Teachers' Perceptions on Addressing Rural School Challenges for Quality Teaching and Learning.

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Abstract.

Extensive research has been conducted on rural education, particularly focusing on the challenges faced by teachers in rural schools. However, there remains a limited body of research that specifically explores the strategies that can be employed to address these challenges, with the aim of enhancing the quality of education in rural contexts especially from the perspectives of rural teachers themselves. Therefore, this study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of strategies for mitigating challenges in rural schools to enhance the implementation of quality teaching and learning. A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study, with a purposive sampling technique used to select a sample of 20 rural teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The key findings revealed that, in order to mitigate the challenges faced by teachers in rural schools and enhance the quality of teaching and learning, the Department of Basic Education must invest financial resources in rural schools particularly by ensuring that rural teachers have

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access to digital tools. Furthermore, the findings indicated a critical need for strong partnerships between rural teachers and parents, enabling greater parental involvement in their children's education. The study recommends that rural teachers promote parental engagement by utilising technology, such as social media platforms and mobile applications, to keep parents informed about school activities and important updates, thereby making it easier for them to participate meaningfully in the educational process.

Keywords: Rural teachers; rural education; parental involvement; financial assistance; school management team.

Introduction

Despite the South African government's post-1994 initiatives aimed at transforming the education system, rural schools continue to grapple with multifaceted challenges that undermine the quality of education offered. Jama et al., (2024) in the Eastern Cape show these persistent struggles, identifying a lack of in-service training on inclusive education policies and a widespread inability among educators to identify and address learning barriers. This deficit hampers the creation of supportive learning environments for learners with diverse needs. Complementing these findings, Makiwane-Mazinyo and Pillay (2017) observed in KwaZulu-Natal that many teachers lack the confidence and competencies to support learners experiencing learning difficulties, leading to the marginalisation of such learners and their exclusion from meaningful learning. Resource scarcity remains a defining feature of the rural education landscape in South Africa.

Ogbonnaya and Awuah (2019) reported that schools in rural Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal, operate under severely under-resourced conditions, often lacking basic amenities such as clean sanitation facilities, safe drinking water, and adequate classroom furniture. In the Uthungulu District, similar

constraints are exacerbated by additional pedagogical and curriculum-related challenges, including language barriers, curriculum overload, and ineffective instructional methods (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018). These structural inadequacies are not merely logistical concerns but deeply pedagogical and psychosocial, impeding both teaching efficacy and learner engagement. They reflect broader systemic neglect and highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions that take rural contexts into account.

Rural schools in South Africa, which have historically been disadvantaged, experience educational reforms as particularly challenging compared to their more affluent counterparts. Implementing and sustaining these reforms has proven to be a major struggle for them (Msila, 2009). Additionally, educators in rural areas often face numerous obstacles that hinder their ability to perform their teaching duties effectively. Many of these difficulties could be alleviated if the Department of Basic Education provided adequate resources to these schools, which could greatly enhance their functionality (Omodan, 2020). Nevertheless, the South African Schools Act (Republic of South Africa, 1996) has further complicated matters by shifting control from central government to local communities. This legislation places the responsibility on school governing bodies (SGBs) to ensure learners receive quality education through sound management practices. Various factors contribute to the difficulties teachers encounter in delivering effective classroom instruction.

Developing countries such as Lesotho, Tanzania, Malawi, and Uganda face persistent challenges in delivering education in rural areas. These challenges significantly impact the assignment and retention of teachers in those regions (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). For example, in Arusha, Tanzania, factors such as poor access to basic services including inadequate housing, lack of clean water, and low salaries contribute greatly to teacher staffing issues. Additionally, in some rural communities,

existing classrooms are being repurposed as homes, and many students live in severely substandard housing conditions (Mohamed, 2017).

A common trend among educators is a preference for transferring to semi-urban rather than rural schools. A study in Ghana revealed that many teachers were unwilling to accept placements in rural areas. Their reluctance stemmed from low pay, poor infrastructure, limited access to recreational and healthcare services, inadequate teaching resources, and a lack of advanced professional development opportunities (Yeboah & Adom, 2016).

Even in highly developed nations, teachers in rural schools encounter numerous challenges. In the realm of public education, the role of the English language has sparked widespread debate, especially concerning its linguistic, economic, social, and cultural benefits and drawbacks (Crystal, 2012; Roldán & Peláez, 2017). Many universities have adopted English as a second language in their curricula (Arias & Izquierdo, 2015; Woodend et al., 2019), and English has also been introduced as a subject in many primary and secondary schools (Kihlstedt, 2019). While these developments are positive, they also create specific challenges for rural schools. For instance, in Latin America, there is a persistent shortage of qualified English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers (Bonilla & Peláez, 2014). As a result, generalist teachers who may lack specialized training are often required to teach English in rural classrooms (Coelho & Henze, 2014; Hernández & Izquierdo, 2014).

In South America, school enrolment rates are typically low, with many high schools having few students. Despite high tax burdens, teachers receive very low salaries. As a result, many teachers leave after gaining a few years of experience, seeking better opportunities in more affluent areas. This leaves rural South American schools without qualified educators to properly support learners (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021).

Teacher shortages have thus emerged as one of the most pressing public challenges facing rural schools in the region (Mulkeen, 2008).

Similarly, rural schools often reflect the social realities of their surrounding communities, including issues of racism and class-based segregation. In the United States, funding is a key issue for rural schools. Many of these schools operate with inadequate financial resources, which severely affects teaching quality and overall educational provision (Kinkey & Yun, 2019). As a result, numerous rural schools struggle to maintain basic infrastructure and deliver effective instruction due to chronic underfunding.

The persistent funding disparity between urban and rural schools amplifies challenges that rural teachers face. Bryson and Daniels (2015) argue that rural schools receive disproportionately less funding, exacerbating inequalities in access to quality teaching materials, infrastructure, and professional development. Habib and Smerdon (2013) further note that this underfunding constrains schools from investing in technological advancement and upskilling their teaching workforce. In addition to material deprivation, rural teachers frequently receive lower remuneration (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017), which deters qualified educators from taking up posts in rural areas. To redress this imbalance, Ajani (2020) proposes systemic investments in teacher support, including mentorship, collaborative planning time, and access to online professional development resources. Such measures can significantly improve teacher morale and competence, enabling them to deliver quality instruction even in resource-constrained settings.

To attract and retain high-calibre teachers in rural schools, Ingersoll and Merrill (2017) advocate for competitive salary packages and comprehensive benefits. Housing stipends or affordable accommodation is also needed for teachers in rural schools (Arnold et al., 2005). Bryson and Daniels (2015) propose loan forgiveness programmes as an effective

mechanism to reduce teacher attrition in rural schools. Professional development programmes, such as mentoring, regular in-service training, and subject-specific coaching, are essential for teachers in rural based schools (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Furthermore, Habib and Smerdon (2013) recommend providing dedicated time for collaborative lesson planning and offering online learning platforms and workshops (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

The strategic integration of technology also holds promise in addressing challenges that teachers face in rural schools. Studies by Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) and Koehler and Mishra (2009) show the importance of using technology for virtual learning experiences, such as virtual field trips and guest lectures, and implementing mobile learning initiatives. Ensuring universal access to internet connectivity and digital devices is critical (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017). School partnerships with local businesses can play vital role in addressing challenges that teachers face in rural schools (Bryson & Daniels, 2015). Volunteer programmes, and training in cultural sensitivity can further strengthen community-school relations. (Arnold et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Community engagement is a powerful yet often underutilised tool in rural education reform. According to the Department of Basic Education (2019), schools should actively cultivate relationships with local stakeholders to promote parental involvement and shared responsibility in education. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) argue that community engagement initiatives ranging from parent-teacher associations to local business partnerships can bolster the resources available to rural schools. Habib and Smerdon (2013) demonstrated that teachers involved in community engagement reported greater job satisfaction and reduced feelings of professional isolation. Arnold et al. (2005) emphasise the importance of volunteer support, which can augment school capacity while enhancing community ownership of educational outcomes.

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Department of Basic Education (2015) show the significance of Teacher Training and Development (TTD) as a cornerstone of educational reform. Key components include the provision of necessary teaching resources (National Education Policy Act, 1996), mentorship programmes (South African Council for Educators, 2017), and classroom management training (Department of Basic Education, 2018a). According to Darling-Hammond (2017), effective teacher development should encompass workshops, coaching, and mentoring that are tailored to address rural-specific challenges. Ingersoll and Merrill (2017) also highlight the value of differentiated instruction and learner-centred strategies, while Habib and Smerdon (2013) found that teacher confidence significantly improves with meaningful professional development. The success of such initiatives, however, depends on contextual relevance, sustainability, and teacher autonomy (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

Equally important is the emotional and social support of learners, which necessitates training in trauma-informed teaching and social-emotional learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Online platforms extend access to training opportunities, reducing the professional isolation commonly experienced by rural teachers (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). As the Department of Basic Education (2015) argues, training programmes must aim to bolster both pedagogical and content expertise. Retention strategies must complement professional support mechanisms. Department of Basic Education (2016) notes, incentives such as improved salaries and housing benefits are instrumental in addressing the high turnover of rural teachers. Despite the critical importance of these interventions, a significant gap remains in the academic literature. Balfour (2022) points out the limited research focused on the lived experiences of rural teachers. Rogers (2019) critiques the policy oversight in understanding how school consolidations affect rural communities, while Lockhart (2021) emphasised the need for frameworks that support rural-

specific teacher development. Azano (2020) highlights how rural settings uniquely shape teacher identity and growth, yet these factors are under-explored in mainstream research. Drake (2018) calls for more intersectional analyses to understand how these variables collectively impact learner outcomes. Lemaire (2019) advocates for participatory action research to amplify rural teachers' voices and agency in policy discussions. Shepard (2022) and Glass (2017) further emphasise the need for policy analysis and innovative technological interventions suited to rural contexts.

Aim of the study

- This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of strategies for mitigating challenges in rural schools to enhance the implementation of quality teaching and learning.

Research main question

- What are teachers' perceptions of the strategies for mitigating challenges in rural schools to enhance the implementation of quality teaching and learning?

Theoretical frameworks

The presented study adopted rurality theory developed by Balfour in 2008. The reality theory understands the challenges faced in rural regions and education in rural areas and provides insight into the risk factors that can be identified and how these challenges could be addressed (Balfour et al., 2008). Rurality is also associated with land and water resources (Chen et al., 2018). Rurality theory was selected in the study to provide framework on strategies that can be taken to address challenges teachers face in the rural school. If these strategies are implemented, they can enhance quality of teaching and learning in rural schools. Teacher training and support form part of the rurality theory and inform the development of teacher training and support programmes in line with rural schools' needs (Williams, 2018). Curriculum development includes incorporating rurality into curriculum development, ensuring that the content addresses rural-

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based schools' specific contexts and needs (Hill, 2018). Access and equity are rural areas that help identify and address disparities in education access and equity within rural communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Place-based education occurs when rurality informs place-based education approaches, emphasising local contexts and community engagement (Gruenewald, 2003). Additionally, the rurality theory emphasises the importance of place-based knowledge and culturally relevant teaching in rural classrooms (Berkes, 2018). Teachers attuned to their local context can create more meaningful and engaging learning experiences for their students. The rurality theory highlights the impact of limited resources in rural education, a challenge often intensified by geographic isolation. Rural schools frequently deal with inadequate funding, restricted access to professional development, and difficulties in attracting qualified teachers (Lubienski, Lubienski & Crance, 2021). Therefore, addressing these challenges is vital in improving quality education in rural based schools.

Material and methods

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. This method emphasizes in-depth data collection, analysis, and interpretation following structured procedures (Creswell, 2015). Using this approach encouraged participants to express their views and emotions more freely, particularly since their responses remained anonymous. An exploratory research design was used within this qualitative study. This design was well-suited to the research because it allowed the researchers to explore the issue through the experiences and perspectives of rural teachers. The study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that reality (ontology) is socially constructed and best understood through direct interaction with individuals in their natural environments. In this study, multiple perspectives were gathered during interviews, reflecting the participants' unique experiences. The knowledge (epistemology) gained was based on teachers' and school leaders' insights into strategies for

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overcoming rural education challenges and promoting effective teaching and learning. The study population included teachers and members of school management teams from rural schools in the Swayimana Circuit of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. These participants were selected because of their direct experience with the challenges of rural education. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 participants: Primary School One: one principal, two deputy principals, two departmental heads, and six teachers. Secondary School: one principal, two departmental heads, and two teachers. Primary School Two: one principal, one deputy principal, one departmental head, and two teachers. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one year of experience as either a teacher or a member of a school management team in a rural school within the Swayimana Circuit. Individuals who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study.

Table 1: Sampling procedure

Participants	Sampling
Principal (Foundation Phase Qualified)	3
Deputy principal	2
Departmental heads (Foundation Phase Qualified)	3
Departmental heads (Intermediate and Senior Phase Qualified)	2
Teachers (Early Childhood Development)	2
Teachers (Foundation Phase Qualified)	2
Teachers (Intermediate Phase Qualified)	3
Teachers (Senior Phase Qualified)	3
Total sample	**20**

The gatekeepers for this research were the Department of Basic Education in Pietermaritzburg, the circuit manager, and the school principals. The Department of Basic Education facilitates the researchers access to the schools through the circuit manager and principals, allowing for deeper insights. In this study, data were collected through semi-

structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were well-suited for this research, as they combined elements of both structured and unstructured interview guides that would assist the participants in being open about matter under investigation. Since semi-structured interviews are not set questions, the interview between the researchers and participants was much better. Semi-structure interview which lasted 30-40 minutes each were recorded. Table 2 show the interview guide that the participants were asked during the interview:

Table 2: Interview questions

Interview questions
• How do you perceive the role of financial resource allocation in addressing the challenges encountered in rural schools and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning? • In what ways can parental or broader community involvement can contribute to overcoming the challenges faced by teachers and support the promotion of quality teaching and learning in rural school settings? • Apart from the aforementioned factors, what additional strategies do you suggest for addressing challenges in rural schools to support the effective implementation of quality teaching and learning?

Data collected was analysed through thematic analysis, wherein he six phases of a thematic analysis were implemented (Braun & Clark, 2013) as follows: Become familiar with the data; This step involves reading through the data multiple times to gain a deep understanding. In this study, the researchers read all the data carefully and took notes to begin developing codes. Generate codes; This step involves identifying and assigning brief labels or codes to different topics found in the data. In this study, the researchers created specific codes for each identified topic. Generate themes; After coding, the researcher organizes the codes into broader categories known as themes. This step requires interpreting the

meaning behind the codes and grouping them into higher-level patterns. Some frequently appearing codes are developed into themes. In this study, the researchers grouped commonly occurring codes to form themes. Review themes; The researcher goes back over the coded data to examine and refine the themes. It is important to ensure that the themes accurately represent the data. The aim is to connect the themes clearly with the data and gain deeper insights. In this phase, the researchers reviewed all themes to determine the key ones. Define and name themes; At this stage, the researcher clearly explains what each theme means and may also identify related sub-themes. Theme names should be clear and descriptive. In this study, the researchers explained the meaning of each theme and then gave each one a suitable name. Write the report; In the final step of thematic analysis, the researcher presents the findings in a written report. In this study, the results were presented in findings section in this manuscript.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed in the present study. Prior to the commencement of data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa (Reference Number: 2024/07/12/00000094/02/RB). Participants were fully informed about the aims and objectives of the study and were required to sign an informed consent form prior to their involvement. AI tool such as Grammarly and Google Gemini were used to edit and proofread the manuscript before it was taken to the language specialist for editing. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were rigorously applied.

Results

This section presents the findings on teachers' perceptions of strategies for mitigating challenges in rural schools to enhance the implementation of quality teaching and learning. Four themes were generated during thematic analysis, the first theme is additional funding by the Department

of Basic Education, in this theme number of issues were raised by the participants which include better ways and methods of supporting the rural schools, financial support. The second theme is department of Education assistance, in this theme the following issue were raised, funds, workshops, leadership. The third them is parental involvement, these issues were raised in this theme assistance, present in child life, interact with teachers, parent's forum. The last and four theme is multifaceted strategies, the following issue were raised in this theme inclusive education, mentorship programmes, technological gadgets, positive behavioural interventions

Additional funding by the Department of Basic Education

The participants indicated that the funding provided by the Department of Basic Education is insufficient. They emphasised how the Department of Basic Education failed them by not providing sufficient funding for the effective functioning of the school. However, they suggested that extra funding was needed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in rural schools

> **P2** observed: *"The Department of Education should come on board concerning the sufficient funding of rural schools. We are in need of funds at the moment compared to urban schools. If more funding is given to us, we can automatically purchase the right number of resources needed in the schools, and learners will not be at a disadvantage."*
>
> **T19** noted*: "If the Department of Education can provide us with additional funding, it will make working at a rural school a pleasure. We can employ more teachers, so we won't suffer from multi-grade teaching and purchase the required resources to assist and help these learners."*
>
> **T20** stated: *"With additional funding that the Department of Education can provide for rural schools, we can also*

get furniture for the learners. It is difficult to teach in a class where three learners share one desk, and two are having to share one chair."

The participants expressed considerable concern about the Department of Basic Education's lack of additional funding for rural schools. If the Department of Basic Education can provide additional funding to rural schools, it will make it much easier for them to function and offer higher and better education for learners who come from vulnerable backgrounds.

Department of Basic Education assistance

The participants emphasised the assistance that the Department of Basic Education give to rural schools is not enough. They tend to find it difficult at times to function without assistance from the Department of Basic Education. Therefore, they believed that the department could assist them with financial assistance, to improve the quality of education in rural schools.

> **DP5** shared: *"The Department of Education has assisted secondary schools from the time of Covid-19 until 2023 with teacher assistance. They helped teachers by copying their worksheets and helping the teachers whilst teachers taught learners without losing lesson time. Due to the financial strain in the Department of Education, they could not employ teacher assistants again."*
>
> **DH6** indicated*, "The Department of Education has not provided us fully with financial assistance. When we find a difficulty or a need and contact them, we are always told that they do not have funding for us. It would be nice if the Department could provide some assistance to make life easier for the school management."*

The participants' statements indicate that teachers in rural schools receive limited support from the Department of Basic Education, compared to the

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assistance provided during the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this issue, the participants believed that additional support is needed to help them manage rural schools more effectively.

Parental involvement

Parental involvement is crucial in the educational development of learners. Participants in the interview suggested that some of the challenges teachers faced in rural schools can be addressed if parents can play an essential role in their children's education and help them with learners. They emphasised that if parents play a role, it will help them function better at school.

> **P1** suggested: *"With parents playing their roles in the learner's life, they can expose learners to books, improving reading comprehension and spelling. They should also be able to interact with teachers regularly to see the needs of their child and how they can assist."*

Reflecting on the above quotation, teachers indicate that parents need to develop a strong working relationship with teachers and cultivate a love of reading in their children. This will help improve their spelling and reading skills, which are crucial for their learning ability.

> **DH7** advised, *"Parents must be actively involved in their learners' education by communicating and cooperating with teachers. They need to attend meetings more frequently."*
>
> **DH10** stated, *"Parents can be a great help to us as teachers by getting involved and doing follow-ups at school. They can even help us by helping the learners complete their homework and asking us for assistance where they do not understand."*

After reviewing the participants' responses carefully, parental involvement is recognised as crucial in a child's development. The participants

observed and stressed that when parents engage actively in their children's lives, it can make a significant difference. Education and teaching in rural schools become easier for them, and they will also have enough time in class to help the weak learners.

Multifaceted strategies

The participants stated that many strategies can be implemented to address the challenges they face in rural schools. They believed that the Department of Education should also provide assistance by helping them address the challenges fully.

> **DP4** noted: *"There should be more remedial teaching, more specialised teachers for learners with barriers as teachers are not fully equipped to deal with this."*

The participants' statement above suggests that the Department of Basic Education should support rural schools in remedial teaching and make specialised teachers available to assist learners facing barriers to learning. Current teachers lack sufficient training or are not equipped to address the diverse needs of these learners effectively, highlighting a gap in the education system's capacity to provide inclusive education. In addition, the presence of specialised teachers in rural schools will play a vital role in addressing some of the challenges that teachers face in rural schools.

> **DH9** argued: *"There should be more mentorship programmes for new teachers. This will not only help the teachers but also help the school and learners to make better progress."*

Reflecting on the response above from the participant, it is clear that rural schools need to have mentorship programmes designed to assist teachers in improving their teaching practices in rural schools.

> **T11** commented, *"Resources such as technological gadgets can be integrated, positive behavioural interventions can be implemented. Improvement of classroom management is needed."*

The participant's statement emphasises the need for teachers in rural schools to be equipped with digital tools to facilitate the integration of technology into their teaching practices. Additionally, it highlights the urgent need for interventions that promote positive behaviour among learners, which could help address challenges such as bullying - one of the challenges frequently reported by teachers in rural schools.

Discussion

This paper set out to explore teachers' perceptions of strategies for mitigating challenges in rural schools to enhance the implementation of quality teaching and learning. The findings revealed that the delivery of quality education in rural schools is significantly constrained by the limited funding provided by the Department of Basic Education. This persistent financial shortfall undermines rural schools' capacity to provide effective teaching and learning environments. Addressing this issue requires a substantial and sustained financial commitment from the Department, specifically directed toward rural education. Increased funding would enable educators to access essential teaching resources, improve instructional practices, and create conducive learning environments for both teachers and learners. These findings align with previous studies by Ingersoll and Merrill (2017) and Ajani (2020), who assert that adequate financial investment is critical for enhancing teacher effectiveness and improving the overall quality of education in rural schools. Similarly, this study indicates that targeted support from the Department of Basic Education through funding, resources, and programs has the potential to

significantly improve the educational landscape of rural areas. Such support should address specific rural challenges, including limited access to advanced coursework, inadequate infrastructure, scarce technological tools, and a shortage of qualified teachers. This view is supported by Mncube, Ajani, Ngema, and Mkhasibe (2023), who highlight that opportunities for professional development and training in rural schools are frequently curtailed due to budget constraints. These financial limitations restrict the ability of rural schools to support continuous teacher development initiatives. Therefore, providing targeted financial assistance would allow rural schools to invest in essential facilities, enhance teacher training, and expand co-curricular activities, thereby enriching the overall learner experience. Furthermore, programmes that promote community engagement can strengthen the relationship between schools and local families, fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for learners.

The study also reveals the importance of parental involvement in rural schools, as it plays a pivotal role in learner success and community cohesion. Active parental engagement through attending school events, volunteering, and maintaining communication with teachers has been shown to correlate with improved learner performance, higher attendance rates, and enhanced social development. However, as Henderson and Mapp (2002) observe, rural parents often face significant barriers to involvement, including inflexible work schedules, transportation challenges, and socio-economic hardships. These factors limit parents' ability to support their children's education and may contribute to learners' academic underperformance. Promoting strong parental involvement can compensate for limited resources in rural settings, helping to build a collaborative and supportive school environment. In this regard, Darling-Hammond (2017) recommends that schools develop structured programmes aimed at fostering sustained parental engagement in rural education contexts.

The study further identifies the need for a multifaceted strategy to address the unique challenges facing rural schools. Such a strategy would include the integration of educational technologies, development of community partnerships, and provision of support services tailored to the needs of diverse learners. Shepard (2022) and Glass (2017) advocate for greater investment in educational technology for rural schools, especially to support instruction in science and technology-related subjects. Integrating such tools not only enhances academic outcomes but also ensures learners are better prepared for the demands of the digital economy.

A holistic approach combining academic support, social-emotional learning, and extracurricular opportunities can create a more engaging and inclusive educational experience. This is especially important in rural areas where educational resources are limited. Moreover, to improve the quality of instruction, rural educators must be provided with ongoing professional development opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Habib & Smerdon, 2013). When implemented effectively, these multifaceted strategies can enhance collaboration among teachers, parents, and community organisations, leading to innovative and context-specific solutions that improve learner achievement and overall school effectiveness.

Our study's findings substantiate the rurality theory, which argues that teachers in rural educational settings confront significant challenges that impede effective teaching and learning. Such challenges encompass, for instance, inadequate financial resources and restricted access to professional development opportunities (Chen et al., 2018; Williams, 2018). Consistent with the rurality theory, our research suggests that mitigating these challenges for rural educators necessitates robust professional development programs and enhanced parental engagement in students' academic lives (Hell, 2018).

One limitation of this study is that participants were drawn from only three schools, resulting in a relatively small sample size of 20 individuals. As a result, the findings may not be generalisable to other rural schools across South Africa. Furthermore, the letter of approval from the Department of Basic Education stipulated that the study could not be conducted during examination periods and should not disrupt the normal functioning of the schools. These conditions constrained the amount of time available for the researcher to interact with teachers and members of the school management teams.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our findings, based on the perceptions of rural teachers, highlight a range of strategies that must be considered when addressing the challenges faced by teachers in rural schools. When implemented effectively, these strategies can play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in rural-based educational settings. While the strategies identified in this study are grounded in the South African context, they possess broader relevance and potential applicability across both the Global South and Global North. Among these strategies, professional development programmes are particularly emphasised not only for their role in improving job retention and certification, but more significantly for their capacity to strengthen teachers' pedagogical skills, adaptability, and overall well-being. To improve quality of teaching and learning in rural schools this study recommends that the Department of Basic Education can enhance resource availability in rural schools by implementing targeted funding initiatives that address the specific needs of these communities. This can include grants for upgrading technology infrastructure, providing access to high-quality educational materials, and ensuring adequate facilities. The department can create resource-sharing programmes that enhance educational opportunities by fostering partnerships with local organisations and businesses.

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