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# Exploring the Problems of Limited School Resources in Rural Schools and Curriculum Management

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## Abstract

Various scholars have demonstrated the intricate and diverse nature of social disparities in South Africa. These inequalities are evident in dividing schools into urban and rural settings and distinguishing between well-equipped and inadequately equipped institutions. This division significantly impacts learners' performance across the nation's schools. Of particular disadvantage are rural schools, which grapple with constrained resources. This scarcity poses challenges for stakeholders involved in curriculum management and effective delivery within these schools. The legacy of apartheid has further compounded the hurdles faced in curriculum management within rural schools. The lingering imbalances from that era remain primarily unresolved, evident in the deficient resourcing and infrastructure prevalent in many rural schools. This study embraced an interpretivist perspective to gain insight into the experiences of 40 school principals from rural educational institutions in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. Employing semi-structured interviews, researchers analysed audio recordings through thematic analysis. The findings disclosed a pronounced need for more clarity in curriculum management as a principal impediment to efficiently handling resources and sustaining infrastructure. Moreover, the study uncovered a novel social phenomenon of collusion between principals and suppliers, which detrimentally impacts the education system by restricting access to quality and sufficient resources. Thus, the study proposes that school principals adopt pragmatic and transparent strategies in resource management. It further advocates for implementing suitable oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability and effective infrastructure utilisation in curriculum execution.

**Keywords:** rural schools, limited resources, curriculum, stakeholders, school funding

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## Introduction

Rural schools encounter many obstacles that significantly impact the quality of education they deliver (du Plessis & Mestry, [2019](#)). Among these challenges, limited school resources are one of the most substantial. This limitation encompasses inadequate funding, remote geographical locations, oversized classrooms, and high learner turnover rates. Rural institutions often need more financial support than urban schools, leading to deficits in essential materials like textbooks, computers, and instructional tools. This scarcity hinders teachers from providing high-quality education. The remoteness of rural schools complicates the attraction and retention of qualified teachers while impeding access to necessary resources and support services. This results in difficulties in implementing and managing an effective curriculum. The issue of large class sizes further obstructs personalised attention from teachers, impacting learner learning negatively (Ajani, [2018](#)) and leading to potential academic struggles. Additionally, frequent learner turnover in rural schools disrupts teacher-learner relationships and consistent education provision, compounding curriculum management challenges.

Despite South Africa's substantial education budget relative to other African nations (Homphashe, [2018](#)), the educational outcomes across the country's schools remain marked by significant disparities. Within this context, school principals shoulder a dual responsibility, assuming the roles of instructional leaders and financial stewards. School principals collaborate with School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to manage school budgets (Muremela et al., [2023](#)). This is important because it helps ensure that schools have the resources to provide effective teaching and learning. Existing research has examined the dynamics of curriculum management. However, there needs to be more literature on policy reforms that would equip principals with the resources and infrastructure they need to manage the curriculum effectively. Curriculum managers are vital in distributing physical and financial resources, ensuring all learners have access to a quality education. Addressing the challenge of educational equity requires a more nuanced understanding of how resource allocation and infrastructure can help close the educational quality gap. South Africa's education system is characterised by deep-rooted social inequalities and disparities, particularly compared to historically white urban schools. Dube ([2020](#)) and Homphashe ([2018](#)) have acknowledged this, and the latter report found that

principled leadership in curriculum management has contributed to more favourable outcomes in historically white schools.

Proactive principals can allocate resources to strengthen curriculum delivery, which can lead to immediate improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. However, rural schools that are struggling financially face unique challenges, such as remote locations, underdeveloped network infrastructure, and challenging terrain. As a result, providing essential services such as running water and electricity can be very costly. In order to address the challenges faced by rural schools, it is crucial to provide them with the resources and infrastructure they need to manage the curriculum effectively. This could include providing them with more financial support and access to training and technical assistance. It is also essential to create a more equitable distribution of resources so that all schools have the opportunity to succeed. The intricate challenges of limited rural school resources and curriculum management require multifaceted solutions (Naidoo, [2019](#); Ajani, [2022](#); Govender et al., [2023](#)). While no single approach can tackle all these issues, several strategies can enhance the situation. Increased funding can enable rural schools to secure essential resources, attract skilled teachers, and maintain smaller class sizes.

Additionally, rural teachers need support for instructional planning, learner evaluation, collaboration, and professional growth, which can be facilitated through mentoring, professional development, and online resources (Ajani, [2020](#)). Collaborative efforts between rural schools and communities can identify and address challenges, involving initiatives like transportation, after-school programmes, and parental support in their roles as primary teachers. Addressing resource challenges and curriculum management issues in rural schools ensures equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of location.

This study aims to comprehend rural high school principals' viewpoints across diverse contexts, seeking to foster an optimal learning environment. Effective curriculum management, entailing resource allocation and infrastructure provisions, is a pivotal strategy for localised, high-quality teaching and learning (Ajani, [2023](#)). Successful innovations implemented in rural provinces offer solutions for both intra- and inter-province enhancements in curriculum management within these regions, acting as catalysts for improvement.

## Nexus between Education Resources and Curriculum Management

Educational resources constitute vital components essential for the operation of schools. These encompass human resources, both material and intangible, the school environment, and community assets that enhance curriculum management and facilitate the teaching and learning process (Usman, [2016](#)). In simpler terms, education system resources encompass teachers, support staff, physical infrastructure, educational materials, and community assets leveraged for educational purposes. Yulieana ([2020](#)) argues that education resources encompass a wide array, not limited to teachers but to community members, objects, specimens or models, school buildings, instructional tools like chalk and display boards, and all other resources contributing to teaching and learning endeavours. Thus, various educational resources are pivotal in curriculum implementation and shaping the teaching and learning environment. Khoza ([2016](#)) similarly asserts that teachers' confidence in their teaching competencies is bolstered when schools provide sufficient and pertinent resources.

Usman ([2016](#)) also contends that the presence of suitable and adequate educational resources significantly influences the effectiveness and performance of school administration. Consequently, proficiently managing these resources in schools inherently dictates overall school performance. Conversely, the absence or insufficiency of any of these resources can impede the attainment of educational objectives and hinder the efficacy of school leadership. Yulieana ([2020](#)) agrees that schools with ample resources operate with efficacy and yield high-quality productivity. Nonetheless, Yulieana ([2020](#)) highlights that many schools in developing African nations need more government funding to provide the requisite resources adequately.

Moreover, schools are situated within communities, relying on community members for educational resources. Unfortunately, pervasive poverty in numerous African countries has hindered the community's ability to provide such support (Ajani et al., [2018](#); Ajani & Govender, [2019](#); Fafunwa & Aisiku, [2022](#)). Consequently, astute management of available educational resources becomes imperative to achieve desired outcomes. As Usman ([2016](#)) stated, school leaders must ensure prudent resource management to achieve balanced utilisation and maximise efficacy, which is vital for attaining school objectives.

## Curriculum Management as a Concept

Curriculum management constitutes the foundation of school operations, encompassing oversight over the arrangement, creation, packaging, and execution of subject matter. Many studies have indicated that curriculum management and instructional leadership are frequently used interchangeably in educational leadership frameworks, aiming to examine the principal's involvement across all facets of school programs (Ajani, [2022](#)). Within this complex role, principals strive to strike a harmonious balance while proficiently steering curriculum management and instructional endeavours, all the while managing additional educational dimensions such as financial administration, staff well-being, School Governing Bodies (SGB), and more (Muremela et al., [2023](#)).

The role of principals entails comprehensive planning, design, monitoring, and evaluation of educational content and programs tailored to the unique context of their schools, all while ensuring the judicious allocation of resources (Mandukwini, [2016](#)). Consequently, principals adopt diverse strategies to effectively manage financial resources and procure materials that augment the quality of teaching and learning. Curriculum management serves as the bedrock for a school's essential activities, encompassing teaching, learning, and assessment, where the effectiveness of these endeavours serves as a litmus test of their efficacy. Beyond effective instruction, the pivotal factor shaping learner achievements hinges on skilful curriculum management and its adept execution (Mohapi & Netshitangani, [2017](#)). Mandukwini ([2016](#)) further underscores the importance of continuous curriculum review and assessment in upholding school functionality and enhancing educational benchmarks. Hence, those tasked with curriculum management must comprehensively grasp its intricacies.

Moreover, Naidoo ([2019](#)) accentuates the pivotal roles of principals and School Management Teams (SMTs) as curriculum managers and leaders. They wield significant influence in devising strategies and providing resources to implement the curriculum within the school context effectively. Similarly, Mandukwini ([2016](#)) expands upon the responsibilities of curriculum managers, including adaptation, scrutiny, and tailoring of the prescribed curriculum to instil values and cater to the distinctive educational needs of the school.

## Managing Curriculum in Rural Schools

The study conducted by Mohapi and Netshitangani (2017) found that the leadership behaviours demonstrated by principals play a crucial role in facilitating instructional and curriculum improvements. These behaviours were found to significantly impact the overall effectiveness of teaching and learning outcomes for learners. Nevertheless, it has been observed that a significant number of school principals and School Management Teams (SMTs) operating in rural regions encounter various obstacles when it comes to effectively carrying out their responsibilities and addressing the educational requirements of learners (Bashir et al., 2018). The assertion made by various scholars is supported by extensive research, which suggests that rural school districts frequently face resource limitations compared to their suburban or urban counterparts, leading to unequal educational opportunities (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Bashir et al., 2018; Ajani & Govender, 2019; du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). In their scholarly work, du Plessis and Mestry (2019) assert that educational institutions in geographically isolated regions encounter significant obstacles when enhancing crucial material assets.

Basson and Mestry (2019) shed light on many challenges rural schools face, encompassing deficiencies in learning resources, incongruities in curricular frameworks, insufficiently qualified teachers, limitations in infrastructure, and elevated learner-teacher ratios. The study by Mohapi and Netshitangani (2017) shed light on the challenges faced by principals and School Management Teams (SMTs) when it comes to implementing curriculum changes within rural educational settings.

In light of the implementation of the "Rural Education Policy" by the Department of Basic Education (2011), it is evident that there is room for improvement in curriculum management within rural schools. The primary objective of this policy is to ensure equitable access to educational resources for rural schools throughout the country, thereby enabling effective curriculum implementation in rural communities (Yulieana, 2020). Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the policy's effectiveness in enhancing curriculum management necessitates additional fine-tuning. This is evident from the persistent concerns raised by rural schools regarding inadequate educational outcomes and substandard quality. These concerns have been documented by various authoritative sources, including Mestry

(2017), Ajani (2018), Ajani and Govender (2019), as well as Basson and Mestry (2019).

## **Resource Provisioning and Infrastructure in South African Rural Schools**

Effective resource provisioning and infrastructure are crucial in facilitating quality curriculum delivery in educational institutions. In the context of South African rural schools, where limited resources are often a challenge, the role of school principals in managing these resources becomes paramount. This literature review explores the existing body of research surrounding resource provisioning and infrastructure management by principals in South African rural schools, focusing on their impact on curriculum delivery. Resource provisioning refers to allocating and managing essential resources such as textbooks, teaching materials, technology, and human resources within educational settings. In the South African context, particularly in rural schools, the availability and allocation of resources significantly influence the quality of curriculum delivery (UNESCO, 2017; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). School principals must manage these resources efficiently to ensure effective teaching and learning (Mandukwini, 2016).

**Infrastructure Challenges in Rural Schools:** Rural schools in South Africa often grapple with inadequate infrastructure, including physical facilities like classrooms, laboratories, and sanitation facilities (Bashir et al., 2018). These infrastructure challenges hinder quality education and impact the overall teaching and learning experience. Principals must navigate these challenges to create conducive learning environments (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Principals in South African rural schools are tasked with strategic resource allocation to optimise curriculum delivery. Their decisions regarding resource allocation are influenced by various factors such as government policies, funding constraints, and community needs (Mohapi & Netshitangani, 2017). Effective resource allocation requires principled leadership to ensure that limited resources are distributed equitably and efficiently (Mestry, 2017).

Equitable resource provisioning is essential to address historical inequalities in South African education (Ajani & Govender, 2019). Rural schools often face resource disparities compared to their urban counterparts, leading to unequal educational opportunities (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021).



Principals play a critical role in advocating for equitable distribution of resources to enhance curriculum delivery for all learners, regardless of their geographic location. Principals in rural schools encounter numerous challenges in resource provisioning and infrastructure management. These challenges include limited funding, inadequate support from social partners, and bureaucratic obstacles (Hompashe, [2018](#); Shava & Heystek, [2021](#)). To overcome these challenges, principals employ strategies, including prudent financial management, collaboration with community stakeholders, and creatively utilising available resources (Basson & Mestry, [2019](#)).

The literature highlights the pivotal role of principals in managing resources and infrastructure for effective curriculum delivery in South African rural schools. Principals must navigate challenges related to resource allocation, infrastructure deficiencies, and equity concerns (Buthelezi & Ajani, [2023](#)). As custodians of school resources, principals' decisions profoundly impact the quality of education provided to learners. Policymakers and teachers must collaborate to provide principals with the necessary support and tools to manage resources and enhance curriculum delivery in rural schools effectively.

### **Resource Provisioning and Infrastructure: The Role of Principals**

Resource provisioning and infrastructure are pivotal components of educational systems worldwide. These factors are crucial in determining the quality of curriculum delivery and overall learning experiences in schools. School principals, as leaders and administrators, bear significant responsibility in managing and optimising the allocation of resources and ensuring adequate infrastructure. This literature review delves into the role of principals in resource provisioning and infrastructure management, with a specific focus on their impact on curriculum delivery. Resource provisioning involves allocating and managing various resources, including financial, human, and material resources, required for effective curriculum delivery (Fafunwa & Aisiku, [2022](#)). Inadequate resources can impede the implementation of educational programs and hinder learners' learning outcomes (Bantwini & Moorosi, [2018](#); Ajani, [2023](#)). As critical decision-makers, principals are responsible for judiciously allocating resources to meet the diverse needs of teachers and learners.

Infrastructure encompasses physical facilities, technological resources, and learning environments that contribute to the teaching and learning

process. An enabling infrastructure fosters conducive learning environments and supports curriculum delivery (Naidoo, [2019](#); Ajani, [2023](#)). Principals must address infrastructure deficiencies, especially in rural schools, where inadequate facilities hinder effective teaching and learning (du Plessis & Mestry, [2019](#)). Principals as Resource Managers: School principals play a multifaceted role in resource management. They are responsible for financial planning, budgeting, procurement, and human resource allocation (Mandukwini, [2016](#)). Effective resource management requires principals to balance competing demands, make informed decisions, and ensure equitable distribution of resources (Mohapi & Netshitangani, [2017](#)). Principals' decisions impact curriculum development, teacher professional development, and learner engagement. Equity in resource provisioning and infrastructure is a fundamental principle in education. Disparities in resource allocation can lead to unequal educational opportunities and hinder curriculum delivery in marginalised communities (Ajani & Govender, [2019](#)).

Principals must advocate for equitable distribution, ensuring all learners have access to quality resources and learning environments. Principals encounter various challenges in resource provisioning and infrastructure management. Limited funding, bureaucratic constraints, and external pressures can impact their ability to optimise resource allocation (Homphashe, [2018](#)). To address these challenges, principals employ effective financial management, collaboration with stakeholders, seeking external partnerships, and leveraging community resources (Basson & Mestry, [2019](#)). The role of principals in resource provisioning and infrastructure management is integral to curriculum delivery and overall educational quality. Effective principals prioritise equitable distribution of resources, address infrastructure deficiencies, and navigate challenges to enhance learning experiences for learners. Policymakers, teachers, and stakeholders must support principals in resource management endeavours, recognising their pivotal contributions to shaping the educational landscape and ensuring optimal curriculum delivery.

### **Realigning Education with Societal Needs: Policy and Legislative Implications**

The crucial task at hand involves ensuring that educational policy and legislative modifications are in harmony with society's demands and the nation's overarching goals (Bantwini & Moorosi, [2018](#)). In the particular

South African context, it is observed that the complex dynamics of conflicting interests often result in a diversion of governmental attention away from the efficient management of curricula and the fair allocation of resources to ensure high-quality education in rural schools (UNESCO, [2017](#)). In order to address historical inequities and promote the provision of education of a superior standard, the education system in South Africa has undergone substantial transformations (Mohapi & Netshitangani, [2017](#)). The imperative nature of implementing transformative reforms designed to restructure the educational environment to meet the needs of most individuals has been underscored, as elucidated in the findings presented by Table (2015). According to Ajani ([2023](#)), implementing the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSST) in 2014 was pivotal in this reform initiative. This legislative measure was designed to rectify the existing funding disparities that disproportionately benefited affluent urban schools.

The National Education Policy Act (NEPA) is a fundamental pillar in the pursuit of equitable resource allocation, primarily focusing on utilising provincial equitable shares (Maree, [2022](#)). This particular approach facilitates the efficient management of curriculum and promotes the achievement of high-quality educational outcomes. Within educational institutions, it is essential to recognise the significant contributions made by school principals and School Management Teams (SMTs) as crucial figures in curriculum leadership (Makena & Omodan, [2022](#)). Their roles extend beyond the mere execution of curriculum plans, encompassing the strategic management of curriculum changes. Frequent reassessment of curriculum implementation strategies is crucial to maintain congruence with ever-changing educational requirements (Mandukwini, [2016](#)). This process necessitates the development of leadership that is both supportive and knowledgeable in the field of education (Naidoo, [2019](#); Dube, [2020](#)).

Notwithstanding the provision of financial resources, a multitude of research studies consistently highlights the difficulties encountered by rural schools in obtaining crucial educational resources, infrastructure, and learning support materials that are indispensable for the successful management of curriculum (UNESCO, [2017](#); Bashir et al., [2018](#); du Plessis & Mestry, [2019](#)). In educational settings, it is common for principals to take on multifaceted roles that go beyond traditional expectations. They are responsible for managing the curriculum, as well as engaging in full-time

teaching, all in order to effectively implement the curriculum (Dube, [2020](#)). Buthelezi and Ajani ([2023](#)) share an insightful analysis that underscores the importance of principals demonstrating exceptional fortitude and ingenuity in effectively leading school management teams (SMTs) towards attaining high-quality educational outcomes. The viewpoint expressed by the user is in line with the conclusions drawn by Mohapi and Netshitangani ([2017](#)), who propose that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) should implement extensive educational changes to facilitate advancements in curriculum administration and tackle the various elements that impact learner achievement in rural educational institutions.

Despite implementing the Policy Framework for Education and Training (PFET), which aims to streamline the National Learning Systems by adopting learner-centred and achievement-driven approaches, rural schools need help fully integrating these systems (Mestry, [2017](#)). The adaptation being discussed holds immense importance within the realm of education, as it directly influences the academic accomplishments of learners. This assertion is supported by the research conducted by Govender and Ajani ([2021](#)). Ajani ([2023](#)), in his study, reveals that it is evident that curriculum management extends beyond mere procedural aspects and encompasses the skilful management of individuals. This crucial aspect plays a central role in guaranteeing favourable outcomes in the realm of teaching and learning. In addition, teachers must cultivate their adaptability concerning instructional methodologies and pedagogical approaches, regardless of the geographical context in which their educational institution is situated (Madukwini, [2016](#); Ajani & Govender, [2019](#); Naidoo, [2019](#)).

## Theoretical Framework

This study has embraced the lens of Critical Emancipatory Theory (CER) to delve deeply into the social phenomenon under investigation. The philosophical origins of Critical Emancipatory Theory have sparked various assumptions. However, there is a consensus among scholars that Jürgen Habermas initiated its development while he was associated with the Frankfurt School in Germany in 1923 (Bananuka, [2023](#)). Habermas, a pioneering figure in this realm, formulated Critical emancipation research to empower individuals, granting them a platform for their perspectives to be acknowledged and their voices amplified (Kanyopa, [2022](#)). Employing the CER framework allows for a comprehensive examination of the fiduciary responsibilities held by School Management Teams (SMTs),

particularly within the context of resource provision in rural schools. Habermas' CER draws inspiration from the Marxist viewpoint on economic and social dynamics (Motsoeneng & Veronica Sithole, [2022](#)). Furthermore, the lineage of CER's ideas can be traced back to the philosopher Immanuel Kant, who first introduced critical theory in 1871, as explored by McKernan ([2013](#)). Over time, this concept evolved into a philosophical approach to reshaping societal structures. Many scholars who explored CER have grappled with addressing historical and social crises, oppression, and inequality, striving to replace them with emancipatory alternatives (Lunga et al., [2021](#)).

Against this backdrop, the rationale behind employing CER in the context of South African rural schools lies in its potential to emancipate School Management Teams (SMTs), School Governing Bodies (SGBs), and learners, thus fostering improved social and learning environments (Ajani, [2023](#)). CER serves as a conduit for delivering equitable and high-quality resources to rural learners, ultimately enhancing their educational journeys and academic achievements (Mkhize & Shembe, [2022](#)). Moreover, it can alleviate the burden on SMTs, enabling them to lead teaching and learning initiatives without encountering backlash from members of underserved communities. In addressing inadequate resource allocation in South African rural schools, CER presents itself as an apt theoretical framework that empowers stakeholders to challenge systemic deficiencies and devise remedies (Segalo & Dube, [2022](#)). At its core, CER's primary objective is to empower marginalised rural schools with the necessary human resources to spark transformative change alongside other essential resources to tackle transient challenges (Mkhize & Shembe, [2022](#)). As an encompassing theory, CER is an appropriate approach to ensure the inclusivity of all learners within transformative educational experiences, achieved through individual emancipation while upholding fundamental societal values of human rights, social justice, and inclusion (Kanyopa, [2022](#)).

## Research Methodology

### The Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to delve into the perspectives of selected rural school principals concerning the challenges linked to limited school resources and the maintenance required for

effective curriculum implementation within their educational institutions. Creswell (2014) underscores that qualitative research design is an investigative approach aimed at comprehending the significance of individuals' encounters and how they interpret their surroundings. Often employed in social sciences, humanities, and education, this approach delves into human behaviours and societal occurrences. The appeal of this design lies in its adaptability and all-encompassing nature, allowing for the exploration of social phenomena (Ngozwana, 2018).

This qualitative study aimed to extract comprehensive insights from rural school principals who navigate curriculum management within two South African rural provinces, specifically KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. This methodology sought to unveil the principals' strategies to attain impartial and enduring resource distribution and infrastructural improvements within their respective schools. Ngozwana (2018) describes qualitative research as an inquiry-based investigation that delves into real-life settings, capturing individuals' lived experiences through techniques like interviews and observations. The resulting findings are communicated through words rather than statistical data. Creswell (2014) further emphasises that qualitative research elucidates diverse standpoints rooted in lived encounters concerning a specific phenomenon.

### **Sampling**

Forty principals were intentionally and conveniently selected to gather data through self-reflection and semi-structured group interviews. Chilisa (2019) contend that using purposive and convenient sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants who share common characteristics and can contribute insightful and detailed information that aligns with the research questions in a manner convenient for them. Employing a purposive sampling technique, the study aimed to gather in-depth data from participants with knowledge directly relevant to addressing the research inquiries (Ngozwana, 2018; Chilisa, 2019).

### **Data Collection Methods**

In two provinces, the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with participants. The research adopted an interactional epistemological standpoint, aiming to delve into the subjective lived experiences of school principals who manage institutions with limited resources. The researchers directly engaged with these participants within

the unique context of their schools, conducting interviews that spanned 30 to 45 minutes. Consistently, an identical open-ended, semi-structured interview guide was employed to facilitate data collection. Pilarska (2021) proposes that the inter-subjective or interactional epistemological reality establishes a subjective connection between the researcher and the subject, aligning with the interpretive approach to explore subjective motivations and extract meaning from social actions.

For data collection, the researchers utilised open-ended semi-structured interviews, employing an interview guide encompassing various managerial topics. This interview guide was designed to ensure consistent information collection and to explore data from all participants comprehensively. In order to delve deeper into insights that address the research questions, probing questions were posed to participants (Chilisa, 2019). Pilarska (2021) asserts that adopting a 'guided' interview approach enables researchers to systematically cover issues and gather pertinent information to fulfil the research objectives. To maintain the accuracy and credibility of the information provided, all interviews were recorded with the explicit consent of the participants. The purpose of recording these interviews was to precisely capture the participants' statements and ensure the fidelity of their messages (Chilisa, 2019).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants' voluntary participation was a priority, with their informed consent obtained after a comprehensive explanation (Creswell, 2014). To enhance privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, pseudonyms were adopted when sharing their data. Participants were fully aware of their option to withdraw from the study at any juncture. The study was carried out with the endorsement of the university's Ethics Committee and the Department of Basic Education, ensuring ethical adherence (Ngozwana, 2018).

### **Data Analysis**

The recorded interviews underwent transcription, coding, and analysis through Tesch's open coding method. Creswell (2014) elucidates that data analysis entails researchers interpreting and categorising data to address research questions. The researchers adopted thematic analysis for this study, following the structured steps delineated in Ajani (2023).

## Discussion of Results

Data were gathered through audiotaped, semi-structured interviews conducted with forty principals from two provinces. Although the provinces in question boasted hundreds of rural schools, the study's resource constraints necessitated focusing on only forty schools. This subset was meticulously selected to mirror the study population (Creswell, [2014](#)). The recorded audio interviews underwent transcription, after which the transcripts were provided to the participants for validation. These validated transcripts underwent multiple readings, with akin ideas from interviews addressing the same questions being grouped and assigned codes by the researchers. These clustered insights were amalgamated and analysed using Tesch's open coding methodology, yielding distinctive main themes. As a result of this data analysis, four primary themes emerged, encapsulating the experiences of rural school principals functioning as both school managers and instructional leaders (Buthelezi & Ajani, [2023](#)). Select excerpts from several participants buttress the ensuing discussion of findings (Pilarska, [2021](#)). However, due to the article's length, not all excerpts from the forty participants could be incorporated into this study.

### Principal's Conceptualisation of Resources

According to the principals, they find themselves in roles encompassing administration, supervision, and instruction to ensure the seamless continuation of teaching activities. In practice, these principals orchestrate fundamental tasks to effectively harness the assortment of school resources allocated to their respective institutions, all in pursuit of educational objectives. Irrespective of the province—KwaZulu-Natal or Limpopo—the principals share a common perception of resources as tangible and intangible factors indispensable for achieving educational aims. The study's outcomes revealed that, from the participant's standpoint, resources encompass an expansive spectrum of physical entities and human assets. In this context, these assets notably include teachers, who, as part of the equation, are integral to the framework. Referred to as Learner-Teacher-Support-Materials (LTSMs), this composition encompasses various stationary items such as textbooks, calculators, and practical materials such as laboratory equipment.

Furthermore, this inclusive classification encompasses the structures that house learning—classrooms and other educational spaces. This



comprehensive definition of resources emerged consistently across all participants during the semi-structured interviews. One of the principals, Principal 39, expressed it in the following manner:

Coordinating between the human resources department and the facilities and equipment facilitates effective teaching and learning within our schools. The adequacy and calibre of these resources are contingent upon school administrators' comprehension of the processes of resource procurement and acquisition. In essence, resources encompass all Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM), which naturally include books and exercise books; however, the availability of stationary still needs to be improved. Undoubtedly, with comprehensive access to stationary, the effectiveness of teaching and learning is maintained, hindering the successful implementation of educational initiatives. Hence, every school must ensure the availability of these resources to foster success.

The individual interviews revealed that principals with a well-defined vision and familiarity with specialised teaching and learning tools are more likely to achieve their objectives. Principals from both provinces unanimously agreed during these interviews that, despite the limitations imposed by constrained educational resources, effective management is still possible for administrative and curriculum implementation tasks—driven pragmatically by necessity. Participants from KwaZulu-Natal notably voiced this perspective. Principal 28, echoing this standpoint, further augmented the notion by addressing the matter of resources:

Our understanding of resources depends on context. We understand resources to mean all resources relevant for the implementation of the curriculum, including the availability of personal resources, the availability of the LTSMs, which are textbooks, furniture, learners, and their parents, because you cannot plan without the leading players, which are learners, and also learners' stationery because you cannot cover the curriculum or deliver the curriculum without having the learners and the stationary.

These findings concur with Fafunwa and Aisiku (2022), and Makena and Omodan (2022), who comprehensively enumerate those educational resources such as teaching and non-teaching staff in schools and

communities, buildings in various school layouts, and communities at large contribute to the success of school systems. Seemingly, Usman (2016) posits that educational resources facilitate curriculum management, including human and non-human learning and teaching support materials and all other materials used for teaching and learning within school systems. Furthermore, Barrett et al. (2019) opine that principals are instructional leaders who are well-informed about the resources that schools need for curriculum management. Amin and Mahabeer (2021) affirm that inequalities exist in resource distribution to schools in South Africa. However, rural schools suffer more than urban schools. Therefore, Tapala et al. (2021) affirm that the principals are best positioned to conceptualise educational resources that can influence curriculum management in schools for sustainable development.

### **Resource Availability**

The recurring inquiry into the presence of resources continued to surface, bearing implications for the success of the teaching and learning endeavour. One of the participants (Principal 33) reiterated:

Sufficient and suitable resources are essential for effective school administration and achieving desired educational outcomes. The dual facets of this issue are that efficient resource management enhances the motivation of human resources and contributes to goal achievement.

The outcomes illuminated that the mere provisioning of human and physical resources needs to be improved, as their availability hinges on factors such as learner enrolment and financial resources. Bolstering this perspective, participants from Limpopo exhibited evident frustration regarding the absence of fundamental resources within their schools. Principal 12 emphasised this sentiment as follows:

Resource scarcity poses significant challenges within our schools. It is not uncommon to witness teachers fully prepared to instruct yet facing the absence of laboratories and an inadequate supply of textbooks. This situation often compels learners to share these limited resources. Unfortunately, smaller schools seem to bear the brunt of neglect and adversity. The education department's approach, which hinges on learner enrolment figures, can lead to

unfavourable actions, such as stream reductions in smaller schools, ultimately jeopardising the educational prospects of our learners.

As emphasised, the severity of resource scarcity in schools is compounded by the distribution of funds to educational institutions. This allocation of funds exhibits marked inequality, stratifying schools along dimensions of rural/urban, impoverished/affluent, and high-performing/underperforming across provinces. The participants expressed deep concern over the state of their schools, which are among the most economically disadvantaged and suffer acutely from the lack of educational resources necessary for effective curriculum management. Consequently, the principals grapple with the dual challenge of maintaining school structures and furnishing essential amenities that not only facilitate curriculum delivery but also ensure the safety and security of the learners.

Funding formulas emerged as one of the most pressing predicaments confronting rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal. A participant from this province felt compelled to shed light on how funding formulas directly impact resource availability in schools within the province. Principal 2 substantiated this sentiment by sharing the following insight:

... Remember that schools in each province are categorised into five groups, ranging from the most economically disadvantaged to the least disadvantaged. To elaborate, Quintile 1 comprises schools within each province serving the poorest 20% of institutions. Quintile 2 is responsible for the subsequent 20% of schools with higher economic needs, whereas Quintile 5 schools encompass the least economically challenged institutions.

The most poignant revelation from the participants in both provinces pertained to categorising their schools into quintiles 1–3, rendering them ineligible to levy fees and relying solely on government funding. This predicament has disheartened the principals, as avenues for generating additional funds from alternative sources like parental contributions or local businesses are non-existent. While the government does allocate resources, a recurring issue emerged regarding the absence of a comprehensive needs assessment prior to resource allocation by the educational department. This oversight has had adverse consequences for curriculum delivery. A principal in Limpopo articulated a fervent discourse about the ramifications

of deficient resource access, underscoring this concern. Principal 37 reaffirmed this stance with the following statement:

Every year, we have an increase in our enrolment, but we need more resources to cater for our learners adequately. We need to receive adequate stationeries or textbooks. Learners have to share the few available resources, affecting our output. Giving learners tasks that can be done at home is challenging if they need the materials to be used at home. So, the shortage of LTSM is a critical problem. Likewise, inadequate classrooms make classrooms to be overcrowded.

A comparable viewpoint arose among the principals in Limpopo, with some taking this perspective a stride ahead by delving into their exasperation concerning vacant positions and the scarcity of resources necessary for conducting experiments. These participants conveyed that overseeing the operations of these schools entails significant challenges. Principal 11 lent weight to this assertion by contributing the following affirmation:

Filling of vacant posts- takes too long, and the synergy and teamwork are adversely affected. Because of the shortage or absence of resources, sometimes experiments and science experiments are not done in some schools. Sometimes, buildings are not there. Sometimes, buildings are there, but they are not used as they need to be used. For instance, we have computer labs, and these computers have no internet connectivity because of financial constraints. Our schools cannot afford cheap data and internet servers, a sad story for our times.

Principals of rural schools often find themselves caught in a dilemma, being tasked with delivering educational objectives in the face of inadequate resources (Chabala & Naidoo, [2021](#)). The insufficient provisioning of resources highlights the disparity between rural schools and their urban and suburban counterparts, leading to a lower quality of education in rural settings. The significance of learning resources in schools for successful curriculum delivery is underscored by Barrett et al. ([2019](#)). Consequently, effective curriculum delivery remains a pivotal function of the educational system. The insights garnered from participants in both provinces align with the conclusions of several prior studies conducted on this phenomenon in

South Africa (Barrett et al., [2019](#); Amin & Mahabeer, [2021](#); Shava & Heystek, [2021](#)).

### **Support from the Department of Education**

According to the Republic of South Africa's (1996) South African Schools Act (SASA), principals are recognised in dual roles, serving as instructional leaders and administrators tasked with supervising school finances. They are ex-officio members of Finance Committees, working in tandem with School Governing Bodies to construct comprehensive school budgets. Participants from both provinces agreed that these budgets are designed to sustain the school's operations throughout the academic year. Principals acknowledge the Department of Basic Education's role in striving for equitable distribution of educational resources and expect the Senior Management Teams (SMTs) to adopt a fiduciary responsibility in supplementing school resources. Even with this, the analysis reveals that the allocated funds for securing necessary resources are often ineffective and inadequate for their intended purpose (Ajani, [2020](#)). Echoing this sentiment, two principals from each province corroborated these challenges, with participants in both KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo reiterating these concerns. To illustrate this point, Principal 9 provided the following statement:

We must reevaluate the matter of funding. If proper funding procedures were in place, our school would have a much more substantial pool of resources available to us. Funding for most schools, excluding 'function C' schools, is based on a set of norms and standards referred to as section 21. This classification categorises our school as a government-funded entity but with certain limitations on its operational capacities, such as purchasing supplementary stationery and books. In contrast, some fortunate schools fall under section 21 with function C, granting them full access to their allocated funds and the autonomy to decide how to utilise them.

A thought-provoking comparative examination was conducted, contrasting urban and affluent schools with their rural and semi-urban counterparts to shed light on the role of the government. The department's tacit support prioritises well-funded schools while disadvantaging rural and underprivileged schools. The sentiments conveyed during the interviews

echoed strong critique regarding the government's aid to rural schools. Principal 24's statement provided further reinforcement and lucidity to this argument:

In rural and semi-urban areas, most schools fall under Section 21 without function C, receiving 40% of their allocation while 60% is held in reserve. For example, if the school should receive 1 million, you are given R410 000 in your account. Section 21 with function C, however, clearly stipulates that if you are qualified for R100 000, it is transferred directly to your school account as a show of trust in your school's responsible financial management. Our schools are barred from seeking funding from private entities, which leaves them in dire circumstances.

Participants unanimously agreed that in schools operating under section 21 without function C, the government procures resources from suppliers who exploit the situation by overcharging. Senior Management Teams (SMTs) often find themselves powerless to confront this corruption, as they merely serve as recipients of these resources from suppliers. Amin and Mahabeer (2021) and Govender et al. (2023) argue that rural and urban schools require substantial support from the Department of Basic Education. According to Ajani (2020), the Department of Basic Education is responsible for hiring teachers in various public schools across South Africa. School Governing Boards also take on this role in cases where schools lack staff. However, Chabalala and Naidoo (2021) and Ajani (2023) assert that the unequal distribution of resources between rural and urban schools remains concerning. Shava and Heystek (2021) and Buthelezi and Ajani (2023) contend that the persistent disparities in allocating school resources present a significant challenge that undermines the success of rural school principals in curriculum management.

### **Support from External Partners**

Participants conveyed the view that specific organisations and government agencies demonstrate prejudice against semi-urban and rural schools. It was proposed that these social partners should undergo a thorough assessment by the government and engage in transparent communication with schools to determine their resource requirements. Hence, assessing and evaluating school resources is imperative to identify urgent requirements accurately. Implementing such measures would

alleviate the administrative burden on principals and enhance overall school performance. This approach would foster inclusivity within schools, allocating resources according to priority areas, thereby assisting schools facing challenges. The participants further revealed that obtaining support is more complex in South Africa. Principal 7's perspective sheds light on this issue:

At times, we receive resources as donations from our social partners. Local industries, retail shops, public and private organisations, and even the Umhlathuze Municipality offer incredible support. They donate items such as old and new computers, printed media, and various audio-visual and digital formats, including e-books, which have proven accessible and suitable. Notably, we have also seen contributions like tablets and smartphones from major companies like Vodacom and Cell C, enhancing our resource capacity. However, these resources are not fully utilised due to teachers' lack of familiarity with their use.

Some participants have approached private and public stakeholders for assistance, which has often resulted in successfully bridging resource gaps. Principal 18 shared:

The situation in our schools is more dire than it may appear, and sometimes we are compelled to contact different companies for assistance. We request critical resources such as cartridges, maps, and specific subject-related software. While we sometimes receive services instead of actual computers, we have currently organised civil engineering, electricity, and mechanics workshops for our learners.

During the interviews and group discussions, the support issue from external partners emerged as a topic of great significance in both KZN and Limpopo provinces. It became apparent that specific schools within these provinces had forged strong connections with social partners through initiatives such as school adoption (Ajani, [2023](#)). Nevertheless, most schools lacked affiliations with external partners that could provide financial or material resources, dependent on the initiative of principals and SMTs (Maree, [2022](#)).

## **Implications of the Study**

The study that examines the difficulties associated with limited school resources and curriculum management in rural South African schools carries substantial implications for policymakers, teachers, and community stakeholders dedicated to improving educational quality in these areas. Firstly, the research emphasises the pressing need for enhanced funding allocation to rural schools. As these schools often face insufficient funding, resulting in limited access to crucial resources such as textbooks and technology, increased financial assistance is vital to ensure the delivery of quality education. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of offering comprehensive support to teachers in rural settings. These teachers often grapple with distinctive challenges such as large class sizes, remote locations, and high learner turnover. Targeted support mechanisms are essential to assist them in instructional planning, assessment, collaboration, and learner engagement. Thirdly, the study underscores the importance of fostering collaboration between rural schools and their communities. Collaborative efforts can effectively address challenges such as transportation, after-school programs, and parental involvement, collectively enhancing the learning environment.

Thus, this study's findings carry crucial implications for policymakers, teachers, and community stakeholders committed to advancing education quality in rural South Africa. Addressing the resource constraints and curriculum management challenges is pivotal to ensuring equitable access to quality education for all learners in rural areas.

## **Conclusions**

Extant literature affirms that social inequalities exist in South Africa and rear their ugly heads in the school system. Schools are stratified according to various parameters. However, rural and urban schools are the most common classification that shows schools with adequate resources and schools that lack adequate resources. Principals in rural schools, which are usually underfunded and need more resources to compete with urban schools, need help managing available school resources to implement curriculum efficiently. This study revealed the lived experiences of rural school principals from two provinces in South Africa. The principals admitted they need more adequate and appropriate resources to implement the National Curriculum used in uniform examinations for learners in South



Africa. The principals lamented that despite being classified as rural schools, they needed help to source external funding from parents or businesses. The participants also decry inadequate support from SMTs to provide school resources that can assist schools' classroom practices. Amin and Mahabeer (2021) concur that providing educational resources is an enormous task that the government alone cannot bear, especially the negligence of rural schools. Hence, Barrette et al. (2021) call for encouragement from social partners like businesses and NGOs to support schools with the necessary resources to assist teachers' classroom practices. Tapala et al. (2021) agree that business owners or companies can allocate some of their profit to support educational needs through their Community Social Responsibilities (CSR). Buildings and other learning materials can be supplied to schools.

### **Recommendations**

Curriculum delivery is the business of the schools. Hence, rural school principals are responsible for attaining this goal. Hence, this study proffers some specific recommendations that can be applied in South Africa. The government should increase funding for rural schools by allocating more resources to the Department of Basic Education. The government should support rural teachers by offering professional development opportunities, mentoring programs, and access to online resources. The government should encourage collaboration between rural schools and communities by funding transportation, after-school programs, and parent-teacher organisations. Rural communities can get involved by volunteering at schools, donating resources, and advocating for their children's education. By working together, we can make a difference in the lives of children in rural South Africa and ensure that they have the opportunity to succeed.

### **Limitations to the Study**

The scope of the study was confined to 40 rural school principals in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. Therefore, the findings should be separate from the entirety of the country. However, it is advised that a broader investigation encompassing mixed methods, either quantitative or more extensive qualitative research, should be undertaken for more comprehensive insights.

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