broader systemic and policy factors on the school environment. The need for policy-driven solutions to reduce class sizes and provide necessary teaching aids reflects how external support structures can enhance pedagogical effectiveness in rural schools. In addition, this study brings to light a critical yet underexplored issue: the acute shortage of clean running water in rural primary schools. Teachers reported that on several occasions, schools were forced to close early due to the unavailability of water, resulting in significant curriculum time loss. Unlike previous studies, this finding draws attention to the infrastructural vulnerabilities in rural education that directly affect teaching and learning time. Addressing the water crisis in these schools is not only a matter of public health but also essential for ensuring uninterrupted access to education and curriculum delivery.

7. Limitations of the study

This study is not without limitations. One notable limitation is its narrow scope, as the research was conducted at only two rural primary schools within a single district in South Africa. As a result, it would be methodologically inappropriate to generalise the findings to all rural primary school contexts across the country. The lived experiences reported by the teachers in these two schools may not comprehensively reflect the broader realities experienced by rural primary school teachers in different provinces or educational settings. Additionally, the study intended to include insights from two principals and their deputies at the sampled schools to gain a more comprehensive understanding of school leadership perspectives. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, specifically the illness of one principal and one deputy principal, these key stakeholders could not participate in the interviews. Their absence represents a missed opportunity, as their managerial and policy perspectives could have further enriched the data and added depth to the findings. Despite these limitations, the study offers a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge. While previous studies (Siyaya et al., 2022; Taole et al., 2024; Yizengaw & Nigussie, 2023) has generally examined challenges in rural schools, these studies have specifically focused on the unique dynamics and structural barriers within rural schools in general. Therefore, this study, focusing on primary schools, a foundational phase that is critical for early childhood development, addresses this important gap in the literature. This focus is particularly relevant in the context of the Global South,

where rural learners often face systemic educational disadvantages from the outset of their schooling journey. Therefore, this research not only strengthens context-specific knowledge but also highlights the need for targeted interventions at the level of rural primary schools to improve long-term educational outcomes.

8. Conclusion

This study was conducted at two rural primary schools in the Tshwane North Gauteng Province district. This study indicates that addressing institutional challenges, thereby improving teachers' pedagogical effectiveness in rural schools, is a multifaceted approach that will require the Department of Basic Education to invest in rural primary schools in terms of physical, school materials, professional development, and technological resources. It is clear from this study that the issue of insufficient physical, financial, and technological resources in rural schools needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. It cannot be correct that teaching and learning are allowed to take place in dilapidated buildings with insufficient furniture. Apart from the need for more high-quality professional development programmes, the issue of overcrowded classrooms and multi-grade teaching requires immediate attention. The issue of high teacher-learner ratios is a total contradiction to the requirements of a conducive teaching and learning atmosphere. Similarly, the issue of a single teacher having to teach learners from two or more different grade levels simultaneously in the same classroom is a significant concern. For effective teaching and learning to take place, adequate clean-running water and sanitation should be made available in rural schools. It cannot be disputed that the availability of clean-running water is a requirement for any human life to exist. The Department of Basic Education, school curriculum specialists, and education policy developers may benefit from this study by considering the perspectives of rural primary school teachers when allocating funds, creating new curricula, and allocating resources to schools. If rural primary school teachers' perspectives are considered, it will help improve teacher effectiveness and learners' academic achievement in rural primary schools.

9. Suggestion

This study recommends that the government should address the lack of access to clean running water and electricity in rural schools by providing rural primary schools with these essential services. Teachers in rural primary schools should be trained effectively to adapt to the conditions of rural areas during their initial training at college or university level. Youth-serving organizations, which provide non-formal education in the rural communities where their institutions are located, should collaborate with primary schools to offer supplementary lessons and support the maintenance of classroom discipline. This will play a vital role in improving rural primary teachers' pedagogical effectiveness.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Vhurande, D: Literature review, conceptualization. Chauke T.A: methodology, Vhurande, D data analysis. Vhurande, D: 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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About the Contributor(s)

Vurande Dadirai is a teacher with master's degree in educational leadership and management.

Email: 45126267@myunisa.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4746-908X>

Thulani Andrew Chauke is an NRF-Y2 Rated Researcher and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Adult Community and Continuing Education in the College of Education at the University of South Africa, South Africa. His research interest is Youth Development and Social Issues in Diverse Contexts. Chauke obtained his PhD in Education from Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa.

Email: Chaukt2@unisa.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4891-0017>

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